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# Classrooms or Crackdowns? How Violence Affects Security Policy Preferences in Mexico

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## Abstract

Penal policies have been the primary strategy of Latin American governments to combat crime, but preventative social policies such as youth education programmes may be more effective solutions. Penal and social policies are often treated as a trade-off by governments, who expect citizens—especially victims of violence—to be more supportive of punitive solutions. Using an original online survey experiment conducted in 2021 in Mexico, we challenge the idea of a trade-off between penal and social policies by studying how different policy solutions along the penal-welfare policy continuum affect victims' support for increased state security presence. We unpack differences between victims of criminal perpetrators and state violence and those who are fearful of crime. Our vignette experiment reveals—in contrast to previous results—that crime victims are more supportive of state security presence when coupled with pre-emptive measures. Surprisingly, the same holds for victims of state violence and for those fearful of crime, including those residing in neighbourhoods with watch groups. Victimization, by either crime or the state, raises demand for policies to increase employment and improve education.

**Keywords** Online survey experiment · Criminal violence · Social policy · Penal policy · Mexico

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## Introduction

Levels of drug-trafficking and gang-related criminal violence are currently reaching new heights in Latin America, already one of the most murderous regions in the world. The UN Office of Drugs and Crime reports that ‘the number of civilian casualties linked to organized and gang crime violence and state responses to this violence exceed those of major current armed conflicts’ (UNODC 2023). In Mexico, where 94 murders occur daily (Mexico Peace Index 2022), crime and the fear of crime are key concerns for its citizens. In 2021, 29% of Mexican households experienced at least one crime, and 76% of citizens reported feeling unsafe in the state in which they live (ENVIPE 2022). What policy solutions do victims of crime demand in such ‘violent democracies’ (Arias and Goldstein 2010)?

Criminal violence puts pressure on the contract that binds citizens to the state. When citizens pay taxes, but states fail to deliver high-quality public goods, citizens can become disenchanted (Altamirano et al. 2020; Berens 2020; Castañeda et al. 2020). Recent works have revealed that crime victims become more angry citizens who are more supportive of punitive solutions to crime, including militarisation of policing, harsher criminal punishment (Visconti 2020; Price et al. 2019; Singer et al. 2020; Ventura et al. 2024) and even non-state extra-legal solutions such as public lynching or vigilantism (see Cruz and Kloppe-Santamaría 2019; García-Ponce et al. 2023). Crime victims also become more active citizens, with a higher propensity to politically engage in the community (Bateson 2012) and a taste for more authoritarian forms of government (Holland 2013; Merolla et al. 2013). At the same time, crime victimisation entails very concrete costs for the individual such as immediate health care out-of-pocket expenses, temporary loss of income due to injury, traumatisation and possible long-term mental harm in need of treatment (see Altamirano et al. 2020: 397). Thus, as Altamirano et al. (ibid) find, victimisation raises both a need and a demand for public social protection policies. In contrast, researchers have also found robust evidence that those who are fearful of crime withdraw from the state, possibly because they lose trust in the ability of state institutions to tackle criminal violence (Altamirano et al. 2020; Trelles and Carreras 2012; Gingerich and Oliveros 2018; Ley 2018). Collusion between politicians and organised crime and the abuse of power by state security institutions adds to this scepticism (González 2020). Instead of black and white, violence presents itself as sordid mélange of grey that blurs the lines between supposedly bad criminals and good security forces (Trejo and Ley 2020).

In these difficult and dangerous circumstances, when do citizens support an expansion of security forces? Would citizens prefer to complement such an expansion with preventive policies (such as youth education and employment programmes) or punitive policies (for example longer sentences and aggressive policing)? How do fear of crime and victimisation by either criminals or state security forces affect these preferences?

We address these questions in the context of Mexico, a country where—despite growing militarisation of security—the number of state security officers per inhabitant is low. For every 1000 inhabitants, there are 0.8 police officers, a figure well below international standards (Artz 2019). The figure is even lower in the most violent states of the country, such as Baja California, Sinaloa and Tamaulipas (Mexico Peace Index 2022). Mayoral candidates across Mexico have pushed for increased investment in state security forces and proposed complementary crime-reducing strategies spanning from punitive to preventative measures (see Ventura et al. 2024).

We examine how respondents' support for increasing the presence of law-enforcement agents on the streets to reduce the level of violence varies when this security policy is paired with either punitive penal or pre-emptive social policies. Pre-emptive approaches to counter crime encompass social policies such as investments in youth education, youth employment and rehabilitative measures for (former) criminals. Punitive solutions include iron-fist policies, such as harsher punishment of criminals and police militarisation. Taking into account that the state has a toolkit of instruments to address the problem of violent crime, we expect crime victims, individuals who are fearful of crime and those who have experienced violence and abuse by state security institutions to demand different types of security policy responses from the state.

Welfare state scholars have identified a trade-off between penal and social policy approaches to crime (Garland 2017; Guetzkow 2020). Governments often chose to tackle crime through either a punitive approach (for example by militarising the police and extending the length of prison sentences) or with pre-emptive policies (such as investments in education, youth employment and rehabilitative measures for former criminals) (Hinton 2016). We are interested in understanding how exposure to violence affects citizen support for a more punitive versus a more pre-emptive approach to address crime. In the extant literature, only Altamirano et al. (2024) have compared support for punitive and preventative policies in the Latin American context. Importantly, violence is not only exerted by criminals; security institutions in 'violent democracies' have proven to be recurring perpetrators of human rights violations in the region. We therefore investigate how differences in violence exposure, and the identity of the perpetrator (criminal or state), affect security policy preferences. Drawing upon the contrasting findings in the literature, we expect those fearful of crime to become more supportive of punitive measures, but implications for victims of (violent) crime and state abuse are less clear cut. Those who have suffered state abuse are likely to oppose any expansion of the security apparatus when policy options are purely punitive and to react at best neutrally to pre-emptive policy options.

