

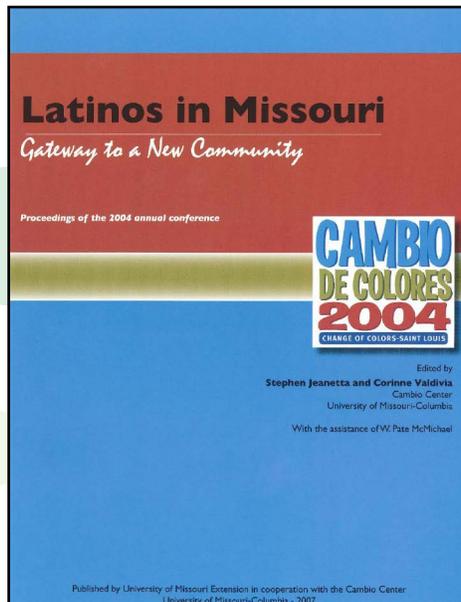


Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Conference
Latinos in Missouri:
Neighbors in Urban and Rural Communities
A multistate conference about integration of immigrants
March 12-14, 2003 in Kansas City, Missouri
www.cambio.missouri.edu/Library/

Police-Latino Community Relations: Addressing Challenges in Rural Communities

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Keywords: police-Latino relations, rural Latino communities, immigrants and law enforcement

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Within the last decade, the growth of the Latino population in the midwestern United States—often termed the “browning” of the Midwest (Aponte and Siles, 1994; Rochin, Siles, and Gomez, 1996; Rosenbaum, 1997; Rural Migration News, 1996)—has received much attention. Consequently, much discussion has focused on how the increase in Latino residents is affecting education, health care, housing and other public issues. While these concerns are important, little research has investigated what impact the population growth has on the criminal justice system, specifically police-community interactions. This focus is particularly important for rural communities in the Midwest where law enforcement is faced with new challenges in addressing the needs of Latino immigrant communities while maintaining current relationships with majority communities.

This essay is based on the *Cambio de Colores 2003* conference presentation “Latinos and Law Enforcement: A Report Card,” which highlighted the findings from research conducted on police-Latino relations in three mid-Missouri communities—Warrensburg, Knob Noster, and Sedalia (Herbst, 2002).¹ An overview of relations between the police and Latino community is provided followed by a discussion of problem areas in this relationship. The essay concludes with suggestions on how these problem areas can be mitigated to help develop and strengthen police-Latino community interactions.

Police-Latino Community Relations

There is little research on Latinos and the criminal justice system (Holmes, 1998; National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice, 1982; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1970). Although there is a large literature on race and criminal justice, virtually all of it deals with African-Americans (Walker, Spohn and Delone, 2000). Interactions between police and ethnic groups, particularly Latinos, have been largely ignored (Holmes, 1998; Walker et al., 2000). Historically, conflict between the police and Latino community is well documented. The 1970 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (p. 88) cited several patterns of misconduct against Mexican-Americans in the Southwest that included excessive police violence, discriminatory treatment, and inadequate protection. Latino residents in a study on police-Chicano community relations in the Southwest believed that the conflict between their community and the police could be attributed to harassment, prejudice, and over-patrolling (Mirande, 1981). The National Hispanic Conference on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice (1980) noted that there is a constant tension between police and Latinos that is characterized by suspicion, fear, and hostility. Conflict between Latinos and the police, some scholars argue, is due to the fact that Latinos view the police as an outside and oppressive force (Mirande, 1981; Morales, 1972); ethnic minorities feel disenfranchised from the white power structure and view police officers as symbols of racism and repression (Duignan and Gann, 1998).

