REFERENCES

Latino Youths' Experiences with and Perceptions of Involuntary Police Encounters

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Research has consistently shown that African American youth report less favorable evaluations of the police than their white counterparts. The literature on police-citizen relations in Latino/a communities is scant and narrowly focused on Mexicana/os and Chicana/os in southern and midwestern U.S. cities. Therefore, we know little about the experiences of Latino/a populations in other parts of the country. This article uses a Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) perspective to examine thirty Afro-Caribbean youths' experiences with and perceptions of New York City police. Study findings highlight respondents' views that aggressive policing tactics are intended to restrict and criminalize Latino/a youths' use of public space. The authors conclude with recommendations for improving police–community relations with this population.

Keywords: Afro-Caribbean youth; Latinos/as; police-community relations; LatCrit; immigration status

An abundance of literature documents the often tenuous relationship between the police and African American communities. Research has consistently shown that African American youth report less favorable evaluations of the police, question police legitimacy, and are more likely to believe that their communities are routinely overpoliced in comparison to their white counterparts (Brunson and Miller 2006b). Unfortunately, research concerning Latino/a adolescents' perceptions of and experiences with the police is scant. Furthermore, existing studies of Latino/a citizen–police interactions have failed to fully explore how particular policing strategies shape the way police–citizen encounters are viewed by Latino/a youth.

The current study employs a Latino critical race (LatCrit) conceptual framework to examine Afro-Caribbean youths' detailed accounts of encounters with New York City police officers in public spaces. Akin to critical race theory, a LatCrit perspective is characterized by several features: (1) the view that race and racism in combination with other forms of subordination

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(e.g., gender, class) are central to understanding individual experiences with the law, in this case the police; (2) a related questioning of purportedly race-neutral (e.g., consensus) frameworks as supporting existing relationships of power and privilege; (3) an emphasis on research that offers possibilities for transforming racial or other forms of subordination and, as such, offers policy options; and (4) an emphasis on the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). In line with these features, our application of the LatCrit perspective offers a demonstration of how aggressive policing tactics are used as oppressive tools to control "dangerous" urban Latinos/as and, in doing so, reinforce broader systems of inequality. One form of aggressive policing is the widespread use of stop and frisk strategies. Relying on the experiential knowledge of an understudied segment of Latino/a youth (Afro-Caribbeans), we explore youths' assessments of policing within their communities and whether patterns are similar for subgroups of Latino/a youth vis-à-vis ethnicity, gender, and immigration. Given the LatCrit focus, we expect few within-group differences (gender differences being a likely exception). Rather, we anticipate a similarity of views among Latino/a youth, who may all confront or view aggressive policing in their neighborhoods.

Minority Community Perceptions of and Experiences with Police

Some minority groups view police as agents of an institution that routinely represses them through constant surveillance rather than as diligent public servants (Solis 2004). Members of minority communities often distrust police because of

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what they perceive as widespread racially discriminatory policing practices (Menjivar and Bejarano 2004). Researchers evaluating citizens' perceptions of and experiences with the police propose that unfavorable opinions stem from negative interactions and "over- and under-policing" (Brunson and Miller 2006b). Scholars have also found important interactions based on age, gender, and race/ethnicity, such that young minority men are apt to hold more negative attitudes toward the police than young white men or women of color (Brunson and Miller 2006a, 2006b).

While research concerning police–minority citizen relations has grown, it is somewhat narrow in focus. That is, most investigations give attention to African Americans versus whites. In the small though growing number of studies in which Latinos/as' interactions with police are examined, attention has been focused mainly on those of Mexican origin (Menjivar and Bejarano 2004; Weitzer and Tuch 2006). Findings from studies considering multiple groups have been instructive. Although communities of color may share broad perspectives on police, scholars have observed variation among blacks, whites, and Latinos/as in their attitudes toward, experiences with, and support for the police. For example, Weitzer and Tuch (2006) found that blacks and Latinos/as have more negative views of the police than whites. Latinos/as and blacks are more likely than whites to report that they have been threatened or had excessive force used against them during a police contact. And blacks are more likely than other groups to identify racial profiling as a central problem. Yet, the extent to which the findings for Latinos/as apply broadly is still unknown.

