



Testimony of
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Introduction

Thank you, members of the task force, for inviting me to speak today on behalf of Voto Latino, a national, nonpartisan organization working to empower Latino Millennials to claim a better future through civic participation, issue advocacy, and leadership.

The topic of this listening session, “**Building Trust and Legitimacy**” between police agencies and local communities, is of critical importance to Latinos in the U.S. While recent high-profile confrontations between civilians and police have directly affected members of the African-American community, the Latino community also has a painful history with law enforcement agencies. This history includes the deaths of men like Andy Lopez, Alex Nieto, Manuel Diaz, Joel Acevedo, and Cesar Cruzⁱ – young Latinos who were killed at the hands of law enforcement in the past two years alone—the recent immigration enforcement practices of a rogue Arizona sheriff, and well-documented racial profiling cases that stretch from Connecticut to California.ⁱⁱ

Latinos respect the fact that police put their lives on the line every single day to serve and protect our communities. Police officers, like all of us, deserve to come home and be with their families at the end of each day.

As part of Voto Latino’s efforts to unite diverse communities, we reached out to our audience via social media, SMS, and email to provide feedback on how to improve relations between law enforcement and the communities they serve. We received more than 430 responses in less than 24 hours, which tells us this is an issue important to our community and one on which they *want* to be engaged. While we received a diverse array of comments, a few common themes emerged.

Role of Police

First and foremost is how our community views the role of law enforcement. One young Latino in Texas said the role of law enforcement is “to serve and protect the people, regardless of race, age, gender, or sexual preference. Another Latina in Colorado added, “The role of police in our society should be one where they *are* community members... where they can fully protect and serve.” A poll released last month by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) and conducted by *Latino Decisions*

supports this view, indicating that 84% of Latino adults agree that police are there to protect them and their families.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, the *Latino Decisions* poll also shows 68% of Latino adults worry law enforcement authorities will use excessive force against them. And it is very difficult to cultivate a relationship of trust between a fearful population and police. In our Voto Latino questionnaire, more than half of respondents indicated they, or someone close to them, had previously experienced harassment from the police. Most disturbingly, many of the respondents who had *not* experienced harassment qualified this by saying, “No, I’ve never been harassed; but I am white.”

This expectation, that minorities should not be surprised when they are harassed and non-minorities are safe from police intimidation, is disturbing. Case after case has been documented of racial profiling and police brutality against the Latino community.^{iv} Racism, xenophobia, and increased concerns about undocumented immigrants are to blame, even though today, U.S.-born Latinos account for 60% of the growth in the Latino population.^v There is a perception among non-Latinos that Latinos are presumed to be immigrants, and immigrants are presumed to be undocumented until proven otherwise.^{vi} This has led Latinos’ fear of racial profiling to extend to immigration agents, as well as traditional law enforcement police officers. This fear and mistrust severely hinder law enforcement officers’ ability to protect communities, and clearly, this needs to change.

The Voto Latino audience’s suggestions to resolve some of these issues included increased interaction between police and community members, diversity and cultural sensitivity trainings, demilitarization of our police forces, use of body cameras, and more. Our recommendations for the Task Force are summarized below.

Familiarity With Communities Served

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Decouple policing from immigration enforcement. Eliminate Secure Communities.** This is the single, clearest policy that can strengthen relations between law enforcement and the Latino community. Having police officers act as de facto immigration officers is detrimental to public safety, because

undocumented immigrants are reticent to call the police or cooperate in investigations for fear of deportation.

- **Police officers should live in the communities they serve.** As with other groups, Latinos say that officers can earn the public's trust by *being* members of our communities, including being required to live in the jurisdictions they serve.
- **Hire from a diverse pool of applicants.** Most Voto Latino respondents favored hiring from a diverse pool of applicants to help bridge the trust gap between law enforcement and community members.
- **Diversity and cultural sensitivity trainings.** Improved – and more frequent – diversity and cultural sensitivity trainings should be implemented in police departments across the country.
- **Increased police involvement in community events and gatherings.** Police should also be more involved in neighborhood events – local fairs, sporting events, community gatherings, school assemblies, town hall meetings, etc. – as community participants.
- **Use social media to communicate with the public.** Social media is a platform that can be leveraged to improve communication between police departments and community members.
- **Training in community outreach best practices.** Officers should receive training in community outreach best practices so they know how to interact with *all* members of a community, regardless of race, gender, economic status, or sexual orientation.
- **Revise educational requirements for ranking officers.** Another recommendation is to raise the educational education requirements for police officers. At minimum, ranking officers should have an Associate's degree from an accredited college or university, with course study in sociology, communications, psychology, anthropology, and diversity. Better educated officers will be better prepared to interact with all members of our community in a respectful, humane manner.