To overcome possible social desirability biases when studying observational data in previous studies (Holland 2013; Visconti 2020), we make use of an online vignette survey experiment in which we randomly present participants with different preventative and punitive complementary policy solutions when asking them about their support for expanding state security forces. Previous studies have overlooked pre-emptive approaches to crime, limiting our understanding of citizens' policy preferences and how they are shaped by victimisation and fear thereof. In

line with Ventura et al. (2024), we avoid viewing punitiveness as a ‘black box’, and instead consider different types of punitive policies in our experiment. In addition, we make a contribution by testing for heterogenous effects according to respondent’s exposure to criminal violence, fear and victimisation by state security institutions, thereby accounting for the multitude of perpetrators of violence in developing democracies.<sup>1</sup>

We collected the data with the online survey provider Pollfish in December 2021 in Mexico. Our convenience sample consists of  $N = 2401$  respondents.<sup>2</sup> Comparing the range of policy solutions to crime, our findings reveal that offering complementary pre-emptive security measures makes respondents more likely to support security force expansion. Preferences for pre-emptive policies—particularly youth education programmes—are significantly stronger among those who have experienced criminal violence and state abuse. Despite experiencing first-hand the state’s failure to provide protection (or worse, victimisation by the state), victims of crime, victims of state violence and those who are fearful of crime remain supportive of state solutions and, crucially, want these solutions to be welfare-based and preventive.

In spite of policymakers’ desperate search for policy solutions to crime, scholars have only recently started to unpack citizens’ security policy preferences (Ventura et al. 2024), finding mounting evidence that victims acquire a taste for punitiveness (García-Ponce et al. 2023; Visconti 2020). Our results from a study that allows comparison of pre-emptive and punitive solutions contrast with these previous findings by showing that violence does not simply raise citizens’ appetite for vengeance, but that victims of violence want increased state security presence to be combined with pre-emptive measures. However, given the nature of our sample, the identified causal effects apply mostly to urban residents with above-average education and income levels in Mexico.

Our paper thus adds to the growing number of studies that use experimental evidence to examine citizen preferences for public security policies in Latin America (Cafferata and Scartascini 2021; Cafferata et al. 2023; Flores-Macías and Sánchez-Talanquer 2020; Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021; Flores-Macías 2022; Laterzo 2024; Masullo and Morisi 2024; García-Ponce et al. 2023; Ventura et al. 2024) by randomising policy solutions that encompass the range of punitive and pre-emptive approaches. Our approach builds on existing research by unpacking different dimensions of security demands, revealing citizens’ and especially victims’ preferences for policy solutions that combine both prevention and security force expansion.

Finally, considering that violence is not only perpetrated by criminals but, particularly in the context of ‘violent democracies’, also by the security apparatus of the state, we are able to compare the impact of different perpetrators of violence

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<sup>1</sup> One could argue that crime victimisation and fear are endogenous to other factors that determine security policy preferences such as income, gender or age. While it is impossible to randomise crime victimisation, investigating the correlates of crime victimisation in our context shows that crime cuts across class-lines.

<sup>2</sup> Ethical approval was obtained in 2021 from the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy, Birkbeck College, University of London (reference number: BBKPOL2021/22-02). We registered the pre-analysis plan 20220115AA (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XUS8Y>) on OSF/EGAP prior to data collection.

on individual support for security policies. The use of violence against law-abiding citizens by the state's security apparatus may be the most tremendous shock to the social contract and thereby most critically undermine individual support for policy solutions to crime in 'violent democracies'. Our study thus contributes to the scholarly debate on attitudinal and behavioural implications of crime by studying how experiencing violence by both non-state and state perpetrators affects security policy preferences, further bridging the crime and war-related literature on victimisation experiences.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we describe the case of Mexico. Second, we examine the existing literature and present a series of hypotheses on individual preferences for pre-emptive and punitive approaches. Third, we describe our data and empirical strategy. Fourth, we present our main findings along with subgroup analyses. Finally, we conclude by discussing potential mechanisms and the implications of our results.

## Contextual Background

Since the launch of the 'War on Drugs' in 2006, crime fighting has become a divisive topic in Mexico, influencing party politics, voting behaviour and protest engagement (Trejo and Ley 2020; Ventura et al. 2014). Since the administration of Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), presidents have labelled organised crime as an issue of national concern and increasingly tasked the military with domestic security. As presidents have taken over the fight against crime (Romero et al. 2016), militarised security policies have become nationwide in scope. The consequences of a punitive militarised strategy pursued by successive administrations in Mexico have, however, been dismal. Not only have crime and violence reached new heights, but there has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of torture, forced disappearances, extrajudicial assassinations and other human rights violations committed by state security forces (Flores Macías 2018, Flores Macías and Zarkin 2024; Gonzalez 2020; Magaloni and Rodríguez 2020). Furthermore, it has become increasingly common for state security officers to collaborate with organised crime groups (Trejo and Ley 2020).

In Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries, politicians have exploited security issues to garner electoral support (Diamint 2015; Corbacho et al. 2015; Krause 2014; Pion Berlín and Carreras 2017; Visconti 2020). As documented by Ventura et al. (2024), with the onset of the War on Drugs in Mexico, local politicians began advocating for punitive crime-control measures. These measures go beyond mere alignment with the national government's militarised strategy but also include the implementation of harsher penalties, such as endorsements for the death penalty and life imprisonment made by Mexico's Green Party. In states, such as Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, Sonora and Sinaloa, local politicians have even suggested (and enforced) curfews to keep citizens safe from nighttime crime (El Sol de Mexico 2019; El Universal 2017; Milenio 2023a, b; Ochoa 2022). Similarly, crack-downs and zero tolerance policing have been proposed (and implemented) in cities including Ciudad Juárez, Mexico City, Torreón and Tijuana (Arroyo 2003; Davis

and Reyes 2007; Morales et al. 2020; Müller 2016; Pansters and Castillo Berthier 2007). As levels of violence have worsened across the country, however, politicians have begun to propose non-punitive solutions to crime too (Pocasangre Meneses 2022; Ventura et al. 2024). Various groups in Mexican civil society have also mobilised and taken to the streets in opposition to punitive solutions.

As a candidate, for instance, former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) promised to reverse the government's punitive approach towards crime-fighting by offering amnesty to individuals involved in the illegal drug trade. In the 2012 electoral campaign, AMLO (2012) stated: 'The most effective, the most humane, and probably the least expensive solution to crime is reducing unemployment; [...] and offering viable alternatives to the youth who have been excluded from development'. By proposing employment and education programmes for the youth, AMLO promoted a pre-emptive strategy to reduce crime, with a campaign slogan cementing his approach: 'Abrazos, no balazos' ('Hugs, no bullets'). These proposals aligned with reports indicating that organised crime had exploited the vulnerability of the youth by recruiting young offenders (Salomón 2019).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, empirical evidence from El Salvador shows that vocational training programmes are cost-efficient solutions to youth crime (Dinarte Diaz et al. 2019). Compared with other groups of the population, young males are less risk adverse and hence are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of crime and violence.