The term "Latinos/as" encompasses numerous groups from throughout the Americas—people who speak different dialects from one another and who have distinct cultures and customs. This diversity among Latinos/as raises questions regarding which segments of this group have what attitudes toward and perceptions of the police. It also highlights the need to document the lived experiences of Latinos/as from different backgrounds. As noted, to date most sociological investigations of Latino/a groups focus on Mexicanos/as in southern and midwestern U.S. cities. Less attention has been given to Latino/a populations in other parts of the country. In addition, prior research has often been conducted with adult Latino/a samples relying primarily on surveys or official data. The current study contributes to the literature on police–minority youth interactions and extends the scope of research by focusing specifically and *qualitatively* on Afro-Caribbean youths' views of and experiences with police in the El Barrio (Spanish Harlem) area of New York City.

LatCrit theory and racialized spaces

As noted, the LatCrit perspective builds on critical race theory and emphasizes the effects of oppressive institutions on Latino/a populations. Together these frameworks call for exploration of the intersection of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression in shaping the historical and daily experiences of people of color living in the United States (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). LatCrit theory has been used to explore how the legal and criminal justice system creates inequitable outcomes for Latinos/as, and recent research has begun to reveal how disparate police practices shape police–community relations.

Romero (2006) uses a LatCrit perspective and reveals racial profiling in immigration roundups in Chandler, Arizona. She concludes that policing is a tool to control public areas that are viewed as dangerous. Gonzalez and Portillos (2007) use a LatCrit framework in explaining how national and state education and criminal justice policies oppress and criminalize Latinos/as because of the perception that their communities are crime ridden. As noted, however, most LatCrit policing research is limited in that it focuses solely on Mexicanos/as and Chicanos/as. To address this limitation, we conduct an analysis of the experiences of Afro-Caribbeans with the police. In addition, we build on Romero's (2006) and Gonzalez and Portillos's (2007) work by focusing on the role of police officers' perspective of racialized spaces as "dangerous." That is, we highlight the implications for minority citizen–police interactions of officers' concerns about suspicious or unsafe settings. Spaces that generate concern are often public; composed largely of ethnic minorities; and socially constructed as dangerous by politicians, media, and law enforcement personnel (Portillos 2004). Within the context of these racialized spaces, frequent and seemingly unwarranted police contacts have the potential to reinforce unfavorable views of law enforcement among Afro-Caribbeans.

A history of aggressive policing in Afro-Caribbean communities in New York City

Puerto Ricans are the largest Latino/a group in New York City and have been U.S. citizens since 1917. Despite their citizenship status, they have endured many of the same negative conditions and experiences faced by Dominicans and other Latino/a immigrants. These include poor housing, unemployment, inadequate education, and limited political power. Puerto Ricans in New York City have also shared with other Afro-Caribbeans a long history of aggressive policing, oppressive institutions, and conflicts with the police (Cotton 1971). Dominicans are the second largest and fastest growing of the Latino/a populations in New York City (Hess 1972). Prior to 1962, most Dominicans living in New York resided in predominantly Puerto Rican communities and were "difficult to distinguish from Puerto Ricans" by local police and U.S. immigration agents (Hess 1972). The similarity of the racial and cultural characteristics of these two populations has meant that regardless of their citizenship status, community residents are subjected to "racial affronts," where they are often "stopped and searched without cause" (Romero 2006).

Afro-Caribbean communities in New York City have been characterized as poverty-stricken ghettos with disproportionately high crime rates, especially among youth (Gordon 1947). In fact, a number of *New York Times* articles published between 1940 and 1975 described both Dominican and Puerto Rican communities as violent, drug infested, and crime ridden (Gordon 1947). Police and politicians were especially concerned about youth gangs in Afro-Caribbean neighborhoods. Such fears sanctioned a more aggressive style of policing in these neighborhoods (Cotton 1971).

