Police Perceptions of Latinos: Insights from front-line officers in a mid-size Urban Area

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By conducting in-depth interviews with twenty-four police officers, this article taps into officers' attitudes toward Latinos. What is revealed are the following: 1) given the radical shift in the country's racial demographic over the past twenty years, police departments may have to consider targeting a different type of recruit than has historically joined the police force 2) although day-to-day racism may not be as overt as that of earlier eras, many white police officers still hold views that do not reflect well on minorities and 3) the findings of this research may have far-reaching policy consequences for police departments located in jurisdictions with sizeable concentrations of Latinos.

Introduction

Latinos are now, the largest racial group in the United States and continue to be the country's fastest growing minority (McClain and Stewart, 2009). According to the 2000 Census, while African Americans comprised 12.3 percent of the U.S population, Latinos made up 14 percent of the total population. Ten years later the Latino population had increased to 16.3 percent of the total U.S. population (Humes, Nicholas and Ramirez, 2010). Some contend that the influx of Latinos over the past twenty years mirrors that of the earlier massive immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, when millions of Europeans who suffered through the Industrial Revolution, economic depressions, and debilitating famines came to America in search of a better life (Montero-Sieburth and Melendez, 2007). One hundred years later millions of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other Spanish speaking immigrants followed suit. In their

[1] Deceased

eyes, America was the land of unbounded opportunity. As years passed the number of Latinos who came to America's shores swelled.

This exponential increase in Latinos has also been accompanied by a noticeable change in the group's composition. From 1992 to 2004 the number of illegal immigrants has noticeably increased, while the number of legal immigrants has declined significantly (Passel and Suro, 2005). The U.S. has also experienced tremendous changes in the settlement patterns of Latino immigrants throughout every state. Beyond the traditional southwestern belt (California, Texas and Arizona), the central state of Illinois, and the Northeastern states of New Jersey, New York, jurisdictions and states such as Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Colorado, Minnesota, Utah, and southern states such as Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida are experiencing unprecedented growth in the numbers of Latino residents. Given these developments, it is not surprising that the Latino population has been at the center of many political debates. Moreover, the rapid growth of any group is certain to have a discernible impact on the ability of local governments to mete out services that municipalities are obliged to provide. Such a development would seem to have special relevance to police departments and other service oriented agencies.

This essay, which draws heavily on interviews with police officers, focuses on police perceptions of Latinos in one mid size city in Southern California. Particular attention is devoted not only to attitudes, which may be a reflection of the officer's character and constitution, but also to statements, that may have public policy implications, from which police departments generally, can benefit.

Literature Review

To say that police officers play an especially important role in the relationship between community residents and local governments is an understatement. Not only are police officers

America's most powerful street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1983), but they are the state agents that many Americans are most likely to encounter on a daily basis (Jeffries and Jones, 2010). Given the mountain of scholarship on police perceptions of their work and job performance over the past thirty years (Vila, 2006; Kakar, 2003; Worden, 1995; Greene, 1989; Fry and Greenfield, 1980), and the prominence with which race is featured; relatively little research has been done on the relationship between police departments and Latino residents. By contrast, a number of scholars have examined police attitudes toward African Americans and African American perceptions of the police. Consequently, much is known about such things as the ignominious history between Blacks and the police, how Blacks feel about police officers and why many police officers [given their penchant for extra legal force] seemingly believe that Blacks merit a more aggressive form of policing than do other residents. The research pertaining to police-Latino relations, however is scant and incredibly one-sided; nearly all of it examining Latino perceptions of police performance (Solis, Portillos and Brunson, 2009; Menjivar and Bejarano, 2004; Carter, 1985). Despite the fact that Latinos are currently America's largest minority we have found no such scholarly work on police perceptions of the Latino community. Michael A. Ikner, Janic Ahmad and Alejandro del Carmen (2005), in their important article, *Vehicle Cues and Racial Profiling Police Officer's Perceptions of Vehicles and Drivers* indirectly touch on the issue, but it is not the focus of their work. However, the similarity between the two works is that both make good use of interviews as a way of gleaning information about attitudes that police officers have about their work and the people they encounter.

Significance of Research

Why is this research important? A rapidly changing society requires police departments that are equipped to meet the demands and needs of the people they are sworn "to serve and

protect". Therefore this article is important for several reasons. First, it is important to gain insight into the kind of applicant that police departments are targeting. The rapidly changing racial demographics of many cities may require a different kind of police officer than has been recruited by police departments in the past. Second, it is important to ascertain what police officers think of this burgeoning minority group. In other words, do police officers feel threatened by the massive influx of Latinos in their cities or do they view this development as a challenge to which they look forward to meeting? This issue is important, because some view the rise of the Latino population as devastating for the future of the country. For example, in his book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* renowned Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington argues incredulously that Latino immigration threatens Ango-Saxon American culture as well as the political integrity of the country (Huntington, 2004). Third, there is also the belief that the influx of Latinos (especially those who enter the country illegally) adversely impacts the job prospects of white Americans (Bush, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Simply put, some whites believe they are losing out on employment opportunities, because Latinos are willing to work for less money, thus making them more attractive to some employers who desire to keep costs at a minimum. Fourth, it is vital to know whether police officers harbor stereotypical views about Latinos, as these notions may manifest itself in their behavior toward them. Fifth, this research will reveal whether or not police officers believe that different policing techniques are required for Latinos versus other groups. Finally, the results could possibly have far-reaching policy ramifications that could help police departments better serve the Latino community.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with police officers over a four month period in an effort to assess their perceptions of the Latino community in this mid size Southern California City. In-depth interviews were conducted with key police personnel such as the Chief of Police, a sergeant in the department's Community Relations Unit[2], and three patrol officers to tap their attitudes and opinions vis-a-vis problems involving the Latino community. A total of twenty four officers agreed to take part in the project and all were interviewed from each of the three watches or shifts. Some of the interviews were conducted during "ride alongs[3]" while others took place at the station. Since one of the purposes of this work was to help improve relations between the police and the Latino community generally, it was thought that police officers who had the most frequent and direct contacts with the community might be in the best position to assess this relationship. Hence, the majority of those interviewed were rank and file officers. Their ages ranged from 21 to 52. Years of police experience ranged from two to thirty and years of education ranged from high school graduate to post baccalaureate degree.