AMLO, who won the presidency in 2018 by an overwhelming margin of victory, did not pursue any of his promised pro-social (pre-emptive) solutions to tackle crime.<sup>4</sup> Not only did the AMLO government rely heavily on the military to control crime, it also tasked the armed forces with building infrastructure, distributing state assistance, providing healthcare and preventing irregular migration (Carvallo 2022). As the implementation of heavy-handed approaches to crime proceeded, the country's prison population exploded but without accompanying investment in the penal sector, inhibiting the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. Like in most of Latin America, Mexican prisons are now operating beyond their capacity (Villalta and Fondevila 2019).<sup>5</sup> Living conditions in prisons have worsened, leading to more rights violations and mental and physical health issues (Felbab-Brown 2020). Additionally, there has been an increase in the development of criminal skills and the formation of criminal networks among inmates. Not only is criminal behaviour exacerbated upon inmates' release, but crime is often orchestrated from within prisons (Cruz 2016; Lessing 2021; Skarbek 2020). In Mexico, recidivism is most frequent among youth who have committed serious crimes (Reinserta 2018).

If punitive policies have consistently failed to reduce insecurity in Mexico, what type of crime-reducing policies would citizens—particularly those who have been exposed to crime and state violence—prefer to be implemented?

<sup>3</sup> Presently, there are approximately 5000 juveniles in custody in Mexico (Reinserta 2018).

<sup>4</sup> One of the first actions of the AMLO government was the creation of the 'National Guard', in which members of the Federal Police now act under military supervision and command.

<sup>5</sup> Overpopulation in some Mexican prisons exceeds 300 percent (Villalta and Fondevila 2019).

## The Argument

Exposure to criminal violence might be expected to reduce trust in the state and increase preferences for non-state service provision because victims experience first-hand the failure of the government to provide security. Citizens who have been victimised might therefore perceive the private sector or civil society to be more capable of performing the tasks that the state is unable to do and thus less supportive of state-based strategies—whether security—or welfare-based—to confront crime.<sup>6</sup> Studying citizens' public spending priorities in Mexico and Brazil, Altamirano et al. (2024) reveal that crime victims become indifferent when confronted with policy alternatives; they are less likely to distinguish if more of the government budget should be allocated to social as opposed to penal policies.

Yet most of the literature argues that crime victims will be more supportive of punitive approaches to crime, the effect being driven by increased anger about the experienced harm and trauma (Cruz and Kloppe-Santamaría 2019; García-Ponce et al. 2023, Price et al. 2019, Visconti 2020). Studies of Latin America show that victims of crime are more willing to vote for candidates endorsing 'iron-fist' policies (Holland 2013; Ventura et al. 2024; Visconti 2020). Growing levels of insecurity have also been associated with the rise of 'punitive populism' throughout the region (Villalta and Fondevilla 2019).

However, as Laterzo's (2024) recent study on Argentina and Brazil shows, when it comes to security policy, individuals (particularly victims and the fearful) make their preferences based more on the expected success of policies than on moral or ideological factors. That is, citizens update their security preferences based on their assessments of the efficacy of existing security policies (Cafferata et al. 2023), and hence support those policies which they believe are more effective in reducing crime. In the context of Mexico, where there has been security policy continuity over time and punitive policies have proven to be ineffective solutions to insecurity and violence, individuals (particularly those exposed to crime and violence) may now be more supportive of pre-emptive approaches to crime.

In some parts of Mexico, violence levels have reached epidemic proportions, similar to those in warzones (Agren 2017). The war literature (e.g. Blattman 2009; Bellows and Miguel 2009) suggests that violent experiences in the wake of civil wars, where violence experience is often traumatic, lead to pro-sociality and thus support for pre-emptive policies. This literature finds that victims are more likely to vote and to engage in community meetings as a result of post-traumatic growth. Wartime victims engage as a way to cope with trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Wartime victimisation differs from crime victimisation in many regards, but victimisation by organised crime in contexts such as Mexico shows similarities regarding the intensity of injuries, the level of traumatisation and the sense of the experience being collective more than individual. Berens and Karim (2024) find that war victims in

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<sup>6</sup> Public safety is different from other types of public goods. Healthcare and education can be substituted with private alternatives (e.g. private schools). In comparison, state-provided security is harder to fully substitute with private alternatives (López García and Maydom 2021, Flores Macías 2022).



Liberia are more supportive of social protection policies, whereas victims of quotidian crime demand greater public investment in security.

Despite empirical findings that crime leads citizens to ‘exit’ the state (Ley 2018; Trelles and Carreras 2012), various scholars have noted that crime victims politically engage and demand more goods from the state (Altamirano et al. 2020; Bateson 2012; Berens and Dallendörfer 2019). Cross-national findings from Latin America similarly show that crime victims are more supportive of public health care compared to non-victims (Altamirano et al. 2020). Also, Ventura et al. (2024) find in a conjoint experiment that political candidates in Mexico who promote investment in youth education are more likely to be supported by victims of crime. The severity of the experienced harm may solve some of the conflicting findings. When directly comparing violent with non-violent criminal experiences, victims of less violent crimes are more likely to vote (Berens and Dallendörfer 2019). Non-violent experiences might provoke anger and indignation in a similar way to violent crime, which is however met with more sober approach to address the crime problem such as pre-emptive and rehabilitative policy measures. Victims of non-violent crime may thus be more supportive of pre-emptive policies to fight crime, whereas victims of violent crime may develop a taste for more punitive approaches, when both policy instruments are compared.<sup>7</sup> As García-Ponce et al. (2023: 275) reveal with a survey experiment in Mexico, exposure to violence raises anger and support for punitive justice, especially when crimes are ‘morally outrageous’.

*Hypothesis 1a: Victims of non-violent crime* will be more supportive of pre-emptive approaches to crime than those who have not been victims of (non-violent) crime.

*Hypothesis 1b: Victims of violent crime* will be more supportive of punitive approaches to fighting crime than those who have not been victim of (violent) crime.

Similar to victims of violent crime, there is reason to expect that citizens who have not directly experienced crime but worry about victimisation demand more radical solutions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, most crime is committed with violence, meaning that people are more likely to die or be injured during the course of a crime being committed (UNODC 2023). The fear of being killed can have important psychological consequences for potential crime victims. Despite empirical findings that the fearful are more sceptical of state-based solutions (Altamirano et al. 2020), fear is also positively associated with anger and a heightened taste for authoritarian measures and extra-legal approaches (Cruz and Kloppe-Santamaría 2019; Rosen 2021; Singer et al. 2020) and for public expenditures to be allocated towards security policies (Altamirano et al. 2024). In contrast to victims, who have immediate costs to bear

<sup>7</sup> As victims of violent crime become more engaged in politics and community affairs, they may become more empathetic. This ‘empathetic identification’ may improve their understanding of the contextual reasons why individuals turn to crime and so develop a distaste for punitive policies compared to other anti-crime policies (Cafferata et al. 2023). However, such a preference change would only develop over a longer time period.