Afro-Caribbeans living in Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and El Barrio, whether citizens or not, have been forced to endure human rights and civil liberties violations as a result of routine stops and frisks. During the late 1940s, and again between 1994 and 1997, neighborhood residents witnessed police barricades that restricted access to dwellers or visitors with government-issued identification (Davis, Mateo-Gelabert, and Miller 2005). In this way, public space was (and is) socially constructed as dangerous in many Afro-Caribbean communities and serves to maintain racial and ethnic subordination as well as formal mechanisms of social control (Gonzalez and Portillos 2007; Romero 2006).

In New York City, as community policing strategies were being developed between 1980 and 1990, Afro-Caribbean communities requested *better* policing—rather than aggressive policing—in their neighborhoods (Silverman 1999). Community policing objectives called for fostering better communication and collaboration with neighborhood residents to identify and solve local problems. However, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) made few efforts to include Afro-Caribbean residents in the planning and implementation of community policing initiatives or to change its aggressive policing style (Silverman 1999; Solis 2004).

When community policing strategies were touted as failures and crime continued to rise throughout New York City, the Giuliani administration responded by implementing a new crime reduction strategy referred to as Compstat (Computerized Statistics) in 1994. Among other features, this model involved strict enforcement of "quality of life statutes and target[ed] gangs, drugs and youth violence" (Davis, Mateo-Gelabert, and Miller 2005). Compstat provided an oppressive, rigid, and uncompromising style of law enforcement that ultimately increased citizen complaints (Davis, Mateo-Gelabert, and Miller 2005; Silverman 1999), including allegations of excessive use of force that sometimes resulted in death (Solis 2004). Despite efforts to change or eliminate Compstat, it has remained the primary policing strategy in New York. And to date, Puerto Rican and Dominican communities have not been included in discussions about proposed police reforms, including Compstat (Silverman 1999; Solis 2004). Partly as a result, police practices in El Barrio primarily consist of frequent pedestrian and vehicle stops by police personnel. This style of policing lends itself to claims consistent with the LatCrit perspective that law enforcement is, and has been, an oppressive institution for Latinos/as. Also consistent with research on the intersection of race and place, as we highlight later, study participants believe that the underlying basis of their treatment by the police is multifaceted, tied in part to their presence in dangerous places, but also undeniably about race.

Methodology

The current research explores Afro-Caribbean youths' experiences with and attitudes toward the police and is based on in-depth interviews with thirty Puerto Ricans and Dominicans between eighteen and nineteen years of age. The interviews were conducted between spring 2000 and fall 2001. Participants were recruited

from a community-based educational training facility located in Spanish Harlem (El Barrio) that serves a large population of Latino/a youth. Most program participants either have a general education diploma (GED) or are working toward one while training for business-related careers. Youth were selected using purposive sampling as we were particularly interested in the perceptions and experiences of youth at risk of involuntary police contacts. The interviews were approximately one hour in length and were conducted in either English or Spanish (depending on respondents' preferences). All interviews took place in private classrooms at the research site.

Prior studies suggest that youth are less supportive of police than adults primarily due to frequent, negative public encounters with officers.

The interviewers used semistructured and open-ended questions to obtain detailed information. All interviews were conducted, tape recorded, transcribed, and coded by the first author. Interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding Afro-Caribbean youths' perceptions of and experiences with New York City police officers. Respondents were asked to provide detailed accounts of both their positive and negative encounters with the police and to suggest solutions to improve police and community relations. By examining Latino/a youths' detailed accounts of police encounters, we are able to ground the "real-life experiences of a marginalized people" and facilitate understanding of identified problems (Villalpando 2003). In addition, the detailed and localized narratives of Afro-Caribbean youth in New York City may offer insights that challenge dominant views of race (Villalpando 2003) and/or enhance direct practice by pointing to strategies for improving police–Latino/a youth relations. As such, the findings here set the stage for additional comparative research on the views and experiences of Latino/a groups with the police.

Study Findings

Youth perceptions of differential policing

Prior studies suggest that youth are less supportive of police than adults primarily due to frequent, negative public encounters with officers (Brunson and Miller 2006b; Taylor et al. 2001). Our study participants reported unfavorable views of local police, concerns about the amount of time it takes for officers to

arrive when summoned, and officers' routine disrespect of community members during involuntary police-citizen encounters. For example, Jose stated,

> [The] police don't care about my neighborhood. When you call them they take their sweet time [coming] and then they come with [an] attitude. I bet if this was where those rich people lived, you know like on the east side, white and rich, they'd come real fast and would be real respectful.

