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Investigating Trust Between Hispanic Immigrants and Law Enforcement

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MS, Southern New Hampshire University, 2019

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Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the evolving perceptions of law enforcement among child immigrants from Central and South America following their immigration to the United States were investigated. Anchored in social learning theory, the aim was to discern whether interactions with law enforcement in their home countries and the United States influence these perceptions. A phenomenological approach was used to conduct in-depth interviews with six Latino individuals who immigrated between the ages of 7 and 17 and are at least 18 years old at the time of their interview. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, and interview questions were used to explore their experiences with policing in their home countries, their initial perceptions of police in the United States, and their current views on law enforcement. The data gathered from participants' responses identified three themes: distrust, good and bad in law enforcement, and training. The results of this study showed that better understanding and trust can be built between the Hispanic immigrant community and law enforcement. The study also showed that trust takes time and training. For both the Hispanic immigrant community and law enforcement, this will require effort and a better understanding from both communities.

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Dedication

There are a few people that I want to make sure are mentioned in this section. They have assisted me on this journey and made me who I am at the end of this experience: my mother, my Aunt, my husband, my children, and my dog.

My mother has shown me how a strong woman can be in this life. I learned from her that education is something that no one can take away. She is one of the most educated people I have ever met, and she is more worthy than she knows.

My Aunt Amy is my rock! She is my twin flame. She is an amazing woman. She's a protector, a light in the dark, and one person I could never function without. I can't say enough about her. She is right up there in the smartest women I know category.

My husband is the one person who made me go back to school. If he had not pushed me, I would not be here typing this. This man is the best thing around. I could not have asked for a better partner in this life.

My children, I love you all. I am here with their support, their love for me, their dedication to me, and the proud faces they give me. There is no end to the possibilities in life. They are my everything, and I would do anything for each of them.

My pupper, my snuggle buddy, my crying partner, my therapist. He has been the one who has listened to me the entire journey without any judgment. Watched me yell at my computer, lose my resources, have hard drives crash, and did not try to help or judge. He's my dance partner when I needed a break, and the first one I told about being approved for each step. He might not know how much his silence helped me, but sometimes it's what I needed.

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I leave the best for last, Dr. Jana Price-Sharps, has been sent to me when I needed the push the most. She was there to make sure I did not quit when I wanted to, and she also helped me realize that the literature review will not be the end of me. She pushed when I needed and listened when I needed as well. I was the squeaky wheel, and she was my WD-40.

I do not think that I would have made it to the end if it were not for all of the people listed above. They all touched and supported me in different ways and at various times during the process, when I needed them the most. I appreciate them more than they will ever know. Thank you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

There is existing research regarding the concerns of immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala who have crossed the southernmost border of the United (Venta et al., 2022). However, research is lacking on immigrants' feelings towards law enforcement, as well as their involvement with law enforcement later in their lives. Studies have been conducted regarding law enforcement interactions with immigrants, but not from the perspective of new immigrant youth in the United States (Venta et al., 2022). The impacts on immigrant children's views of law enforcement could lead to negative law enforcement interactions in their later years. Immigrants hold differing views on the purpose, role, and influence of law enforcement, depending on whether they entered the country through legal or illegal means (Giano et al., 2020; Roles et al., 2016).

Researchers have not interviewed immigrant adults concerning their perceptions of law enforcement when they immigrated to the United States as youth. Researchers who interviewed immigrants who immigrated during their younger years may find changes in the immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement. Immigrants often leave their home countries for various reasons (Schwartz, 2024). Immigrant youth leave their home country due to poverty, lack of support for themselves and their families, and the encroaching gang violence (Giano et al., 2020). The early removal of immigrant children from their homeland or families could contribute to later involvement with the police or a lack of trust in policing (Schwartz, 2024). There is a possibility that children who immigrated to the United States earlier than the age of 12 could show aggressive behaviors (Salas-Wright et al., 2016). Aggressive behaviors, such as fighting, anger

outbursts, drugs, and alcohol, could contribute to later involvement with law enforcement (Kirksey & Sattin-Bajaj, 2021). Understanding the reasoning behind immigrant youth leaving their home countries will help law enforcement. Law enforcement may be able to help the immigrant population with their misconceptions of police.

It is essential to recognize that youth who travel from their home countries to a new country have experienced situations that youth in the United States have not. The perceptions of safety, who to turn to for safety, and the role of law enforcement among youth immigrants differ significantly from those of youth who grew up knowing that law enforcement offers safety to those who need assistance. These perceptions of law enforcement could be why interactions with law enforcement later in life are negative.

Background

The surge of immigrant children who are unaccompanied at the southern border of the United States seeking entry has tripled from 2016 to 2018 despite the law changes regarding asylum seekers (Schwartz, 2024). Immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala who have immigrated at a younger age may show posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Schermer, 2021). This can be due to a lack of mother attachments and attention (Schermer, 2021). The removal of maternal support due to immigrating at such an early age without their maternal support system can be attributed to PTSD later in the immigrant youth's life (Schermer, 2021).