Internal Institutional Reforms

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Revise existing policies.** Existing policies should be revised to screen for institutional racism and cultural bias.
- **Revise training and curriculum at police academies.** Training practices and curriculum at police academies should be reviewed to make sure our officers are trained to meet the needs of our diverse 21st century communities. This includes cross-cultural training.
- **Advise the use of violence *only* as a last resort.** Many who provided feedback to Voto Latino and stated they previously experienced police harassment said law enforcement officials should be trained in nonviolent problem-solving tactics. Violence should only be used as a last resort.

- **Demilitarize police departments nationwide.** We strongly urge the demilitarization of our police departments. Most officers, especially those with neighborhood beats, have no need to be armed with military-grade weapons.
- **Institute review of police actions by a third-party agency.** Law enforcement officials should be held accountable for their actions by an independent third-party agency. Along this line, maintain a reporting database to track *who* police stop and *why* to better assess patterns in racial profiling.

Use of Body Cameras

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Officers should use body cameras with audio at all times.** The use of body cameras with audio – a tool already in use by some police departments was highlighted. When asked if police officers should be required to wear body cameras on the job, the overwhelming majority (80%) of Voto Latino respondents said yes, but there were many concerns. Many cited the Eric Garner case in Brooklyn, where a video recording of the incident was taken, but neither the video nor the rule prohibiting chokeholds were enough to ensure the application of justice. Other respondents cited concerns about police officers’ ability to turn the devices on and off, saying body cameras would only be effective if they are required to be in use at all times. Other concerns included the high capital costs as well as the intrusion on privacy. Overall, however, our audience believed that body cameras would benefit law enforcement and civilians as one element of an overall program to improve relations.

Conclusion

As both the *Latino Decisions* poll and the feedback from the Voto Latino audience showed, Latinos understand and appreciate the role of police in our society. But immigrant Latinos, specifically, are reluctant to engage with law enforcement for fear they, or family members and friends, may be deported even after interacting with police in a positive way.

Across the nation, we are seeing efforts by local police to reach out to Latino communities. In Anaheim, CA, where protests and rioting broke out in 2012 after two separate, deadly police shootings of Latino men, the city with a majority Latino population hired its first-ever Hispanic police chief last year.^{vii} Greater political representation of Latinos at City Hall is also promised, following voter approval last November of single-member districts instead of at-large seats on the City Council.^{viii}

In Las Vegas, Metro police are expanding the “Hispanic Citizens Academy,” a 7-year program conducted in Spanish – proof of citizenship is not required – to improve relations with the Latino community. Similar efforts are underway in other cities.^{ix} Our respondents also shared many success stories of different types of community and police interactions that helped foster trust and relationships, including safety trainings, youth activities, and community fundraisers. Local efforts like these are highly laudable, but they are not enough. Unfortunately, campaigns by conservative city councils, state legislatures and members of Congress to continue programs like **Secure Communities**, or to propose legislation that makes local police responsible for immigration enforcement, do much more harm than good and are opposed by police chiefs in major U.S. cities.^x

This Task Force’s promise is that this conversation is not one of “us” versus “them” but one of community building with law enforcement, academics, elected leaders, and the communities they serve. My hope is to continue to work towards solving what is clearly a problem so our streets are safer and our communities are stronger.

ⁱ NCLR Action Fund. "[Racial Profiling to Death.](#)" *Huffington Post*. Aug. 19, 2014

ⁱⁱ Nitle, Nadra Kareem. "[Latinos on the Receiving End of Racial Profiling and Police Brutality.](#)" Accessed Jan. 7, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ "[Poll of Latino Families Finds Optimism Despite Many Obstacles.](#)" W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Nov. 12, 2014.

^{iv} Nitle, Nadra Kareem. "[Latinos on the Receiving End of Racial Profiling and Police Brutality.](#)" Accessed Jan. 7, 2015.

^v Krogstad, Jens Manuel and Mark Hugo Lopez. "[Hispanic Nativity Shift.](#)" *Pew Research: Hispanic Trends Project*. Apr. 20, 2014.

^{vi} Lilley, Sandra. "[Poll: 1 out of 3 Americans inaccurately think most Hispanics are undocumented.](#)" *NBC Latino*. Sep. 12, 2012

^{vii} Martinez, Michael and Jaqueline Hurtado. "[Two years after riots against cops, Anaheim gets its first Latino police chief,](#)" *CNN*, Feb. 1, 2014

^{viii} Aguilar, Erika. "[Anaheim Voters Choose Single Member Districts.](#)" *Southern California Public Radio*. Nov. 6, 2014

^{ix} Valley, Jackie. "[Police Seek to Strengthen Bonds With Hispanic Community.](#)" *Las Vegas Sun*. Apr. 8, 2011.

^x [Letter to Speaker Boehner and Leader Pelosi](#) from the *Major Cities Chiefs Police Association (MCCA)*, the *National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE)*, the *Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)*. Oct. 1, 2013