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Bridging the Divide: Strengthening Trust Between Latino Communities and Law Enforcement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Latino communities in the United States often mistrust law enforcement, making it difficult to keep neighborhoods safe. Many people, especially in mixed-status families, avoid reporting crimes and cooperating with police because they fear detention or deportation. This mistrust stems from historical discrimination. It is further reinforced by policies such as 287(g) and Secure Communities, which connect local police with federal immigration enforcement. Racial profiling, language barriers, and limited cultural understanding make the problem worse. As a result, crimes go unreported, investigations are weaker, and community-police relationships suffer. Solutions include cultural competency training for officers, hiring bilingual staff, and partnering with trusted community organizations. Laws like the Trust Act, which separate local policing from federal immigration enforcement, can reduce fear and increase cooperation. By combining community policing, Trust Act policies, and enhanced oversight, law enforcement can improve trust, increase crime reporting, and deliver safer, fairer, and more culturally responsive policing.

Key Definitions or Terms

- *Community policing* is a strategy that builds partnerships between law enforcement and the community to proactively address the root causes of crime, social disorder, and public safety concerns through collaboration and problem-solving.¹
- *Racial profiling* is the practice by law enforcement of targeting individuals for suspicion of criminal activity based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin rather than on individual behavior or evidence.²
- *Secure Communities* is a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) program that uses fingerprint data from local and state jails to identify and remove immigrants who may be deportable under federal immigration law.³
- *Trust Act laws/policies* are local and state policies that limit cooperation between law enforcement and federal immigration authorities, aiming to promote community safety by ensuring that immigrants, regardless of their status, feel secure in reporting crimes and interacting with police without fear of deportation.⁴
- A *287(g) agreement* is a voluntary partnership between the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and a state or local law enforcement agency that authorizes designated local officers to perform certain federal immigration enforcement duties under ICE supervision.⁵
- “*Juan Crow*” refers to modern systems of laws and policies that discriminate against Latino and immigrant communities, mirroring the racial segregation and exclusion of the Jim Crow era.⁶

- *The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)* is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation’s state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources. COPS pillars focus on community partnerships, organizational transformation, and problem-solving.⁷

BACKGROUND:

Historical Context

The strained relationship between Latino communities and law enforcement has deep historical roots shaped by racialized policing and immigration enforcement.⁸ Over the years, Latino populations have been disproportionately targeted by programs that blur the line between community safety and immigration control. Programs like Secure Communities and the expansion of the 287(g) agreement allowed local police to work closely with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).⁹ This has led to an increase in deportations for minor offenses or even non-criminal encounters.¹⁰ These collaborations have fueled the perception that local law enforcement acts more as an extension of federal immigration authorities than as protectors of public safety. Historical discrimination, along with racial profiling practices sometimes called “Juan Crow” laws,¹¹ has further embedded fear and skepticism among Latino communities toward the police.¹²

Current Climate

Mistrust continues to shape how Latino communities interact with law enforcement today.¹³ According to the Urban Institute, 20 percent of adults in immigrant families and 44 percent in mixed-status families report feeling “a lot” or “some” worry about speaking to police.¹⁴ Many people avoid contacting law enforcement, even when they are victims of crime, because they fear immigration-related consequences for themselves or their family members. This underreporting weakens public safety, slows investigations, and reduces the effectiveness of policing, especially in areas with heavy immigration enforcement partnerships or high numbers of undocumented or mixed-status residents.¹⁵

PROBLEM ANALYSIS:

Persistent mistrust between Latino communities and law enforcement is a major obstacle to public safety and effective policing in the United States. This lack of confidence stems from long-standing experiences of racial profiling, biased enforcement practices, and the overlap between local policing and federal immigration agencies. Many Latinos, especially those from mixed-status households, hesitate to engage with police because they fear that routine interactions could lead to questioning, detention, and deportation. This mistrust not only puts individual safety at risk but also limits law enforcement’s ability to build trust, gather accurate information, and respond effectively to crime. It is important to recognize that Latino communities are not monolithic. Differences in country of origin, language proficiency, race, immigration status, and Indigenous or Afro-Latino identities shape how individuals experience policing.¹⁶ Trust levels vary depending on local policies, policing practices, and community conditions, with some groups facing higher levels of discrimination.¹⁷ For instance, one study found that 24 percent of Latinos with darker skin tones reported being unfairly stopped by police, showing how experiences with law enforcement can differ within Latino communities.¹⁸

Factors driving mistrust are complex and systemic, going beyond isolated incidents of bias and fear. It is rooted in historical and structural patterns of racialization and reinforced by policies that blur the line between policing and immigration enforcement. Programs like 287(g) and Secure Communities formally integrate local police into federal immigration operations, effectively positioning officers as agents of deportation.¹⁹ In the current administration, 287(g) partnerships have increased by 641 percent, increasing from 135 agreements to 1,001.²⁰ Additionally, under Secure Communities, participating jails submit arrestee fingerprints to immigration databases, allowing ICE to access information on individuals held in jails.²¹ Through these tactics, there is a

disruption of Latino communities' relationship with law enforcement. States that have expanded these agreements are seeing a normalization of fear, racial profiling, and authoritarian enforcement tactics at the local level.²² While masked as a way to improve public safety, these programs often have the opposite effect, causing residents to view routine policing as a threat rather than protection. This perception is heightened by the legacy of "Juan Crow" laws, modern systems of discrimination that mirror Jim Crow-era exclusion.²³ Together, these policies and practices embed fear and skepticism, making Latinos hesitant to engage with law enforcement.

