



# UNDERSTANDING THE LINKS BETWEEN SOCIAL COHESION AND VIOLENCE

## Evidence from Niger

MARCH 2021

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Improving social cohesion has become a cornerstone of violence prevention and peacebuilding, and, more recently, efforts to combat violent extremism around the world.<sup>1</sup> Building trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared purpose between historically-divided individuals and groups in society – and between society and the state – is generally desirable within itself.<sup>2</sup> Yet donors, policymakers, and practitioners often focus on these tasks because they see them as essential for mitigating political and social conflict and establishing the foundations for a sustainable peace. While there is a growing push to understand “what works” to strengthen social cohesion,<sup>3</sup> there is limited evidence regarding the actual relationship between social cohesion and violent conflict in different contexts.<sup>4</sup> To what extent are individuals and communities that exhibit higher levels of social cohesion actually less likely to experience, support, or participate in violence? What dimensions of social cohesion matter most for violence outcomes, and under what conditions?

## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis from survey data shows that:

- Only some dimensions of social cohesion are associated with propensity towards violence. In particular, there is a clear relationship between a lack of **trust** - especially around the sharing and management of natural resources - and support for the use of violence.
- Only **positive** inter-group interactions are linked to reduced support for violence.
- Aspects of both **vertical** (state-society) and **horizontal** (inter-community) cohesion are linked to reduced support for violence.

Peacebuilding programs therefore need to:

- Emphasize trust-building around the central issues driving social tensions.
- Prioritize the quality, not the quantity, of interactions between communities.
- Focus on improving government-society relations in addition to inter-group relations.

To shed some light on these questions, this brief presents an analysis of baseline data from Mercy Corps’ USAID-funded Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased social cohesion Efforts (PEACE) program, being implemented in the Tillabéri region of Niger.<sup>5</sup> The baseline survey collected data on several dimensions of social cohesion (Table 1) and respondents’ perceptions of, and experiences with, conflict and violence.<sup>6</sup> In addition to *horizontal* cohesion (between groups and communities), the survey also explored *vertical* cohesion (between communities and the government). Understanding these linkages has implications for when, where, and how practitioners should engage in social cohesion programming - and what aspects they should focus on.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, United Nations and World Bank (2018); Catholic Relief Services (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Research has demonstrated, for example, a number of ways that social cohesion can help build community and household resilience to economic and environmental shocks and stresses (Kurtz and McMahon 2015; Aldrich 2012; Kim et al. 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Sonnenfeld et al. 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The few studies that exist find that different dimensions of social capital or social cohesion have different and sometimes contrasting relationships with political violence. See Alcorta et al. (2020), Bhavnani & Backer (2007), and Chapman (2008).

<sup>5</sup> This is the second research brief on the drivers and consequences of social cohesion in Niger based on data from the PEACE baseline study. The first research brief, which examines the factors that contribute to local-level variation in social cohesion in Tillabéri, was published as part of the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) series. See Lichtenheld et al. (2021).

