



SYSTEMSTATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

Perceptions of Crimes Affecting North Carolina's Latino Residents: Results from a Qualitative Crime Prevention Needs Assessment

Introduction

The Latino population of North Carolina has grown dramatically over the past decade and all signs indicate that it will continue to grow. Latino immigrants are settling in all regions of our state from the Atlantic Coast to the Mountains, and in rural as well as urban communities. News reports and anecdotal information indicate that Latinos residing in North Carolina, and many other states, are often the victims of crime. There are few statistics on the proportion of North Carolina's Latino residents who are crime victims or on the types of crimes perpetrated against them. However, a 1998 Governor's Crime Commission study, based on brief telephone interviews with law enforcement and judicial agencies, notes that one-third of those interviewed reported, "... a perception that crimes against members of the Latino/Hispanic population had increased within their respective jurisdictions. Respondents reported that crimes against this group had increased between 3% and 500% over the last five years" (SystemStats Fall, 1998:4).

Local law enforcement agencies across North Carolina are expanding their efforts to provide service to the Latino residents of their communities. Implementation of these efforts face several barriers. There is insufficient information on the crime experienced by Latino residents; crime reports and crime statistics do not include information on the ethnicity of the victims. Local law enforcement officers are unfamiliar with the values and behaviors of Latino residents, and are not able to provide the desired level of service. Few officers in North Carolina speak Spanish, further limiting their ability to provide service. Finally, differences in language and education make most available crime prevention materials inappropriate for Latino residents.

Based on these acknowledged problems in law enforcement services to Latino residents, the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission provided a grant for a project that would: (1) document the perceptions of law enforcement officers and Latino residents of the crime experienced by Latinos; (2) document barriers to communication between law enforcement officers and Latinos; and (3) develop culturally and educationally appropriate materials for Latinos in North Carolina that could be used by law enforcement agencies and community groups to educate Latinos about crime prevention. This report summarizes results from this project.

Project Design

We used in-depth individual and focus group interviews to investigate the perception of crimes committed against Latinos and to identify factors that constrain communications between law enforcement officers and Latinos. We focused our data collection efforts on six North Carolina communities. The six communities were selected to be representative of North Carolina, including rural and urban locales, and large and small cities. These communities were Greene and Wilkes Counties, Durham, High Point, Fayetteville, and Charlotte.

Within each community our goal was to complete in-depth individual interviews with two law enforcement officers, two social service providers, and two leaders of Latino community organizations. We also planned to complete focus group interviews with one group of Latino men, and one group of Latino women in each community. In some communities it was extremely difficult to identify Latino community leaders. We also found that in the Latino communities individuals who were social service providers were also community leaders. In the end, we con-

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ducted forty-two individual interviews: fifteen with law enforcement officers who included patrol officers as well as crime prevention officers; eleven with social service providers; fourteen with individuals who were social service providers and community leaders; and two with individuals who were community leaders. We completed twelve focus group interviews that included fifty-one men and forty-nine women.

Results

The data allowed us to delineate the crimes perceived to have the greatest effect on Latinos, and indicated the factors affecting communications between law enforcement officers and Latinos. The respondents made several recommendations to improve communications for crime prevention. The information was extremely useful in the development of crime prevention materials for Latinos. We illustrate our results with quotes from the interviews.

Crimes Committed against Latinos

Those interviewed generally agreed that the two most common crimes perpetrated against Latinos in the state are robbery and fraud.

Robbery: Many Latinos carry large amounts of cash or have large amounts of cash in their homes. This is widely known and has often been reported in newspaper stories. As a result, Latinos are held-up on the street, their homes are burglarized, and their homes have been invaded. Two of those interviewed described the problem this way.

