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Latino Immigrant Perceptions about the U.S. Police: An Exploratory Study

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Latino Immigrant Perceptions about the U.S. Police: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

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New population trends by Latino immigrants have caused much debate in the field of criminal justice. Lack of research and literature on this growing population has left the justice system looking for ways to properly tap into the Latino population. Among the many areas that have been overlooked is one about how Latino immigrants adapt to their new life upon arriving in the United States. In addition, no study has ever explored how immigrants deal with the criminal justice system, especially the perceptions they have about the U.S. police. This thesis is an attempt to fill this void in research by being the first study of its kind.

This thesis examined Latino/Immigrant perceptions about the police in Southeast Omaha, Nebraska. Specifically, the thesis aimed at discovering what the perceptions of Latino immigrants are about the U.S. police and whether or not these are shaped by their experiences with the police in their home country.

Focus groups among Latino immigrants associated with different organizations and a local church in South Omaha were conducted. Different Latino backgrounds were selected in order to acquire a sample that was sufficiently stratified by nationality and other socio-demographic characteristics. A total of 32 people participated in these focus groups with nationalities from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The present study aimed at investigating the following research question: **What are Latino immigrants' perceptions about the U.S. police?, and what are the factors that influence these perceptions: 1) immigration status, 2) mistrust due to language barriers, and/or 3) fear which is connected to experiences with the police in their home countries.** The findings from this study by way of focus groups with Latino immigrants suggest that the relationship between these two groups of people is positive. Although there is still room for changes to be achieved, the majority of the participants felt pleased with the way police rendered their services. Most participants said they do not feel comfortable calling the police for assistance mainly in part because of their immigration status. Most prefer to maintain a distance from the police out of fear of having to deal with questions about their legal situation. Most contacts with the police emerged out of a traffic stop and at times turned into a discussion of whether or not the participant had legal documentation to be in this country.

There is some mistrust and fear of the police that is similar to the fear they have for the police in their home countries. However most of the fear that is felt by Latino immigrants towards the police is partly due because of the fear of being deported.

Immigration plays a very important role on why Latino immigrants refrain from engaging in any contact with the police. The issues surrounding immigration does affect the relationship between the police and Latino immigrants in a negative way. Latino immigrants become reluctant to engage in any contact with the police out of fear of being deported. But overall, most participants viewed the police favorably and said if they had more of a grasp of the English language, they would be more likely to call the police for assistance.

Suggestions offered by focus group participants, such as having community meetings with police officers and the hiring of bilingual officers, suggest that Latino immigrants are interested in building a positive relationship with law enforcement personnel. However, they also understand that both police departments and police officers must be willing to make changes and also work at achieving a positive relationship between the two. Finding ways to accurately deal with this growing population would ensure that a proper relationship built on trust and communication would be established between the police and Latino immigrants.

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INTRODUCTION

America is ever-changing. In recent years, Latinos have become the fastest growing minority group in the United States. It is estimated that about 9-11 million immigrants from all over the world enter the United States each year (Maiello and Kitchen, 2004). These immigrants make up 34% of employees in the United States (Ramos, 2000:24). Vargas (1997) reports, "since the 1970s, huge numbers of Latino and Asian immigrants have arrived in the United States" (1). The high level of immigration has caused America to take notice of a once unnoticed population: Latinos. This is due to the fact that in 1997, it was estimated that immigrants (both legal and illegal) contributed about 10 million dollars a year to the U.S. economy (Ramos, 2000:24-25). This has forced the U.S. to take notice of the fact that immigrants are transforming the nation; at the same time the U.S. is benefiting from the growing flux of immigrants (Ramos, 2000:25).

Latino immigrants have not only settled in urban areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Miami, but also in smaller communities in the United States. One of them being Omaha, Nebraska, the site of this study (Lopez, 2001: iv).

This sudden emergence of Latinos has raised concerns in terms of how these individuals are treated by the criminal justice system. As Skogan et al., (2002) notes,

> "the influx of immigrants and the corresponding changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the nation's population have placed significant demands on the infrastructure of the nation's public service sector, particularly the criminal justice system" (1).

One of the most controversial areas of concern is in the way police render services to certain minority groups. Since the late 1960s, tensions have amounted between ethnic minorities and the police. With events such as the L.A. riots and the Rodney King beating, tensions and mistrust have continued to increase between these two groups (Walker et al., 2000). When looking at whether police exhibit differential treatment based on race, the issue of discrimination emerges.

Lack of research and literature on this growing population has left the justice system struggling to find proper ways of treating the Latino population. One of the areas that has been overlooked is how Latino immigrants adapt to American culture. No study has ever explored how immigrants view the American criminal justice system, specifically the area of law enforcement, in comparison to the criminal justice system in their home countries. This thesis attempts to fill this void in research.

This thesis will examine Latino/a immigrant perceptions about the police in southeast Omaha, Nebraska. Specifically, the thesis will aim at discovering whether Latinos' perceptions about the police are shaped by their experiences with the police in their home country, or by factors associated with their immigrant experiences in the United States, Omaha specifically. This will be the first study of its kind.

Focus groups were conducted among various groups of Latino immigrants associated with different churches and Latino organizations in South Omaha. Different Latino organizations and a local church were utilized, to help provide pre-established community groups, which helped reduce selection bias within the sample group.

This research will draw attention to the potential problems of perceptions about the police from new immigrant populations and make a positive contribution to the field of criminal justice. It will also hopefully draw awareness to the Latino community by developing an in-depth understanding of how the recent immigrant experience is affected by police relations.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latinos in the United States

The United States is currently experiencing a dramatic shift in population. The "increased immigration, along with high birth rates, has made racial minorities the fastest-growing segment of America's population" (Vargas, 1997:1). As Rochin and Aponte (1996) note,

> "a major development of the 1980s was the phenomenal growth in size and influence of Latinos who added more to the population than all other minorities combined. Latinos are having a major impact on the ethnic, socioeconomic, and demographic features of the U.S. population" (viii).

As Vargas (1997) reports, since 1980, the number of Latinos in the U.S. has increased by at least 50% (1). The sharp increase in Latinos "has been due to recent and rapidly growing immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean, making Latinos the largest immigrant population in the country" (Rumbaut, 1996:1). Latinos have grown to become the most prominent minority in the United States, surpassing the African American community by comprising 14% of the total U.S. population. According to the Census's

Population Reference Bureau, the Latino population has gained about 13.3 million people since 1990 (United States Department of Commerce, 2003). A recent article published by the USA Today notes that, "Hispanics, the nation's largest minority, numbered 39.9 million in July, 2003, up from 13% from April 2000" (USA Today, "Hispanic, Asians counting explosive population growth," June 14th, 2004).

Latinos differ not only from non-Latinos but among each other in regards to education, occupation, income and family type (Rumbaut, 1996:3). The terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably to refer to the Latino population. These two terms seek to lump together millions of U.S. residents, immigrants or not, who trace their ancestry to the Spanish-speaking societies of "Latin" America. This means that many are forced into a "one-size fits all category"; and the vast majority of people labeled Hispanic or Latino in the U.S. do not identify themselves by either of these super national terms. The politically correct usage of Hispanic or Latino ignores the more fundamental point that such labels are historically and empirically incorrect (Rumbaut, 1996:1). It is important to recognize the differences among Latinos, because this will allow for the proper treatment of these groups. However, not only are Latinos helping to change America racially, ethnically and economically, "but in terms of language, the United States now has the fifth largest Spanish speaking population in the world" (Vargas, 1997:1).

The U.S. Census has strived to find accurate ways to account for this ethnic population. As Gonzales Jr. (1996) explains, "since the 1980's, the official census designation of any person of Spanish origin or descent is Hispanic or Latino. Hence, the

term Hispanic/Latino now includes: Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans and other" (10).

The 2000 Census was the first survey that allowed people to designate themselves as more than one race. The 1990 Census only included four racial categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black and White. However, the 2000 Census applied a new standard to make sure all new populations were accounted for by the Census. The 2000 Census kept the previous four categories but now included Hispanic/Latino and some other race. In terms of ethnicity, the 2000 Census included two categories: Hispanic/Latino and Non-Hispanic or Non-Latino. This allowed respondents the opportunity to identify themselves to more than one race (United States Department of Commerce, 2003; Villarruel et al., 2002:12). Before the 2000 Census was released, "systems for gathering data in many states and the federal government did not have a "Latino" or "Hispanic" ethnic category. They also failed to separate ethnicity from race; therein Latino/a were often counted as White" (Villarruel et al., 2002:10-11). There is no doubt that the 2000 Census made an enormous contribution in the way Latinos are viewed and accounted for.

The 2000 Census helped to define race and ethnicity in ways that are easier to comprehend. While race refers to the "major biological divisions of mankind which are distinguished by color of skin and physical features" (Walker et al., 2000:5; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997:313; National Survey Of Latinos, 2002), ethnicity is the, "differences between groups of people based on cultural customs, such as language, religion, foodways, family patterns, and other characteristics" (Walker et al., 2000:9; Pew

Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Ethnicity or origin is often times defined as the "heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or person's parents or ancestors before arriving in the United States" (United States Department of Commerce, 2003). Proper designation of this population is necessary to accurately conduct the research needed to understand this ethnic group.

Is it Hispanic or Latino

One important aspect that one must make reference to when discussing Hispanics, involves terminology. Debates have fueled discussion on whether to refer to this ethnic group as Hispanic or Latino. According to Martinez (2002), "Latinos are defined as persons whose national origin is Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and any other Spanish-speaking country" (96; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997; Skogan et al., 2002:23). Although labeling this population is a difficult task, in much of the literature available, the terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably. This is partly due because there is currently no uniform system that accurately defines the terms Latino and Hispanic (Villarruel et al., 2002:11-12).

When discussing the Hispanic/Latino population, it is important to note the various groups of people with different national origins that are categorized as Hispanic/Latino. When people hear the word Hispanic/Latino, Mexican-Americans are the first group of individuals that come to mind. This is no surprise, since Mexican-Americans make up about 66.9 percent of the total Hispanic population in the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). However, it is important to note that there

are other ethnic groups that are residing in the United States, besides Mexican Americans (**See Table 1**). These groups include Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Latin Americans which until recently have only begun to increase in population in certain parts of the United States (Walker et al., 2000:10; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997; Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002).

Controversy as to how these groups should be categorized and addressed has become a prevalent issue. As previously discussed, the terms Hispanic/Latino are often used interchangeably. Many Spanish-speaking citizens prefer to be called Latino/a, as opposed to Hispanic, which is a term created by the Census (Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). As Gonzales, Jr. (1996) describes, "the word Hispanic comes from the Latin word Hispania, designating residents of the Iberian Peninsula. Latino is a cultural-linguistic concept encompassing all groups in the Americas who share the Spanish language, culture and traditions" (10). Latinos are defined as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and the new arrivals from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Central and Latin America (Vargas, 1997:1).

Finding ways to properly address this ethnic group is only part of the problem that arises from conducting research on Latinos. Many other problems come into play when it comes to looking at Latinos in regards to the criminal justice system. Whether it is in the area of law enforcement or the court system, Latinos have been subject to many injustices on behalf of the criminal justice system. Latinos have been subject to stereotypes that have hindered them from gaining the appropriate place they deserve in today's society. As Vargas (1997) discusses, "for Latinos as well as other racial

minorities, the economic dislocation of the last quarter-century has intensified racial intolerance. On a daily basis, people of color confront a legal system that punishes, rather than promotes fairness" (1).