In more recent research, public opinion surveys report that Latinos consistently rate the police less favorably than white Americans, although not as unfavorably as African-Americans (Pastore and Maguire, 2001). Latinos are also more afraid than whites of being stopped and arrested by the police when they are completely innocent, yet not as afraid as African-Americans (Pastore and Maguire, 2001). A survey in Chicago revealed that—compared with whites (10 percent) and African-Americans (33 percent)—40 percent of Latinos believed the police in their area “were too tough on people they stop” (Skogan, Steiner, DuBois, Gudell and Fagan, 2002, p. 18). There is also some evidence that Latinos interact with the police at higher levels than either whites or African-Americans (Greenfeld, Langan, Smith and Kaminski, 1997). In vehicle stops by the police, African-Americans and Latinos were more likely than whites to be arrested. In addition, Latinos were more likely to be ticketed by police (65.6 percent) than either African-Americans (60.4 percent) or whites (51.8 percent) (Langan et al., 2001).

¹ Hereinafter mid-Missouri study.

There are some indications that Latinos' views of the police are not always negative. A study of citizen attitudes toward the police revealed that Latino citizens, particularly Spanish-speaking respondents, endorsed the police more strongly than non-Latinos (Ross, Snortum and Beyers, 1982). Similarly, Latinos exhibited positive attitudes about the police in research on attitudes toward police work and the police profession in Texas (Chaurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999). The authors of this study suggested, "Although not totally clear, it appears that Spanish-speaking Hispanics who are facing greater cultural barriers (especially language) understand police work and are willing to cooperate with the police in any reciprocal activities."

Problem Areas

Language Barrier

Communication problems due to language have a significant impact on the police-Latino interactions. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1962 noted that complaints of "police nonresponsiveness in protection and services" were due to the inability of the police to communicate with members of the Latino community (Kuykendall, 1970). Most American police officers speak only English and cannot communicate effectively with Latino community members who either do not speak English at all or have limited English skills (Bondavilli and Bondavilli; Herbst and Walker, 2001). Officers may regard the speaking of a foreign language as deviance (Chevigny, 1969) or may become frustrated at the inability to communicate (Herbst and Walker, 2001). Street and patrol interactions such as vehicle stops and criminal investigations can be particularly difficult for non-English-speaking persons and officers who do not speak Spanish. As a result, officers may be hesitant to stop vehicles with Latino drivers because of the inability to communicate with them to obtain basic information (Herbst and Walker, 2001; Herbst, 2002). Focus groups in the mid-Missouri study revealed that several Latino residents had been stopped by the police for traffic violations and that the language barrier made the experience confusing. Arrest situations are equally problematic. If a non-English-speaking citizen is arrested, officers may be unable to advise him/her of constitutionally protected rights (Diaz-Cotto, 2000). For non-English-speaking Latino residents, the language barrier may result in few, if any, calls for police assistance (Herbst and Walker, 2001) and may affect their perception of crime—attitudes toward the police and participation in community policing initiatives (Skogan et al., 2002).

The language barrier is even more problematic for rural police departments who are not likely to have the resources to provide their officers with training to acquire special language skills (Herbst and Walker, 2001; United States General Accounting Office, 1998). Most of the officers in the mid-Missouri study perceived the language barrier as the most important issue to address in their relationship with the Latino community. Over 41 percent of officers interviewed stated that when they encountered Latino residents they had communication problems due to language most of the time. Almost 71 percent of the officers stated they had experienced interactions with non-English-speaking Latinos where they needed an interpreter and one was not available to assist.

Within the last decade, some police departments across the country have enrolled their officers in "Survival Spanish," a course that teaches officers how to communicate in basic Spanish for routine responsibilities such as making an arrest, conducting a basic interrogation and assisting victims (Sack, 2001). In addition, many police departments use phone company translation services, civilian translators, and offer bonuses for bilingual employees (DeGeneste and Sullivan, 1997). But the prevalence and efficacy of these programs is not known.