There's been a lot of crimes in the area since 1990 – the end of 1996, 1997. Mostly home invasions and robberies on the days that people get their checks from work, so somebody might be walking in the street and they know that that's the payday and they rob him. [Latino community leader]

So what are you going to do? If you're going to rob somebody, you take the opportunity, you rob a Hispanic person, chances are they have a lot of money. Chances are they may not even report the crime in the first place. If they do report the crime, the

officer's going to have a hard time talking with them, speaking with them. And even if they do report it and the officer speaks with them, chances are they're not going to be around come court time. If they can point you out. So if you were going to rob somebody, that's who to rob. [Police officer]

Latinos carry a great deal of their money in cash because many send much of their money to family members in their home communities in Latin America, and because many do not use banks. Respondents do not trust banks due to experiences in their home countries and to a lack of familiarity using banks. If they try to open a bank account in North Carolina they fear that they will be asked for documents that they do not have. Few banks in North Carolina have Spanish speaking tellers, so opening an account or conducting business at most banks is very difficult for Latinos. *"I lived in my home country for 22 years before I came to North Carolina, and I never had a bank account or had to write a check. No one trusted the mail to be delivered"* [Latino community member].

Several banks in North Carolina are making efforts to serve Latinos. For example, the ATMs for some banks now have directions in Spanish as well as English. A Latino credit union has been incorporated. However, there is still a great need among North Carolina's Latino population for banking services.

Latinos are taking several actions to protect themselves from robbery. Some are moving from neighborhoods in which they were victimized to those in which they feel safer. Others are barricading their homes at night; for example, sliding furniture in front of their doors. Others, particularly women, simply do not go out at night. Finally, some are arming themselves. *"Some guys keep knives close to their beds, and some even keep a gun under their mattress"* [Latino community member]. Each of these behaviors has negative implications. Changing place of residence is often costly, and requires finding low cost housing. Barricading the home can be a fire hazard. Fear and becoming a prisoner in your home results in mental and emotional stress. Finally, having weapons in the home may lead to accidental injuries.

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Fraud: There are many ways in which people are defrauding and taking advantage of Latinos. Selling fake documents to Latinos has become a major problem. Along with selling fake documents, some individuals are misrepresenting their ability to provide legal services to Latinos.

. . . you hear stories of people telling folks that they will help them with documents and they don't. So they charge, for example, \$600 to solve the situation in court. They go to court and they ask for more time and they come back and say, you see, I solved your case, so you are okay. Next thing they know is they get a letter from the court saying you didn't come to court in the time da, da, da. And they come here and say, well, I paid \$600 to this person, you know. . . . A lot of people taking advantage and promising things related to immigration. I will help you if you pay me this, I can give papers to work here legally and I can do this and that. [Latino community leader]

Unfortunately, we do have some people that are representing themselves as paralegals that tell people well, I'm a paralegal, I can help you with your immigration status. And they'll ask for a certain amount. And people do not know, number one, who to speak to, and number two, that this is a crime. [Police officer]

Other types of fraud include the sale of faulty merchandise, or employers not paying Latinos for work performed.

Also another fraud is that people are employing people that are not necessarily legal or illegal immigrants that are in a – I guess in a status of limbo right now. And they'll employ them for 3 or 4 weeks and not pay them. And unfortunately people do not know what recourse they can take from this. [Police officer]

I think fraud happens a lot more than people mention. People buy cars or documents that they think are legal and appropriate and then find out they've been cheated or that they did not get what they were promised. They are afraid to get legal help because

they don't want to get involved with the legal system in any way, due to immigration fears and lack of understanding English and the whole U.S. system. [Latino Community leader]

During focus group discussions when one participant would touch on the fraud theme, other participants would often add comments or provide additional examples. Unfortunately, while they feel taken advantage of, many Latinos do not consider fraud or being taken advantage of as crimes, and so do not report fraud when it occurs.

Latinos as Perpetrators of Crime

Although this project was directed at crimes committed against Latinos, respondents provided information about common ways in which Latinos are committing crimes. This information is important as it also provides additional content for crime prevention materials and programs.

When discussing crimes committed against Latinos, respondents often mentioned these crimes being committed by Latinos. This discussion of Latinos as perpetrators often overlapped the discussion of Latinos as crime victims and the two themes are directly related, as Latinos are commonly victimized by other Latinos. Latinos often live and work in neighborhoods with other Latino residents, making contact more likely. Latinos are victimized by perpetrators who know their habits, who know when they are at home or away, where they keep their cash, and when they have the most cash on hand. Respondents noted that Latinos robbed and defrauded each other, committed domestic violence, and abused drugs and alcohol.