Symptoms of PTSD in immigrant youth are not just from leaving their home countries and their families, but also from the trauma the immigrant youth have experienced on the trip over to the United States (Venta et al., 2022). When immigrant

youth reach the border of the United States, they face uncertainties and myths they have been told along the way (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). These myths include being sent back to their home countries and back to gang violence (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2017). The immigrant children who are traveling to the United States border are in fear of deportation back to gang violence and poverty (Venta et al., 2022). Immigrant youth may also see people die from trying to obtain a better life while taking the journey to the United States (Schwartz, 2024; Tello et al., 2017). These experiences are traumatic to children (Schwartz, 2024). These youth are trying to find a better existence in the United States, but they see death, despair, hunger, and roadblocks along the way to the United States' southern border, where there are kidnapping, murders, rape, and other fears (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020).

Children who immigrate with their parents form views of police interactions as soon as they, or their parents, first interact with the police (Armenta & Rosales, 2019). The perceptions of immigrants about the police are based on interactions with law enforcement. This may be the reason first-generation Hispanics do not have positive views of law enforcement (Han et al., 2020).

When immigrant children arrive in the United States, they manage trauma differently depending on their age and gender (Schwartz, 2024). Younger immigrant children tend to act out, yell, and not listen (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). Older immigrant children are depressed, angry, and like to fight (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). Girls are more likely to become depressed, while boys are more likely to act out and become aggressive (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). When immigrant children come to the

United States, they seek assistance to improve their own lives and those of the families they left behind (Schwartz, 2024; Barnes et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

Hispanic children from Mexico and Guatemala who have crossed the southern United States border and were removed from their families during their youth may have harmful interactions with law enforcement in their later years. Adult immigrant removal from familial entities could lead to a spiral of continued delinquent interactions with law enforcement (Raymond-Flesch et al., 2023). Due to the increased public awareness of the detention of immigrant children, now is a perfect time to review and study the perceptions of law enforcement that immigrant children have at an early age as a root cause of future negative law enforcement interactions.

In this study, I focused on immigrants in the state of Delaware. According to the Institute of Immigration Research at George Mason University (2022), there has been a 26% increase in immigrants entering the United States from Mexico (Cherian et al., 2022). Approximately 3% of the immigrants were from El Salvador, and 2% from Guatemala (Cherian et al., 2022). Approximately 52% of the immigrants from Central America were men. A majority settled in Arizona (68%), New Mexico (73%), and Texas (63%; Cherian et al., 2022). Hawaii, Maine, and Vermont were the states with the smallest increase in their Central American immigrant population (Cherian et al., 2022). Delaware's population increased by roughly 28% in 2018, according to the George Mason University Institute of Immigration Research (Cherian et al., 2022). The University of Delaware (2021) researched the increase in the Central American

Immigration population between the 2010 and 2020 censuses. According to Dr. Robins at the University of Delaware (2021), there was a 51% increase in the Hispanic population in Sussex County, Delaware's southernmost County. Most of the increase in the immigrant population was from Guatemala and Mexico (Robbins, 2021). Due to the Latino population representing nearly half of the population in the County of Sussex, Delaware, immigrants' views of law enforcement are influenced by their experiences (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020).

First-generation immigrants are cautious when speaking to law enforcement, especially when reporting a crime (Raymond-Flesch et al., 2023). If the younger immigrant generation does not positively view law enforcement and thinks that the Latino population will not be treated fairly, they are less likely to call the police in an emergency or be a willing witness to a crime (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). Due to immigration numbers from the last 10 years, young Latino populations will become one of the largest minority groups in the United States in the future (Morales & Curry, 2021). Delaware has already seen an increase of over 50% in immigrants from Central America in Sussex County (Robbins, 2021). The continued influx of immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala will increase the Hispanic population's political and social impact (Cannon et al., 2018).

Young immigrant children gain their opinions of police while they are in their home country (McCully, 2024). Youth immigrants' first interactions with law enforcement in the United States and their future interactions with law enforcement are influenced by their perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries (McCully,

2024). Immigrant children who have negative views of law enforcement in their home countries will likely also have negative views of law enforcement in the United States (Morales & Curry, 2021). Youth will continue to distrust law enforcement if law enforcement continues to treat Hispanic youth negatively in Guatemala and Mexico (Liu, 2024). If the immigrants do not have faith in the police within one generation, the distrust will impact the next generation (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Law enforcement, knowing that children who come from these countries have negative views and no faith in law enforcement, can work to change immigrant views by learning how to handle trauma and distrust (Center for Law and Social Policy [CLASP] et al., 2023). Research needs to be done for law enforcement to change their treatment of Hispanics so that the views immigrants have toward police can change, and the immigrants' possible future interactions with law enforcement will be positive (Liu, 2024). By changing the view of immigrant youth for future generations' interactions with law enforcement, they can potentially deter them from becoming part of the system (Cavanagh et al., 2024).

The specific research problem that I addressed through this study is whether immigrants can change their perceptions of law enforcement. This would be after immigrant youth have had interactions with law enforcement in the United States and their home countries.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to evaluate the views of child immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala of law enforcement in the United States and whether these views were impacted when they immigrated to the United States as children.

Additionally, I looked at whether the future interactions and experiences with law enforcement in the United States were also impacted by their experiences as child immigrants. Mexico and Guatemala have laws against murder, sexual assault, child abuse (sexual/physical), as well as theft (Rodriguez et al., 2018). There are laws in Guatemala and Mexico regarding violence against children, women, assault, and murder. Rural areas have very few protections (Cannon et al., 2018). These protections are typically available in larger cities, where funding is readily accessible (Gutierrez, 2017). Due to the lack of police or Government officials in rural areas, people do not feel protected (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). Often, vigilante justice is enacted, where individuals take the law into their own hands (Rodriguez et al., 2018). When people do this, they are more likely to hurt innocent people, children, and/or women who get involved (Buckner & Walker, 2023).