Fear of the Police

Latino fear and mistrust of the police is another considerable challenge for law enforcement. Personal experiences of mistreatment by the police in their native countries affect Latino residents' reluctance to form relationships with American police (Hinkle, 1991). A community leader from the mid-Missouri study explained that police officers in Mexico, for example, are not viewed as friends. "They are somebody that you avoid because they're generally seen as corrupt. So I don't imagine that they would feel any differently

about American ones because of their experience in their own country.” Latino interpreters² in this study also characterized the police in Mexico as brutal and stated that some members of the Latino community recounted stories of being beaten by the police. Abuse by the police in Mexico and other Latin American countries is well documented (Human Rights Watch, 2001). A national survey of police and community contacts revealed that compared to whites and African-Americans, Latinos have lower, self-initiated contact with the police; that pattern may be attributed to the combination of language and cultural barriers and experiences with police in their native countries (Greenfeld et al., 1997).

Immigration

Finally, immigration issues are an additional barrier to building effective police-Latino partnerships. Members of the Latino community may not initiate contact with the police for fear that officers will inquire about their immigration status. For undocumented immigrants in this country, there is no incentive to be candid about their status—particularly to government institutions—because “there is always the possibility that revealing the information will result in some ‘cost’ such as deportation” (Chiswick, 1988, p. 18). This cost could ultimately lead to the loss of a job and consequently, substantial income for themselves and their families.

Recognizing that immigration issues may affect contact and cooperation with the police, some research has found that police officers convey to Latino residents that immigration is not their concern. Perceiving that the issue was a potential barrier in establishing trust, police officers in a California community informally communicated to residents that immigration status would not be a focus of their law enforcement duties (Torres and Vogel, 2001). Similarly, in a study of police-Latino interactions in a midwestern city, patrol officers stated that they did not ask about immigration status because they felt that the issue of illegal immigration was beyond their control and that performing their tasks despite the issue was a top priority. As one officer stated, “We tell them (Latinos) that we don’t care if they are illegal aliens because there is nothing we can do about it, we just want to get the information. He added that telling this to Latinos facilitated their job. “They are more willing to answer questions knowing they will not be deported” (Herbst and Walker, 2001).

Improving Relations: Addressing Problem Areas

According to the majority of police officers, leaders, and residents in the mid-Missouri study, mitigating the language barrier was the key to establishing a relationship between police and non-English-speaking Latino residents. As an officer stated, “It’s kind of like a marriage or a relationship. If two people cannot communicate what they want or their feelings, they can’t trust one another.... when officers and Hispanics can’t communicate to each other, they can’t develop that trust.”

Many participants in the study suggested that hiring bilingual officers for each department would diminish the impact of the language barrier. In addition to interpretation assistance, as one community member explained, if the Latino community could communicate directly with at least one officer in each department, a better rapport between the police/sheriffs’ agencies and Latino residents could be established. Attracting and retaining bilingual officers in rural law enforcement agencies, however, is difficult. Bilingual applicants are more likely to seek out larger police departments where they can initially earn a higher salary as a police officer with additional pay incentives for their proficiency in a second language.

Other methods to mitigate the language barrier in some rural agencies have included bilingual material to assist in booking and processing procedures (e.g., Miranda forms) and access to paid or volunteer interpreters within their communities.³ In addition, a few officers in the mid-Missouri study had attended basic Spanish (e.g., “Survival Spanish”)⁴ training. Several officers expressed an interest in attending a

² All of the interpreters in the mid-Missouri study were Latino.

³ All police agencies in the mid-Missouri study had access to paid and volunteer interpreters.

⁴ “Survival Spanish” is typically an eight- to sixteen-hour language course that is designed to teach officers certain phrases that are applicable to most law enforcement situations. Officers are taught for example, to ask someone in Spanish their name, address, telephone number and other necessary administrative information. Officers are also taught

language class but could not because of limited department budgets. One officer suggested that rather than seek department funds to pay for travel and training, community members could be invited to help create in-service training. This type of training, he stated, “would benefit the officers and the citizens immensely. I would think there are both white Spanish-speaking and Hispanic English-speaking citizens who would love to serve the community in that capacity if asked.”