In part, the reason why it is difficult to accurately find means of addressing the problems of Latinos is the lack of data that is available about this ethnic group. Part of the problem also lies in the fact that the Census "counts Hispanic or Latino as an ethnicity rather than a race, so Hispanics can be of any race, including white," (USA Today, "Hispanics, Asians continuing explosive population growth", June 14th, 2004). Although data collection and research on Latinos is more extensive now than in the past, several caveats in the usage of this data must be recognized. Santiago (1990) explains in detail what these implications are. He explains,

> "First, the Census has inconsistently defined and collected information on Latinos. Spanish heritage is determined based on respondent self-identification. Second, it is still somewhat problematic to examine differences for Latino subgroups. Most published reports have only sketchy information about Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Latino subpopulations. A third problem reflects one of geographical level of analysis. Available local area data are less detailed than those existing at the state level. Finally, there is still limited range of information available on Latinos. There is limited information on issues such as health status and other concerns for the region" (8-9).

Part of the problem may be a reflection of the fact that information on Latinos is practically non-existent. In a report by Villarruel et al., (2002) it is noted that "current means for collecting and accessing data are inadequate, resulting in under-counting and inaccuracies in reporting disproportionate representation and disparate treatment of Latino(s) in the U.S. justice system" (10-11). Therein, our picture of this population is incomplete and we are unable to make accurate decisions involving this ethnic group.

This "lack of accurate, consistent Latino/a data inhibits researchers' ability to separate Latino/a data from the data of other racial/ethnic groups in reports that may critically impact change in policy and access to funds for services" (Villarruel et al., 2002:11).

Assimilation of Latinos in the United States

When discussing the role that Latinos play in the United States, it is important to discuss the perceptions and ideologies that Latinos envision they enter this country. For many Latinos, the hope of a better life away from their homeland sounds appealing. For others, the necessity of being able to provide for family and friends in their native countries is what brings them to the United States. For these and many other unknown reasons, Latinos as well as other ethnic groups, leave their home countries in search of a better life, which they feel they will find in the United States. Many of these immigrants "arrive on tourists visas and simply stay, while others come smuggled in boats or hustled across the border with Mexico" (Maiello and Kitchen, 2004:74-75). These immigrants leave their countries because of many factors such as: lack of jobs, low levels of education, or political repression, and they arrive to the United States because their labor is a necessity here (Ramos, 2000:24).

When Latinos emigrate to the United States, they lack an understanding of the English language and American culture. This, in turn alienates many Latinos and forces them to either adopt the American culture or stay true to their native culture. As Maiello and Kitchen (2004) note, "most undocumented immigrants melt into society, leading anonymous lives and doing faceless jobs such as: janitorial work, making beds, and

washing dishes"(75-76). The theory of assimilation is the "prevailing model of immigrant political movement and its shaped by a geographically determined definition of political space and agenda" (Torres, 1998:170-171). The assimilation model assumes that,

> "recent immigrants do not participate in politics immediately after their arrival in the host country because they are still preoccupied with their home country issues and with trying to adapt to a new environment. By the second generation, ties to the homeland have weakened. Political involvement begins at the local level, moving to the national level within another generation. By the third generation, the political agenda of immigrant groups may include international issues; by this time the focus of international affairs is not confined to the country of ancestry because the connection with the homeland has effectively been broken" (Torres, 1998:170-171).

The theory of assimilation has some limitations. First, this theory does not take into consideration the fact that many countries do not welcome nor allow immigrants to assimilate socially or legally (Torres, 1998:172). Second, the theory of assimilation cannot explain "the persistence and reappearance of ethnicity and the desire to reconnect with their homeland in the sons and daughters of immigrants" (Torres, 1998:172). Rumbaut (1996) explains that, "the panethnic identities of Hispanic and Latino are said to reflect a denationalized identification with racial-ethnic minority groups and self-conscious differences from the white Anglo majority population" (134).

Within assimilation theory, immigrant identity is determined by a person's generation, and generation is an important determinant of ethnic identity and behavior. Ethnic awareness is amplified in the third generations and beyond (Alba and Nee, 1997; Portes, 1997). Latinos often face the difficult task of finding their place within American society without having to relinquish their ethnic identity (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

This difficult challenge is not only applicable to Latinos, but rather to all ethnic groups who immigrate to the United States in search for a better life.

Identity Crisis: How America redefines the identity of Latinos

While the 1960s brought a movement towards equality, both in the area of politics and civil rights, the definition of ethnic identity became a significant issue within the Latino community. The fact that Latinos were now coming in and out of both their home and host country, forced them to re-evaluate their identities, more specifically, their border identities. As Torres (1998) explains, "border identities are unique because they contain elements of various cultures coexisting side by side. Community organizations have played a central role in the creation of border identities, because they have defined the parameters for Latinos and offered more radical notions about identity and politics" (177). It is necessary to recognize the importance of being able to accurately access this border of identities, because it helps to examine "the presence and synthesis of many cultures. One does not have to deny the existence of the other, and ambiguity is accepted as an essential part of identity" (Torres, 1998:178).

The concept of *Chicanismo* is the closest concept to border identity. The reason being is because it assumes that there is fusion. Meaning that the fusion of many identities will make one and this is ultimately the goal of *Chicanismo*. Hence, the reason why the Chicano movement saw itself as a unique nation in search of a state (Torres, 1998:178). As Rodriguez (1996) explains,

> "the Chicano movement was both a civil/human rights struggle and a movement for liberation. This movement had separate visions and unique histories. Some of

> the goals were to improve the lives of farm workers, to end Jim Crow style segregation and police repression, to improve educational opportunities and the struggle for political representation and self-determination" (1).

Aside from the goals of *Chicanismo*, other Latino communities have had to struggle to find an identity here in the United States. Torres (1998) refers to this as a reconstruction of identity. For example, the border between New York and San Juan, Puerto Rico, brought on a debate about the identity of Puerto Ricans. Where they "Newyoricans" (Puerto Ricans living in New York) or where they "Puertorriqueños" (Puerto Ricans from the state of Puerto Rico)? As a result of this debate, many island residents of Puerto Rico rejected those Puerto Ricans who lived in the United States. However, at the same time, Puerto Ricans were not accepted as Americans. The result was a hybrid-reconstruction "that encompassed both identities and reasserted itself in the eyes of both the host and home country" (Torres, 1998:178).

Just like Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, Cubans face similar difficulties, as they struggle to find their identity in the United States. Cubans from Miami and Cubans from Havana, Cuba, faced the same strains as do the Puerto Ricans from New York and those from San Juan, Puerto Rico. For those Cubans living in Havana, *Cubanía* "belonged to those who were committed to the political project of the state" led by Fidel Castro (Torres, 1998:179). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, exile remittances were the main source of cash for the Cuban government. The government then made efforts to reach out to the exiled Cuban community, but at the same time excluding them from their homeland (Torres, 1998).

It is important to understand that the identity of immigrants is "far more the result of an interplay between forces within the host society (where they emigrate to), the sending society (the country they came from), and the migrant communities involved" (Staring et al., 1997:16).

Stereotypes, attitudes and misconceptions about Latinos

A rapid demographic change in America has allowed multiculturalism to gain considerable resonance and importance in the United States. The inability of people to recognize this as an important issue that demands attention, has allowed many racial and ethnic minority groups, to be subject to injustices on behalf of Whites for many years. As Torres (1998) explains, in the United States,

> "the civil rights movement of the 1960s led communities that had been excluded from the political process on the basis of race or national origin to demand inclusion on the same grounds" (173).

Gerstle and Mollenkopf (2001) also note that the "1960s should be seen as an ongoing series of negotiations through which Americans have attempted to uproot old, and stubborn, problems of racial discrimination and exclusion" (14). Extensive focus was placed on the African American community during this time because the fight against injustice was a top priority for civil rights activists (Walker et al., 2000). With atrocious acts of injustice caught on camera towards African Americans by Whites during this time, many were forced to re-evaluate their stance on Blacks and other minority groups. However, with incidents like the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, many thought this country would be forever plagued by racism and injustice.

To further ingrain this idea, incidents like the Rodney King beating, the Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo cases, allowed for many to concentrate on the injustices and abuses towards Blacks only. All while forgetting the abuses that many other racial and ethnic groups were being subject to at this time as well. As suggested by Rodriguez (1996), "in 1966, aware of the uneasy race relations within the civil rights movement, Elizabeth Martinez (past director of the New York chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) wrote an article where she pointed out to a problem that Latinos today often observe: when it comes to race, Latinos do not matter" (4).

However, this began to change with the emergence of immigrant organizations as they sought to define "their identities in terms of difference. Difference was celebrated in a search for roots that had been severed by oppression and denied by shame" (Torres, 1998:174). At the same time, many radical movements emerged in Mexico and Puerto Rico that reached out to many communities abroad. All of this helped to draw awareness to the on-going struggles that Latinos were forced to be a part of, because up until this point, most of the efforts geared towards equality were being focused on the African American community. During this time, various groups of similar national origin began to come together "as a means to mobilize community and political resources." (Torres, 1998:175). The city of Chicago is said to be one of the first cities to experience the cohabitation of communities from different Latin American countries. This Torres (1998) says, allowed for "individual ethnic identification under certain circumstances that would also allow the community to adopt the label of "Latino", a broader ethno-political identity that coexisted with other ethnic identities" (175).

These and many more struggles were only the beginning for ethnic and racial minorities. As Vargas (1997) explains, "the attacks on multiculturalism conveniently ignored the vetoes of civil rights legislation and intensified the fact that racism underlines much of America's history" (2).

Linda Jackson (1995) studied how Whites view Latinos. Her study revealed that most Whites' perception and attitudes towards Latinos are unfavorable (3). Latinos are regarded as being lazy, cruel, ignorant, pugnacious, but also family-oriented and tradition-loving (Fairchild & Cozens, 1981; Jackson, 1995). In Jackson's 1995 study, she found that Whites perceived Latinos to be,

> "less productive, optimistic, ambitious, business-wise, dependable, independent, self-disciplined, efficient, intelligent, sophisticated, good-looking, well-adjusted, patriotic, industrious, prosperous, knowledgeable, and prompt. At the same time, Anglos perceived Latinos to be more uneducated, poor, rebellious, physically violent, dirty, noisy, and criminally inclined"(6).

These negative perceptions and stereotypes is what has hindered Latinos from benefiting from the opportunities that this country has to offer. What makes these stereotypes even more damaging is that many Whites have little contact with Latinos, making these stereotypes inaccurate. This allows these inaccurate and distorted stereotypes and misconceptions about Latinos to be passed on to others (Jackson, 1995:9). But, Whites are not the only ones that carry around negative perceptions of Latinos; many minority groups form stereotypes towards other minority groups as well.

The negative perceptions and misconceptions that Whites and some minority groups have about Latinos and other racial and ethnic groups are reinforced by the mass media. Harris (1989) has examined how the media portrays minority groups in the

United States, including Latinos. His study found that Latinos are rarely portrayed on television[1] and when they are portrayed they are inaccurately depicted. They are portrayed as criminals, crooked cops, waiter/waitresses, and/or the hired help. Few television shows accurately portray Latinos as successful individuals in today's society. Few television shows will portray Latinos as lawyers, CEO's or important members of society. Although Jackson (1995) recognizes that the "film industry may be awakening to the untapped Latino market, there is little evidence that TV has increased the frequency and diversity of roles for Latino characters" (10).

The media is not the only one to blame for the misconceptions people have about minorities, especially about Latinos. There is a lack of research addressing how "families, communities and educational institutions communicate negative perceptions, either explicitly or implicitly" to the general public (Jackson, 1995:10). Jackson (1995) explains that the way Latino children are treated in the classroom communicates something about the perceptions teachers have of Latino children compared to Anglo children. The attitudes and behaviors of certain communities towards Latinos say something about the perception adults have of Latinos, which in turn gets passed on to their children (10). Extensive research on these areas is necessary to avoid transmitting these inaccurate visions and messages about minority groups that can undoubtedly enrich a country with its culture. As Jackson (1995) urges,

> "more research is needed in these settings to determine if and how negative perceptions are being communicated and how to change such communications.