(e.g. healthcare costs, income loss or unemployment) and where the state might be an important provider of financial support, the fearful do not incur direct costs. Public security investments such as prisons may appear less costly and more immediate for the average taxpayer compared to social policies, such as schools and youth employment programmes, which also require time to become effective, leading those fearful of crime to prefer short-term punitive over long-term pre-emptive policy solutions.<sup>8</sup>

*Hypothesis 2: Citizens who fear crime and violence* will be more supportive of punitive approaches to fighting crime than those who do not fear increasing violence.

But citizens in Latin America do not only experience victimisation through criminal perpetrators. The state itself is increasingly a source of human rights violations in these violent democracies. As a result of weak oversight, police militarisation and collusion between poorly-paid security forces and organised crime groups, citizens can become victims of violence at the hands of both criminal and state perpetrators. In Mexico, there is a ‘grey zone’ of criminality with members of the military and the local police acting in collusion with organised crime groups (Trejo and Ley 2020). Gingerich and Oliveros (2018) find that citizens in Costa Rica who experience victimisation by state authorities are less inclined to report crimes, indicating that state abuse leads citizens to refrain from cooperating with the state on anti-crime efforts. Not only have crime reporting rates experienced historic lows in Mexico, but as crime-fighting has become more aggressive, human rights abuses by state agents (including the military) have increased (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2024). We thus expect that compared to other individuals, people who have known (or experienced) abuse by state security agents to be either against all type of security policy extension or, if anything, to be indifferent to pre-emptive solutions to crime.<sup>9</sup> Compared to crime victimisation, abuse by state institutions should reduce support for state-based solutions because it is the state itself that fails to adhere to its own regulatory framework and essentially violates the social contract.

*Hypothesis 3: Citizens who know of (or have experience with) state violence* will be indifferent of pre-emptive approaches to fighting crime and reject punitive measures compared to those who do not know of (or have experience with) state violence.

Table 1 summarises our theoretical framework.

<sup>8</sup> Hypotheses 1a–1b were pre-registered in the PAP 20220115AA as Prediction E5.2. and E5.2a–2b. Hypothesis 2 was pre-registered as E5.2c.

<sup>9</sup> Hypothesis 3 was pre-registered in the PAP 20220115AA as Prediction E5.2d. We slightly modified the prediction, focusing on the indifference aspect. We registered six predictions for this vignette experiment (E5 in the PAP) for average respondents, crime victims, fearful citizens and victims of state abuse (see SM section H).

**Table 1** Theoretical framework

Group	Pre-emptive policy	Punitive policy	Hypothesis
Violent crime victim	(-)	(+)	H1a
Non-violent crime victim	(+)	(-)	H1b
Fearful	(-)	(+)	H2
State abuse victim	n.s.	(-)	H3

N.S. not significant

## Empirical Setup

To test our hypotheses, we employed a vignette experiment embedded in an original online survey conducted in Mexico in the winter of 2021. Survey responses were collected via the Pollfish platform. In the context of a global pandemic, collecting data online was preferable to ensure the safety of participants and enumerators (see supplementary material [SM hereafter] for an extensive discussion of the sampling method). Convenience samples are commonly used in the study of security police preferences (Huber and Gunderson 2023). Although the survey experiment proposed here identifies the causal impact of the randomised treatments (Druckman and Kam 2011; Mullinix et al. 2015), we cannot assume that this causal effect applies to the average Mexican respondent because respondents self-select into the sample. The survey experiment did not involve any potential physical or emotional risk of harm for our respondents and they gave informed consent prior to taking part in the study. Upon completing the survey, respondents received a small reward from Pollfish as indicated in the consent form. We implemented several quality control techniques prior to and during data collection, including pre-tests, attention checks and time stamps to identify straight-liners.

The final sample consisted of 2401 Mexican citizens aged 18 or above, living in Mexico at the time of the survey, who had one of Pollfish's 140,000 partner apps installed on their mobile phone or tablet computer. A quota ensured that half of our respondents were female.<sup>10</sup> When compared to Mexico's 2020 Census population, respondents in our sample have attained a higher level of education on average and are more likely to be middle class, have an internet connection at home and work in the formal sector (see SM, Section C). Reported results are unweighted.

In total, our questionnaire included 50 questions in Spanish and had an average response time of 20 minutes. In order to pre-test the survey, we applied quality control techniques (Groves et al. 2011). We performed cognitive interviews (<5) and a pre-test involving 10 participants from the target population (but not included in

<sup>10</sup> The survey oversampled Mexican households with a family member in the US (50/50) because of an interest in studying migrant household attitudes. In order to ensure that our analysis is not under-powered, we decided to work with the entire sample and add controls for migrant and remittance-receiving households in the analysis below.

the Pollfish sample). We revised the item wording of some the questions after this evaluation of the questionnaire.

## The Experiment

When violence is widespread, efficiency considerations for an increase of the state's security apparatus might explain support for the expansion of state security forces. To investigate citizens' support for increasing state security forces, we create a survey vignette in which we randomly vary the character of complementary policies to be either pre-emptive or punitive and the territorial implementation of state security force expansion to be either generalised or targeted in high-crime hot spots. By considering different types of pre-emptive policy solutions (e.g. youth employment, education programmes) and hybrid approaches (e.g. increased investment in prisons with rehabilitation programmes), our study presents a novel analytical strategy.

We ask respondents: 'On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree", to what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'To reduce and control crime <territorial manipulation>, it is necessary to have more state security officers on the streets <complementary policy manipulation>'. The control group receives empty fields. In the complementary policy manipulation, we randomly vary the nature of the policy strategy. In line with Ventura et al. (2024), we examine various types of punitive and pre-emptive policies. We suggest the following pre-emptive social policy solutions: (T1a) 'and implement vocational and training programmes for the youth' and (T1b) and 'create more employment opportunities for at-risk young people'. As a hybrid solution, we offer a rehabilitative penal policy solution: (T1c) 'invest more in correction and detention centres, with better living conditions and in-prison rehabilitation programmes'. As punitive penal policy solutions we offer: (T1d) and 'enact more severe laws, impose harsher punishments and longer prison terms' and (T1e) 'with law-enforcement agents punishing all infractions of the law, no matter how insignificant they may seem, conducting raids, enforcing curfews, and implementing other zero-tolerance policies'.