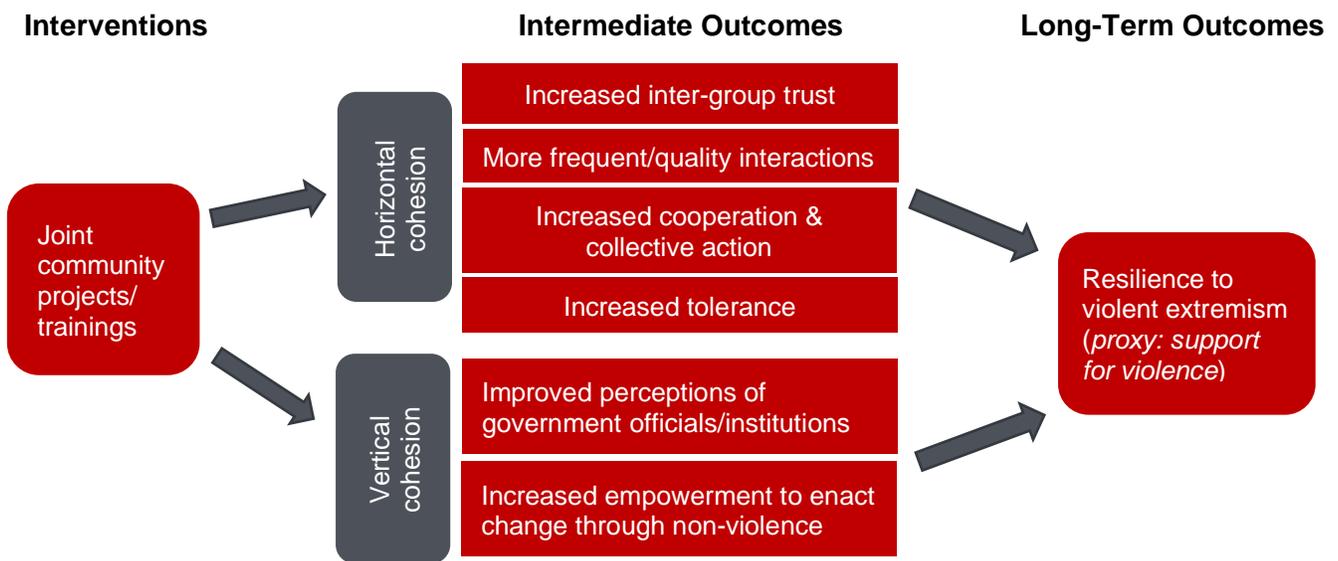
<sup>6</sup> Mercy Corps defines social cohesion as *a sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper* (Kim et al. 2020).

# Program Context

The Tillabéri region of Niger, hindered by poor service delivery, weak governance, and corruption, has suffered from increasing violent conflict driven by a combination of socio-economic crisis, climate shocks, shifting migration patterns, and the spillover of armed group activity from neighboring Mali, including violent extremist organizations (VEOs). As environmental stressors reduce the availability of natural resources, VEOs compound the issue by further restricting the movement of pastoralists' access to land and water. The threat of losing already limited resources negatively impacts the livelihoods of both pastoralists and agriculturalists, fostering economic and physical insecurity and increasing tensions and competition between livelihood groups, often along ethnic lines. These tensions, and the threat of banditry and VEO attacks, expands communities' reliance on ethnic self-defense groups, which correspondingly increases the prevalence of arms and the potential for violence in the region. There is deep concern that VEOs are capitalizing on the growing fear and hostility between different groups, along with feelings of marginalization, mistrust, and resentment against the government, to boost recruitment and expand their influence.

The PEACE program seeks to respond to these concerns. Through the program, Mercy Corps and its local partner, Cercle Dev, are supporting communities in the development and implementation of joint community projects aimed at strengthening social cohesion along ethnic, citizen-government, and inter-generational lines.

FIGURE 1: PEACE PROGRAM THEORY OF CHANGE



## Research Question and Theory of Change

PEACE's theory of change posits that *if* communities are fully involved in the assessments, design, and implementation of community projects, *and* the community projects work to bring diverse communities together to strengthen trust, improve social interactions, facilitate cooperation, and support tolerance, *then* community resilience to violent extremism will improve. By strengthening ties between social groups and between communities and leaders, program activities will make it more difficult for VEOs to manipulate inter-

group and governance-related grievances to recruit new members and garner support.<sup>7</sup> Many social cohesion programs in conflict-affected settings take a similar community-driven development (CDD) approach, though the actual impact of these programs on social cohesion and violence-related outcomes is mixed.<sup>8</sup> The key assumption underlying this theory of change is that a lack of horizontal and vertical cohesion is a key driver of support for violence.<sup>9</sup> This brief uses baseline data to test this assumption and interrogate the link between the program’s intermediate and long-term outcomes (Figure 1).