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[1] In his 1989 study, Harris found that only 1.5% of all characters on television were Latinos. The few Latinos on successful TV shows were all involved in law enforcement on shows like L.A. Law and Hill Street Blues.

> Other's perceptions have a profound effect on self-perceptions by way of self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, the future of Latinos depends in part on developing positive perceptions in the minds of all about their Latino peers" (10).

Latinos in Omaha, Nebraska

The influx of the Latino population in Omaha is a fairly recent phenomenon. Many attribute the revival of South Omaha to Latinos after the "collapse of the big meatpacking plants" (Lopez, 2001:1). The city of Omaha underwent a huge transition in population over the last 50 years, allowing the Latino community to change the face of the city. The changes and transitions in this small, Midwestern city, have exposed Latinos to different experiences than those immigrants who settle in larger cities. And their experiences have gone untold, up until recent years, where a growing interest in the study of Latinos has emerged. The population increase in cities where Latinos were practically non-existent, has fueled issues related to "immigration, adaptation, and inter-ethnic conflict" as topics for extensive and much needed research (Lopez, 2001:1).

In Nebraska, there have been two waves of Latino immigrants, who are often times referred to as *Nebrasqueños* (Lopez, 2001: v). The first wave entering in the 1920s and the second wave "arriving in the 1980s, who came to the Midwest to find jobs in the meatpacking industry" (Lopez, 2001: v). Even though 50 years separated these two immigrant groups, they had similar experiences upon their arrival. As Lopez (2001) explains, "their labor was needed in the plants, both migrations faced economic discrimination in the workplace, and some degree of racial hostility in the community" (v). Many of these immigrants are also faced with their undocumented status, which may hinder and at times discourage this population. But as Lopez (2001) explains, "over time,

the two immigrant waves have put down roots in Omaha. By buying homes, establishing businesses and communal institutions, and raising their children in the Cornhusker state" the community continues to flourish (v). This allows for the Southeast part of Omaha to be recognized as being predominantly populated by Latinos.

The Latino community in Southeast Omaha is a growing community. Its growth can be defined as a manifestation of ethnicity. As Nelson and Tienda (1985) explain "these communities are structurally produced by their concentrations in minority labor markets and by the continued influx of immigrants who help to renew cultural traditions and subsequently elaborate them as a basis for social solidarity" (71). Such communities "cushion the impacts of cultural change and protect immigrants against outside prejudice and initial economic difficulties" (Rumbaut and Portes, 1996). Specifically, in Nebraska, "such ethnic community exists in South Omaha" (Lopez, 1998).

CHAPTER 2

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND LATINOS

With Latinos being an underreported population, it has become very difficult to accurately access their role in society. As a result, there has been very little research produced on Latinos and the criminal justice system (Holmes, 1998). As Walker and Herbst (2001) note, "it is widely believed that official census data underreports the actual Hispanic population. Some estimates report that minorities in general are overlooked

five times more often than whites" (332; Ogawa, 1999:11). As explained by Villarruel et al., (2002),

> "persons of Hispanic and Latino heritage can be of any race; they also can choose to identify their race as Hispanic or Latino/a. However, current data gathering systems generally fail to account for these facts. Many data systems only collect information on race and only offer choices-such as "White", "African American" and "Other"-that do not consider ethnicity. With only these choices, more than 95% of Latino/as report their race as White" (12).

For many immigrants, the problems for underreporting to the U.S. Census may lie in their inability to comprehend and speak English, the mistrust they may have in the government, and the fear of exposing their immigration status (Ogawa, 1999:2; Walker and Herbst, 2001:332). For Omaha specifically, it is "estimated that undocumented immigrants represent an additional 35 percent of the Hispanic population" (Walker and Herbst, 2001:332; Gouveia, 1998).

With all of these ongoing changes in society, the criminal justice system has found itself trying to figure out a way to accurately deal with this special population. Many police departments have begun to make changes within their departments to specifically meet the needs of Latinos. For example, many police officers receive departmental training in "survival Spanish": which is enough Spanish to let them handle an encounter with a Spanish speaking citizen. Other officers acquire, through experience, Spanish that teaches them commonly used Spanish phrases. Many departments have also begun to offer cultural awareness training to help avoid any misunderstandings between the police and minority groups (Sack, 2001; Herbst and Walker, 2001:332-333).

Even with all of these efforts, many police departments still have concerns about the future of this population. As Lopez (2001) acknowledges, "in a recent survey of sworn officers and police personnel, 56% of those surveyed believed race relations were strained between the police and the community[2]" (ix). This is just one of the many issues facing Latinos, immigrants, and other minorities, and the criminal justice system, specifically within the Omaha community.

Among other pressing issues that Latinos face, is the emergence of a new phenomenon called racial profiling; which emerged in the 1980s as a result of the "war on drugs" (Harris, 2002; Walker et al., 2000:101). Racial profiling, according to Weitzer and Tuch (2002) "refers to the use of race as a key factor in police decisions to stop and interrogate citizens" during traffic stops or any citizen-police interaction (435; Engel, 2002: 249-250; Harris, 1999, 2002; Russell, 1999; Smith & Petrocelli, 2001; Walker, 2000:1; 2001). In an effort to catch all of those individuals who were involved in drug trafficking, many innocent minorities were swept along with the drug dealers. This began to infuriate many civil rights activist, because they claimed that now minorities were being targeted and not just drug dealers. Hence, racial tensions between the police and ethnic minorities became more intense and more prevalent.

The "war on drugs" has proven to be one of the most pressing issues which has increased racial tensions between police and minorities, and at the same time, has fueled the stereotypes aimed at certain minority groups by the general public (Harris, 2002; Kennedy, 1997; Tonry, 1995; Walker et al., 2000) The "drug courier profile" allowed

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[2] *Omaha World Herald*. 1999. "Survey of Police Indicates Tensions." December 23."

for stereotypes to be formed towards minorities, especially towards blacks and Latinos (Harris, 2002; Kennedy, 1997; Tonry, 1995; Walker et al., 2000).

Difficulties in the study of racial profiling and discrimination in the criminal justice system, has been hindered by the lack of data available on minorities other than Blacks. Most of the research that is available when it comes to the study of race and the criminal justice system, generally involves African Americans (Walker et al., 2000). Research on Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians is practically non-existent (Harris, 2002; Herbst and Walker, 2001; Walker et al., 2000:12). This becomes a problem, since Latinos are now the fastest growing population in the United States. Therein, efforts to study this population have been flawed by the lack of data and research on this ethnic group.

Stereotypes and misconceptions about minorities have transcended from the police towards the general public; hence the reason why many people perceive minorities to be responsible for the majority of the crime in America (Anderson, 1995:3-25; Carter and Radelet, 1999:213; Kennedy, 1997; Richey Mann, 1993:116-165; Walker, 2000). As Kennedy (1997) describes, race was being used as a proxy for dangerousness and was the sole indicator that many law enforcement personnel used when deciding to stop an individual (136-167; Walker et al., 2000:104). This allowed for the emergence of "driving while black", which signified that Black citizens were most likely to be stopped by police in comparison to Whites. With the increased tensions between police and racial and ethnic minorities, this phenomenon fueled investigations to either prove or disprove if this profiling actually existed. With reports of racial profiling targeting African

Americans sprouting, many began to believe that racial profiling occurred mostly to Blacks. However, with the increase in the Latino population, this ideology has shifted.

The emergence of a new phenomenon has come into the limelight: "driving while brown" (Harris, 1997; Harris, 2002). This now meant that Latinos were being targeted by police along with Blacks. As Harris (2002) noted, the recent "demographic shifts in our country forced us to be alert to the reality that profiling of Latinos is prevalent and immigration issues will be spread" (133). The study of racial profiling now deems to be focused on Blacks and Latinos. The growth in research in this area has increased due to the disparate treatments that minorities have been subject to after the emergence of the "war on drugs" (Tonry, 1995; Kennedy, 1997; Walker et al., 2000:117). Researchers around the country have focused their research on the exploration of whether or not this phenomenon actually exists within the police subculture, and if so, what needs to be done to prevent it.

The police and the public

Policing is an interactive profession in which the people play a major role in the ways officers do their job. Police officers depend on citizens to do their job, because they are the ones who request the services of the police. Police officers are often times called to solve problems that people are not able to solve on their own (Black, 1980; Martin, 1990:7; Reiss, 1971). As Langworthy and Travis (1999) state, "a major influence on police practice is the people involved in police-citizen encounters" (24). Officers often times serve as mediators between citizens as they negotiate between all the parties

involved. Trying to come up with proper solutions to problems is something officers often times struggle with. If a negotiation is not a possible means of resolution to a particular problem, "arrest or the use of coercive force are the police strategies of last resort and typically occur when negotiations have failed" (Langworthy and Travis, 1999:25).

Many people believe that police officers are crime fighters who should be able to solve any and all problems. They should also be "friendly, knowledgeable about the neighborhood, and helpful" (Walker and Katz, 2002:30). However, this is an inaccurate description as to how police officers truly behave and handle specific situations. Police officers are not always friendly, they engage in non-professional practices, and some are even guilty of engaging in corruptive practices. Official records show that many officers use excessive physical force when dealing with certain individuals and certain incidents (Walker et al, 2001; Walker and Katz, 2002). Past research demonstrates that "police officers enjoyed little citizen respect and often faced open hostility from the public" (Walker and Katz, 2002:30). Police officers have also benefited from the lack of direct supervision. Their job allows them low visibility from their supervisors, which makes it nearly impossible for them to be reprimanded for their bad behavior. Police officers exercise discretion in ways that is often times unprofessional and allows them to respond to "public hostility with physical force" (Walker and Katz, 2002:31).

The hostility between citizens and police became so prevalent during the 1960's, that changes were necessary (Walker et al., 2000:89-92). Police needed to regain public trust and emphasize their role as, "watchmen, service men, and legal style men" whose

main purpose was to achieve control in a disorderly society (Langworthy and Travis, 1999:19).

Treatment of Latinos by the police

Some of the issues that have been discussed as potential problems that Latinos face within the area of policing is the lack of research and knowledge about Latino culture. The knowledge about Latinos and their culture has been one that has been neglected for years. Extensive research needs to be conducted to allow police officers to provide proper services to this population. Aside from the lack of knowledge on this particular population, another problem that arises is that of not being able to explain the "patterns of police arrest of Latinos compared with Whites and African Americans" (Walker et al., 2000:12). This is due to the fact that Uniform Crime Reports do not report data on ethnicity, therefore this piece of information is currently not available for review (Herbst, 2001:330; Walker et al., 2000).

Another problem that pertains to Latinos is that of language. As Herbst and Walker (2001) point out, Latinos who only speak Spanish face cultural barriers (330; Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:96; Walker et al., 2000). This can also create serious problems in how police interact with this ethnic group. Latinos who do not understand English may not understand what police ask them to do and this can escalate a situation (Herbst and Walker, 2001:330-331; Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:96). This can happen because most police officers are not properly trained in Spanish. Many officers claim to know "survival Spanish", which as discussed earlier, means enough Spanish to get them by the day's work which they have learned through experience (Herbst and

Walker, 2001:332). As Herbst and Walker (2001) point out, "this inability to communicate with Spanish-speaking citizens creates potential communication problems and misunderstandings in police-citizen encounters" (331; Walker et al., 2000). Some police departments have begun to offer special training to officers in Spanish due to the increase of Latino population in their specific beat areas. Some police departments have also "adopted incentive programs to attract Spanish-speaking officers" to work in their police departments (Herbst and Walker, 2001:331; Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:96).