Youth also discussed what they perceive as a lack of concern about Latino/a neighborhoods and expressed fears of becoming crime victims due to inadequate police protection and negative treatment from officers. Such findings corroborate prior research regarding Latinos/as' and African Americans' concerns (Greene, Bergman, and McLaughlin 1994). Due to inadequate police services, youth are hesitant to provide police with information about criminal wrongdoing. Elsie commented on her reluctance to involve the police:

> Those who are using and selling drugs are people who I grew up with. I advise them to stop, but I never go as far as getting police involved because I'm afraid for what can happen to me or my family. You know the dealers are in the neighborhood all the time, the police sure aren't.

Elsie's cautions are echoed by most (twenty of thirty) Latino/a youth in the study. A couple of examples will suffice to make the point.

> **Luis**: I hate cops they don't respect nobody. And I ain't telling them shit either. You gotta watch your back on my block; if [the criminals] see you talking to [police], they think you be snitching.
> **David**: I'm not about snitching. [Police officers] think we are all dealers or criminals anyway and there's too many of us locked up, some you know did a wrong but others were [innocent], maybe at the wrong place, wrong time, but if you're Spanish or Black, you're going down.

Jones-Brown (2007) posits that the extensive history of severed relationships between police and communities of color has resulted in the emergence of the "stop snitching" campaign. She maintains that this movement discourages collaborations between police and minority citizens and can prove detrimental to effective crime-control strategies as information that could potentially improve neighborhood conditions never reaches the police. Ironically, although youth avoided speaking with the police about criminal behavior in their communities, they freely provided such information to the interviewer. The interviews suggest that they indeed have a great deal of information to share regarding crimes. For example, respondents identify *specific* streets, buildings, hallways, stairs, and rooftops as places where drugs are sold. For some, the unwillingness to cooperate with the police may seem counterproductive. However, participants' concerns about being identified as snitches or about lack of protection from police should not be minimized. Latinos/as are much more likely than whites to be victims of violent crime (Bastian 1990). If they perceive that police do not protect the community, then law enforcement becomes one more symbol of inequality, and the police will lack the ability to gain information needed to address crimes.

More than half of study participants said that police are not satisfactorily addressing problems identified by the community. For instance, Maria observed,

> Cops don't even walk around in my neighborhood. They drive by sometimes real slow to try to scare you with mean faces, they don't get out of the car and talk to you. [The police] just want you to feel threatened by them. . . . They think we are criminals anyway.

Similarly, Gustavo stated,

> From what I see they [the police] really don't do anything. Some people tell [them] things to look out for but they don't do nothing. The mob must be really paying them off.

While some youth feel that a greater police presence would deter crime, they are not convinced that having more police in the neighborhood is really in their best interest. Respondents explained that officers routinely subject them to indignities and regard them as criminals. In the next section, we discuss how youths' direct experiences with aggressive policing contribute to their belief that police discriminate against Latino/a communities.

Not only do respondents view individual police officers as abusing their power, they also believe that injustice exists at the institutional level of the NYPD.

Youths' experiences with aggressive policing

Youth view negative police contacts occurring in their neighborhoods as racially/ethnically biased contacts. For example, respondents report that police target them because they are "Spanish." They note that when police respond to calls in their neighborhoods, they are routinely targeted for stops and frisks and are treated relatively harshly. Some youth state that police are openly disrespectful when they, or their friends, are stopped, questioned, and searched, often without cause or explanation. Not only do respondents view individual police officers as abusing their power, they also believe that injustice exists at the institutional level of the NYPD. Eddie describes what happened to him during an investigatory stop: "Since I'm Spanish, the police thought I was up to no good. It didn't matter what I [would have] said. I was Spanish, so I must be guilty." Elena and Zoriada affirm Eddie's view that police routinely treat Latinos/as as outsiders. Elena stated,

> I'm Puerto Rican right, I live in Washington Heights, a lot of Dominicans live [there] too you know, we call it little Quisquella, cops around here have no problem throwing people up against walls, stores, cars and even the floor. They always ask all us Spanish people, even me, now remember I'm Puerto Rican, for some kind of [identification]. Why do I need to walk around all the time with [identification] like I'm some kind of illegal person? . . . [M]y family has lived in this neighborhood for over thirty years and things haven't changed very much so my mom and grandma tell me. They tell me things like how in the old days the cops used to ask everyone around here for visas, it didn't matter, if you were Spanish, they didn't know who was American, who was Dominican or who was Puerto Rican.