Laws also exist against assault, domestic violence, and femicide in Mexico and Guatemala (Schmidt, 2022). However, few programs assist victims of domestic violence or children who are victims of physical/sexual abuse (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Programs like child protective services that will remove a child from a dangerous familial situation do not exist in Guatemala (World Health Organization, 2014a). Even though laws have been enacted to protect the citizens of these countries and to punish the accused, the lack of enforcement by the Government leaves victims with negative thoughts toward law enforcement (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Although laws exist to protect people, they are often not implemented (Rodriguez-Vega, 2022). The Guatemalan Government does not arrest the accused when a report is made, nor does it protect the victim from possible

revictimization (Chenane, 2025). Guatemalan and Mexican governments are not able to protect their citizens, leading the victims to become hesitant to call the police or interact with the police in their home countries (Schmidt, 2022). The knowledge that the police are less likely to assist victims of crime may result in victims being reticent to report crimes (Wirth & Baumer, 2024). Immigrants are less likely to report crimes if they live in rural areas where law enforcement is less prevalent (Antony & Thomas, 2017). Law enforcement and governmental guidelines regulate laws for arrests and prosecutions of the accused (Golash-Boza, 2018). The police departments are not investigating incidents involving child abuse, child sexual assault, marital rape, and other sexual offenses due to a lack of law enforcement funding and personnel (Gutierrez & Kirk, 2017). Government and law enforcement investigations can be conducted without accountability (Chenane, 2025). With a lack of funding from the Government for police and protective programs, children are left with their abusers (Liu, 2024).

Children start to form their views of the legal system early in their lives (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). They see that the legal system did not protect them when they were being abused or when a parent was being abused, and this can impact their views even when they come to another country (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020). The lack of policing support and lack of positive interactions with police in the home countries of the immigrants leads to negative views of the police when they immigrate to the United States (Castaneda & Melo, 2019). Reports state that translators are also in demand and have a short supply (Schmidt, 2022). This also leads to mistrust of the criminal justice system and police in the children's home countries because they cannot trust that what

they are saying is accurately being translated. Translators are needed for the native languages spoken in urban Guatemala and Mexico (Zero et al., 2023). If victims live in more rural areas, law enforcement either does not make it to the crime scene fast enough or at all, and often, the police choose not to investigate due to a lack of personnel, funding, and resources for the victims (McCully, 2024). People living in rural areas are disproportionately affected by these funding issues, the lack of police, resources, and assistance (Morales & Curry, 2021). All this contributes to the negative views of the police in the home countries of immigrant children.

Police are viewed differently by immigrants depending on how they entered the United States (Schmidt, 2022). The view can also differ if they have been a victim in their home country and have not received adequate assistance from the police in their home country (Cannon et al., 2018). If immigrants entered the United States lawfully, their views of the police were positive. However, if they entered the UnitedS illegally, their views toward police and policing were different, but not all negative (Buckner & Walker, 2023). This can also be said of those who are victims crossing the border (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). When the police are called, immigrants are more likely not to trust the police and do not understand the scope of how the police can help with the crimes against them (Roles et al., 2016). This is especially true if they did not receive adequate assistance when they were victims of need living in urban areas in Mexico and Guatemala (Valentin-Cortes et al., 2020).

Immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, tend to live in the same areas as people from their home country (Theodore & Habans, 2016). Due to this, the views of

the police and the criminal justice system tend not to change (Golash-Boza, 2018). Even though there are resources here in the United States, the Latino population stays to themselves for fear of people finding out their immigration status and possible deportation (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). This fear adds to children's shaky perception of the criminal justice system (Buckner & Walker, 2023). Even though the police might be able to help when a crime occurs, they are aware that there is a possibility that their parents, guardians, or family members could be taken away (Torres, 2023). Learning and understanding the immigrant generations' views on policing can change how the Latino population views law enforcement (Han et al., 2020). Increasing the understanding of why children view the criminal justice system this way allows the police department, courts, and corrections centers to learn how to interact and build trust with the third-largest population in Delaware (Han et al., 2020).

Research Question

How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive the criminal justice system from the time they came to the United States as youth to now?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework for this study is based on social learning theory (see Bandura, 1978). Social learning theory draws on constructs from Rotter's (1954) social construct theory , including expectancy, potential, behavior, and reinforcement value. These constructs are based on the measurement and prediction of behavior (Rotter, 1954). Social learning theory states that environmental influences impact an individual's cognitive processes (Bandura, 1978). Cognitive factors interpret external experiences,

how they are perceived and processed, and how they ultimately impact the person in the long term (Bandura, 1978). People can impact their cognitive processing by changing their environment (Bandura, 1978). The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of the study will focus on different aspects of social learning theory. This theory can impact individuals by causing them to leave their home country and travel to the United States, which has a negative view of the criminal justice system (Schermer, 2021).