As subsequent evidence will indicate, many police officers believed that it was especially important for the department's top brass to be made aware of the attitudes and perceptions of the men and women in the field. In order to preserve anonymity and to facilitate a candid discussion, a decision was made to interview the officers individually rather than as a group.

A list of fifty questions was prepared. The interviews ranged from one to four hours in length. To secure an adequate distribution of opinions, the interviewers arrived at various times of the day such as, for example, seven o'clock in the morning, one-thirty in the afternoon, and seven o'clock in the evening. All officers were assured that all statements made by them, would

[2] The Community Relations Unit is a fictitious name used to prevent the reader from identifying the police department in question.

be held in the strictest of confidence. As a result, no information [with the exception of the officers' race] is provided, which might divulge the identity of the police department or a specific respondent.[4] Four of the twenty-four officers were Latino and the rest were white. In this study, every effort was made by the interviewers through their manner of speech, dress, and posture to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, which would be conducive to a frank discussion. Initially some officers appeared apprehensive or anxious to express only those opinions, which might reflect well on the department and its leadership. Perhaps the most significant evidence of the success of the study was the fact that, after the initial interviewing session; when talk of the study had circulated throughout the department, reticence diminished and many officers displayed an increased willingness to share information and/or offer their opinions, which appeared to reflect deeply held thoughts and convictions. It should be noted that the areas covered in this article were not solely determined by the authors. Again the authors approached each subject with a set of questions, however, the interview was often guided by the officers' responses. In other words, the authors did not go into the interviews with any preconceived ideas about what we might uncover. Instead, the areas covered, were in large part, determined by the officer's own concerns and responses, many of which were unsolicited.

Topics Covered

What follows is not only a discussion of the Latino community [that features the officers own words[5]], but a presentation of the officers' perceptions of those elements that they believed presented the greatest challenge to serving the Latino community. In subsequent pages the

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[3] A ride along is an opportunity to accompany a police officer while on patrol.

[4] In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality none of the direct quotes presented in this article are attributed to any particular officer. One author in particular gained unprecedented access to police officers in this department, thus he would not want to breach the agreement made between himself and the police department or jeopardize future projects by compromising the officers' identity.

following areas are covered : 1) police perceptions of the Latino community generally 2) the language barrier 3) crime in Latino communities 4) family structure and culture 5) fieldwork and 6) the role of the police department in the Latino community.

FINDINGS

General Perceptions of the Latino Community

Most of the white police officers believed that relations between the department and the Latino community were "good." In fact, in response to a broad question about this subject, few of them identified any problems. Many sought to point out the positive actions, which the department had taken in working with this population. There was total unanimity on the subject, however. One officer took the opportunity to express his frustrations with the department as well as the city:

> This city has traditionally been regarded as progressive in ethnic relations. Local officials don't address the problems of crime because of ethnic sensitivities. They downplay the problem of gangs. They're called 'youth groups.' It's probably the politics of the situation.

Similar comments were made by other officers as the interviews progressed. Several officers, including two lieutenants, observed that the Latino population was not one homogeneous community. One young white lieutenant noted:

> You've got two factions in the Hispanic community: (1) the Mexican nationals or the undocumented workers, and (2) the Mexican Americans. It's fifty-fifty. The nationals fear being deported. Among the Mexican-Americans, some are hard-working and others get in trouble.

Another lieutenant commented:

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[5] Although somewhat unconventional for a scholarly paper, the authors felt strongly that the officers own words be featured prominently in this work so as to give the reader keen insight into the mindset of modern day police officers. All statements are unfiltered.

> The Hispanic population here has grown ten-fold in the last five years. There are two communities: the legals and the illegals. We also have run-ins with gangs because of the way they deal with their problems. The 'macho' concept, you know. They're willing to put their lives on the line. Illegals also don't report some crime to us. Maybe Mexico is different; they may expect something different.

In this article, this view of the Latino population as consisting of at least two different communities is adopted as a theoretical perspective.

Unlike most of their white counterparts, the Latino officers did not rate police relations with the Latino community as "good." Their chief concern can be summed up in one word: communication. As one Latino officer put it:

> There are not many channels of communication (between the police department and the Latino community). They (Latinos) don't want to become involved in communicating with us; there is poor involvement by the community.