All of this information does not suggest that those Latinos, who do not master the English language, will in turn have negative attitudes about the police. As reported by Herbst and Walker (2001), in a Texas study it was found that "Hispanics exhibited positive attitudes about the police" and they understood police work and were willing to cooperate with the police (330). This was further supported by Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch (1999) as they explain that Spanish-speaking citizens are more likely to agree with police practices and are more willing to cooperate with them (95). Much of the public opinion data that exists today, "contradict the popular image of total hostility between the police and minorities" (Walker et al., 2000:91). In terms of public opinion from Latinos towards the police, reports suggest that "they are law-abiding people who rarely have contact with the police, and their major complaint is a lack of adequate police protection" (Walker et al., 2000:91).

However, one unique problem that Latinos face is the cultural differences they experience when they emigrate to the United States. Latinos must submerge themselves

in a world that is unknown to them. The U.S. is an unfamiliar place where different languages, cultures, laws, and values must be adopted to become accepted within society. Many Latinos, who do not speak English, refuse to let go of their individual values and traditions, which is what makes their experiences with the criminal justice system unique (Herbst and Walker, 2001). The criminal justice system must be able to "distinguish significant variation in interpersonal relations, family, and values that exist between these cultures" (Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:88). If the system does not attempt this, then both "conflict and lack of responsiveness on the part of the criminal justice system" may lead to the increased hostility and strained relationships between Latinos and the police (Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:88). The lack of cultural knowledge within the criminal justice system personnel can lead to misunderstandings in terms of how to appropriately cater to the needs of Latinos (Villarruel et al., 2002:3).

As noted by Martinez (2002), "Latinos are economically disadvantaged when compared to Anglos" (85). This, he says, is due to their large family size and structure, their low levels of education, the years of work experience, and their recent immigration to the United States (Martinez, 2002:96; Skogan et al., 2002:4-5). All of these issues allow for the stressful relations between Latinos and the police. Many Latino families are large in size which makes it impossible for many families to provide the proper educational skills to their children. In turn, many children must face the grueling challenge of working low-paying jobs at very young ages. Hence, the reason why many Latinos live below the poverty level (Carmarota, 2001:2; Martinez, 2002:96; Walker et al., 2000:92-93). All of these issues must be taken into consideration and be addressed,

because only then will we be able to acknowledge that the experiences of Latinos differ from those of other racial and ethnic groups (Skogan et al., 2002:5).

As Walker, Spohn and DeLone (2000) found, "Latinos initiated contact with the police less frequently than either Whites or African Americans and are far more likely to be stopped by the police" (93). Reasons for the lack of initiative to contact the police may be due to their immigration status and their inability to speak English. As previously noted, Latinos may not understand English and it would be impossible for them to be able to communicate with the police. Therefore, they may not call the police as often as other minority groups. Latino immigrants may not call the police, because they fear that this may prompt an investigation in regards to their immigration status (Walker et al., 2000:93). Another important issue that might affect their unwillingness to initiate an encounter with police might be due to their private family structure. Latino families hold their families as the center of their world and many feel that calling the police, would be a "threat to the family's integrity and, in the case of an arrest, as an attack on the father's authority" (Walker et al., 2000:93; Carter, 1983:217; Herbst and Walker, 2001).

Even with all of the issues that Latinos have faced over the last few years, research has demonstrated that Latinos still respect law enforcement personnel. Latinos are more willing to cooperate and respect the police even though they do experience a language barrier when having contacts with the police (Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:99; Herbst and Walker, 2001). Latinos who are "facing greater cultural barriers (especially language) understand police work and are willing to cooperate with the police in any reciprocal activities" (Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:99).

Even though Latinos are more willing to cooperate with police than Blacks, this does not imply that police are more willing to cooperate with them. The research available suggests that Latinos are more likely to be arrested on "weaker evidence than Whites and this concludes a disparity in the treatment of Latinos and other minority groups within the criminal justice systems" (Petersilia, 1983; Walker et al., 2000). The lack of knowledge about the Latino culture may be one of the reasons why police may treat this minority group differently; hence, the reason why Latino experiences with the police differs from other minority groups.

The lack of knowledge and interest in the Latino culture by the criminal justice system has caused conflicts in how Latinos are perceived and treated by the system. As a consequence, "often times the results are diminished service delivery, increased hostility, and a mutual distrust between Latinos and the criminal justice system" (Herbst and Walker, 2001:330). The justice system must take a pro-active approach in attempting to improve the relations between Latinos and law enforcement. As Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch (1999) point out,

> "learning about other cultures and knowing the attitudes of those races are very important to criminal justice practitioners, especially law enforcement officers. Since a large percentage of the immigrants now come from Asia and Latin America instead of European countries, the study of Latinos becomes essential. The immigration trend, plus a number of undocumented citizens residing in the United States, are likely to have great implications for the criminal justice system, in general, and local law enforcement departments" (88).

This is an important issue for the criminal justice system to take into consideration. It is essential that research on Latinos be increased and that more attention is focused on improving the relations of this minority group in all stages of the criminal justice system.

This will allow for the better handling of Latinos in a system that has ultimately ignored them.

Latino perceptions about the police

Latinos are subject to inaccurate perceptions thanks to the media and other agencies that inaccurately depict this ethnic group. Law enforcement personnel have also been guilty of perpetuating these inaccurate misconceptions. Since the emergence of the "war on drugs" in the 1980s, police officers have been responsible for intensifying the perceptions other law enforcement personnel and citizens have about minorities. When it comes to Latinos, the common stereotype towards Latinos is one that they are undocumented immigrants trying to gain access to this country. Misconceptions such as these are what allow police officers to view Latinos as criminals or undocumented immigrants (Carter and Radelet, 1999).

These types of attitudes and behavior by police have alienated Latinos, forcing them to mistrust the American criminal justice system. They may feel that this system emulates the way the criminal justice system in their own native countries operates, since a lot of countries from which these immigrants come from are plagued with police corruption. Latinos learn to mistrust the police and the criminal justice system as a whole by their interactions with the police. This mistrust and alienation brings on a new set of problems. For example, Latinos may be unwilling to contact the police when they have a problem. They may be less willing to co-operate with the police when needed, and most importantly, it can often times lead to misunderstandings between the police and Latinos;

this being due to the language and cultural barriers between the two groups (Walker and Herbst, 2001).

These misunderstandings can occur at any point within the criminal justice system, but they play a more significant role in regards to the area of law enforcement. This is because police are the ones who come into contact with citizens more often. Latinos are now the most prominent minority in America; attempts have been made to accurately learn what this will mean for society. Cultural and language barriers have affected the way Latinos are treated, because they are different from any other minority group. Although there are many other ethnic groups that reside in the United States, Latinos have now become the most pervasive. Attention on how to accurately manage and render services to this group has now become a necessity.

Latinos and their effects within Law Enforcement

As previously discussed, within the area of law enforcement, the idea to hire bilingual officers to be able to render proper services to Latinos emerged within police departments. This seemed like a rational decision, since these bilingual officers would be able to offer their services in Spanish, all while grasping the cultural differences that sets this group apart from the rest.

The fact that many Latinos do not master the English language becomes a problem not only within society, but also when it comes to their interactions with the police. There has been limited research devoted to the study of Latino relations with the

police, but some similarities are found with the way Blacks view the police. As Carter and Radelet (1999) note,

> "police attitudes toward Latino citizens appear to vary geographically throughout the United States. There is a greater likelihood for officers to assume that a Latino is an undocumented alien, notably if the person is perceived to be of a lower socioeconomic class. Officers also tend to equate a strong Spanish accent with a lack of intelligence, a higher probability of being an undocumented alien, and/or the probability of being a criminal" (213).

These and other stereotypes have hindered many Latinos from advancing within society and have prompted increased hostility between police and minorities. When looking at Latinos' attitudes toward the police, "the research indicates that the image of the police decrease as fear of crime increases, frequency of contact with the police increases, and victimization increases" (Carter and Radelet, 1999:213).

Many studies have shown that language and cultural barriers make it difficult for Latinos to want to interact with the police and vice versa (Carter, 1983 and 1985; Cheurprakobkit, 1999; Herbst and Walker, 2001:330-331; Martinez, 2002; Skogan et al., 2002:9; Walker et al., 2000). Cultural and language barriers make it difficult for Latinos to want to interact with the police and it also is difficult for police officers to understand this minority group. Part of the whole problem is that most officers neither speak Spanish nor understand the Latino culture. It then becomes the police officers duty to want to introduce and familiarize themselves with the Latino culture. This will ultimately enable them to become more efficient in their police duties, all while helping to build strong relationships with all of the members of the community.

Hiring bilingual officers is the first step in establishing long-lasting relationships with the Latino community. Police officers, who willingly and adequately accept to be

trained to deal with any type of situation and to respond to the needs of all the people, will be the most efficient. When dealing with racial and ethnic minorities, language and culture can play a very important role in the way in which police render their services and in the way in which they perceive these ethnic groups.

Improving the Relations between Latinos and the Police

Current conditions may make it easier for Latinos to reside within their own ethnic communities and not be willing to branch out to their adopted community. This may be due to fear of family disruption, fear of deportation because of their immigration status, or because of the language and cultural barriers that separates them from other groups within society (Nelson and Tienda, 1985; Walker et al., 2000:93). Research has found that many Latinos feel,

> "routinely discriminated against by not only the police but also by the entire criminal justice system. This feeling of discrimination was based upon the belief that the police would do little or nothing to deal with victimization or to help them resolve conflicts" (Carter and Radelet, 1999:213).

Better relations can be established between the police and the Latino community, by putting forth effort to build ties between these two groups. Officers need to be properly trained to learn to be receptive of the Latino culture and be fluent in Spanish. Problems will arise and it will not allow for proper relationships to be established, if police officers are not properly trained in Spanish. However, learning to communicate in Spanish is not enough. If police officers are looking to be viewed in a positive way by Latinos and if they expect to properly deliver their services to this population, more things need to be accomplished.

As Herbst and Walker (2001) point out, "the inability for police officers to communicate with Spanish-speaking citizens creates potential communication problems and misunderstandings in police-citizen encounters" that may lead to bigger consequences for citizens (331; Walker et al., 2000). Some police departments have begun to offer special training to officers in Spanish due to the increase in numbers in their specific beat areas. Some police departments have also "adopted incentive programs to attract Spanish-speaking officers" to work in their police departments (Herbst and Walker, 2001:331; Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 1999:96).

However, solely hiring bilingual officers or teaching officers Spanish, will not ensure that positive relations will be formed between Latinos and police officers. Nonetheless, Sweeney (1982) speculates that "they [bilingual officers] will display more understanding and compassion towards minority residents" (94). However, this is not always proven to be true. Sometimes, minority officers who work in minority neighborhoods are sometimes regarded as "sell outs" or as "uncle toms by members of their own group because they joined the police force" (Sweeney, 1982:94). Nonetheless, police departments have failed to recruit minority applicants. However, "one of the reasons more minority group members are not hired is a failure to pass police entrance exams. For example, Latinos, Orientals, and women often fall below minimum height requirements" (Sweeney, 1982:94). Departments must then take active measures to modify their entrance requirements, in order to ensure that more minorities are eligible (Sweeney, 1982:94), all while not lowering their standards and not overlooking important information for the mere sake of filling a position or diversifying a department.