Nature of the Study

For this study, I used a qualitative approach based on a phenomenological perspective to address the research question. This design included interviews with immigrants who crossed the border into the United States at a younger age. This qualitative study may help professionals in education, mental health, and law enforcement. I focused on individuals who crossed the border into the United States as youth and their current perceptions of law enforcement. Insights from these interviews may reveal how immigrants felt about law enforcement in their home countries and how they perceived their initial interactions with law enforcement in the United States. I also considered how they currently view law enforcement. This qualitative analysis may help with understanding the traumas of crossing the southern border of the United States on individuals who crossed as children and their potential future interactions with the criminal justice system (Salas-Wright et al., 2016).

Definitions

Chilling Effect - According to legal cases, chilling occurs when an individual or group of people self-censor (Penney, 2020).

Sanctuary State - The police are not required to ask individuals about their legal status if it is not pertinent to a case involving a victim or an offender (Thompson & Wilson, 2022).

Unaffected Bystander - When the individual views violence for extended periods and becomes desensitized to fear and trauma, and cannot intervene (Sladkova, 2014).

Assumptions

In this qualitative study, I assumed that all participants answered the questions truthfully. The assumption was that the participants accurately answered the questions asked based on their own experiences

Scope and Delimitations

This study included seven participants, male and female, from Delaware who are immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala. The Hispanic immigrant participants were interviewed regardless of their current documentation status. These participants crossed the southern United States border when they were younger than 17 years old and are now over the age of 18.

One delimitation was that the participants in this study preferably came from Sussex County, Delaware. A second delimitation was that the participants were of Hispanic origin, preferably from Mexico and Guatemala. Central American participants

were offered the opportunity to participate if there were not enough participants from Mexico and Guatemala.

Limitations

A limitation was that the smaller number of participants may not accurately represent the Hispanic community as a whole. These are just a few concerns that researchers may encounter during their studies. I was concerned that the immigrant participant has heard rumors influencing their perceptions of law enforcement in the United States or their home country. The person may not have experienced the situation directly, so their perceptions may be somewhat subjective rather than entirely objective. The participants may answer the questions based on their beliefs rather than their experiences.

Another barrier could be the firsthand experiences crossing the border and their perceptions of law enforcement. These are the lived experiences of the immigrant. Their stories regarding their life in their home countries, how they crossed the southern border of the United States when they were young, and how they feel and perceive law enforcement here in the United States could also be a barrier because they may be reliving experiences they no longer want to speak about.

The researchers' biases can influence the potential interview answers (Zamora, 2022). I needed to ensure that I entered the interview with a clear understanding to refrain from sharing my personal opinions and not to affect the participant. These are potential weaknesses of this study.

Significance

This study has significance because it may increase our understanding of the experiences of child immigrants who have crossed the southern border of the United States and how immigrating impacted their involvement in the criminal justice system. It may also facilitate a deeper understanding of how their experiences with police and policing in their home countries shape their future involvement with the criminal justice system in the United States. When a child crosses the southernmost border of the United States, their views of law enforcement are unknown. As a result, their later views of law enforcement can influence their future involvement with it (Rengifo & McCallin, 2017). Hispanic communities trust the police less within the first generation than any other generation (Han et al., 2020). The perception of the police is the reason why the first generation does not view law enforcement in a confident way (Han et al., 2020).

Summary

Understanding how immigrant children perceive law enforcement in their home country and the United States, as well as their interactions with law enforcement, will enable law enforcement to provide more effective assistance to immigrant children when they cross the border, fostering positive views of law enforcement (Rengifo & McCallin, 2017). The younger the immigrant children are when they are involved with law enforcement, the more negative their views tend to be. If law enforcement can understand these interactions, then, possibly, in the future, these views will no longer persist negatively (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Law enforcement may learn how to interact with

immigrant youth so that law enforcement can de-escalate a traumatizing situation for immigrant children (Han et al., 2020).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Hispanic children from Mexico and Guatemala who have crossed the southern United States border and/or have been removed from their families during their younger years may have negative perceptions of the criminal justice system in their later years (Wong et al., 2021). The perceptions of young immigrants of police in their home countries, as well as with the immigration police, detention center officers, state police, and county police in the United States, could be a root cause of future negative perceptions of police (Wong et al., 2021). According to the George Mason University Institute of Immigration Research, 26% of immigrants entering the United States in 2018 were from Mexico, and 2% were from Guatemala (Cherian et al., 2022). According to Giano and Anderson (2020), there will be a roughly 88% increase in immigrants, including first-generation immigrants and their descendants, in the United States over the next five decades (Giano et al., 2020). This increase in the Hispanic population, whether first-generation or descendants, will make the Hispanic population the largest minority group in the United States (Giano et al., 2020). Latinos is a term that describes an ethnicity comprising a diverse range of nationalities and cultures that are Hispanic (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). Each of these nationalities may also have their own opinions about the police (Thompson & Wilson, 2022).

In this study, I focused on Hispanic immigrants in the state of Delaware. According to the Institute of Immigration Research at George Mason University, in 2018, there was a roughly 28% increase in Hispanics from Mexico and Guatemala in Delaware (Cherian et al. et al., 2022). The University of Delaware conducted a research study on

the increase in the Central American Immigrant population between the 2010 and 2020 censuses (Robbins, 2021). According to Dr. James Robbins at the University of Delaware, there was a 51% increase in the Hispanic population in Sussex County, Delaware's southernmost County (Robbins, 2021). Most of the increase in the immigrant population was from Guatemala and Mexico (Cherian et al., 2022). This information is crucial when assisting immigrants with law enforcement. When immigrants comprise a significant portion of the community, law enforcement should strive to understand the culture and how their experiences in their home countries and past interactions with law enforcement influence their perceptions of law enforcement in the United States.