As might be inferred from this comment, Latino officers appeared to owe their primary allegiance to the department rather than to the Spanish-speaking community, thereby lending some additional credence to their assessment. Another Latino officer made the following statement about relations between the police department and the Latino community, "I think there's a lack of true communication. I don't see any resentment, but there is definitely a lack of communication." As subsequent evidence from both white and Latino officers indicated, the problem of communication was indeed one of the more serious issues affecting police relations with Latinos.

The Language Barrier

When both white and Latino officers were asked questions about communicating with Spanish-speaking civilians, most of them acknowledged that it was a problem. One white officer who had previously assessed police relations with the Latino community as "better than

average," responded to the question about situations in which people do not speak English by saying, "That's a big problem. I guess that's one of the main complaints." The officer who had previously been critical of departmental policies toward ethnic groups confessed, "That's a definite problem. I can pick up some Spanish; but you can't get very far when people speak broken English and you speak broken Spanish."A few moments later, the potential magnitude of the problem appeared to hit home with this same officer. He thought for a few seconds and offered a chilling thought: "It suddenly dawned on me. What if I'm chasing some guy who is running out of a liquor store, and I can't speak the language? I might have to waste the dude." Several other officers professed that they did not encounter a language barrier frequently, but many were concerned about the problem in emergency situations.

Police officers gave various estimates of the frequency with which they encountered non English speaking Latinos. A white officer judged that it was "one or two out of ten, but one usually gets a translator." Another officer responded cynically by saying, "If they righteously don't speak English, I can't communicate. But that only happens once a month." Nonetheless, the language barrier does seem to produce some inefficiency in police operations. Another officer stated, "Every moment is precious. Waiting for a translator can cost lives."

As these statements indicate, many police officers were especially concerned about the language barrier in emergency situations. As a result, some of the officers were asked if they had heard of other first responders, such as paramedics or firefighters, having problems on emergency calls. Most were unaware of such issues, but a few offered some interesting opinions. One officer said, "The paramedics are more creative in getting translators. Policemen are more apt to call somebody to take their place." A traffic officer countered, "paramedics and

firefighters don't have to get identification. But there have been some major fires where the language barrier might really have hurt."

Several officers also commented on the impact of the language barrier upon law enforcement standards. A traffic officer responded to a question about the possible effects of non-Spanish-speaking officers:

> Many people were taken to jail who shouldn't have been. It's worked both ways. Sometimes I've just said, 'Adios!' It's popped up in many cases. Many times I've told myself, 'Let this person slide.'

A Latino officer made a similar observation: "I've seen various extremes. The first thought is to call for a translator. The second approach is to avoid further contact. The third is, 'Let's just go to jail, it's easier." Most of the white officers, however, would agree with the comments of the police officer who acknowledged that the language barrier could result in a person's death.

Officers also were asked if bystanders were used to help translate while investigations were being conducted. Most admitted this practice, but they did not believe it caused any problems, except perhaps in family disputes where hardly anyone can be neutral. One astute officer, however, pointed out the legal implications of this method:

> If it's a victim, it doesn't matter. But in cases involving a suspect or an arrest, you have to rely on another officer or someone from the department. It's a legal problem. Citizens could lie. And I could lose a conviction because of it.

A Spanish-speaking officer answered the question about the reliability of information obtained from a bystander, "That's a definite problem, especially when a ten or fifteen year old is used to translate."

Latino officers also were questioned about their role as translators. One Latino officer pointed out, "Most policemen perceive the Spanish-speaking community to be unwilling to learn

English." When asked to offer a solution to the problems created by the language barrier, he said, "It won't start with the community. The easiest group to change is the police. But a lot of Spanish-speakers on the force don't use the language because there's no pay incentive." This comment was echoed by another Latino officer who noted, "The incentive for extra work is not there." The first officer, however, went on to offer some solutions: "The department should encourage education. There should be careful monitoring, both of the training and the use of Spanish while on the job."

Several white officers mentioned that the department had made an effort to handle the language problem by installing or subscribing to a telephone answering service, which provided translation. Two of the four Latino officers, however, were critical of this practice. One pointed out:

> The translator service seems superficial. That doesn't solve the problem in the field. Spanish-speaking officers are unnecessarily sent on details merely because the caller spoke Spanish. Many of these people could speak English, but they prefer to speak Spanish. So I have to take a lot of time away from my regular duties to respond to their calls.

The other noted, "Sometimes I'm assigned to calls because the caller spoke Spanish. Some officers shy away from it. The incentive for extra work is not there."

The evidence contained in these statements seem to suggest two important conclusions. First, despite the generally favorable assessments of police relations with the Latino community, there are some definite problems affecting this relationship that need addressing. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, many of the above comments indicate that these difficulties extend far beyond the obstacles posed by the language barrier. Thus, some discussion of police perceptions of Latino culture is necessary in order to put the essay in its proper context.

Crime

Some of the most interesting responses elicited from officers pertained to questions about crime. "Relative to other sections of (the city), how would you rate the number of reported crimes in Latino areas"? About the same number, more, less, or what?" The responses to this inquiry by both white and Latino officers at every rank were almost unanimous. Latino residents, and especially Mexican nationals or undocumented workers, simply do not report crimes in the same proportion as other segments of the population. One lieutenant offered the following:

> There is a large population of illegals [sic] who almost never report crimes. It causes a real problem. We probably get reports on one in five of the crimes, which are committed in the Hispanic community. If only twenty percent are reported, it makes it difficult to cut down on crime.