In addition to Latinos perpetrating crimes against each other, they were also involved in other violations that brought them into contact with law enforcement agencies. One of the most frustrating areas discussed by law enforcement officers centered on traffic violations.

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The majority of the time that we do deal with them [Hispanics] it's more of a self-initiated activity such as like traffic stops. Their laws concerning traffic and driving cars, I assume, are a little bit different from ours. Most of them are either somehow related to traffic such as driving while impaired, (DWI), seatbelt violations, registration violations, no driver's license and things of that nature. [Police officer]

Well, one thing that I know that's always been a dilemma is obtaining a license or actually having all their documents or records, the proper records to obtain a car or to drive a car in the state of North Carolina. Which is insurance, proper registration of a car and, most importantly, a license. I think that it's – now that you have to present a social security number or card, it's become even more difficult for these new immigrants to obtain a license and to comply with the state's requirements to drive a car. [Police officer]

It appears to law enforcement officers that Latinos often commit traffic violations because they do not know North Carolina traffic laws. Once stopped, Latinos often lack proper documents such as a driver's license that is valid in the US, proof of registration, proof of insurance and proof of inspection. When Latinos do have these documents, the ways in which they construct their names (use of surname and middle name) is confusing to Americans. Two valid documents may have what appear to be different names for the same person. Compounding these issues, Latinos sometimes give wrong or misleading names to officers when they are stopped. This results from having different sets of documents. This causes officers a great deal of consternation as they try to write citations. Latinos often do not wear seatbelts, nor do they have child passengers using seatbelts. Finally, Latino beliefs toward consuming alcoholic beverages while driving differ from North Carolina law. It appears that Latinos do not feel that drinking beer and driving is a problem.

Attitudes Toward Police

Fear of police is the most overwhelming sentiment present in statements made by Latino community

leaders and community members. Latinos fear police for several reasons. Foremost among these is their experiences with police in their home countries. Many state that they were abused by police in their home countries. These police were corrupt and robbed them and demanded bribes. The majority of Latino community members participating in the focus group interviews indicated that they did not know whether it was legal or illegal to bribe a police officer in the United States.

You have to understand that so many Latinos are afraid of the police before they even come to the U.S. They have been beaten or robbed by the police at home, and when they come here they're even more afraid, because the entire system is new and different. There aren't many people in the community who explain how things are here, and what to do if you need help. [Latino community member]

I'm one of those people that has been from the very beginning working very closely with the police to try to bring the police close together to the Hispanic community. Those of us that come from Latin America are very prejudicial against uniforms because we have been really mistreated by the forces. Anybody with a gun at home does whatever they feel like it. . . . Personally, I'm learning to see this in a different way, and it's taken me years. I have lived in this country more than in my country. It has taken me years to feel comfortable next to somebody that has a uniform on because of the things that I've seen. [Latino Community Leader]

People tell me that they feel uncomfortable when dealing with the police, because they can't communicate well, and they're afraid they'll get into trouble if they don't have papers. Many Latinos see the police as people who can get them deported, and they may not have had positive experiences with police in their home countries. Police corruption and violence are common in many parts of Latin and Central America and it's hard for people to understand the system is very different here. They just want to avoid contact with the police if they can, so they try to stay out of trouble. [Service provider]

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Many Latinos in North Carolina do not understand the role of the police in the US. In their home countries police were often involved in controlling the population, while in the US the role of the police is to protect and serve people. Latinos often assume that the police and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) work together. They are afraid to ask for help because they may be deported.

People know that we're [Latinos] afraid to call the police. We don't want to create problems for ourselves or get in trouble. If you don't have papers, you aren't going to call. What should I do – call the police and lose my job and get thrown out of the country? [Latino community member]

I haven't had any problems with the police here. I think they treat us okay. I try to avoid contact with the police, because I don't want to get deported. I just keep quiet and try to stay out of trouble, so I don't really need to talk to the police. [Latino community member]

Due to these fears, Latinos do not want to talk to police even to ask for help or to report a crime. They fear being stopped and questioned by law enforcement officers.