## Data and Methods

This brief draws on baseline survey data for Mercy Corps’ PEACE program, in which 12–15 individuals were surveyed in each of the 40 villages where the program is operating, for a total sample of 575 respondents.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of the survey was to 1) provide a baseline measure of social cohesion based on individual-level attitudes and behaviors; and 2) identify the factors related to social cohesion that appear to contribute to the risk of violence. The survey included questions that measure six underlying aspects of social cohesion: trust, tolerance, inclusion, cooperation, interactions between ethnic groups, and collective action.<sup>11</sup> The survey also asked whether respondents thought violence is sometimes necessary to defend a social or political cause. Due to the risks and sensitivities of asking people about violent extremism - and communities’ general reluctance to openly discuss VEOs - we used support for violence as a proxy measure. The findings discussed below are based on an analysis of the survey results - controlling for respondent demographics - using logistic regression (see annex for details). We also controlled for whether respondents reported that their community had *experienced* conflict with other groups in the past 24 months. Since these relationships are based on correlations, they cannot be interpreted as causal.

TABLE 1: SURVEY QUESTIONS MEASURING SOCIAL COHESION

Dimension	Survey Question
Trust	Do you feel at ease having a member of other ethnic groups (a) watch your animals, (b) work in your field, (c) trade with you, and/or (d) marry a close relative?
Interaction	How frequently do you interact with members of other ethnic groups? Are these interactions mostly positive?
Tolerance	What is your general perception of members of other ethnic groups? Are you able to accept an idea/principle/advice from other groups that differ from your rules/principles?
Collective Action	Are you willing to work on an activity of common interest with a member of other groups?

<sup>7</sup> As cleavages along ethnic, citizen-government, and inter-generational lines widen, groups become more divided, stereotyping and scapegoating becomes normalized, and people feel their group’s identity is threatened. This division and perception of threat then creates space and opportunities for VEO recruitment.

<sup>8</sup> For a review of this evidence, see Mercy Corps 2017b.

<sup>9</sup> As explained in the next section, due to the risks and sensitivities of asking people about violent extremism, we used support for violence as a proxy for one’s vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment by VEOs.

<sup>10</sup> The sample size for some questions is lower due to differences in response rates across questions.

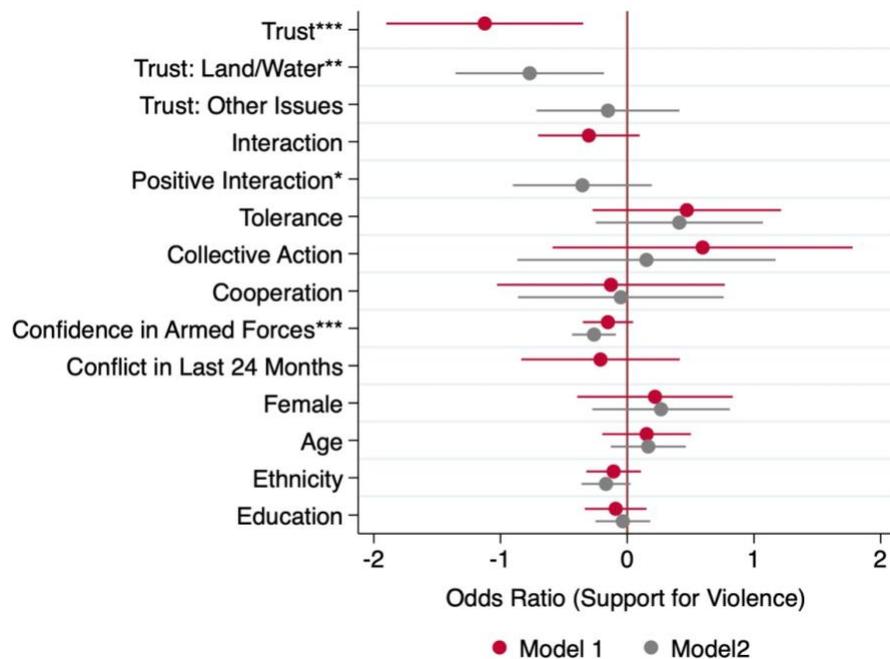
<sup>11</sup> Mercy Corps developed this six-dimension framework for social cohesion with a particular emphasis on inter-group social cohesion, in 2016. These factors seek to capture indicators along three axes of social cohesion: relationships between groups, behaviors, and attitudes. Mercy Corps is currently updating its social cohesion framework and guidance, building on the definitions and measurement strategies used in Kim et al (2020).