Literature Search Strategy

Databases such as PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, SAGE Journals, SocINDEX, EBSCO, and ProQuest Dissertation were searched to identify relevant, peer-reviewed literature. The keywords searched included *immigrants in the US/police/or arrest, police/law enforcement/Hispanic immigrant, immigration/migration/migrant/immigrant/police/cops/psychology, police/law enforcement/immigrant/border crossing, police/law enforcement/Hispanic/Latino(a)/border crossing, immigrant/incarceration, immigrant families/psychology/cj,* and *immigrant children/detention*. Additionally, Boolean operators AND and OR were used to optimize the results. While I focused on peer-reviewed literature published within the last 5 to 10 years, some sources were dated before this time due to their relevance to foundational research.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1978). Social learning theory draws on constructs from Rotter's (1954) social construct theory , including expectancy, potential, behavior, and reinforcement value. These constructs are based on the measurement and prediction of behavior (Rotter, 1954). Social learning theory states that environmental influences impact an individual's cognitive processes (Bandura, 1978). Cognitive factors interpret external experiences, how they are perceived and processed, and ultimately impact the person in the long term (Bandura, 1978). A person can impact their cognitive processing by changing their environment (Bandura, 1978). This theory can be used to explain the impact on individuals who leave their home country and travel to the United States and how this leads to negative views of the criminal justice system (Schermer, 2021).

Literature Review

Youth immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala are among the most significant minority groups in the United States (Cherian et al., 2022). Youth immigrants come to the United States, leaving their home countries in search of a better life (Zayas, 2018). During the trip to the United States, youth immigrants are uncertain about what they may encounter upon arrival. They are also not always aware of the potential dangers associated with crossing the border (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). There is an increased chance of harm to the youth while traveling to the United States (Kang & Cohen, 2017). They may experience violent attacks themselves or witness violent attacks on others (Updegrove et al., 2019).

Perception of Policing in Youth Home Country

Understanding the impact of law enforcement on young immigrants within their home countries is the first step in understanding the perceptions of law enforcement of immigrant children. The first impacts are from their home countries, as well as the subsequent interactions that occur when they travel and cross the United States' southern border. These views can be carried into their interactions with law enforcement once they are within the United States. This first step is crucial in assisting law enforcement with how to handle immigrant youth effectively.

Mexico and Guatemala have laws against murder, sexual assault, child abuse (sexual/physical), as well as theft (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). There are laws in Guatemala and Mexico regarding violence against both children and women. It is illegal to assault or murder people. However, there are very few protections in rural areas (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). Laws have been enacted to protect the citizens of these countries, as well as to punish the accused (Updegrove et al., 2019). The governments in these countries have a history of failing to enforce the law (Updegrove et al., 2019). This results in victims not trusting law enforcement to take appropriate action or uphold the law (World Health Organization, 2014b; Raymond-Flesch et al., 2023). Legal protection is typically available in larger cities, where funding is readily accessible (Buckner & Walker, 2023). Few police or government officials in rural areas of Mexico or Guatemala protect their citizens (Gunadi, 2020). Victims of crimes in these areas tend not to report criminal activity because they believe that no action will be taken by the authorities (Giano et al., 2020). The government does not arrest the accused when a report is made,

nor do they protect the survivor from possible revictimization (Liu, 2023). The police departments are not investigating incidents due to a lack of funding and police personnel. If the government were held accountable, then these rural areas would be able to hire the personnel needed to investigate crimes (Rodriguez-Vega, 2022).

Reports state that translators are also in demand and in short supply in both Mexico and Guatemala (Giano et al., 2020). Survivors of crimes may find it challenging to navigate the criminal justice system due to language barriers. (Giano, et al., 2020). Since the criminal justice system often lacks sufficient funding and staff departments, interpreters are typically unavailable (Giano et al., 2020). If an individual speaks Maam or any other native language that is not Spanish, the police cannot take a criminal report from a crime survivor (Giano et al., 2020). Due to the lack of translators, the perceptions of law enforcement are more negative if the individual calling for assistance speaks Spanish or another language other than English.

Children from Guatemala and Mexico are not protected from abuse. Lack of law enforcement leaves children with their abusers since there is no personnel to investigate and no form of child protective services (Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) et al., 2023). Children start to form their views of the legal system at very young ages, especially if they have interactions with law enforcement and view violence where there is no sense of protection (Cavanagh et al., 2024). Youths see that the legal system did not protect them when they were being abused or when their parents were being assaulted. This leads to a negative perception of the police even when they arrive in another country (Zero, Tobin-Tyler & Goldman, 2023). Youth do not have the ability to recognize that

different law enforcement from different countries will not behave the same. They have observed that the law enforcement in their home countries did not protect them or their families, so they view all law enforcement the same way.