Police officers in the mid-Missouri study had the majority of their contact with the Latino community through driving and/or vehicle offenses such as not having a valid driver’s license, insurance and/or vehicle registration. Latino residents believed that non-English-speaking Latino drivers needed to be better informed on the tickets/citations that may be issued from these types of violations, and how to dispose of them (e.g., pay a fine, appear in court, etc.). Therefore, they suggested that tickets and any other information given to them that resulted from a traffic stop and/or arrest be printed in English and Spanish. Further, Latino residents’ greatest concern was the inability to obtain all material related to driving (e.g., driver’s license manuals, local driving laws and ordinances) in Spanish. Some members stated that they were aware of state driver’s license manuals that were written in Spanish, but their local police departments did not carry the manuals. In short, focusing on both verbal and written communication could lessen the impact of the language barrier for police and Latino residents.

Police-sponsored community meetings or an “open house” was suggested by many participants in the mid-Missouri study as an additional opportunity to help establish cooperative interactions between police and Latino residents. In the meetings, law enforcement could receive language training, learn about Latino customs and culture, and determine Latino expectations for the police. As one officer explained, “You would have to sit down and ask, ‘Where do you think we’re at? What do you expect from us?’ ... get a really good grasp as to the direction we need to go.” Latino residents at the same time could also receive English language training and learn about local laws and ordinances. Further, questions regarding driving regulations and contact with the police could be answered for the Latino community. For example: How do I contact the police if I need help? What do I contact the police for? What should I do when the police stop me? Why do the police need my identification? What do I need to apply for a driver’s license? How do I learn about taking a driver’s license test? These meetings could also focus on other general concerns within Latino communities such as fear of the police, allegations of racial profiling, and immigration issues.

Recent case studies of meatpacking communities reveal that some rural police agencies are engaged in outreach efforts for Latino residents. In Lexington, Neb., a videotape was produced in Spanish by law enforcement and other groups to educate newly arrived Latinos on local ordinances and regulations (Gouveia and Stull, 1995). Similarly, the Marshalltown, Iowa, police department is creating a “Welcome to Marshalltown” video in Spanish and English to introduce residents to police department services and to local laws and ordinances (Walker, 2003). Storm Lake, Iowa, responded to its dramatic increase of Latino residents by establishing a Community Service Officer (CSO) program in which one of the CSOs is bilingual in Spanish and English (Walker, Herbst and Irlbeck, 2002). Other communities across the country, both urban and rural, have found additional ways to reach out to Latino residents. These include: Spanish-language citizen police academies, Spanish-language hotlines, crime-victim support, and the hiring of non-sworn community liaison personnel (Walker et al., 2002)

Finally, future efforts for enhancing police-Latino community relations should focus on a comprehensive needs assessment of Latino residents. In addition to outreach efforts described above, the formation of community relations committees or advisory groups with representatives from all segments of the population should be considered. These forums give residents a “voice” to share their experiences and unique needs to local law enforcement, which will “prompt police agencies to be more open and responsive to the community” (Bennett, 1995, p. 2). With the assistance of Latino leaders and interpreters, soliciting input from various neighborhood groups and citizen surveys (McCartney, 2001) are additional ways to learn the needs of Latino community members.

commands in Spanish such as “stop,” “put your hands up” and “get out of the car,” how to conduct traffic stops and obtain basic information.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between law enforcement and Latino communities—particularly, in rural areas—will not be an easy task. The language barrier, fear of the police, and immigration issues compounded by limited police resources significantly hinder progress toward establishing strong police-Latino relations. As more Latino newcomers come and make their homes in rural communities across the Midwest, it will become increasingly important to equip law enforcement with the skills and tools needed to focus on the problem areas addressed here. It will require a commitment not only from law enforcement but from Latino residents and other community stakeholders as well.

Further, as community and government leaders in the mid-Missouri study cautioned, unlike other racial and ethnic groups, it might take time for the Latino community to respond to police outreach efforts. A Latina leader explained, “Old mind-sets die hard. They’ve got it in their heads that ‘police are not good people.’”

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