There is very little research dedicated to the study of Latinos in relation to the criminal justice system (Herbst and Walker, 2001; Walker et al., 2000). A lot of the research that deals with the issue of race has been specifically geared towards the study of African Americans. However, when research on Latinos has been attempted, one of the prevalent problems lies in the way Latinos are categorized in official data. Most Latinos are lumped in the "White" category without distinguishing between those Latinos that are White and those that are non-Latino Whites (Herbst and Walker, 2001; Walker et al., 2000: 10-13). In the past, "government agencies generally classified Latinos as White. As a result, most criminal justice data sets do not provide good longitudinal data on Latinos" (Walker et al., 2000:10).

This lack of research does not permit for an accurate assessment of how Latinos interact with the police. However, the scarce literature suggests that "not only is there conflict between the police and the Latino community, but the experience of Latinos with the police is different in important respects from the experience of African Americans" (Herbst and Walker, 2001; Walker et al., 2000). Proper steps need to be taken to ensure that this growing population is looked upon as a source for future research. These changes for improving police effectiveness with a population that has systematically been ignored are necessary within the area of law enforcement.

These steps will hopefully improve Latinos willingness to contact the police when they have a problem or question. Making them more receptive to the police, increase their likelihood of reporting without the fear of any repercussions, and most importantly, it will make them feel like a part of the community. Also, preventing them from isolating

themselves from the rest of the community, and be willing to branch out and associate with other members of the community. There is research that supports the idea that "Latinos who are victims of crime will not report crimes to the police because: they feel the police would do little or nothing, their previous experience with the police was bad, they did not want to [bother] the police, and they were afraid of the police" (Carter and Radelet, 1999:213).

The fact that we are dealing with a unique population and having police improve the way they deliver their services, will bring about a lot of change within the community. It will send a message to the rest of the community on the importance of the integration of all groups residing in the community. It will allow other members of the community to want to associate with all groups within the community, instead of ignoring them just because they choose to be separated. As Fielding (1995) notes, "the relationship of the police and the public is influenced by police participation in the community" (8). Having the police take the initiative to build positive relationships with the Latino community, will then allow citizens to model officer behavior, and act as a team in the total inclusion of Latinos in this country.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction:

This chapter describes the research methodology used to conduct this study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the research setting and explaining the purposes of the data collection. Next, discussion about the data collection strategies is presented. Finally, this study's data collection process is explained.

The Setting:

Omaha, Nebraska lies in the Midwest region of the United States. The city has a population of 399,357 as of 2002. Latinos[3] comprise 5.7% of the total population (United States Department of Commerce). For this "Midwestern city, it is estimated that undocumented immigrants represent an additional 35 percent of the Latino population" (Walker and Herbst, 2001:332; Gouveia, 1998). Many of these immigrants emerged during the "economic boom years of the 1990s, thanks to the plethora of low-wage jobs" (Maiello and Kitchen, 2004:75-76). The Southeaster part of Omaha is heavily populated by Latinos, making this the perfect setting to conduct this study.

[3] In this report, Hispanic/Latino includes any race (United States Department of Commerce, 2002).

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of experiences with police personnel in their home countries from Latino immigrant[4] viewpoint. Essentially, this study investigated the following research question:

What are Latino immigrants' perceptions about the U.S. police?, and what are the factors that influence these perceptions: 1) immigration status, 2) mistrust due to language barriers, and/or 3) fear which is connected to experiences with the police in their home countries.

The following hypotheses were derived in an attempt to address this research question:

H1: *Immigrant experiences with the police in their home countries heavily influence their perceptions of the police in the United States.*

H2: *Latino immigrant perceptions about the U.S. police are generally negative.* This hypothesis was formulated on the basis that corruption and fear plagues Central and Latin American police departments. It was assumed that before Latinos came to the United States, they had experienced some form of police corruption and maybe even brutality in their home countries. Hence, it was assumed that they transmit that suspicion and fear to the police here in the United States.

H3: *Immigrants will avoid contact with the police in the United States.*

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[4] Latino immigrants are defined as "all persons not born in the United States, one of its outlying territories, or of U.S. parents living abroad" (Camarota, 2001).

Data Collection:

Focus groups with community members (N=32[5]). Data was collected through a series of focus groups with Latino immigrants. According to Krueger (1994), "focus groups are the best method of studying subjects that have not been studied before" (29). They are also necessary if we are trying to unravel the "vocabulary and the thinking patterns of our target audience" (Krueger, 1994:29). Focus groups also help to identify the "perceptions, feelings, and manners of thinking that the participants may have" (Krueger, 1994:19). Therein, conducting focus groups seemed to be the most effective method in attempting to obtain a more comprehensive view on Latino culture, specifically on Latino immigrants' interactions and views about the U.S. police.

Although focus groups can have its limitations such as: providing the primary investigator with less control or providing data that may be difficult to analyze, conducting focus groups is a great research technique for this particular topic. Latino immigrants may be reluctant to share their experiences with someone outside of their close circle of friends, especially in regards to policing issues. However, if a level of trust is gained between the researcher and participants, it then allows them to share their experiences. Rich data can then be attained versus a qualitative analysis on immigrant

[5] The total number of focus group participants was 33. However, one participant was of Puerto Rican descent. This study aimed at exploring foreign-born Latino immigrant perceptions about the police. According to the U. S. Census, Puerto Ricans are not considered foreign-born because they are born U.S. citizens (United States Department of Commerce, 2002). Even though they emigrate to the United States in later years, they are still not considered foreign-born immigrants. Therefore, this participant was excluded for the purpose of this study.

perceptions about the U.S. police. First hand accounts provide a more in-depth view as to the feelings and perceptions Latino immigrants may have about the U.S. police.

Therein, focus groups with Latino immigrants[6] were conducted in cooperation with different Latino organizations, as well as churches, in South Omaha. Both the Chicano Awareness Center (CAC) and one local church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, located in the heart of South Omaha, provided the perfect setting in order to acquire a sample that was sufficiently stratified by nationality and other socio-demographic characteristics. The CAC serves as a resource center to Latino immigrants and their families. This center is also the place where many seek to learn English, explore different activities with their families, or simply become aware of what is going on within the Latino community. The decision to use the Chicano Awareness Center as the study site was due in part, because it provided the principal investigator with pre-existing community groups, which helped to reduce the selection bias[7] within the sample group. Prospective participants were also recruited at Our Lady of Guadalupe church located in South Omaha. This is a very popular church and with the help of previous focus group participants, a sizable group of individuals who would also serve as focus group members was gathered.

With the help of the program director for the Aguante program at the CAC, participants were recruited for this thesis. The program director made several

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[6] Latino immigrants that were interviewed were foreign-born immigrants. This study strictly focused on foreign-born immigrants, as opposed to first or second generation immigrants. This is partly due, because the focus of this study is to discover how the perceptions about the police of foreign-born Latino immigrants, differ from the perceptions of other Latinos that have resided in the United States for more than five years.

[7] Selection bias can negatively affect the quality of a study. As Krueger (1994) suggests, "one must be aware of participants picked because they have expressed an interest in the topic," (80-81). This may become problematic because participants may express concern, anger, and frustration towards a specific topic; hence, wanting to express these feelings may lead to a biased study. (Krueger, 1994: 80-81).

announcements about the study during his meetings with families. He also contacted individuals directly and told them about the study. Most prospective participants were eager to participate and share their stories.

The study only used adults over the age of 18. No juveniles were used. Adults participating in the study were allowed to bring their children to the meetings. This was done in part to avoid participants not wanting to attend the meetings because of their inability to secure child care. Consent forms, in both English and Spanish, were provided to the participants in this study to ensure their anonymity and to protect their privacy (See Appendix A and B). Participation in this study was voluntary, and no one was coerced or forced to participate. No sensitive questions were asked. Sensitive questions in this study were considered those dealing with immigration issues, personal issues (private matters), or issues that would offend participants. This was clearly explained in the consent forms they were asked to sign before their participation in the study began, as well as, before the beginning of each meeting. Participants were ensured total confidentiality and protection of their rights was guaranteed at all times.

The focus groups were conducted at the Chicano Awareness Center between May, 2004 and June, 2004. The site was chosen because of its location and familiarity to possible participants. Participants included members of the church and of social and civic organizations. A total of five focus groups were conducted. The number of participants for the focus groups ranged from three to 11 members. There was no time limit for these sessions; each session ranging from one hour to two and half-hours. The sessions were monitored by the principal investigator, and on occasion the program

director was present. All of the sessions were semi-structured (See **Appendix C and D** for a list of focus group questions) and conducted in Spanish by the principal investigator who is bilingual, which allowed for a comfortable setting for participants. At the same time creating a manageable environment in which all parties could participate in. The principal investigator took notes and tape recorded all of the sessions. All participants in the focus groups received 10 dollars for their participation. Some of the participants refused to accept the 10 dollars for their participation. After the data collection was complete, the principal investigator reviewed the notes and tapes for common themes revealed by the participants. An extensive review of the data, both on paper notes and on tapes, allowed the principal investigator the ability to provide the findings presented in this study.

The participants' nationalities varied by country as follows: 23 Mexican, 5 Salvadorian and 4 Guatemalan (See **Table 2).**[8] The dominant population in South Omaha is the Mexican community, which was reflected in the composition of the focus groups, where the majority of the participants were of Mexican ancestry (71%). The Salvadorian (16%) and Guatemalan (13%) community also seems to be a thriving one in South Omaha; which is why their presence in these focus groups is also very valuable. The objective was to conduct enough focus groups that would produce a sizable sample, which would allow for this study to be credible and helpful, to make further changes in the way police render their services to this population.

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[8] As explained earlier, the responses provided by the Puerto Rican participant were excluded from this analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings in regards to the way Latino immigrants view the U.S. police. Although it can be difficult to gauge the feelings and perceptions of Latino immigrants towards the police, it is not impossible. All focus groups participants were asked what the police in their home countries were like, followed by a more specific focus on their experiences and their contacts with the police in Omaha, NE.

Finding 1: Experiences of Latino immigrants with the police in their home countries

Most of the respondents described the police in their home countries as being inaccessible. They admitted that fear of the police is prevalent in their home countries and corruption was widespread. Most of the participants from Mexico all agreed that if they ever had a problem with the police, it was necessary to offer the police some money (mordida) to solve the problem. Nonetheless, the money being offered did not guarantee police involvement. This was clearly described by Hinkle (1991) who described the relationship between the police and new immigrant groups as somewhat reflective of the relationships they had with the police in their country of origin. Hinkle (1991) makes note that the police in Latin America are "crude, illiterate, brutal, and underpaid" (54). One participant commented:

One is so used to giving officers money (mordidas) in Mexico, that you come here and you forget that you are not supposed to do that. I have tried to offer money to the police when I get pulled over. But they just look at me, don't take my money, and I am left confused and scared.

Finding 2: Perceptions of the United States and Omaha

Most focus group members were quick to state that life here in the United States is a lot better than in their home countries. However, many also acknowledged that they are not given the opportunities they envisioned before their arrival. Many still work low-paying and labor driven jobs that allow them to make more in a week than they will ever make in a month in their native countries.

Finding 3: Experiences and perceptions of the police in the United States

Finding 3a. ***Contacting the police in the United States***

It was hypothesized earlier that immigration issues would not play a significant role in the interactions between the police and Latino immigrants. However, immigration issues do negatively affect police-Latino relations. Latino immigrants are reluctant to engage in any contact with the police out of fear of being deported. They fear being stopped by the police or simply calling the police for assistance out of fear of having to divulge information about their legal status. Allowing Latinos to fear the police promotes a continuous cycle of fear towards the police in their home countries. Overall, the sentiment towards the U.S. police felt by most of the focus groups members was that of trust and at times frustration when language became an issue. The main themes that

emerged from the meetings were the following: few Latino members ever called the police for assistance or service and most felt that the problems they encountered were not issues that they could not deal with themselves.