Due to the lack of law enforcement in rural areas of Guatemala and Mexico, vigilante justice often prevails, where individuals take the law into their own hands (Venta et al., 2022). When people use vigilante justice, they are more likely to hurt innocent people, including children and women who are involved (Venta et al., 2022). The continued lack of policing and lack of positive interactions with police results in negative views of the police in their home countries (Wong et al., 2021). This may later lead to negative views of the criminal justice system among youth who come to the United States (Wong et al., 2021). The governments in Mexico and Guatemala are not able to protect their citizens, leading the victims to be hesitant to call the police or interact with the police in their home countries (Wong et al., 2021). This often results in survivors of violent crimes hesitating to call the police in the United States (Rodriguez et al., 2018). This may also lead to mistrust of any criminal justice system the youth encounter with, as they do not feel protected and do not trust what the police are saying (Welker, Venta & Galicia, 2021). These first interactions with the police in their home countries will impact the way these youth view future police interactions (Cordero, Feldman & Keitner, 2020).

Countries such as Guatemala do not have child protective services that will remove a child from dangerous, volatile, or violent familial situations (Updegrove et al., 2019). There are very few programs that assist victims of domestic violence or children

who are victims of physical or sexual abuse (Blackburn et al., 2025). Children who have negative views about the police in their home countries come to the United States with no trust in the legal system or the police and continue those negative thoughts if the legal system continues to treat them negatively (Wirth & Baumer, 2024).

Youth Immigrant Journey to the United States

Youth coming from Guatemala and Mexico travel alone or in small groups. When they travel alone, they tend to form groups that travel in the same direction, allowing them to protect one another. Traveling alone is extremely dangerous for all youth, making them more susceptible to being victimized. Creating groups to travel together can create a sense of protection.

The view of the police by young immigrants is often shaped by their initial exposure to law enforcement in the United States (Chen & Jiang, 2020). If immigrants enter the United States lawfully, their views of the police are more likely to be positive (Ruehs-Navarro, 2019). If they entered the United States illegally, their views toward police were different and not necessarily all positive (Gunadi, 2020). This may also be true if they were victims of crime while crossing the border (Chen & Jiang, 2020)).

Immigrant Perception of Federal Policing in the United States

Immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala have diverse perspectives on law enforcement. These perspectives began when they were youth in their home countries. Immigrants from other countries may have race issues that carry over from past police interactions (Venta et al., 2022). If there is no faith in the police, courts, or the justice system, then these views will likely impact the next generation (Chen & Jiang, 2020).

Suppose the younger generation does not positively view law enforcement and thinks that the Latino population will be mistreated. In that case, they are less likely to call the police when there is an emergency or be willing witnesses to crimes (Lopez, 2023). For the youth from Mexico and Guatemala, there is a climate of fear and distrust toward law enforcement, specifically immigration enforcement (Heinrich et al., 2023). This phenomenon is referred to as the 'chilling effect' (Heinrich et al., 2023). According to cases within the law, the chilling effect occurs when an individual or group of people is self-censor (Payan, 2022). Hispanic immigrants who experience fear of recourse by law enforcement experience the chilling effect (Payan, 2022). Immigrants have a legal right to access legal services, medical, and therapeutic services; however, due to the fear of repercussions, they often self-censor or refrain from seeking these services, fearing arrest and deportation (Wong et al., 2022).

Policing in the State of Delaware/Sussex County Youth Immigrant Perception

The Hispanic population accounts for nearly half of the population in Sussex County, Delaware (Robbins, 2021). This may impact the views of police in the County as well as their policing strategies (Becerra et al., 2017). Cultural understanding regarding the Hispanic population is one impact that the police encounter (Cavanagh et al., 2020). Understanding the foundations of family within the familial unit can have an impact on policing (Cavanagh et al., 2020).

Delaware, unlike other States, is a sanctuary state and does not have their police officers act as immigration enforcement (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). The police are not

required to ask a person they contact about their legal status if it is not pertinent to a victim or an offender in a case (Thompson & Wilson, 2022).

Immigrants may also struggle with language difficulties. Language may be of significant concern in the legal system (Giano et al., 2020). Immigrants want to be included in conversations about what is happening in a criminal case (Zero et al., 2023). They want their voices to be heard, and they want it to be known that they are the survivors of trauma (Gunadi, 2020). If the immigrant's language is not used by law enforcement when the immigrant is speaking with someone in law enforcement. The immigrant is less likely to accurately report what events transpired, including how and when they were victimized (Zero et al., 2023). This is a concern for police because they are the first point of contact in the event of an incident (Gunadi, 2020). Police tend to speak in their native language, which in the United States is most often English (Giano et al., 2020). If the police do not offer to have the victim speak to someone in that individual's language, the police will lack information about the case (Giano et al., 2020). Even worse, the police may primarily listen to the perpetrator, who will either blame the survivor or translate incorrectly (Gunadi, 2020).

Growing Hispanic Community

The Hispanic population has been the largest minority group in the United States since 2011 (Cavanagh et al., 2020). There is little research concerning Hispanic youth and their interactions with law enforcement (Cavanagh et al., 2020). Hispanic youth do not view law enforcement as a source of protection (Rodrigues et al., 2023). The

Hispanic youth view police as a threat to their friends, family, and the Hispanic community (Rodrigues et al., 2023).

Interaction with the Criminal Justice System as a Youth

Hispanic youth are experiencing separation from their family and friends when they choose to leave their home countries. According to Patel et al. (2021), youth have multifaceted implications regarding their development that stem from their separation from their family. Patel et al. used a sample of 42 adolescents who recently migrated from Central America. The study consisted of questions regarding why the youth came to the United States and how the youth felt about being reintegrated with their family after being separated at the border (Patel et al., 2021). This qualitative study revealed that family separation has a socioemotional toll on youth and that reunification can have a positive impact on them (Patel et al., 2021). This research demonstrated that the legal system can facilitate the reunification of youth and their families in culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate ways while maintaining family safety (Patel et al., 2021).

