

# Policing immigrants: Fear of deportations and perceptions of law enforcement and criminal justice

David Becerra | M Alex Wagaman | David Androff | Jill Messing | Jason Castillo

## Latinos in the United States

The Latino population in the United States has grown exponentially.

- According to the United States Census Bureau (2012) there are over 50 million Latinos in the United States, comprising 16% of the total US population.

## Why is this issue important?

The growth of Latinos and the increased anti-immigration policies and enforcement strategies in recent years make it necessary to better understand Latinos' fear of deportation and perceptions of law enforcement and the criminal justice system.



Over the past 25 years, the Latino population in the United States has grown exponentially.<sup>1</sup> The growth the Latino population and the increased anti-immigration policies and enforcement strategies in recent years make it necessary to better understand Latinos' fear of deportation and perceptions of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Historically, police have struggled to develop relationships with communities that have been victims of racial discrimination (Culver, 2004; Davis & Hendricks, 2007). This relationship building has been further stifled by Latinos' perception of police as both the protector and immigration officer, resulting in a greater fear of deportation in the Latino community (Arbona et al., 2010; Vollmer Hanna & Ortega, 2016). This perception of law enforcement is not surprising given the fact that law enforcement officers are increasingly tasked with carrying out immigration enforcement. But crime prevention and intervention efforts on the part of local police departments require positive relationships between law enforcement, the criminal system, and local communities (Davis, Erez, & Avitabile, 2001; Vidales, Day, & Powe, 2009). Crime prevention and intervention rely heavily on the collaboration of the crime victims and reports of community members (Kidd & Chayet, 1984). As such, it is necessary to develop a greater understanding into Latinos' fear of deportation and how this fear impacts public safety, police-community relations, the reporting of crime (or lack thereof), and overall perspectives of Latinos toward the criminal justice system.



<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) there are over 50 million Latinos in the U.S., comprising 16% of the total US population (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert 2011).



## The participants

Data for the study was drawn from a 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center.

- The total sample consisted of 2,015 Latino participants.
- Nearly forty-eight percent (47.9%) were males and fifty-two percent (52.1%) were female; all residing in the United States.

## Summary of Findings

The results of the study found that participants who expressed greater fear of deportation also expressed:

- less confident that police would not use excessive force on a suspect
- less confidence that police would treat Latinos fairly
- less confidence that the courts would treat Latinos fairly
- less willing to report being a victim of a violent crime to the police

Many Latinos experience negative interactions with the police or the criminal justice system, and these interactions affect Latinos' perceptions. The negative view of both law enforcement and the criminal justice system held by many in the Latino community has been a detriment to the effective crime prevention and intervention efforts. The recent increase in local police being used as immigration officials has exacerbated these negative views.

## Analysis

Becerra, Wagaman, Androff, Messing, and Castillo<sup>2</sup> analyzed the increased fear of deportation amongst Latinos in the United States and the effect this increased fear can have on their perceptions of (a) law enforcement and (b) the United States criminal justice system, and (c) willingness to report crimes. The study found that participants who had a greater fear of deportation were less confident that police would not use excessive force, were less confident they would receive fair treatment by police and the courts, and were less likely to report violent crimes.

## Findings

The results of the study found that, older participants and participants with United States citizenship had greater confidence that police would not use excessive force. Those participants with more years living in the United States and participants who expressed a greater fear of deportation were less confident that police would not use excessive force on a suspect. Similarly, participants with a greater fear of deportation had significantly less confidence that police would treat Latinos fairly. The participants who expressed greater fear of deportation also had significantly less confidence that the courts would treat Latinos fairly. Further, when participants were asked about the likelihood of reporting a violent crime to the police, participants who expressed a greater fear of deportation were significantly less willing to report being a victim of a violent crime to the police. This is in contrast to females and older participants, who were more likely to report being victims of a violent crime to police.

The results may be more relevant today with the increase of restrictive immigration policies and enforcement strategies, both a federal and state level. Consistent with previous studies, this study indicates that Latinos are hesitant to report crimes to authorities due to the decreased sense of trust in the criminal justice system and law enforcement. The lack of trust and negative perceptions of civic institutions held by the Latino community is detrimental and leads to a strained relationship between members of the Latino community and law enforcement. Not to mention, the fear of deportation and lack of trust diminishes the capacity of law enforcement to fulfill its public safety mandate.

## Implications for Social Work

Based on the findings, social work practitioners should strive to collaborate with all the parties, and ultimately work to strengthen the relationship between law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and the Latino community. The findings suggest that the fear of deportation inhibits a significant number of Latinos from reporting crimes, which is detrimental to community policing and public safety. Social workers can collaborate in the efforts by delivering relevant training to police and criminal justice personnel, addressing the preoccupations and experiences of Latinos, which in return will serve to enhance the cultural competence and training of law enforcement personnel. Additionally, conducting outreach and focusing on educating both documented and undocumented immigrants on how to protect their rights can reduce the fear of deportation and enhance the trust between law enforcement and the Latino community. Social workers can also advocate for immigration reform, which in turn can improve public safety and civic engagement. The health and well-being of Latinos would be enhanced, resulting better and more effective crime prevention and intervention efforts.

<sup>2</sup> Becerra, D., Wagaman, M. A., Androff D., Messing J., & Castillo J. (2017). Policing immigrants: Fear of deportations and perceptions of law enforcement and criminal justice. *Journal of Social Work*, 17(6), 715-731.

# References

- Arbona, C., Olvera, N., Rodriguez, N., Hagan, J., Linares, A., & Weisner, M. (2010). Acculturative stress among documented and undocumented Latino immigrants in the United States. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 32, 362–384.
- Culver, L. (2004). The impact of new immigration patterns on the provision of police services in Midwestern communities. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 32, 329–344.
- Davis, R., & Hendricks, N. J. (2007). Immigrants and law enforcement: A comparison of native-born and foreign-born Americans' opinions of the police. *International Review of Victimology*, 14, 81–94.
- Davis, R. C., Erez, E., & Avitabile, N. (2001). Access to justice for immigrants who are victimized: The perspectives of police and prosecutors. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 12, 183–196.
- Kidd, R. F., & Chayet, E. F. (1984). Why do victims fail to report? The psychology of criminal victimization. *Journal of Social Issues*, 40, 39–50.
- Lott, J. (2007, April 17). [Digital image]. Retrieved from <https://www.hcn.org/articles/justice-arpaio-sheriff-arizona-trial-court-immigration-jail>
- Reed, C. (2017, February) *U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement* [Digital image]. Retrieved from <https://www.hcn.org/articles/justice-arpaio-sheriff-arizona-trial-court-immigration-jail>
- Vidales, G., Day, K. M., & Powe, M. (2009). Police and immigration enforcement: Impacts on Latino(a) residents' perceptions of police. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*, 32, 631–653.
- Vollmer Hanna, A. M., & Ortega, D. M. (2016). Salir Adelante (perseverance): Lessons from the Mexican immigrant experience. *Journal of Social Work*, 16(1), 47–65.