Finding 3b. ***Perceived language[9] and cultural barriers***

Most Latino immigrants had very little English language proficiency, which meant that when they had an encounter with the police, the probability of misunderstandings and conflict was high. According to participants, the most pronounced challenge is the language barrier between police and Latino immigrants. Most agreed that the language difference made communication very difficult and at times frustrating. However, as noted previously, most officers were willing to try to communicate with them. One participant noted:

> *One time I got pulled over because I was speeding. And when he came to the window I noticed he was a gringo (White). I was so scared because I didn't know English and I didn't have a license. Much to my surprise he knew some Spanish. I think they must train them or something because he asked for my license in Spanish. I didn't know what to say except "No license." He then went back to his car and came back with a dictionary. And little by little we started to communicate. Thank God he sent me home with a warning only. But yes, he was very patient and nice. And I think all police here are.*

Although this experience turned out to be a positive one for this participant, another participant who did not speak English did not fare off so well. His experience, as he recounts, was that he was stopped by a White police officer for running a red light. He did not understand what the officer was asking him when he pulled up to the window.

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[9] A language barrier was present when Latinos, in this case immigrant, did not speak English and the police officer(s) did not speak Spanish.

Both became frustrated and he called for back up. The second officer to arrive at the scene was Latino but spoke little Spanish. It turns out the first officer was asking for the license and registration of the vehicle. The driver did not have a license because he could not obtain one due to his legal status. The first officer then told the Latino officer to ask the man if he had legal documents. The man replied "no." This then prompted the White officer to yell and scream at the man and the Latino officer then told him "you know he can deport you if he'd like, so just sit and relax." The man, obviously overwhelmed and scared, was eventually let go with a warning to try to acquire a license. The participant noted that at that moment he felt so helpless and scared. He also said that he felt very disappointed that the Latino officer was not able to help him more, outside of his ability to speak Spanish. Most focus group members agreed that language played a key role in the ability to communicate and understand the police. One participant noted:

> *Even though I don't speak English very well, I have called the police and they have helped me. I admit if I didn't feel comfortable calling them, then I wouldn't do it regardless of whether or not I knew English. But because I have taken some classes and I can speak and understand a little, I will call them if I need them. And they have been nice to me. But like my mom here, she doesn't call because they have been mean to her and her boyfriend too. So I don't know, I guess it depends on the officer.*

Also highlighted in the focus group meetings was the necessity for both parties to learn to communicate with each other to avoid misunderstandings, abuses, and to help build a respectful relationship between these two groups. Many were quick to admit that they attempted to learn English but that it was too difficult for them, as most participants have the equivalent of a grade school education. Most participants explained that they did not know how to read or write in Spanish; therefore making an even greater challenge to try

to learn English. Some participants also admitted that they were not interested in learning English. They said they felt comfortable speaking Spanish and hence the reason why they live in predominantly Latino community; to help avoid problems in regards to the English language. Others noted that they felt they did not need to know English, since they planned on only being here temporarily and eventually go back to their home countries.

Some participants, predominantly the male ones, were more strongly opinionated when it came to this subject. They said that they were not willing to give up their language and traditions to accommodate a society that has never accommodated them. To further explain this point, one man's comments were:

> *I don't feel I have to learn English. Why? It's hard, it's ugly and I just don't want to. You see, I have come here and worked hard to have the little that I have. No one has handed down anything to me. Nobody, besides my family and friends, has helped me be the man I am today. The United States has given me more opportunities to make a better life for myself, yes. But, that doesn't mean that I want to lose sight of who I really am. I am Mexican and I speak Spanish when I want and to whom I want. I see it this way, nobody is going to come and tell me that in order to live better I have to change myself and my traditions and my language and culture. No, it's the little bit that I have left of my country and I plan on retaining every bit of it.*

In essence, many participants believed that retaining their language and traditions was a way of maintaining their identity intact and alive. This ultimately explains why Spanish is one of the most prominent languages in the U.S., aside from English. Latinos intend on keeping their traditions and culture alive in a place they must now call "home". And as most expressed, they do not intend to fully immerse themselves in the American culture anytime soon.

Cultural barriers create additional problems in the interactions between Latinos and the police. An extensive body of literature has been dedicated to explaining the cultural barriers that Latinos face which are different from any other minority group who emigrate to the United States. The different values, traditions, beliefs and legal system that Latino culture encompass, add to the distinctive experience Latinos have with the American criminal justice system (Carter, 1983; Lorenzo-Hernandez, 1998). The familial traditions that Latino families share are very unique, as are the values that families instill to their children who are born in the United States. These family traditions may in fact, affect the interactions Latinos have with the police. As Carter (1983) notes, the father figure in most Latino families is the authority figure that most look up to. The police may threaten this authority by exceeding their power as police officers or by "arresting the Hispanic father, which may be seen as an attack on the authority figure which must be resisted in order for status to be maintained" (217). Therefore, many family members will be advised by the head of the family to avoid contact with the police at all cost. First, out of fear of deportation because of their immigration status. Second, out of fear of having the police disrupt their family circle.

Previous studies have also revealed that language and cultural barriers have more significant effects on smaller police agencies. The large influx of Latinos, due to the collapse of the meatpacking plants in Omaha, NE, has allowed the city to grown in size and population, causing a new immigration wave. However, it has yet to be seen whether police departments will make the appropriate changes to adapt to this new population. As some focus group members noted, some officers did know a little bit of Spanish.

As previously discussed, the literature refers to "survival Spanish" as courses offered by police departments to teach officers how to communicate in basic Spanish for routine responsibilities such as arrest or conducting a basic interrogation (Herbst and Walker, 2001:332-333; Sack, 2001). Others noted that in instances where officers did not know Spanish, they often times carried a dictionary with them to help them communicate with each other. As one participant noted:

> *I think that here in South Omaha, the police officers are nice and they recognize that not all of us know English. Most of us know who the regulars (police officers) are. So it's very good that they come prepared with dictionaries or anything that will help us communicate better. I think that in the end it makes it easier for all of us.*

These small, but important changes mark the beginning of a much needed effort to build positive relationships between Latinos and the police. At the same time it is important to recognize that these groups of individuals refuse to relinquish their cultural origins, which essentially mark who they are. Most want to be able to continue to live the same life they had in their home countries, but with a little more freedom and opportunity for growth. As noted earlier, most feel that if they learn English or adapt to the customs and traditions of America, they are in essence, losing a part of who they are. And as most were quick to assert, they do not see themselves as Americans. Most still view themselves as Mexican, Salvadorian, or Guatemalan. As one man explained:

> *When people ask me what I am, I say Salvadoreño (Salvadorian). I will always say Salvadoreño (Salvadorian) no matter where I go and even if I get my papers. I don't want people to label me an American. I want people to know where I am from and that I am proud of it.*

It is clear, that most do not want to adapt to a new way of life upon their arrival. They simply want to be able to live a better life outside their home countries, while still maintaining close ties with their native land by retaining their language, customs, traditions, and culture.

Finding 3c. ***Personal experiences with the police***

When they did seek police assistance, **they were satisfied with the way police rendered their services.** Most felt that the police officers did their job well and were always willing to help them out even if it meant going out of their way. However, on occasion, respondents reported that the officers they had encountered were patient, and willing to communicate with them. As one participant noted:

> *The times that I have been pulled over by the police, they have been very nice. Sometimes it's hard because we don't understand each other, but then I use signs or whatever I can to get them to understand me. I have even met officers who carry with them a dictionary that helps them with their Spanish. That way we avoid misunderstandings. But yes, they are nice!!!*

Nonetheless, there were still some participants who noted that their encounters had not turned out to be so good. **Some participants noted that the officers they had encountered were rude, impatient, authoritative, and even threatening.** In these situations, participants said they felt scared and nervous. This led to confrontations and even threatening remarks on behalf of the officers. No distinctions were made based on the race of the officer. Meaning that participants said they had the same likelihood of having a bad encounter with a White, African American, and Asian officer as they were with a Latino police officer. Overall, participants were satisfied and had no problems

with the police when they called for service or encountered them during a routine traffic stop.

Finding 3d. ***Impact of traffic enforcement***

Despite the language barrier, most participants described officers as being nice. However, as discussed previously, some were rude and at times some had even threatened to deport them. Most of the police contact was done through traffic stops. Even though Latino immigrants are sometimes reluctant to call the police, meaning they do not initiate contact, they still have contacts with them by way of a traffic stop. During these stops, officers sometimes try intimidate these immigrants by asking them for proof of legal residency in the United States. **Although it is not a protocol that officers inquire about a person's legal status during a stop, participants reported that it does happen frequently when they are pulled over**. Participants who had this experience said that because they are not familiar with the laws, they do not know what police can and cannot do. Most succumb to whatever police officers ask or say out of fear of bigger consequences. They said this also stems from the fact that in their home countries, the police have complete authority. Thus, the notion of an authoritative police has carried over into the way these citizens view the police here in the United States.

Finding 3e. ***Impact of immigration issues***

Most participants noted that they would specifically avoid contact with the police because of their immigration status. Participants believed that their legal status affected their interactions with the police. The majority of the participants worried about

initiating contact with the police out of fear of being questioned about their legal status. Since most were not legal residents of the U.S., they tried to avoid all contacts with the police to lower their risk of being deported. However, participants did not believe that police officers purposely targeted them to inquire about their immigration status. Most believe police officers were doing their job and in the instances where they were stopped, they admitted to doing something that warranted police to stop them.

This finding is one of the most significant for this study, because immigration status was not thought to play a significant role in the interactions between the police and Latino immigrants. However, the issues surrounding immigration does affect police-Latino relations. It negatively affects the possible relationships that they may have with each other. It makes Latino immigrants unwilling to engage in any contact with the police out of fear of being deported. The relationship is strained because Latinos fear the police in the U.S. just as much as the police in their home country. Thus, allowing a continuous cycle of fear to form towards both the police in their home countries and the police in the United States. As one participant explains:

I remember I got pulled over one time, and I didn't have a license. The officer was really nice and told me just to go get one. He didn't ask me for my papers or anything. Really nice Asian cop. Well I went to the Department of Motor Vehicles and they have this really mean Black woman who tells us all Latinos that if we don't have any papers we are wasting her time. So you see I fear that since I can't get a license, every time I get pulled over I am one step closer to being deported. I don't want to go back there (Mexico), but I can't get a license because I don't have papers. What am I supposed to do then? I have been lucky that I have not been pulled over too many times, because you see, I try to obey the laws. Plus, the officers who have pulled me over have been nice, but judging from what I heard here today, one of these days I will get pulled over by a cop who thinks he can boss us around and then I think I will be in trouble.

Many Latino immigrants feel threatened by the simple idea of having to obey laws they are not familiar with, in a country that is not their own, and with officers who at any given point could endanger their stay here in the United States. The fear is great, but most participants said it is a risk worth taking because their lives here are a lot better than in their home countries. Most respondents admitted that if they were ever deported back to their native countries, they would again find a way to make it back to America again.