Elena's statement highlights an important point related to immigration status and policing. The police have a difficult time distinguishing between citizens from Puerto Rico and possible undocumented immigrants from the Dominican Republic. This increases the likelihood that a wide range of Latinos/as will be viewed with suspicion. As Romero (2006) observed regarding immigration roundups by local law enforcement in Arizona, aggressive policing in racialized spaces may result in racial profiling of both legal citizens and undocumented immigrants. In New York City, this would include Dominican (citizens and undocumented) and Puerto Rican (citizens) youth. Zoriada expressed the sentiments of many Dominican youth:

> Many of us Dominicans, at least in my community, are afraid of the police because even when we are citizens and many of us go through so much to get citizenship, the police just continue to stop us and not respect us and so many people end up in jail having to prove they are citizens without needing to. It's like what we worked so hard for is second class citizenship. In this neighborhood full of poor but hardworking people, citizenship sometimes does not matter.

Zoriada's comments reveal the importance of immigration issues for Latino youth. Unlike African Americans who often identify race as central to the structural inequalities they experience, Afro-Caribbean residents must contend with a form of profiling that is tied both to ethnicity and immigration status—even when they are citizens. Furthermore, several respondents noted that language barriers and officers' racist beliefs undermine positive police–citizen relations. For example,

> **Lisa:** Lots of these cops around here like to mock us Spanish people and they don't like for us to be talking in Spanish. They always be telling people who have a hard time talking to them in English things like, "speak English, you're in America now!" And then they want to be respected.
>
> **Julian:** Cops in our neighborhood walk around making crazy remarks. They say "mira" [look] trying to act like they know the language, "what are you doing here" we say we live here, they say "sure you do, think you can afford to live here?" Man like they didn't believe us. Maybe I'm too young to afford to live here but my parents are professionals. They pay rent so we could live in a decent neighborhood and not in the ghetto.

As illustrated, respondents identify language issues as stumbling blocks to effective police–Latino/a community relations. In addition, more than half of study participants believe that police should learn more about Latino/a ethnicity in an effort to dispel racist beliefs and preconceived notions. However, there may not be reason for optimism on this front as stereotyping in policing may be deeply ingrained (e.g., see Skolnick 1994). Yet, to the extent that the broader society and law enforcement embrace the imagery that the typical crime victim is white and the typical assailant is a person of color (Quillian and Pager 2001), minority youth will likely continue to (1) have serious negative, involuntary police experiences and (2) refuse to cooperate with the police in solving crimes.

Gender adds another layer of complexity to youths' perceptions of the police in Afro-Caribbean communities. Young men tend to believe that their negative contacts are connected to racism and discrimination. Young women report similar unpleasant experiences as their male counterparts. However, female respondents often also note that there is a sexualized component to their encounters with police. For example, Elena stated,

> I know I can be street smart, I grew up in my neighborhood, that doesn't mean I'm not afraid of what happens there. I would like for the cops to pay more attention to the stuff going on in my neighborhood instead of checking me out. Sometimes they can make you feel uncomfortable [by] the way they look at you.

Such actions by officers leave young women fearful of becoming victims of street crime, while simultaneously feeling that they may be victimized by police officers. Lisa commented,

> You know things are bad in my neighborhood but sometimes I don't know who is worse. The criminals you are afraid of because you know they can hurt you but sometimes the cops you are afraid of too. The way they look at you as a female sometimes I feel they undress me with their eyes. So sometimes I fear both but, you know, differently.