Cooperation	Do you believe there are benefits to cooperating with all the groups that exist in your community?
Confidence in Armed Forces	How much confidence do you have in the Nigerien Armed Forces?

## Key Findings

- **There is a strong negative association between trust and support for violence.** Respondents who reported higher levels of intergroup trust were generally less likely to support the use of violence. This relationship was statistically significant across multiple indicators of trust, including whether respondents were comfortable with members of other groups watching their animals, working in their fields, trading with them, or marrying a close relative. Critically, these results held even when controlling for whether respondents reported that their communities had *experienced* conflict with other groups. This suggests that building trust is particularly important - and that it can influence support for violence regardless of the level of inter-group conflict.

TABLE 2: SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE: LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS



*Note:* Coefficient plot for ordered logistic regressions. Model 1 includes *trust* and frequency of *interaction* with other groups as independent variables, while Model 2 replaces those variables with separate indicators of trust over certain issues (*land/water* and *other*) and whether respondents reported *positive interactions* with other groups. Point estimates greater than 0 indicate more support for violence (positive relationship with the variable in question) and estimates less than zero indicate less support (negative relationship). Bars represented 95% confidence intervals. Stars denote statistically significant results with \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

- **Mistrust over land and water is especially linked to support for violence.** Those who reported a lack of trust over natural resources - as opposed to other issues like education - were more likely to say that violence is sometimes justified for a political/social cause (see Model 2, Table 2). This is not surprising, since disputes over land and water have been at the center of intercommunal conflict in Tillabéri. Violence has often erupted over water rights and access, and between farmers and herders competing over land for agricultural cultivation and animal grazing. This indicates that it is not just a lack of trust in general, but what resources groups and communities lack trust over, that matters.<sup>12</sup>
- **Positive interactions reduced support for violence, but interactions of any kind did not.** There was no statistically significant relationship between how frequently respondents reported interacting with other groups and their support for violence. Yet those who reported *positive* interactions were significantly less likely to support the use of violence. This finding underscores the fact that interaction creates opportunities to enhance cohesion - and to undermine it, by creating openings for disagreements and disputes. While interaction-focused activities in social cohesion programs are generally motivated by the Contact Hypothesis, there is a debate over whether contact of any sort, or contact under “ideal circumstances” - two groups coming together with a common goal, having equal status, and cooperating with each other - can promote cohesion and peace.<sup>13</sup> The results of this analysis lend support to the latter. The quality of interactions between groups, as opposed to the quantity of them, seem important for reducing violence.
- **Other dimensions of social cohesion had little influence on violence.** There was no statistically significant relationship between different measures of *tolerance* - including whether respondents were willing to consider ideas, principles, or advice from other groups, and how they felt about the cohabitation of different ethnic or livelihood groups in their community - and support for violence. The results for indicators of *collective action* and *cooperation* were similarly insignificant. Individuals and communities that were willing to work on activities of common interest, and those who saw benefits to cooperating with other groups, were no more or less violence-prone or violence-supporting than others. Looking at relationships across dimensions of social cohesion, there was only a weak link between trust and aspects of cohesion like cooperation and collective action. While these action-oriented dimensions may take time to develop, these results raise questions about how essential they are for changing violence-related outcomes. The link between collective action, cooperation, and trust needs to be examined and clarified – not assumed.
- **The greater one’s confidence in the armed forces, the less they supported violence, even when controlling for the level of military presence in their village.** The most robust finding concerned the link between perceptions of security forces and support for violence. This relationship could run in both directions, as those who are more supportive of violence may have lower opinions of security personnel - perhaps because they have had more frequent (and potentially negative) run-ins with the armed forces. Yet this finding held regardless of how active respondents reported the military was in their village. This is consistent with other research showing that resentment towards security actors – due to their use of repression or failure to protect civilians – has been a critical factor in youth radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist organizations.<sup>14</sup> Although a lack of cohesion

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<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with Sonnenfeld et al. (2021)’s finding in its systematic evidence review of social cohesion programs that failing to identify the particular factors blocking intergroup cohesion has hindered the effectiveness of these programs.