I've only been here for 4 months. My life here is – I work and I send money home. Why would I want to get involved with the police? I just want to work and stay out of trouble. At home [Mexico], no one wants to talk to the police, because they'll just rob you, take your money, beat you, hurt you, whatever they want to do. Then people here told me I should call the police because someone robbed outside my apartment. Let me ask you this—Why? I'm not stupid. I don't want to get deported. I just want to work and help feed my family...I know I'll never get that money back. [Latino community member]

Communication

Communication problems between Latinos and officers were often mentioned in the interviews. These communications problems involve several components.

Police cannot understand Latino residents. A tremendous feeling of frustration was evident in the voices of interviewed officers as they related how their inability to

communicate with Latino residents did not allow them to do their jobs effectively. This inability to effectively communicate means that they cannot provide information or answer questions, nor can they take crime reports.

You know, it's just if I can't [get] their information and write it down, if I can't communicate with you enough, you know, I feel like that's a breakdown right there if you can't communicate to get all the information that you need to do your investigation, you know, that's a definite minus to begin with. [Police officer]

I don't know enough [Spanish]. I wish I knew more. I wish I could sit down and actually have a conversation with that person, you know, about the weather or sports or whatever. It would be nice. When I look at some people that can communicate, you know, that interpret for us, I get jealous because I want to know – I want to be able to do that, but you know, I don't foresee that, not with our county. You know it's – And I'm not knocking our county at all, but it's just the fact that it's not available to us. [Police officer]

Bilingual officers feel overextended. When a department is fortunate enough to have officers who speak Spanish, they often feel overextended. Bilingual officers feel that they are on call when any other officer needs to interact with a Latino resident. A few officers also stated that they feel that they are not paid for their special skill. Some agencies do not have bilingual officers. Officers in these jurisdictions need to call on other county residents when they need to speak with a Spanish speaking resident. This causes additional concerns as citizens become involved in police matters.

Residents cannot understand police. When there are no Spanish speaking officers or interpreters available, Latinos cannot report crime or ask for help. Many state that they do not bother trying to talk with police because it is just too difficult.

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My neighbor said, 'Juan, it's different here. You can talk to the police and they will make a report and try to help you.' That's what he told me, but I don't know. Some guys hit me and showed me a gun and ran away with all my money. I wanted to call the police but I can't tell them what happened, where I live, or who those men were. I can't explain anything, you know... I don't speak English. They [the police] don't speak Spanish and I don't speak English...it's just hard living here sometimes. No one understands you and they don't have patience to really listen. Just because I don't speak English doesn't mean I don't have the right to be listened to. [Latino community member]

Recommendations

Those whom we interviewed offered recommendations to improve communications between officers and Latinos, and so improve crime prevention in Latino communities. The first recommendation was that officers should increase their visibility in Latino communities. Examples of positive visibility included attending cultural events such as fiestas; talking to people at local Latino hang-outs such as restaurants, laundromats, churches, schools and tiendas (stores); and traveling through Latino neighborhoods and speaking with residents. *"I wish there was a way we could have meetings with the police department to talk about our problems and to get to know each other. I think that would really help a lot. If we don't know each other and can't talk to each other, how are we going to understand each other?"* [Latino community member].

A second recommendation was that officers make a special effort to show Latinos how to protect themselves. This might include visiting homes to show them ways they can increase home security and reminding Latinos to lock their homes' windows and doors, as well as locking their car doors. Crime prevention materials that we are developing include this information.

Third, officers should find ways to remind Latinos that they should not fear the police. Officers need to tell Latinos that they do not work for the INS, that officers

in this country are paid and do not need to be bribed, that officers will help whether or not a person has documents, and that Latinos should report all crimes to the police or call 911. *"Some police are good, some are bad...that's the same in any place. But here, the police treat us like we're all here undocumented. They assume all Latinos don't have a license or insurance"* [Latino community member].