These gendered interactions suggest within-group differences in Latino/a experiences with police. Yet, in many ways, Afro-Caribbean youths' views of the police parallel those of other Latinos/as, that is, Mexicano/as and Chicano/as. This is consistent with expectations based on the LatCrit perspective, which leads us to expect similarities of Afro-Caribbean youth with other Latino/a ethnic groups, but not with blacks or whites. From this perspective, law enforcement is often used as a tool for social control. It is in the areas of immigration, language, and culture that Afro-Caribbeans' experiences with the police differ from their African American and white counterparts. Due to immigration issues, larger structural inequalities manifest themselves differently in Latino/a communities than perhaps in white and black neighborhoods.

Discussion and Recommendations

This exploratory study is an attempt to give voice to Latino/a youth concerning their experiences with and perceptions of the police in New York City. The literature that we examined pointed to a long history of negative police–community relations between Afro-Caribbeans and the NYPD. Historically, Afro-Caribbean communities have been viewed by police as dangerous, warranting aggressive policing tactics. Our interview data show that respondents believe the police do not care about their communities and, thus, do not offer the same level of protection and concern as in white communities. Furthermore, study participants report that their interactions with the police often involve racial profiling and disrespectful treatment. We also find that respondents' interactions with the police are shaped by officers' uncertainty about youths' immigration status. The importance of such findings lies in what they reveal about larger structural inequalities that manifest themselves in daily interactions between Afro-Caribbean youth and the police. Such disparities have the potential to cause police to widely view Latinos as criminals, thereby justifying the use of aggressive policing tactics against them.

Furthermore, aggressive policing in respondents' neighborhoods seems pervasive in nature. We do not find substantial differences between the reports and narratives of Puerto Rican versus Dominican youth. Nonetheless, we recommend future research exploring this topic in detail for larger, more representative samples. It would also be useful to test hypotheses drawn from the LatCrit perspective with data for a host of Latino/a groups (e.g., Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, immigrant versus nonimmigrant, citizens versus undocumented persons, and so on). Our research does reveal gender differences that should also be explored more fully.

The LatCrit framework uses the experiential knowledge of people of color as a source for assessing how police and criminal justice processes marginalize or subordinate Latino/a communities (Villalpando 2003). Having identified some ways in which such marginalization occurs (e.g., as a result of discriminatory and aggressive policing practices) from the point of view of youthful residents of New York City's El Barrio, we offer a few recommendations that we believe could address some of the larger structural inequalities that manifest themselves in police–community relations in Latino/a neighborhoods. First, we noted earlier that Latinos/as have not been involved in discussions of proposed policing strategies. This should change. Furthermore, our findings make it clear that attention to the ideas and perspectives of Latino/a youth should be an important focus. Given that youth are more likely than adults to have involuntary contact with officers, it may behoove the NYPD to identify and train officers to facilitate workshops on conflict and dispute resolution and on issues of human dignity. Open dialogue between police and Latino/a youth can assist in reforming policies and creating better community policing strategies for dealing with youth. The NYPD has attempted to work with young people through programs such as Law Enforcement Explorers and the Cops and Kids

project. However, Latino/a youth do not attend these programs in substantial numbers. In this sense, the department falls short of its stated goal of opening lines of communication with all communities. Afro-Caribbean areas and youth are neglected in this regard.

If police strategies are designed with youth in mind, the experiences and voices of the young people must be recognized as legitimate and not dismissed as those of potential criminals. To achieve more equitable law enforcement, police agencies should consider adopting initiatives that involve officers helping citizens solve daily problems as opposed to those directly related to crime. We also recommend that officers working in racialized spaces be given effective training to increase their understanding of how perceptions of criminality are perpetuated. Such training will help officers to recognize that racial discrimination is perhaps unintentionally a part of their enforcement efforts and that aggressive policing initiatives have the potential to undermine effective police–community relations. Training may also afford departments an opportunity to make officers aware of cultural and language issues that strain police–community relations. Obviously, training about policing in racialized spaces may not remedy long-standing structural inequalities. However, using policing techniques that assist officers in improving citizen trust and respect will likely have the additional payoff of helping to realize law enforcement's primary function, crime reduction.

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