<sup>13</sup> The initial author of the contact hypothesis, Allport (1954), proposed the “ideal circumstances” model, which was later challenged by Pettigrew (1998).

<sup>14</sup> UNDP 2017; Young 2013.

between communities has been a destabilizing factor in Tillabéri, people's attitudes towards government forces also seem to influence their attitudes about violence, which is particularly important in a region where people have few opportunities to meaningfully engage with state actors outside of those responsible for security.



*Training in conflict management mechanisms, Marke Dori & Marke Douna villages, December 30, 2020*

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

## Lessons and Recommendations for Peacebuilding

These findings point to several recommendations for implementing social cohesion programs with the objective of reducing conflict and violence:

1. **Focus on building trust.** Inter-group trust emerged as a strong predictor of reduced support for violence, even when respondents reported that their communities were experiencing tensions or conflict between groups. This important finding reinforces the focus of many peacebuilding projects on strengthening trust between groups in order to discourage them from resorting to violence to advance their goals or resolve disputes. At the same time, the findings indicate that in the context of Tillabéri, an emphasis on promoting tolerance, collective action, or cooperation between conflicting groups, while desirable, may not be necessary or sufficient to advance wider peace. Programs should seek to implement evidence-based trust-building measures, such as joint projects that work towards a common goal, meaningful inter-group dialogue, and violence prevention planning.<sup>15</sup>
2. **Ensure that social cohesion programs revolve around the issues that are at the center of intergroup conflict.** In other words, if the primary flashpoint is natural resources such as land and water, focusing on improving cohesion through sports may not be very effective, because it does not address the issue over which mistrust influences violence. A systematic review of social cohesion

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<sup>15</sup> For specific examples of evidence-based approaches, see Sonnenfeld et al. (2021) and Dawop et al. (2019).

programs by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) similarly found that failing to identify the particular factors blocking intergroup cohesion has hindered the effectiveness of these programs.<sup>16</sup> In-depth analysis of local social and intergroup dynamics must therefore underpin these interventions. A combination of facilitating processes to improve trust while supporting communities to directly tackle other key drivers of conflict, such as resource scarcity, is likely to be more effective at reducing support for violence.

3. **When focusing on the interaction dimension of social cohesion, prioritize quality over quantity.** While more frequent interaction between groups was not significantly linked to reduced support for violence, positive interaction was. Peacebuilding practitioners should ensure that, when facilitating opportunities for interaction, the right conditions are in place, such as careful facilitation so as to do no harm, collaboration toward a shared goal or interest, and inclusion and participation across groups. These interventions need to place greater emphasis on the *process* through which individuals and groups engage each other, not just the outcome, to ensure quality interactions and model the social behaviors and values that produce these interactions throughout all phases of the project. As an example, Mercy Corps' inclusive community engagement process, CATALYSE, follows seven steps to build communities' capacity to identify and organize around collective priorities, mobilize resources, implement projects and influence leaders. This approach seeks to foster peaceful, community-led change by building norms and relationships that empower diverse community members to work together to address common challenges and help to build social cohesion in conflict-affected areas like those targeted by PEACE.<sup>17</sup>
4. **Integrate efforts to build horizontal and vertical cohesion.** Peacebuilders should layer inter-group contact and other activities on top of governance strengthening activities for increased social cohesion and ultimately, reduced support for violence. In particular, communities need to feel both protected by and trusting of government security forces. Violence prevention programs should pair inter-group strengthening efforts with deliberate efforts to improve relationships between communities and government, and specifically between citizens and security actors. This integration is key because, when support for violence is related to mistrust of state authorities and institutions, simply improving inter-community cohesion will not be enough to influence these outcomes. In places like Tillabéri, where the Nigerien state has a limited presence, building vertical cohesion should start with chiefs and other traditional authorities, who serve as critical brokers between the needs and demands of their communities and the activities of government officials – including those tasked with security.
5. **Fund research on the links between social cohesion and violence.** While a lot of research focuses on how horizontal and vertical cohesion can be built, there also needs to be more evidence generation regarding the conditions under which improving social cohesion has violence-reducing and/or peace-amplifying effects. Better measures and more data on different dimensions of social cohesion is required. The analysis presented here found that indirect measures of trust are particularly useful, as asking people directly whether they trusted other groups was more likely to elicit biased responses than using indirect indicators such as one's willingness to entrust other groups with their livelihoods. Additional research is not only important to further examine the relationship between social cohesion and violence. It is also essential to test and refine how social cohesion and support for violence are measured, so that a valid and reliable set of indicators can be consistently applied across contexts.