Although some police officers sought to minimize the problem, the comments of many officers suggest the momentous implications embodied in this information. As the authors stated in a previous work (Hahn and Jeffries, 2003), albeit in a somewhat oversimplified manner:

> The public usually turns to the police to provide them with a source of protection from the threat of crime. Contrary to the impressions conveyed by detective stories and television dramas, criminal suspects usually are not identified on the basis either of the discovery of an incriminating clue or a long series of logical deductions. More often, when police officers arrive at the scene of a crime, they ask, "Who did it"? and frequently someone-either the victim, a friend, or a witness-tells them... Generally, the information supplied by private citizens is the principal resource available to police in the apprehension of criminal suspects.

As a result, the failure of any group to report violations of the law-for any reason deprives the police of an important resource in their effort to combat crime.

Officers offered a variety of reasons for the failure of Latinos to report crimes. Perhaps the foremost explanation, mentioned by nearly everyone, was the fear that they might be deported if discovered to have entered the country illegally; a view not inconsistent with the

literature on this subject (Culver, 2004). Ironically, this fact may have the effect of reducing the crimes committed by Mexican nationals. As another officer commented, "Usually aliens aren't doing wrong. I had an occasion to go into what you might call a sweat shop. The people there avoided me like the plague. They're a very law-abiding people."

When he was asked to explain why Latinos were reluctant to report crime, a lieutenant provided a more detailed explanation:

> First, there are a lot of uneducated people in the Mexican community. The second reason is fear. The police rule in Mexico. They expect the same thing here. Third is ignorance of the law, what should be reported, and how to report it. Finally, there is fear of the INS.[6]

A Latino officer stated, "There's fear of having contact of any kind. A lot of Latinos grew up here, but they are afraid of the police too." Despite these additional explanations, the fear of deportation emerged as the dominant reason for the reluctance of Latinos to report crimes.

Perhaps the single most dangerous implication uncovered by this research was the possibility that many of the crimes, which are not reported to the police department, might become the subjects of retaliation or revenge. Said one lieutenant, "There is retaliation sometimes. This produces many problems for the department and the city." Not only is there a danger that organized crime might carry out retribution, but there is also a likelihood, that vengeance could be imposed either by self-appointed vigilantes in the Latino community or by a society governed by lawlessness and anarchy. One Latino officer sought to refute this scenario by saying: "No, I don't see an increase in (retaliation). It's just among gangs and post-adolescents." Yet, it seems necessary to point out that these are precisely the segments of

[6] The INS stands for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which was shut down on March 1, 2003. Illegal immigrants are now taken to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). When this fact was brought to the officer's attention he indicated that he was indeed aware of this development. When asked why he continued to

any population, that are most apt to be criminally active. Young people, and especially young males, regardless of race are more likely to be arrested for criminal offenses than any other group.

Some officers related the dangers of retaliation to the concept of "machismo" which is believed to permeate the Latino culture (Arciniega et. al, 2008;Torres, Solberg and Carlstrom, 2002; Mayo, 1997). When asked if the possibility of vendettas was a serious problem among Latinos, one white officer emphatically replied: "Yes, because of their machismo. I know of a suspect who found out who complained, and he came back to finish him off." Another white officer stated: "The Mexican community is least apt to tell you about a crime. They'll take care of it themselves. It's a 'macho' thing." A different officer attempted to relate the two explanations: "They seem to handle the problem of crime themselves. Undocumented aliens fear that we will call immigration. That's why they'd rather handle it in their own realm. Some officers attempted to disclaim any responsibility for the actual or potential problem of retribution. One said, "That might be out of our control. It's a social problem." Another officer lamented, "They're going to have to learn to trust us. The older they get, the more prone they are to shed that ('macho') image."

Surprisingly, many officers pointed out that the department has a policy of not reporting undocumented workers to the USCIS. Yet, because of the inevitable discretion granted patrol officers, this policy may not be strictly observed. A traffic officer, for example, admitted, "I don't take immigration violators in unless they have committed another crime." Moreover, the effort to encourage the reporting of crime by publicizing the policy of not reporting undocumented workers places a police department in the potentially awkward position.

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refer to the office as INS he replied that "everyone knows what I mean when I say INS, no one says USCIS because it is too long." Other officers interviewed with this study concurred with this officer and exhibited a similar pattern.

Several officers mentioned specific types of crimes of which, Latinos were apt to be the victims. Most frequently cited were street robberies. One Latino officer noted:

> Some Mexicans live in the black area. They walk to work. They're prime targets. It's common knowledge that they're easy prey. Mexicans also don't believe in banks. It's not uncommon to arrest a guy and find him carrying four hundred to six hundred dollars in cash.