These policy options have been previously implemented or suggested by politicians in Mexico, including the current president (see Ventura et al. 2024 for further examples). Our experiment and its treatments thus mirror real-life scenarios in the country. We deliberately combine an expansion in security forces with pre-emptive policy instruments because, given the high level of crime in Mexico, a purely pre-emptive strategy is unlikely to be met with much enthusiasm nor considered a viable strategy (Ivey 2023; Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). To suggest a more realistic approach, we thus offer a combination of security force expansion with social or penal policy instruments. Our vignette experiment thus contributes to the literature by unpacking different policy tools to address crime (see Ventura et al. 2024).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Section D in the SM shows that there is balance across control and treatment groups on observable characteristics (Tables A3–A4, SM).

In the territorial dimension, we randomly vary the geographical scope of the policy, distinguishing between ‘in the most violent municipalities of the country’ from the control group who are offered an implicitly nationwide solution.

The total vignette population consists of  $2 \times 6 = 12$  combinations which were randomly presented to respondents as text vignettes. We use a between-subjects design, in which respondents only reply to one vignette, to reduce cognitive burden and survey fatigue. In this paper, our analytical focus is on the policy strategy manipulation.<sup>12</sup> Estimation results for the geographical character of the policy and its interactions with accompanying policies are reported in the SM (see sections E and F, SM).

We refer to ‘state security forces’ instead of specific agencies (like the police or the military) to better reflect the state security landscape in Mexico. Several municipalities in the country either lack their own police forces, have agreements with state governors to outsource police functions to the state police or have requested assistance from the Armed Forces and/or the National Guard to carry out policing duties. Our approach is consistent with similar experiments conducted in Mexico, which refer to ‘law-enforcement agents’ when assessing citizens’ security policy preferences (Flores Macías and Zarkin 2022).

Most respondents in our sample (67.1%) ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the statement that in order to reduce crime, it is necessary to increase the number of security officers in the streets, 19.7% neither agree nor disagree, and 13.2% of respondents disagree (see Figure A1, SM). Although our sample is not representative of the Mexican population, strong support for increasing state security presence in the streets is consistent with recent nationwide polls (Mitofsky 2022).

## Subgroup Variables

We measure crime victimisation with a standard survey question about crime victimisation in the past 12 months with a dichotomous response option. Subsequently, we asked respondents about the nature of the crime they have experienced, distinguishing between a ‘crime committed with violence or the threat thereof’ from a ‘crime committed with no violence or the threat thereof’ to identify victims of violent and non-violent forms of crime (see Berens and Dallendörfer 2019). 55.3% of respondents in our sample had not experienced crime in the 12 months prior to the survey, 29.5% had experienced crime with violence and 15.2% had experienced non-violent forms of crime.

We operationalise fear of crime as perceptions of insecurity at the neighbourhood and state level: ‘How safe do you feel in the state of Mexico where you live?’. The

<sup>12</sup> We expect that those who have experienced crime, state abuse or are fearful of crime to be less supportive than non-victims and non-fearful of targeted security expansion to fight crime. This expectation was pre-registered as E5.2d. We add ‘state abuse’ in the assumption and the respective analyses to balance the theoretical approach for all three hypotheses. High-crime localities might not only signal a need for state security expansion, but also be taken as a proof of weak state capacity and authorities’ collusion with organised crime. Non-victims, who have fewer individual experiences with crime and are thus less aware of possible collusion between crime and state authorities, may follow an efficiency-based evaluation and become more supportive of an expansion of state security forces in high-crime localities than nationwide. In contrast, victims of crime and state abuse and also the fearful may prefer nationwide strategies over targeted ones.

response scale ranges from 1-very unsafe to 5-very safe. We dichotomise the variable into 1-unsafe (1–2) and 0-otherwise (3–5). In our sample, 56.1% of respondents reported feeling (very) unsafe in the state where they live in. Since fear of crime might lead to behavioural changes, we also use a measure based on the response to the question: ‘Have you changed any habit or routine out of fear of crime? For example, change the route to work, stop going out in the evening, etc.’ The response scale is dichotomous (yes/no). In our sample, this applies to 68% of respondents.<sup>13</sup> We report estimation results for fear of crime below and for the behavioural measure in the SM (section F, Table A10). Fear of crime and behavioural change are positively correlated ( $\rho_1=0.28$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), but actual victimisation and the behavioural measure correlate even stronger ( $\rho_2=0.34$ ,  $p<0.000$ ), which is why the behavioural measure might rather be indicative of previous experiences with crime as compared to the insecurity perception measure (see Table A3, SM). This is why we focus on fear of crime below.

To identify victims of state violence, we ask respondents: ‘In the last 12 months, have you or someone in your family heard, or known of someone close who has suffered from physical or verbal abuse by state officers (e.g. police) when being arrested?’ Since violence experienced through the state’s security apparatus is a sensitive topic, we used an indirect question so that victims may find it easier to admit such an experience in a survey situation. 42.5% of our sample knows someone who has suffered from physical or verbal abuse by state security officers.

Crime experience, fear of crime and state abuse are positively and significantly correlated, but the correlation between fear and (state) victimisation is weaker (see Table A2, SM). As Altamirano et al. (2020) show, fear of crime and crime victimisation are in many cases even unrelated, with fear being much more widespread than actual victimisation. 58% of respondents who report crime victimisation also confirm to the state abuse item (see Table A3, SM). 55% of those who feel unsafe are also victims of crime (Table A3) and 50% of the fearful report that they know someone who has received state abuse.