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<sup>16</sup> Sonnenfeld et al. 2021.

<sup>17</sup> For guidance and evidence on this community mobilization approach, see Egan et al. 2019; Mercy Corps 2017a.

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# Annex: Regression Model Results

Table 3 presents the results of ordered logistic regressions using seven different model specifications, demonstrating that the findings are robust to the inclusion of different independent and control variables. The outcome variable, *support for violence*, is measured based on respondents' answers to two questions: whether they thought violence was sometimes necessary to defend a political or social cause, and whether they thought violence was *never* justified under any circumstances. *Support for violence* is equal to 2 if respondents agreed with the first question (and thus also disagreed with the second question), 1 if they disagreed with both questions, and 0 if they agreed with the second question (and thus disagreed with the first question). The independent variables *trust*, *interaction*, *tolerance*, *collective action*, and *cooperation* reflect responses to the survey questions outlined in Table 1. *Confidence in AF* indicates responses to the question "on a scale of 1 to 5, how much confidence do you have in the Nigerien Armed Forces?" while *conflict in last 24 mo* indicates whether respondents reported conflict in their communities over the previous two years.

TABLE 3: SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE: ORDERED LOGIT REGRESSION RESULTS

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Trust	-1.00 * ** (0.27)						
Trust: Land/Water							-0.77 * * (0.31)
Trust: Other Issues							-0.15 (0.31)
Interaction		-0.30 (0.15)				-0.43 (0.18)	
Positive Interaction			-0.38* (0.26)				-0.35* (0.28)
Tolerance				0.36 (0.24)		0.51 (0.35)	0.41 (0.36)
Collective Action					-0.09 (0.31)	0.10 (0.57)	0.15 (0.59)
Cooperation				-0.68 * * (0.32)		-0.19 (0.44)	-0.05 (0.45)
Confidence in AF					-0.19 * ** (0.06)	-0.24 * ** (0.08)	-0.26 * ** (0.08)
Conflict last 24 mo						-0.05 (0.30)	
Female	0.30 (0.24)	0.21 (0.26)	0.18 (0.26)	0.13 (0.22)	0.09 (0.22)	0.11 (0.29)	0.27 (0.28)
Age	0.29 * * (0.13)	0.20 (0.14)	0.22 (0.13)	0.24 * * (0.12)	0.25 * * (0.12)	0.14 (0.16)	0.17 (0.15)
Ethnicity	0.01 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.11 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.21 * * (0.10)	-0.17 (0.11)
Education	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)
Cut1	-1.13* (0.62)	-1.72 * * (0.77)	-1.04 (0.69)	-1.38 * * (0.62)	-1.56 * * (0.69)	-3.43 * ** (1.09)	-2.30 * * (1.00)
Cut2	2.04 * ** (0.65)	0.99 (0.80)	1.64 * * (0.72)	1.55 * * (0.64)	1.28* (0.71)	-0.51 (1.08)	0.63 (1.01)
Observations	313	234	235	358	353	207	217
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.06

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

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