The latter estimate was confirmed by another veteran officer who said, "All of the illegal aliens that I've arrested had at least five hundred dollars in their pockets. They're not afraid of work." Another officer said, "Undocumenteds get rolled a lot. They have late-night jobs. They walk a lot." A fourth officer noted, "Robberies and purse snatching are major types of crime. Burglaries are down the list because there are so many people in a house and they have few possessions." There seemed to be little doubt that many Mexican nationals as well as other Latino residents of the community were subjected to various forms of victimization and exploitation. A fifth officer spoke of a somewhat different form of exploitation, "There are a lot of slum lords, which creates a lot of problems. Six families in one dwelling creates health problems. They're exploited." The difficulty of course is that many Latinos, and especially Mexican nationals, are afraid to call the police or other public authorities when they are the victims of crime or other forms of exploitation. Unless these situations are brought to the attention of public agencies, there is little that can be done. Several officers also noted that Latinos tend to be involved in a disproportionate number of so-called "hit-and-run" collisions. One said, for example, "Inevitably in a hit and run, the suspect is a male Hispanic." A traffic officer estimated, "I see three or four hit and runs a week. They don't have a driver's license. If you take 'em into custody, they are released."Another officer seemed to agree on the problem of hit and runs:

> Hit-and-run collisions are a big problem. That's probably because of a lack of insurance. Sixty percent are caused by Mexican nationals. They're afraid they'll be asked for documents if they apply for insurance.

A Latino officer made a similar observation:

> They are reluctant to stick around after a collision. The majority of hit and runs involve Mexican nationals. They're afraid of being sent home." When he was asked about a possible solution to the problem, he replied simply: "Informing the Mexican community that deportation is not imminent or even probable, when there is a collision.

In addition to public information and education, however, some exploratory discussions could be undertaken with insurance companies and other interested parties to produce a solution to this problem.

A few officers thought Latinos prior experience with Mexican police might affect their attitudes toward police officers in the U.S. In discussing "hit-and-run" collisions, for example, one officer observed that, "In Mexico, you'd go to jail for it. They're militaristic there. That image is bound to carry over here." When a Latino officer was asked about the Mexican police, however, he replied: "It's one of the lowest jobs you can get. They're really the pits. They have little professionalism. Most people come here knowing that we're different."Although the Mexican police sometimes have a reputation for heavy handedness and a lack of professionalism, which may influence attitudes toward the police in this country, the evidence is inconclusive.

When officers were asked about the most prevalent crimes in Latino communities, again, most of them referenced Latino culture. Three, for example, thought that graffiti was a serious problem. A similar problem stressed was alcohol-related offenses. Some comments seemed to reflect rather naive cultural stereotypes. One white officer who cited "drunk driving" as a serious

problem, said: “It’s like the …Indian who can’t hold his liquor. You can’t drink the water down South, so you find a substitute. “Another officer attempted to display more sophistication when accounting for crime: “We probably have more fight calls (in the Hispanic community). I correlate that with drinking and socioeconomic problems.”

Family Structure and Culture

A number of the officers pointed to family structure and culture as explanations for some of the problems that afflict Latino communities. Consequently many of the respondents, were asked about such things as “family and neighborhood cohesion and stability.” The replies did not yield much agreement, however. Interestingly, a young Latino officer stated, “The family structure of the black and the Mexican population is not that different. Mom is still the boss.” A white officer uttered a less flattering and stereotypical comment:

> They seem to have very little pride in themselves or in their families. That’s trouble later on. There are no simple solutions. The problems are deeply rooted in the family structure and values. If you see any changes, they will come thirty years after they become more ‘white like.’

Other officers were more complementary toward Latino families. One white patrolman observed: It’s more of a close-knit society. They don’t have four of five fathers . . .” Other officers noted the dominant role of males in many Latino families. One officer said, “When the husband is beating up the wife, she still won’t call the police.” Another officer stated, “Spanish calls tend to be family problems.” While family problems might appear to be irrelevant to the police department’s mission to combat crime, they do have an important bearing on the functions of law enforcement agencies.

Many of the calls made to police departments have little to do with the commission of a crime. The largest portion of an officers’ active-duty time is spent responding to community services calls. As one officer noted, “There are more calls for service than calls about crime.”

Another officer, in responding to a question about the most prevalent types of crime in the Latino community, stated, “Domestic violence. It’s a heritage thing among Hispanics that the father figure dominates the woman and beats the shit out of her.”Another officer issued the following warning about family problems in Latino homes: “Children are afraid of the father, because they’re afraid of what might happen to them... If the wife wants him arrested, she’d better leave. We suggest 'get out first and then we’ll come in.”

Although none of the officers mentioned it specifically, the inability of many officers to converse with families in their native tongue is almost certain to create problems for law enforcement personnel who attempt to intervene in domestic disturbances. Moreover, the ability of the police to respond effectively to such calls and to other public requests for services may be one of the most important resources the department has in building trust and confidence. These qualities are indispensable to fighting crime and to the performance of similar responsibilities. One possibility, therefore, might involve additional training for police officers both in the use of Spanish and in the psychological skills, which are required for the kind of intervention likely to yield continuing gratitude and respect from the community.

Many police officers volunteered the opinion that their jobs were made more difficult in the Latino community because of the so-called ‘macho’ syndrome. One officer defined it in these terms: “There’s the ‘macho’ thing. It’s carried one or two steps further in the Hispanic community than anywhere else. Losing manhood or face is worse than death.” This same officer pointed out:

> I think it’s serious. It doesn't allow people to get along harmoniously. Especially if there’s a lady watching, you have to go to the wall. In a family fight, the husband can't be pushed around in his own home.

A Latino officer also admitted, “It’s also typical in situations involving two guys and one girl. ‘Let’s deck it out,’ they say.” A few officers ascribed the “macho” syndrome to excessive pride. One observed,

> They’ve got the ‘macho’ thing they have to attain. Maybe that's why they don't snitch on each other. The guy who was stabbed seventy-eight times said to his girlfriend. ‘That’s the way it was supposed to be.’