Theodore and Habans (2016) surveyed four urban counties in the United States that are predominantly Hispanic. The survey consisted of questions concerning whether the local law enforcement participating in immigration enforcement changed their perceptions of law enforcement (Thedore & Habans, 2016). This quantitative study indicated that the majority of the Hispanic population surveyed fear the police (Thedore & Habans, 2016). The fear of law enforcement adds to the Hispanic population's social isolation and mistrust of law enforcement (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). Out of the Hispanics

surveyed, there was an overwhelming portion that would not call the police if they witnessed a crime or were victims of a crime (Wirth & Baumer, 2024). This fear stems from the concern that law enforcement involvement in immigration enforcement may lead to questioning of their immigration status (Rodriguez-Vega, 2022).

Interactions with law enforcement can be detrimental to Hispanic youth. These interactions can impact their views of law enforcement either positively or negatively. Hispanic youth crossing the southern border of the United States deal with border patrol as their first interaction with law enforcement. If Hispanic immigrants had a negative experience with law enforcement when coming to the United States as a child, they are more likely not to trust the police later in their lives (Lemon et al., 2024). This is because Hispanic immigrants often lack an understanding of the scope of law enforcement (Wirth & Baumer, 2024). Hispanic immigrants who are victims of crime do not understand the role and knowledge of law enforcement (Rodriguez-Vega, 2022). This impacts relations between Hispanic communities and law enforcement.

Future Interactions with the Criminal Justice System

Hispanic youth will continue to interact with law enforcement while they are in the United States. Their future interactions with law enforcement are determined by how the youth perceive the trustworthiness of law enforcement. The perceptions of Hispanic immigrant youth are imprinted and impacted by law enforcement's first interactions with Hispanic immigrant youth. Often, border patrol is the first experience a young Hispanic immigrant has when they cross the southern border of the United States. Ruehs-Navarro (2023) interviewed 15 undocumented youth and 67 professionals. This qualitative study

concentrated on unaccompanied youth who were in detention centers (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). I investigated how border enforcement can impact immigrant youth's legal aid (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). Ruehs-Navarro stated that the border patrol officers will delay legal representation due to policies and procedures that are reimplemented at the detention centers. The processes in place can harm the Hispanic youth and can lead to psychological distress because law enforcement either invalidates the youth's trauma or tries to reshape the traumatic experiences. This occurs when immigrant youth are interviewed for legal services. The officials will invalidate the experiences of the youth (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023).

Local law enforcement acts as immigration enforcers in some areas of the United States. Researchers investigated crime in areas where local laws and immigration laws are enforced (Dhingra et al., 2022). Examining the National Victimization Survey data from 2008-2014 and 2016-2017, which included a higher proportion of Hispanic migrants, reveals that local law enforcement had greater cooperation with United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Dhingra et al., 2022). Decreased crime reports were seen in large Hispanic communities. However, there was no decline in crime or victimization. Distrust in law enforcement continues into future interactions with law enforcement. When local law enforcement works with immigration enforcement, the Hispanic community continues to lack access to state services, including the criminal justice system (Dhingra, Kilborn & Woldemikael, 2022).

Undocumented families hold negative perceptions of law enforcement compared to documented families (Cavanagh et al., 2020). In another qualitative study, 103 mothers

were interviewed with their sons, and 52% of the mothers were Spanish-speaking and not native-born to the United States (Zero et al., 2023). The findings were that youth with mothers who were undocumented were significantly more likely to have negative perceptions of law enforcement (Gunadi, 2020). Discussions about future immigration reform are essential for changing the perceptions of Hispanic youth regarding law enforcement (Chen & Jiang, 2020).

A concern that will impact the Hispanic community is that immigrants are becoming an unaffected bystander to future violence (Sladkova, 2014). Unaffected bystander happens when the individual views violence for extended periods and becomes desensitized to fear and trauma, and cannot intervene (Sladkova, 2014). The Hispanic youth's negative perceptions of law enforcement, along with the thought that law enforcement is broken, impact the safety of the neighborhoods (Cavanagh et al., 2020).

Distrust in the Immigration Justice System

Border patrol is often the first exposure to law enforcement that Hispanic immigrants experience at entry points into the United States (Updegrave et al., 2019). Immigrants from Guatemala and Mexico have perceived that border patrol discriminates against them due to their appearance, language, and nationality, regardless of how they enter the United States (Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023). This leads to continued distrust in law enforcement (Chen & Jiang, 2020). Hispanics are less likely to report crime and admit to being witnesses of crime due to these initial interactions with border patrol (Updegrave et al., 2019).

Police and border patrol in the United States cite *US v Brignoni-Ponce (1975)* as a precedent when cases of discrimination are filed by immigrants (Giano et al., 2020). This case precedent allows police to pull over individuals who appear to be of Mexican descent (Giano et al., 2020). The United States Supreme Court ruled that, under the Fourth Amendment, it is legitimate to make an immigration stop if an individual has a 'Mexican Appearance' (Giano et al., 2020). With this law still set as a precedent and being cited, it has given police agencies the ability to legalize macroaggression (using terms that are racist) and microaggression (comments on a person's accent) (Giano et al., 2020). This causes fear within Hispanic communities where police can and are using blatant racial profiling (Giano et al., 2020). Even though the police might be able to help when there is a crime, youth know that there is a possibility that their parents, guardians, or family could be taken away as well (Liu, 2024).