One may wonder why many Latino immigrants have not strived to learn English or attempted to apply to become U.S. citizens. The answer lies in the simplicity of knowing that they want to retain as much from their home countries as they can. They feel that by speaking their native tongue, eating the same foods they ate in their home countries, and keeping their traditions alive is the only way they can feel like they are "home". An interesting finding was that some participants did explain that they are not interested in acquiring a U.S. citizenship, simply because they were not planning on staying in the U.S. their entire lives. Most said they originally just wanted to come, make some money and then go back to their home countries. However as one man put it:

> *It's addicting. When I first came from Mexico, I just wanted to come and make a couple of dollars and leave. You see I left my wife and kids in Mexico. But, when I got here I noticed how much money you can make in a week. Plus you get used to living, you know, like this. With food and money always in your pocket, I even bought a truck here. And I just figured that I couldn't just leave. So what I did is I send my wife money every month. And one day I just sent her enough for her to pay el coyote[10] and now we are all here.*

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[10] *A coyote (human smugglers) are those who help undocumented immigrants cross the U.S. border illegally. It is estimated that human smugglers pull in about 7 billion dollars a year for helping undocumented immigrants sneak into the United States (Maiello and Kitchen, 2004:76-78).*

Most Latino immigrants have the dream of one day returning to their home countries with enough money to be able to live the life they have grown accustomed to. However, some are eager to admit that this dream is unrealistic. This is because of the fact that most of the countries from which these immigrants originate from are ridden with poverty and corruption. Therefore, the idea of retaining the same lifestyle they have in the U.S. seems almost an impossible idea. But, some do not give up hope and for that reason they refuse to become U.S. citizens.

Others however, are not as idealistic. Some of the participants simply said they were too busy to go through the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. As one woman explained:

> *You know I work all day, have three children at home. The least thing I want to do is come home and study to take that exam to become a citizen. Plus, I have a friend who became one when they had that amnesty in 1986, and he says he doesn't think it makes a difference. Why? Because he still has very little education and doesn't know English. So I say for what? People are still always going to think you came here illegally no matter if you have your papers or not.*

As one can observe, a relentless struggle exists between Latino immigrants and the society in which they reside in. They are forced into situations where they must either succumb to the new culture and the society they chose to live in, or be castaways in a society that does not welcome them. This has been an on-going struggle that not only Latino immigrants face, but rather all immigrants who enter this country in search of a better life. However, in the case of Latino immigrants, it is about finding a medium that is equally comforting for them as it is for the American society they live in.

Finding 3f. ***Reluctance to file complaints against the police***

Some participants noted that they would not know how and where to file a complaint. They also noted that because of the bad experiences in their native countries and the language barrier, they would probably not file complaints about the police. This proves to be concurrent with some of the literature available on this topic that finds that Latinos try to avoid contact with the police at all costs. Many participants feared that by initiating a complaint towards the police, they would be inviting them to look deeper into their legal status. Respondents said they would just rather forget bad incidents with the police out of fear of being deported.

Finding 4: Suggestions for improving the police

It is difficult to find the balance between two groups that are so different from each other in ways that are not so simplistic. For example, Latino immigrants, as previously discussed, come from different countries in which their values, traditions and customs are complete opposite to that of the United States. Add to this the fact that they come from a different criminal justice system in which corruption, abuse, and the inability to achieve justice is what they have become accustomed to. Upon arrival into the United States, many immigrants are plagued by uncertainty and confusion of what is to come. Police officers need to be responsive to this and modify their services to appropriately deliver their services to the Latino community.

Although, police departments around the country have begun to make appropriate changes within their departments to respond to the growing population trends of Latinos, it seems not to be enough. Simply training officers into learning "survival Spanish" or

taking a cultural sensitivity class in not enough to welcome and aid a growing community. The attraction towards a career in law enforcement for minorities, especially Latinos, is practically non-existent. Many departments along with researchers have attempted to claim that by hiring more minority officers, the conditions between the police and those minority neighborhoods should improve, even though some studies have found that this is not always the solution.

The number of minority officers that make up a single police department are very few. Add to this the lack of recruiting, the difficulty of passing entrance exams, and the reluctance from police personnel to welcome these new officers has discouraged many from even thinking of a career in law enforcement. However, there are some suggestions provided by the focus group participants that they felt could help improve the relationships between Latino immigrants and the police.

Finding 4a. **Having meetings hosted by police officers to help them (Latino immigrants) learn about their rights.**

Most participants were excited about the idea of coming in for a meeting with a local police officer, who would explain to them what their rights as citizens are and what police officers can and cannot do during a routine stop. Participants said this would make them feel as if the police in Omaha wanted to improve their relationship with Latinos and actually cared about what they had to say. Many even said that it would probably also allow Latino immigrants to feel more secure about seeking help when needed from the

police. They would be less inclined to feel threatened by the police out of fear of their immigration status.

Finding 4b. Hire more bilingual officers

Many participants felt that they would much rather speak to a police officer in their native tongue as opposed to struggle to communicate with them. Some participants explained that in many situations where they could not understand or communicate with the police officer, they sought the help of a neighbor or their own children who knew English, to help them. As one woman stated:

> *Sometimes I feel bad that I keep bothering my neighbor to come and translate for me, but I have no other choice. I mean, what am I supposed to do if I need to call the police and they come and then I can't explain why I needed them in the first place. But my neighbor is nice. I don't think she minds.*

Many feel that if police departments decide to hire bilingual officers, it would make the job much easier for them as officers and for the non-English speakers. Some participants even said that if they cannot hire officers that are already bilingual, to at least train their officers to learn Spanish. That way the communication barrier will still be able to be broken down. Although these are just a few suggestions, many more changes need to be made on behalf of both law enforcement personnel and Latino immigrants if a better relationship is to be developed between these two groups.

Summary

-H1: Not supported; immigrant experiences with the police in their home countries do not influence their perceptions of the police in the United States.

-H2: Not supported; their perceptions about the police are not negative. Most believe officers do their job well. Domestic American issues most important to shaping perceptions about the police

-H3: Supported; immigrants will avoid contact with the police in the United States out of fear of deportation

-Overall, this study did not find a lot of real anger or oppressive feelings towards the police on behalf of Latino immigrants. Their sentiments towards law enforcement seemed mixed yet favorable.

-Immigration issues most important in shaping perceptions about the police

-Traffic enforcement is the most frequent way Latino immigrants engage in contact with the police

-Language and cultural issues are very important

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the way Latino immigrants perceive the U.S. police in comparison to the police in their home countries. Although there has been an increase in the studies focused on Latinos and the police (Carter, 1983; Cheurprakobit and Bartsch, 1999; Herbst and Walker, 2001), much of this research has neglected to look at the relationship between Latino immigrants and the police.

The present study aimed at investigating the following research question: **What are Latino immigrants' perceptions about the U.S. police?, and what are the factors that influence these perceptions: 1) immigration status, 2) mistrust due to language barriers, and/or 3) fear which is connected to experiences with the police in their home countries.** This study aimed to look at whether past experiences with the police in their home countries had an effect on the way Latino immigrants perceive the U.S. police. The findings from this study by way of focus groups with Latino immigrants suggest that the relationship between these two groups of people is positive. Although there is still room for changes to be achieved, the majority of the participants felt pleased with the way police rendered their services.

However, most participants said they do not feel comfortable calling the police for assistance mainly in part because of their immigration status. Most prefer to maintain a distance from the police out of fear of having to deal with questions about their legal situation. Most explained that in various instances what was initially supposed to be a traffic stop for a driving offense, it turned into a discussion of whether or not the participant has the legal documents to be in this country. They want to avoid problems that would stem out of the fact that they are not legal residents.

There is some mistrust and fear of the police that is similar to the fear they have for the police in their home countries. Some participants who prefer not to have any contact with the U.S. police believe that the police might behave and act similarly to the way they do in their home countries; making distance the preferred method of dealing

with the police. However most of the fear that is felt by Latino immigrants towards the police is partly due because of the fear of being deported.

Immigration does seem to play a very important role on why Latino immigrants refrain from engaging in any contact with the police. It was believed that immigration issues would not play a significant role in the interactions between the police and Latino immigrants. However, the issues surrounding immigration does affect the relationship between the police and Latino immigrants in a negative way. Latino immigrants become reluctant to engage in any contact with the police out of fear of being deported. But overall, most participants viewed the police favorably and said if they had more of a grasp of the English language, they would be more likely to call the police for assistance.

Even though a language and cultural barrier is still present between these groups, some participants noted that police officers have begun to improve the way they render their services to Latinos. They noticed officers being more understanding, patient, and even willing to communicate with them in Spanish. Participants noted that some officers carried a dictionary in their patrol cars which seemed very useful during a stop when the officer did not speak much Spanish and the vehicle operator knew very little English. Although some participants did note that there were many officers out there that were the complete opposite. They were rude, authoritative, demanding, and even threatening. And it was these encounters that left lasting impressions on these participants, making them less likely to contact the police for assistance.

Suggestions offered by focus group participants, such as having community meetings with police officers and the hiring of bilingual officers, **suggest that Latino**

immigrants are interested in building a positive relationship with law enforcement personnel. Latino immigrants may not be willing to assimilate by refusing to relinquish their customs and traditions, but they are still willing to learn the laws and the way the U.S. criminal justice system works. However, they also understand that both police departments and police officers must be willing to make changes and also work at achieving a positive relationship between the two. Most participants noted that having centers such as the Chicano Awareness Center, the Latina Center, and even weekly church meetings makes it easier to become aware of what is going on in their community. At the same time, these centers could serve as a networking technique for both the police and Latino immigrants to communicate.

All of the participants, regardless of their country of origin, expressed the notion of coming to the United States in search for a better life. They arrive here with the hopes of embarking on a new beginning in their lives that would be beneficial for both their families and their countries. What was very clear was that most Latino immigrants were not willing to succumb to the American ways of life. They want to retain their heritage, culture, traditions, and language. Most do not want to leave their identity at the U.S. border, but rather build a community based on traditions and culture which they have brought with them from their home countries. However, in terms of improving relations with the police, the issues in regards to language barriers, cultural barriers, and immigration would have to be addressed by police departments. Finding ways to accurately deal with these issues would ensure that a proper relationship built on trust and communication would be established between the police and Latino immigrants. And

although this relationship would not develop overnight, most participants would be willing to cooperate with the police to begin building a relationship that would be beneficial for all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the growing presence of minorities is reshaping America. Hispanics are now the fastest and most prominent minority group in the United States. As Vargas (1997) notes, "the process of demographic and cultural transformation will force us to rethink who constitutes the real Americans" (4). This means that we will have to re-think our ideas about what and who constitutes the minority population. It is estimated that by the year 2050, "Whites and minority groups overall would be equal in size" (USA Today, June 14th 2004). Latinos would eventually grow to make up 47% of the total U.S. population (Holmes, 1998). As the Latino community continues to expand, police departments will have to find ways to appropriately deal with this new population.

Up until recently, very little research was available on Latinos and the criminal justice system. The sudden growth by Latinos has prompted researchers to begin to focus their attention on this newly arrived population. Very little research has been devoted to addressing Latino immigrants' perceptions of the U.S. police. There is research available on Latino immigrants and the way they adapt to living in the United States, however, the literature addressing the relationship between Latino immigrants and the criminal justice

systems, especially with the police, is practically non-existent. This study aimed at helping to fill this void in research.

This study is only one out of many more that need to be conducted in order to fully understand this growing population and to help build a positive relationship between the police and Latino immigrants. Several recommendations for future research in this area should be examined. First, much of the research on police-community relations has focused on the African American community. Currently, the Latino population has surpassed the African American population to become the most prominent minority (United States Department of Commerce, 2003). New studies focused on the examination of this new population needs to be increased and analyzed carefully in order to fully understand this group. This knowledge will allow organizations, such as police departments, to render their services accurately and in a professional manner.

Second, research in regards to Latinos should be increased. With the recent immigration trends bringing in different immigrant groups from all over the world, studies need to be geared at examining other non-English immigrants' perceptions and relationships with the police. This would allow law enforcement agencies the ability to be prepared to handle new populations in the near future and avoid the language and cultural barriers that now plague the Latino immigrant community.