## Statistical Modelling

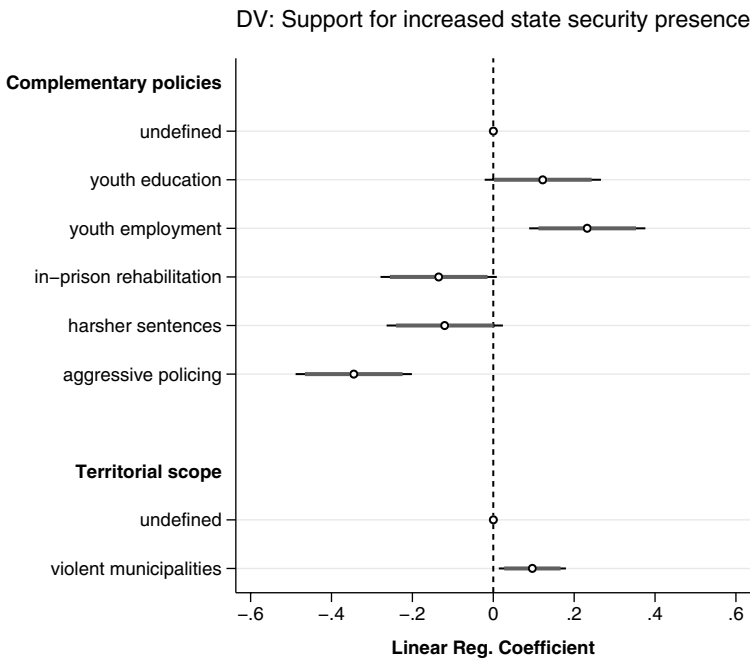
We analyse the data using ordinary least square (OLS) regression models in which our dependent variable is the respondent’s support for increasing state security forces, and our independent variables are the vignette dimensions described above. We are interested in heterogeneous treatment effects for victims of violent versus non-violent crime and non-victims, fearful versus non-fearful citizens and victims of state-abuse versus non-state-abuse-victims. We also consider double treatment, that is, having experienced both criminal and state authorities as perpetrators of violence. We estimate the models using interactive terms between our treatment effects and respondents’ experiences with crime, violence, state abuse and feelings of insecurity. Because the characteristics that distinguish subgroups might be endogenous, subgroup comparisons of the experiment’s estimates should not be interpreted as causal effects (Kam & Trussler 2017).

<sup>13</sup> This accords with nationwide statistics (ENVIPE 2022).

Estimation results with alternative model specifications—(ordered) probit and (ordered) logit regression—are provided in the SM (Table A7). We also conduct a set of robustness tests to analyse the sensitivity of our findings (Table A8, SM). We include a battery of socioeconomic and demographic covariates, such as respondent's age, marital status, income level, employment status, household migration and level of education. As additional controls, we include individual perceptions of the national and the household economy (Singer et al. 2020), ideological self-placement (Holland 2013), support for the incumbent political party, religiosity, ethnicity (Ley et al. 2019) and a variable index measuring how easy respondents think that it is to bribe law-enforcement officers. Since violence is unevenly distributed across Mexico, our models also account for state fixed effects. We use two-tailed tests for the contrasts of interest at the  $p < 0.05$  level (Table A15, SM).

## Results

We are interested in understanding the circumstances under which individuals are more likely to endorse increasing the presence of state security forces in the streets when coupled with different social or security measures. Regression results for the average respondent are reported in the SM (Table A6) and displayed graphically in Fig. 1 below.



**Fig. 1** Average marginal effects of experimental attributes on support for increased state security presence. Source: Mexico Pollfish Survey 2021/22. Note: Predictive margins with 90% and 95% confidence intervals

We find positive and significant effects on support for state security force expansion when respondents are exposed to pre-emptive policy treatments *youth employment* and *youth education programmes* as crime-reducing strategies. In comparison to the baseline, support for increased state security presence increases by +0.12 points when this policy is complemented by youth education programmes, and by +0.23 points when paired with youth employment programmes. Telling respondents that increased state security presence would be accompanied by *harsher punishment* for criminals reduces support for this policy, but the result is not statistically significant. Interestingly, support for state security expansion reduces by -0.14 points when this policy is coupled with *spending on prisons* and *rehabilitation programmes* and by -0.35 points when it is paired with *aggressive policing* measures.

Our findings indicate that for our sample (which is relatively more urban and highly educated than the Mexican population), *aggressive policing* is a policy that should be avoided. As discussed earlier, militarisation has consistently proven ineffective in curbing crime and violence, while at the same time increasing the amount of human rights abuse (Flores Macías and Zarkin 2024). Our findings accord with recent work by Masullo and Morisi (2024), who show that support for militarisation reduces when military operations cause civilian casualties in a nationwide representative survey. It is thus possible, that respondents associate aggressive policing approaches with heightened violence, similar to those observed in civil war contexts.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to the territorial manipulation, we find that when respondents are told that increased state security presence would be implemented only in the most violent municipalities of the country, there is an increase in average support for the policy. We find no significant interaction effects between the main effects of the character of security policies and its territorial scope (Table A6, SM).

## Subgroup Analysis

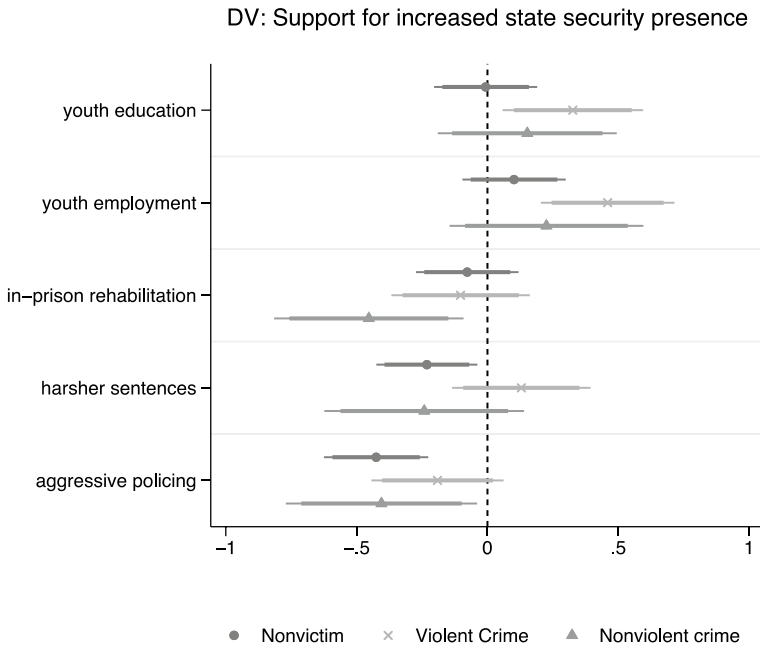
Since all our hypotheses refer to subgroup effects, we now explore how the impacts of the complementary policy treatments vary based on respondents' exposure to state and criminal victimisation and fear of insecurity. Results are displayed graphically in Figs. 2, 3, and 4 below. Full regression models and *t*-tests from the subgroup analysis are reported in the SM (Section F)

## Crime Victimisation

Figure 2 illustrates the marginal effects of the complementary policy treatments by respondents' victimisation experiences (Table A9, SM). Victims of violent crime become more supportive of increased state security presence when this policy is paired with the conditions to invest in *youth education* ( $\Delta_{\text{violent crime}} = 0.326$ ) and *youth employment programmes* ( $\Delta_{\text{violent crime}} = 0.459$ ). However, these

<sup>14</sup> We thank one of the reviewers for this insight.