Another officer told a similar story:

> I don’t know if it’s a question of pride. I had a guy with five stab wounds on the front lawn of the station who wouldn’t tell me who did it. I was trying to get a dying confession, and he wouldn't tell.

Regardless of the source of these attitudes, most of the officers not only believed that the “macho” syndrome was prevalent in Latino communities, but believed it to be a major impediment to police work. In at least a few cases, while officers’ perceptions of Latino “machismo” seemed to be stereotypical. One officer attempted some ethnic humor: “If you needed six guys in the military to make a suicide run, four would be Mexican.” Whereas the prevalence with which the “macho” concept was mentioned, might suggest the need for additional training to provide officers with an increased understanding of Latino culture and how to cope with it, caution must also be exercised to ensure that officers do not get an exaggerated or misrepresented sense of certain aspects of Latino culture.

When the officers, including the Latino officers, were asked if there were any specific types of crimes that seemed to be especially prevalent in Latino neighborhoods, many of them framed their answers around the concept of “machismo.” A Latino officer, for example, reported: “Most (crimes) involve mutual combat. No court is going to get involved in it. One guy took another person's beer, and he was killed. It’s ‘machismo’ again.” In responding to another

question about "different or unique public safety problems" in the Latino community, another officer commented:

> Weddings and baptisms are monumental. Friday nights are a six-pack and loud music. We always wonder when the ritualistic cutting will occur at a Mexican wedding.

Still yet another officer said:

> There are areas in parks which are like territories. We get a lot of complaints from neighbors about the beer drinking, the pissing on walls, the loud language, and the radios. If you're a non-Hispanic walking through those territories, you'll usually get jumped. If it's a white guy, they'll mess with him. Blacks, they'll mess with even worse.

Again, a subjective interpretation of all of these statements suggests that, while they may reflect an officer's own experience, they also might contain some subtle biases.

Field Work in the Latino Community

Many of the officers complained that they had difficulty securing Latino informants. As one lieutenant stated, "Chicanos don't seem to inform on themselves or others. They're a very tight-lipped group. Blacks will snitch. Chicanos will not snitch off on an acquaintance or a friend." Some again ascribed this pattern to a cultural phenomenon:

> I have a couple of black guys who will snitch on anybody. It's hard to turn Mexican informants without being real slick with them. I had a guy cry when he knew what he did. They're heavy into the "macho" thing.

A Latino officer also observed: "Blacks will talk. They will point the finger, Mexicans, won't. If they know the suspects, they fear retaliation. There's always that fear." A question which asked police officers to compare the frequency, with which they conducted field interrogations with Latino residents to other segments of the community, yielded some

interesting responses. Most officers admitted that they were more apt to stop and question African Americans, because the crime rate is purportedly higher in the African American community. Some were also quick to defend themselves against any implication that they stopped members of one ethnic/racial group more often than others. Field interrogations were obviously a sensitive subject for many officers. Beyond these common perceptions, however, there was relatively little agreement about the subject.

A few officers were willing to discuss the subject of perceived harassment candidly. A lieutenant, for example, commented:

> In the Hispanic and black communities, more people are going to be on the streets. In other areas, family structures are different. They're not standing on the corner drinking Bud or Coors. We stop for that. That's probably looked on as harassment. That may be a normal Friday or Saturday night for them. There's one lady who calls every night to ask us to cite the cars on the street. I'm sure that's felt to be harassment, but we're going at somebody's request.

Another officer commented defensively, "I sure hope this survey doesn't come out and say cops hassle low riders." A Latino officer, however, had a different perception of the problem:

> Officers tend to stop youths-Black or Hispanic who are 'low riders.' If you live in a minority area, you get used to being stopped. It's a real common thing. But it bugs you. I know I'd be upset.

It is not the purpose of this article to assess whether or not police officers engage in undue harassment of "low riders" or any other segment of the Latino population. (Interestingly, however, none of the officers mentioned Mexican nationals as a target of field interrogations). The evidence is insufficient; and presumably such a judgment also would have to be based upon information reflecting community perceptions of this subject. Perhaps more important for the

purposes of this study is the issue of whether police officers *believe* that they are more apt or less apt to stop and question Latino residents in comparison to other groups.

Some officers believed that police officers were more likely to stop Latinos than others. Surprisingly, a Latino officer said, "If (a suspect) speaks no English, we're less likely to cut him loose." Most white officers, however, took the opposite position. One veteran officer claimed, "It's easy for a Mexican to shine an officer on." Said another officer, "because of the language problem I'm less apt to talk to a Latin than to a black." This may have also reduced the number of abrasive contacts that have long plagued the African American community. At the same time it also may tend to widen rather than bridge the communications gap, between the police and Latino residents. The solution to this problem seems to extend beyond overcoming the language barrier. Again, it may also require officers to gain an increased understanding of the Latino culture and the initiation of both formal and informal means that would disabuse Latino residents of some of the fears that may have previously inhibited their contacts with police officers.