Finally, this study is the only one of its kind. Many more studies on Latino immigrants and their perceptions about the U.S. police need to be created in order to fully grasp the depth of the problems and be able to find proper means to solve them. More research needs to examine Latino immigrants and their relationship with the police, but

also more research is necessary in regards to their impact on the criminal justice system as a whole. With this new population, research should address what their impact in terms of the criminal justice system is. All while finding ways to help create positive and long-lasting relationships within the criminal justice system and newly arrived Latino immigrants. As Ronald Takaki (1993) states in his book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, "America's dilemma has been our resistance to ourselves; our denial of our immensely varied selves. But we have nothing to fear but fear of our own diversity" (427-428). Until people begin to change their ideologies, perceptions, and misconceptions about the Latino immigrant population, only then will proper conditions be created for Latinos to flourish and gain the status they deserve in the United States.

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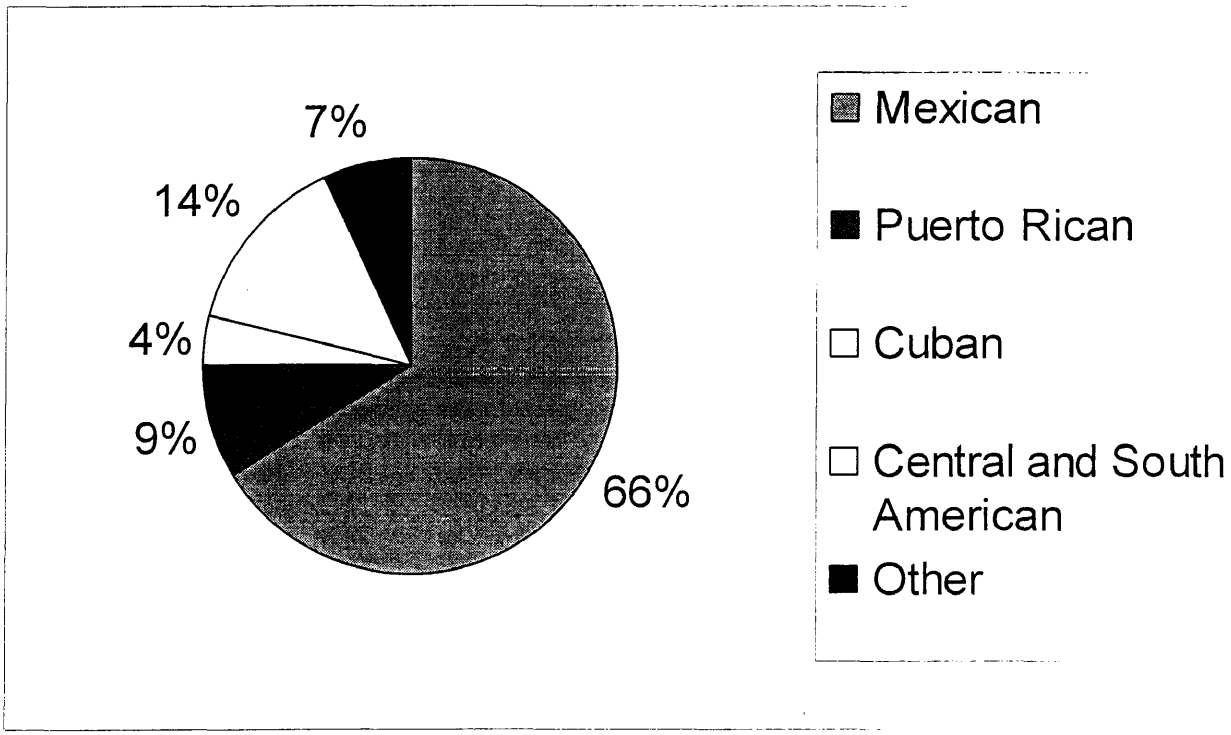
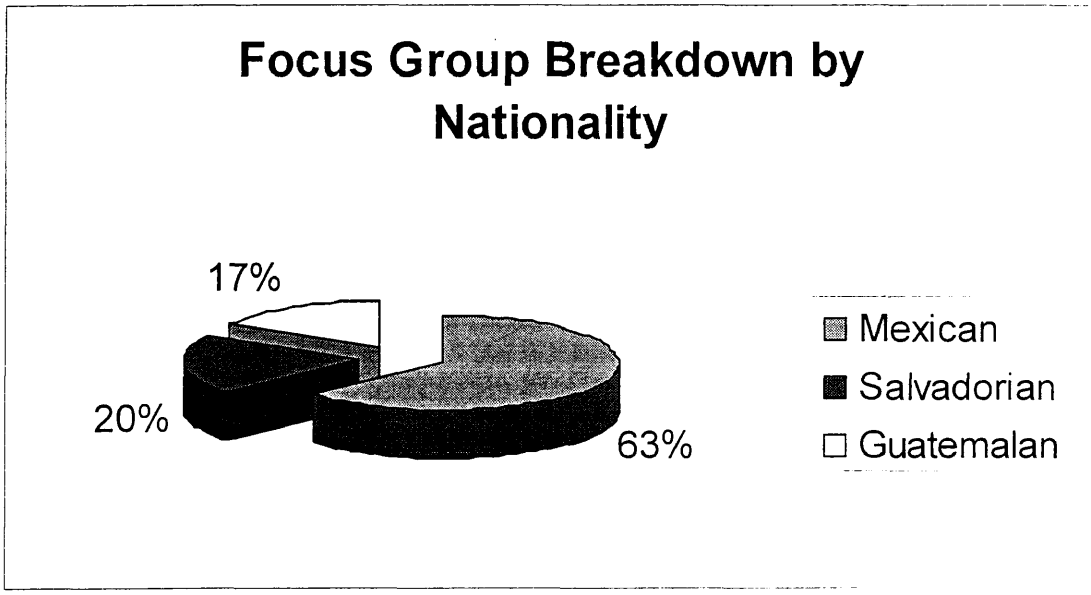
Table 1: Percent Distribution of Hispanics in 2002



Source: United States Department of Commerce. U.S. Census, *Current Population Survey*, March 2002, Page 5.

TABLE 2: Focus Group Composition by Nationality



IRB# 163-04-EX

APPENDIX A: Consent Form

You are voluntarily asked to participate in a study that proposes to understand and discover Latino/a immigrant's perceptions about the police in Southeast Omaha, Nebraska. Specifically, this study aims at discovering whether Latinos' perceptions about the police are shaped primarily by immigrants' experiences with the police in their home country, or by factors' associated with their immigrant experiences in the United States, Omaha specifically. Focus groups will be conducted among various groups of Latino immigrants associated with different churches and Latino organizations in South Omaha.

You have been asked to participate because with your experience, you will help make positive contributions to the field of criminal justice and to the way Latinos are treated in the United States. You will participate in focus group meetings, along with other Latino community members, that will be monitored by a bilingual facilitator. This will ensure that the meetings are conducted in the language in which you feel the most comfortable in. You will only be asked to participate in one focus groups meeting and you should expect the meeting to last about two to three hours. **You will be paid a one time stipend of ten dollars ($10.00) for your participation in this study.**

No inappropriate questions will be asked (no sensitive questions that may make you feel uncomfortable and no questions about your immigration status will be asked). You are guaranteed confidentiality that the information that you share will be used solely for the purposes of the study. You identity will be keep confidential and will not be disclosed.

This research will help draw attention to the potential problems of perceptions about the police from new immigrant populations and make a positive contribution to the field of criminal justice. It will also hopefully help to draw awareness to the Latino community by showcasing their culture, giving them a sense of pride as to who they are and what they will contribute to the United States in the coming years.

By signing below, you have agreed to participate in this study. You have read and understood this consent form and are comfortable participating in this study. You understand that the information you disclose will be used and reported, but your identity will never be disclosed. In advance I thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with me.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Director of Study Date

IRB# 163-04-EX

APPENDICE B: Consentimiento de Permiso

Usted es invitado/a a participar voluntariamente en un estudio para poder entender y descubrir los sentimientos de inmigrantes Latinos hacia la policia en Omaha, Nebraska. Especificamente, este estudio intenta descubrir si los sentimientos de inmigrantes Latinos hacia la policia son producto de sus experiencias en sus paises de origen o por factores relacionados con sus experiencias en los Estados Unidos. Reuniones y juntas se haran con inmigrantes Latinos associados con differentes organizaciones Latinas en el Sur de Omaha.

Usted ha sido invitado/a participar porque con sus experiencias, usted ayudara a hacer contribuciones positivas en el area de Criminologia y tambien en la forma en como tratan a los Latinos en Estados Unidos. Usted sera un participante en juntas de grupos focales junto con otros inmigrantes Latinos y las juntas seran conducidas por una persona bilingüe. Esto asegura que las juntas seran conducidas en el lenguaje en el cual usted se sentira más agusto. Usted participara en solo una junta y la junta durara aproximadamente entre dos y tres horas. **Usted sera pagado solamente una vez, diez dolares ($10.00) por su participacion en este estudio.**

No se le haran preguntas inapropiadas (preguntas sobre su estado de inmigracion or preguntas lo cual lo/a hagan sentir mal). Se le garantiza que toda la informacion que usted nos de sera confidencial y que esta informacion se usara solamente para este estudio. Su identidad sera confidencial y nunca se revelara.

Este estudio ayudara a dar más atención a los problemas que alomejor existen por parte de la policia en contra de los inmigrantes Latinos. Y a la misma vez, ayude a hacer una contribución importante en el area de criminologia. Ojala y ayude a mostrale a la gente la belleza de la cultura Latina, y darle a la comunidad Latina algo para sentirse orgullosos de quienes son y todas las cosas positivas que van a contribuir a los Estados Unidos en los años que vienen.

En firmar este documento, usted esta de acuerdo en participar en este estudio. Usted ha leido y entendido esta forma y se siente agusto participando en este estudio universitario. Usted entiende que la informacion que usted nos de sera usada y reportada en un reporte, pero su identidad nunca sera revelada. De antemano, le doy las gracias por darme su tiempo y por compartir sus experiencias conmigo.

_____ _____

Firma del Participante Fecha

_____ _____

Firma del Conductor del Estudio Fecha

APPENDIX C: Focus Group Questions

1. Where did you originate from?
2. Do you speak and understand English?
3. How did arrive in Omaha, Nebraska?
4. Where there people here in Omaha that you knew before coming?
5. In your home country, who policed your community?
6. What were the police like?
7. What has been your experience with the police?
8. Did you have any personal experiences with them?
9. Can you describe your experience?
10. Have you had contact with the police here?
11. Can you describe that experience?
12. Are there any problems that you see with the police here compared with your home country?

* **Questions modeled after a study conducted by D. A. Lopez, in 2001 where he aimed at discovering the experience of Latinos in Omaha, Nebraska (Lopez, 2001:105-107).**

APENDICE D: Preguntas para los Grupos Focales

1. De que pais es usted?
2. Usted habla y entiende Inglés?
3. Como llego a Omaha, Nebraska?
4. Habia gente aqui en Omaha, Nebraska que usted conocia antes de llegar?
5. En su país de origen, quien vigilaba su comunidad?
6. Como era la policia?
7. Cuales han sido sus experiencias con la policia?
8. Usted ha tenido experiencias personales con la policia?
9. Puede describir estas experiencias?
10. Usted ha tenido contacto con la policia aquí?
11. Puede describir esa experiencia?
12. En su opinión, hay problemas que usted ve con la policia aquí en comparación con la policia de su país de origen?