**Fig. 2** Conditional marginal effects of experimental attributes by crime victimisation experiences. Source: Mexico Pollfish Survey 2021/22. Note: Predictive margins with 90% and 95% confidence intervals

pre-emptive policy treatments do not elicit any significant reaction from non-violent crime victims and non-victims. Differences between violent crime victims and non-victims are moreover significant (education programmes, 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.333,  $p < 0.05$ ; employment programmes, 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.358,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that experiencing violent crime matters for supporting pre-emptive policy preferences.

When respondents are made aware of a hybrid policy, such as increased investment in *prisons with a rehabilitative component* and *better living conditions*, victims of non-violent crime become less supportive ( $\Delta_{\text{non-violent crime}} = -0.453$ ), whereas non-victims and victims of violent crime remain indifferent.

When analysing reactions to purely punitive solutions, we find that *harsher sentences* lower support for increased state security presence for non-victims ( $\Delta_{\text{nonvictims}} = -0.231$ ), but not for victims of both violent and non-violent crime. This aligns with Ventura et al.'s (2024) finding that support for death penalty policies varies with experiences of victimisation.

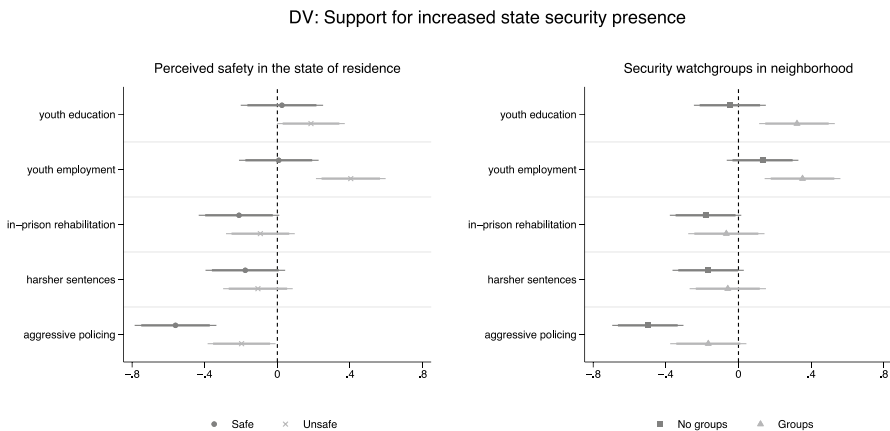
Lastly, when respondents are made aware that increased state security presence would be paired with *aggressive policing* measures, support for state security presence decreases for non-victims ( $\Delta_{\text{nonvictims}} = -0.425$ ) and victims of non-violent crime ( $\Delta_{\text{non-violent crime victims}} = -0.405$ ), but victims of violent crimes show no difference. Yet differences between non-victims and violent or non-violent crime victims are not significant (2<sup>nd</sup> difference = ns). Based on these results, we can only

partially support Hypothesis 1a on victims of non-violent crime and have to reject Hypothesis 1b on victims of violent crime. In contrast to our expectations, victims of violent crime are less likely to support punitive policies. Our results suggest that victims of violent crime support state security force expansion when coupled with pre-emptive policy strategies to address the crime problem. Victims of non-violent crime are indifferent towards pre-emptive measures but they dislike punitive instruments; however, this is the same for non-victims.

### Fear of Crime

Figure 3 displays the marginal effects of the complementary policy treatments by respondents' feelings of insecurity (Table A10, SM). There are significant differences regarding pre-emptive and punitive solutions for the fearful compared with the non-fearful. The *education*, *prison rehabilitation* and *harsher sentence* treatments do not elicit significantly different reactions between those who feel safe in the state they live and those who do not. However, the *employment* condition is more favoured by those who feel unsafe compared with those who feel safe ( $\Delta_{\text{unsafe}} = 0.404$ , 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.396,  $p < 0.01$ ). When presented with the *aggressive policing* treatment, support for increasing state security presence is lower for both groups, although by a smaller magnitude for those feeling unsafe than for those feeling safe in the state they live in ( $\Delta_{\text{safe}} = -0.561$ , 2<sup>nd</sup> difference =  $-0.364$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Similar patterns are detected when considering individuals' changed behaviour due to fear of crime as alternative variables (Table A11, SM).

We thus find a pattern similar to that found for victims of (violent) crime. Crime-fearing citizens react positively to increasing state security presence if this policy is complemented by welfare-preventative policies. Insecurity is not incompatible with pre-emptive policy solutions to crime. It may depend on the policy set, which distinguishes our experimental design from previous studies.



**Fig. 3** Conditional marginal effects of experimental attributes by feelings of insecurity. Source: Mexico Pollfish Survey 2021/22. Note: Predictive margins with 90% and 95% confidence intervals

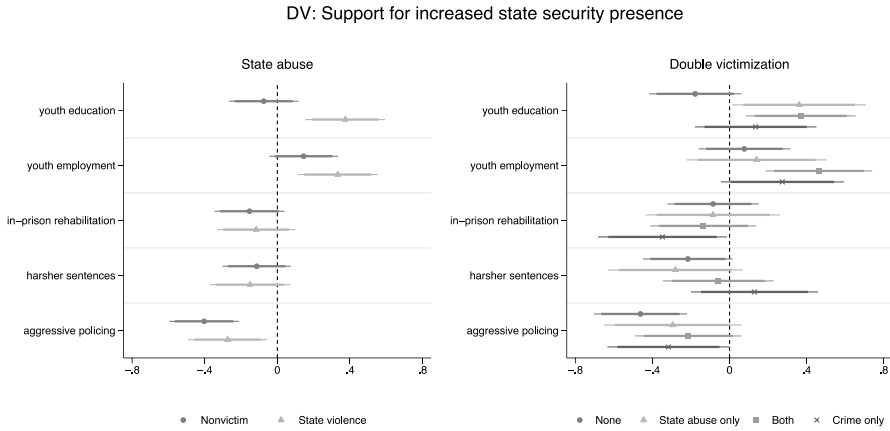
To check the validity of these results, we study the heterogeneous response to the treatments according to whether respondents live in neighbourhoods where there are watch groups (Table A12, SM).<sup>15</sup> Respondents who have experienced crime or feel threatened or insecure are more likely to coordinate and join these groups which sometimes turn violent and use extralegal justice when punishing crime. Thus, citizens in watch groups provide their own supply of security. We find that those living in neighbourhoods with watch groups become more supportive of increasing state security forces when they know that this policy will be complemented by youth education programmes ( $\Delta_{\text{vigilante}} = -0.322$ , 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.370,  $p < 0.05$ ) but do not show significant reactions to the punitive treatments. This finding refutes H2.