The problem of immigration laws seems to be endemic to many of the difficulties that restrict and effect police relations with Latinos. One veteran officer claimed that he had the "inside story" on the reasons for the change in policy on this subject: "It got to the point where immigration wouldn't send someone out to pick up one person when they could raid a factory and get forty people." Regardless of the reasons for the change in policy, it appears that few Latinos are aware of this change or of the fact that they will not be deported if they come in contact with the police. As one Latino officer pointed out:

> I don't believe they're aware of it. You can see the expression on their faces, 'Okay, Mexico here I come.' Most of them fear that the police will send them back. We don't, of course, but I don't think we're going to publicize it. The only way of doing that would be through a Neighborhood Watch. But they do not go to these kinds of meetings. It turns out to be a one on one meeting. That's a slow way of doing things.

The Role of the Police Department

The largest portion of this essay has dealt with the external role of the police in Latino communities. Since the primary focus of this study centered on the relationship between those two groups, this emphasis seemed to be appropriate. In addition, however, a major portion of each interview concerned the internal operations of the police department itself. Some interesting findings, which were gleaned from these discussions, are reported in this section of the article. One question asked officers to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the police department in relation to the Latino population. Almost all of the officers had an extremely favorable view of the department's relationship with this community, and they, tended to stress its strengths. Typical was the comment of one veteran officer who said, "I can't think of any department that gets the cooperation that we do from the minority communities. We're low key and public relations conscious. We even have one-man cars on graveyard. That says a lot." In this respect, therefore, the department drew overwhelming and almost unanimous approval from its officers.

Perhaps the greatest praise was reserved for the Community Relations Unit. As one veteran police put it: "I'm very high on our Community Relations Unit. They do a heck of a job to enhance our image." Another veteran officer added this testimonial:

> The strength of the department is the Community Relations Unit...When we had a black guy who was barricaded; they brought in his friends and minister... Stuff like that makes it easier for us to do our jobs.

A few officers specifically singled out the work of one Latino Sargeant for commendation. One said:_____ _____ is working the community relations angle. That's a strong point. The community is met by _____ _____. They feel comfortable with him. Some officers felt that

Sergeant _____ should receive greater assistance from the department. Both the great volume of problems affecting police relations with the Latino community and the approval bestowed by police officers upon the Community Relations Unit, therefore, would seem to provide a firm basis for augmenting the staff and the resources of this particular unit as well as creating similar endeavors in other cities.

When officers were asked to assess the weaknesses in the department's relations with the Latino community, most again returned to the language issue. Despite the wide range of other problems cited by the officers, they pointed out that an effort to develop a bilingual police department capable of speaking Spanish as well as might lead to other demands for officers who can speak Vietnamese, Armenian, and other languages; but it is a fundamental axiom that governments must ultimately be responsive to the needs of the people it purports to serve. Both practical and philosophical arguments could be employed, therefore, to suggest that, if a substantial number of people living in a city speak Spanish, then local government agencies may have an ethical and moral responsibility to communicate with people in that language.

Questions about the recruitment of Spanish speaking officers did not uncover a consensus among those interviewed. Most officers, regardless of race, expressed a slight preference for Spanish speaking Latino officers. As a young Latino officer said, "People feel more comfortable with a Latino officer. A white officer, added, that he did not see a need for more Latino officers on the force. As he put it, "I don't like the idea of selective recruitment." A white officer said, "I don't see any difference...It may be a problem, though, with gangs who don't want to talk to a white officer." Another veteran white officer expressed a similar sentiment when he responded to the question by saying, "A Spanish officer can relate better. There's got to be a feeling of trust. He'd get further with his own people." In a community which has been suspicious and distrustful

of the police, the arguments in favor of the recruitment of additional Spanish-speaking Latino officers seem to be compelling. On the other hand, the statements of several officers who took the opposite point of view also seem worthy of consideration. One young white officer, for example, pointed out:

> I don't think a Hispanic officer would get any better response, because it's the uniform that people really react to. In family disturbances, knowing the cultural background is important. A person's origin and upbringing are important too, but white, black, and Spanish officers have an equal bearing on most situations.

A veteran white officer expressed a similar opinion: "I think a white officer who speaks Spanish would be more effective. The community considers a Hispanic officer a turncoat. Hispanic officers also come down more heavily on their own people. I've seen instances of it." This viewpoint seemed to receive some confirmation from a Latino officer:

> As a Latino officer, I expect a lot more from Mexicans. I lose patience with them easily. I probably would take a Mexican to jail for being drunk sooner than I would a Black. I don't know what would happen if you had a force of 200 Mexican cops. The reason I react harder is not conscience. I think I'm ashamed of some of the people I see. Black officers also come down harder on a Black person.

Although the somewhat ambiguous evidence on this subject would seem to militate against finding a solution, it might be that departments may wish to tread cautiously about making definite policies about the recruitment of Spanish speaking officers. Instead, police departments could continue to evaluate applicants on the basis of their individual merits. Clearly there seems to be a need for an increased number of Spanish-speaking officers, but there does not yet appear to be any exclusive method of meeting that need, other than to aggressively recruit Latino applicants. While no one was willing to admit it, the reason why perhaps none of the officers suggested targeting Latino applicants is probably because some white officers may resent the idea, as it implies an Affirmative Action approach that many whites still believe is a program

that awards unqualified minorities at the expense of highly qualified whites. On the other hand, Latino officers may have shied away from advocating the recruitment of Latino officers because they do not want to appear to be proponents of Affirmative Action for fear of doing so would might create tension between them and their white colleagues and/or foment reprisal white superiors. This is a body of literature that reveals the lengths to which police departments go to make life difficult for minority police officers who raise issues pertaining to race (Bacon, 2009; Bolton and Feagin, 2004).