Finally, officers should practice patience when dealing with non-English speaking residents. Most Latinos are desperately trying to learn English. However, it would be helpful if officers learned a few Spanish phrases. Officers should not be afraid to make mistakes in speaking Spanish; in general, Latinos are grateful for any attempts to speak their language and overlook any errors in pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar. There are several "Spanish for Police" phrase books available that can provide some key terms to use in speaking with Latinos. Finally, officers should remember that speaking louder will not help a Spanish speaker understand them any better. *"I know the police will try to help me if I have a problem. They help everyone who lives in Durham, but it's really hard to communicate. Some officers are really nice and they listen and try to talk to us, and that's a very good thing. But I've heard a lot of stories from my friends... You see, a lot of police officers are so impatient when we try and speak English. They just get mad, and they don't even try to understand"* [Latino community member].



Brochure graphic

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Conclusions

Based on what the authors have learned from our analysis of the interviews, as well as our ongoing discussions with our advisory committee, law enforcement officers, and Latino community leaders, are developing different crime prevention materials that address the most common issues. These materials will be available from the Governor's Crime Commission when this project is completed. They include brochures, public service announcements for radio and newspapers, a photonovela, and a video.

Brochures

We have produced seven Spanish language crime prevention brochures. The titles of the brochures that will be available are:

- Protect Your Money! Don't be an Easy Target!
- Protect Yourself from Scams. Don't be an Easy Victim!
- Buying Fake Documents is Against the Law! You Can't Buy "Official" Papers!
- You Don't Have to be Afraid to Call the Police! The Police want to Help You!
- How to Call 911. Call 911 in an Emergency!
- Driving in North Carolina. What you must do before you start driving.
- Drive Safely. Here's what you need to know.

Public Service Announcements

These will be produced as audio spots and will be available to law enforcement agencies and radio stations. They will also be produced (and be available) for inclusion as newspaper articles with digital images of the person who is making the announcement.

- Banking Issues
- Role of Police (If you are a victim, do not be afraid to call the police.)
- Contacting the Police (Victor is robbed and convinced to contact the police.)
- Fraud Prevention
- How to call 911

Photonovela

Photonovelas are very popular forms of entertainment in Central America. They are dramatic stories illustrated with photographs and are very similar to comic books / illustrated novels, but with photos rather than drawings. They are used widely in health education programs for Spanish speaking adults in the U.S. Our photonovela, "Don't be a Victim: Basic Home Safety," will be produced in Spanish, but the script will be available in English for anyone who is interested.

This photonovela tells the story of Juan and Maria and their family. The messages that are communicated are how to protect your home from robbery, and how community residents can work with the police.

Video

Two videos are being produced; one for residents and one for law enforcement officers. The video for residents is in Spanish and addresses the twin points of protecting yourself against robbery, and working with the police. The video is about ten minutes long. Work with low-literacy populations indicates that an eight to ten minute length is as long as you can expect to maintain the audiences' attention. Dramatic effect helps to hold the audience's attention and to drive home the key points.

The video for law enforcement officers is also in Spanish but it has English subtitles. It contains information for officers about Latino beliefs and experiences so that police officers can better understand and interpret the behaviors of Latinos.

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Brochure graphic

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The drawings used in this publication are from the
crime prevention brochures.

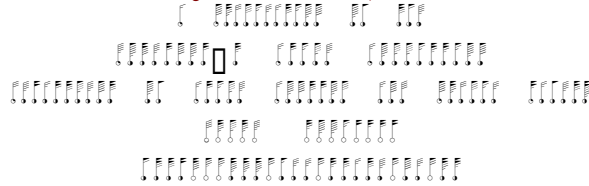
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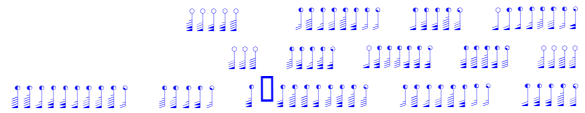
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The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is "to be the chief advisory body to the Governor and the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy." The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.

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