While citizens who fear crime may be more supportive of punitive approaches to fighting crime by joining watch groups, based on the findings for pre-emptive solution strategies, the analysis might allude to an alternative mechanism. It might be the case that the fearful reveal a diminished taste for punitiveness because they already provide punitive solutions themselves by engaging in self-defence organisations or seeing people in their neighbourhood involved. Pre-emptive policy solutions may be thus be welcomed as a complementary rather than an alternative approach. Offering different policy combinations thus sheds light on the complexity behind policy solutions to crime and cautions against premature conclusions that fear automatically raises support for punitiveness across the board. Those who are fearful of crime (either because of changed behaviour or engagement in watch groups in the neighbourhoods and own supply of punitive measures) become more supportive of increased state security presence when this policy is paired with increased spending on social programmes for the youth. Our results not only corroborate but also add nuance to previous studies in Mexico, which found that the fearful want more public spending on security policy and education (Altamirano et al. 2024: 144).

## State Abuse

Figure 4 displays the marginal effects of the complementary policy treatments by respondents' exposure to abuse by state security forces (Table A13, SM). Compared to other individuals, victims of state abuse show higher levels of support for increasing state security presence when exposed to the *youth education* treatment ( $\Delta_{\text{abuse}} = 0.374$ , 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.449,  $p < 0.01$ ). Similar results are found when considering the payment of bribes to state security officers. Relative to other individuals, those who reported having paid a bribe to state security officers exhibit higher levels of support for expanding the state security forces, when they are aware that this policy will be accompanied by youth education ( $\Delta_{\text{bribe}} = 0.304$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.366,  $p < 0.05$ ) and youth employment interventions ( $\Delta_{\text{bribe}} = 0.369$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.263,  $p < 0.10$ ). These findings indicate that, like crime victims, victims of state abuse favour pre-emptive measures.

<sup>15</sup> We asked respondents: 'Have you organized with others into watch or protection groups in your neighborhood?' The response scale is dichotomous (yes/no).



**Fig. 4** Conditional marginal effects of experimental attributes by exposure to state abuse. Source: Mexico Pollfish Survey 2021/22. Note: Predictive margins with 90% and 95% confidence intervals

Since crime groups often act in collusion with state officers (Trejo and Ley 2020), one may ask what individuals prefer when considering experiences with both state abuse and crime. More than 61% of those who reported having experienced or heard of state abuse have also experienced crime by non-state actors (see cross-table A3, SM). We find significant reactions to the complementary policy treatments based on respondents’ double victimisation (Table A14, SM). Compared to non-victims, those who have experienced only state abuse show higher levels of support for increasing state security presence when they are exposed to the *education* treatment ( $\Delta_{\text{abuse only}} = 0.361$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.539,  $p < 0.05$ ), but not to the *employment* treatment. Those who have experienced *both* crime and state abuse have positive reactions to both the education ( $\Delta_{\text{both}} = 0.369$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.547,  $p < 0.01$ ) and employment treatments ( $\Delta_{\text{both}} = 0.463$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = 0.387,  $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, those who have experienced only crime react negatively to the *in-prison rehabilitation* treatment ( $\Delta_{\text{crime only}} = 0.348$ ; 2<sup>nd</sup> difference = ns). Support for pre-emptive policies as a crime-reducing policy thus appears to be mainly driven by experiences with state abuse.

In contrast to H3, we find that state abuse victims are indifferent to punitive solutions, and more supportive of pre-emptive solutions. That is, state abuse does not lead to withdrawal from the state but raises support for welfare policy solutions. Importantly, support is closely linked for policy solutions to be pre-emptive in nature, especially when it comes to education.

## Conclusion

Existing literature draws contradictory expectations about how criminal violence influences citizens’ political behaviour and policy preferences. We revisit these disagreements, focusing on citizens’ preferences for security policy by directly

comparing the appeal for different policy solutions that range from punitive to pre-emptive and rehabilitative ones. Making use of an online vignette survey experiment, we find empirical evidence that, in the Mexican context, crime victimisation is unlikely to reduce the demand for state involvement in security service provision. Our results indicate that feelings of insecurity and crime and (state) violence experiences are related to stronger preferences for coupling security force expansion with pre-emptive crime-reducing policies. Even those individuals organising themselves in security watch groups in their neighbourhood would prefer the state to implement social policies to reduce crime—something that individuals would find difficult to organise or finance without state involvement. In this scenario, pro-social policies would be seen as *complements* rather than substitutes for punitive policies or extra-legal measures.

Keeping in mind that our sample consists of above-average educated and above-average income Mexican citizens, our findings suggest that these citizens do not abandon welfare state solutions in the wake of government failure, either because of crime victimisation or direct abusive behaviour of the public security apparatus. Consistent with the findings of Ventura et al. (2024), our analysis reveals that even support for various punitive policies is not uniform among victims and those fearful of crime. Overall, these findings provide a more nuanced view about how victimisation—by organised crime, petty crime and the state—conditions individual preferences for the role of government in crime-fighting.

One limitation of our study is that we can only infer the average treatment effect for Mexicans with above-average levels of education and income. However, considering that income and education are positively associated with turnout and political engagement, knowing how exposure to (state) violence influences policy preferences of the better educated remains highly relevant. Nevertheless, responses from social strata with poor education might differ. Our experiment stands out for pairing support for security force expansion with varying pre-emptive and punitive policy responses. Researchers and policymakers could replicate the experiment outlined here using more representative samples in Mexico but also in other parts of Latin America. Further research could productively address how much leverage policymakers may have for pursuing combined policy strategies and under what conditions.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-024-09445-z>.

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**Data Availability** Replication data and code are available from Berens et al. (2024).

## Declarations

**IRB Approval** Ethical approval was obtained from Birkbeck College, University of London, by Barry Maydom. Further details are available on request from the Research Ethics Officer of the School of Social Sciences at Birkbeck College, University of London, quoting reference number BKKPOL2021/22-02.

**PAP** The pre-analysis plan 20220115AA is registered on EGAP (OSF, registration <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XUS8Y>); the project is based on Study 5 Experiment E5.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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