As previously indicated, a major problem in police relations with the Latino community arises from a reluctance to report crimes, for fear of being deported and other factors. This pattern conjures up the danger of a private usurpation of legitimate law enforcement functions through retaliation as well as other frightening possibilities. Moreover, as also has been noted earlier, the majority of calls for police assistance from Latinos involve domestic disturbances and similar matters. The conjunction of these circumstances suggests that the suspicion and distrust of Latino residents might be reduced by providing officers with incentives to encourage the effective performance of such service activities. Many officers indicated that they regard service calls as a troublesome interference with what they regard as their primary mission--enforcing the law and combating crime. Yet, service calls may be one of the most valuable resources available to the police in attempting to promote trust and confidence in law enforcement among Latinos. An effective response to calls for services could demonstrate that police officers will not necessarily take action to deport undocumented workers or other punitive measures. Moreover, it could generate the kind of gratitude and appreciation, which might provide a foundation for continuing cooperation with the police. Departmental policies that provide promotional incentives for the effective performance of service activities, therefore, may provide a method of

overcoming some of the distrust and suspicion, which hampers police work in Latino communities.

Discussion

This study not only uncovered some significant facts about police perceptions of Latinos, but it also yielded some important insights regarding the internal structure of this particular department. Effective relations with the Latino community not only entails an understanding of the problems which officers encounter in the field, but it also involves an appreciation of the impact which the organization can have upon those problems. Any institution can learn a great deal about itself by attempting to investigate the attitudes and experiences of its personnel at all levels. Much of the material elicited by the interviews probably could not have been obtained by someone within the department. Information secured by an experienced interviewer from outside the organization regarding both the internal and external activities of the department can be an important resource for increased economy and efficiency (Weber, 1997).

The results of these interviews support the need for increased training of police officers. This educational effort probably can be divided into two parts. The first issue concerns the need to overcome the language barrier, a point that is consistent with early literature on this matter (Herbst and Walker, 2001). Although language is not the only or even the primary problem in police relations with the Latino community, efforts to eliminate this barrier seem to be a fundamental prerequisite to the attainment of other purposes. The language gap has undoubtedly created many other problems including inequities in law enforcement practices, legal difficulties arising from the use of civilians as interpreters, and an inability to obtain needed information about illegal activities in the Latino community.

The second aspect of police training involves the need for additional education to familiarize officers with important facets of Latino culture. Ethnic bias is sometimes subtle and difficult to detect. Most people have, over the years, learned how to discuss the subject of ethnic/racial relations in a manner that is socially acceptable. Yet, deep-seated biases often remain, and they may frequently interfere with effective police work. The ability of officers to intervene effectively in family disturbances and other similar situations may require both a familiarity with the culture and the acquisition of basic psychological and social skills. As noted previously, effective responses to these circumstances may be one of the most important resources available to the department in securing the public's cooperation, which is essential to the fulfillment of law enforcement and other responsibilities. In addition, the evidence suggests that there are a fair number of white officers who have exaggerated notions about Latino culture. Also interesting is that most of the white police officers used the word Hispanic when referring to the subject under discussion while Latino officers used the word Latino. What this means is not entirely clear. Perhaps white officers are slower than others when it comes to grasping new vernacular. For some whites, old habits are hard to break. As a result, the training must be carefully designed to reduce rather than to perpetuate ethnic stereotypes.

Conclusion

Although many of the officers provided answers that reflected ethnic bias, the interviewers also were struck by the high proportion of respondents who referred to socioeconomic status in commenting on the problems that they identified. Culture also seemed to figure prominently in an officers' perceptions of the Latino community. Many officers believed that it impacted their ability to cultivate informants, which as implied earlier, is essential to fighting crime.

As reported earlier, one of the most significant problems affecting police relations with the Latino community arises from a widespread and deep-seated reluctance to report crimes and other serious incidents to the police department. Much of this reticence seemingly stems from the fear that Mexican nationals or undocumented workers might be discovered and subsequently deported back to their respective countries. Again unless some method can be found to encourage Latino residents to report crimes, there is a danger of the private usurpation of legitimate police functions through a system of personal retaliation and other frightening possibilities such as the intervention of vigilantes in this retribution or the emergence of massive lawlessness.

Again, perhaps part of this effort might involve arranging a series of meetings with immigration officials, representatives of other government agencies, insurance companies, and other parties interested in rectifying the problem. In addition, increased and intensified attempts must be made to instill trust and to promote an awareness of the departmental policy, which prescribes that encounters with the police will not necessarily result in deportation. Since departments may be hesitant about publicizing this policy, because of potential conflicts with the law, this vital and indispensable effort can perhaps only be carried out by strengthened efforts in community organization and education.

It is difficult to determine whether or not this particular mid size police department is representative of departments nationwide. However, given the influx of Latinos and the type of recruits police departments historically target, it is not far-fetched to think that police departments in other parts of the country may be faced with similar challenges. In light of this, we submit that additional research concerning these matters would seem to provide a practical

means of improving relations with the Latino community—America's largest and fasting growing minority.

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