Fear of deportation is only one aspect of this mistrust. Racial profiling and limited cultural competency in policing reinforce perceptions of bias and exclusion. Latino immigrants often experience policing as arbitrary or discriminatory, with decisions based on ethnicity rather than behavior or evidence. Many Latino residents are reluctant to report crimes or interact with police because they fear consequences for themselves or their families.²⁴ This is part of what scholars call "legal violence," where laws and policies produce structural harm affecting entire communities.²⁵ Language barriers, economic insecurity, and limited access to resources add to these effects. As a result, many Latinos feel marginalized, isolated, and distrustful of institutions meant to serve them.

The consequences of mistrust are both immediate and long-term. Underreporting of crime is a key problem. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) shows that 37 percent of all victimizations are reported to the police, with immigrant-populated areas reporting at even lower rates.²⁶ When victims and witnesses avoid law enforcement, criminal activity may go unchecked, investigations suffer, and public safety is weakened. Fear also undermines community cohesion and prevents meaningful collaboration between police and Latinos.²⁷ Mistrust affects community policing, a strategy designed to address the root causes of crime through partnership. Trust is essential for any effective police-community relationship.²⁸ When individuals hesitate to communicate with police, information flow is disrupted, and law enforcement's ability to respond proactively decreases.

Policy inconsistencies make the problem worse. Programs that encourage trust, like the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), coexist with initiatives that focus on enforcement.²⁹ Programs such as 287(g) and Secure Communities assign officers a dual role as public safety officials and immigration enforcers. This directly contradicts community policing principles. This duality undermines confidence in law enforcement and reinforces the perception that police are not neutral actors. Limited investment in culturally responsive policies leaves law enforcement unprepared to navigate linguistic and cultural diversity.³⁰ Even well-intentioned programs struggle to build trust or reduce fear without cultural responsiveness.

Mistrust is self-reinforcing. Fear discourages engagement, limited engagement fosters misunderstanding, and misunderstanding deepens fear. This cycle affects both crime reporting and broader community well-being. It creates barriers to justice, reduces civic participation, and contributes to the ongoing marginalization of Latino communities. The overlap of immigration enforcement and local policing also has equity implications. It reinforces social hierarchies that treat Latino immigrants as inherently suspect and undermine equal protection under the law.

Overall, the issue stems from overlapping policies, historical bias, and institutional practices. Distrust is fueled by uncertainty about whether local police are acting as public safety officials or immigration authorities. This leads to underreporting, reduced community policing, and weakened public safety initiatives. Without addressing these structural causes and separating enforcement from community engagement, Latino communities will continue to experience fear, and law enforcement will struggle to establish the trust needed for fair and effective policing. Tackling these systemic challenges is essential for public safety and for promoting justice and equity among immigrant communities.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION(S):

The lack of trust between Latino communities and law enforcement is an urgent matter to address because it affects both safety and equity. Many Latino individuals avoid interacting with police out of fear that even routine

stops could lead to detention or deportation. When people hesitate to report crimes or share information, public safety suffers, and law enforcement loses the cooperation needed to do their jobs effectively. This mistrust comes from many factors. These include historical discrimination, racial profiling, language and cultural barriers, and the overlap of policing with federal immigration enforcement.³¹ Research shows that fear of immigration consequences often reduces trust in police, especially in mixed-status households, making it harder for communities to feel safe and supported.³²

Recommendations

1. Strengthen community policing – Training officers in cultural competency, hiring bilingual and bicultural staff, and partnering with local organizations. This approach would help individuals see police as allies rather than threats. Studies show that when police understand community values and build relationships, trust and public safety improve.³³
2. Enact “Trust Act” policies – These laws prevent local police from cooperating with federal immigration enforcement, allowing individuals to feel safe when reporting crimes without fear of deportation.³⁴
3. Increase transparency and oversight – Collect and share data on stops, detainers, and community engagement disaggregated by race, by language, ethnicity, and immigration status. This would help identify bias, evaluate community trust-building efforts, and improve accountability.³⁵

A combined approach—strengthening community policing and enacting Trust Act laws—can reduce fear of contacting law enforcement in Latino communities. Community policing focuses on day-to-day interaction and relationship-building between officers and Latinos. Trust Act policies remove structural barriers that create fear. Transparency and oversight help track progress and keep law enforcement accountable. Together, these steps can increase crime reporting, improve collaboration between Latino communities and the police, strengthen public safety, and make policing more equitable. By separating immigration enforcement from local policing and investing in culturally responsive practices, communities can feel safer, and law enforcement can build lasting trust.

Considerations for Implementation

Key stakeholders include local police departments, city and county officials, civil rights and immigrant advocacy groups, community leaders, and state legislatures. Potential barriers may include resistance from police unions, limited funding for training and hiring bilingual officers, political opposition to restricting enforcement cooperation, and challenges with collecting and managing data. Agencies will often use provisions for ‘pending’ or ‘active’ investigations as a way to delay disclosure of data.³⁶ The Department of Health Policy and Management argued that insufficient local government assistance is an obstacle to passing police accountability laws.³⁷ Additionally, systems like the FBI’s National Use-of-Force Data Collection are voluntary, which limits the ability to assess patterns of enforcement and bias due to lack of participation.³⁸ The barriers must be addressed to ensure policy effectiveness can be measured through changes in crime reporting, surveys on community trust in law enforcement, the number of bilingual officers, outreach events, and implementation of Trust Act policies. Regular reporting ensures progress is tracked and adjustments can be made if needed over time.

Endnotes

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