It is very stressful when law enforcement is harsh toward Hispanic immigrants (Payan, 2022). With the use of assertive enforcement, structural exclusion from benefits and social goods, unwelcoming/unfriendly environments, and the use of aggressive rhetoric, Hispanic communities continue to distrust law enforcement (Payan, 2022). Undocumented immigrants are continuously on alert due to worry (Payan, 2022). Undocumented immigrants worry about family separation and fear the discovery of their legal status (Payan, 2022). This fear of discovery leads to the fear of potential detention or deportation, as well as mistrust in others due to the possibility of stigmatization or being reported to authorities (Payan, 2022). These fears also hinder undocumented immigrants' ability to access mental health services and other socioeconomic

opportunities (Payan, 2022). As adolescents see their parents or family arrested by immigration, their views and opinions solidify, and they perceive law enforcement as one that can remove their family (Heinrich et al., 2023). This can cause trauma for youth, leading to anger, distrust, possible substance abuse, etc. (Heinrich et al., 2023).

Youth Distrust in the State of Delaware/Sussex County Police

Learning and understanding the views of the generation on policing can change how the Hispanic population perceives law enforcement (Han et al., 2020). Once there is an understanding of why children have a negative view of law enforcement, law enforcement can learn how to interact and build trust with the third-largest population in Delaware (Han et al., 2020). Hispanic immigrant youth form their own opinions through evaluations of fairness within the legal system as they continue to interact with the legal system (Thompson & Wilson, 2022).

Communication in the language of an immigrant is imperative (Gunadi, 2020). In Sussex County, Delaware, it is not required to call a language line if the person who answers the police call speaks English (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). Even if they answer the initial questions in English and then state they do not speak any other language, it is still not a requirement to reach out to the language line. Skilled interpreters are necessary within law enforcement to ensure immigrants receive a clear and concise understanding of police actions (Knopf, 2017).

Youth Immigrant Trauma

When immigrant children reach the border, there is much uncertainty about what they will face (Quinn et al., 2017). Immigrant youth are being sent back to their home

countries and back to gang violence (Ruehs-Navarro, 2019). This instills fear in children traveling through Mexico and Guatemala (Cordero, Feldman & Keitner, 2020). Immigrant youth see people die during their travel to the United States (Tello et al., 2017). These experiences are traumatic to children (Torres, 2023). The youth are trying to find a better life in the United States, but instead, they are encountering death, despair, hunger, and roadblocks along the way (Ruehs-Navarr, 2023). These children are also seeing kidnapping, murders, rape, and other traumatic events (Wirth & Baumer, 2024). When immigrant children do arrive in the United States, they will handle trauma differently depending on their age and gender (Blackburn et al., 2025).

Understanding the Trauma Surrounding the Journey

Tello et al. (2017) examined the narratives of 16 refugees from Central America as unaccompanied minors. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the journey from the lived experiences of minors entering the United States from their countries of origin (Tello et al., 2017). The unaccompanied immigrant minors were coming to the United States due to violence from gangs and poverty (Torres, 2023). Through the research conducted, three themes emerged: life in the United States, the journey to the United States, and the reasons unaccompanied minors left their country of origin (Gunadi, 2020). This research is important for early interventions by people who are trauma-informed because these unaccompanied minors risk PTSD, various degrees of trauma, and depressive disorders (Tello et al., 2017).

In 2022, a qualitative study was conducted by Dominguez et al. regarding asylum seekers and the lived experiences of immigrant youth related to detention and

apprehension. Through this research, five themes were seen: resilience, post-detention trauma, health concerns, no compassion, and detention violence (Dominguez et al., 2022). Researching asylum seekers and their detention allows for more understanding regarding the trauma that immigrant youth face while in detention centers (Dominguez et al., 2022). This information also helps police, advocates, and other professionals understand the lived experiences of youth entering the United States (Dominguez et al., 2022).

Accessing Trauma Treatment

Data collected from a qualitative study in 2019 included recently immigrated unaccompanied youth and their caregivers' self-reports on trauma symptoms (Venta & Mercado, 2019). The reason for this study was to gain information on the trauma of recently immigrated youth (Venta & Mercado, 2019). The results of the research showed that recent immigrants demonstrate higher levels of trauma symptoms than previously thought (Venta & Mercado, 2019). These studies show that there is a need for trauma assessments to be done for immigrant youth as soon as they can be done to give them the therapeutic assistance they need (Venta & Mercado, 2019).

Sarah Mares reviewed 22 studies on children detained in six countries (2021). Mares reviewed qualitative and quantitative research concerning the mental health of children who were detained (Mares, 2021). The individual studies showed the experiences and impact that immigration has on children (Mares, 2021). The research also showed how detention could impact immigrant children and parental mental well-being (Mares, 2021). Children who are disposed of are more likely to experience trauma

and loss that impact their mental well-being (Mares, 2021). If the children end up at a detention center, they display higher rates of mental disorders, developmental problems, distress, and physical health concerns (Mares, 2021). The outcomes assist advocates, policymakers, and professionals who want to assist children with their mental health who are coming across the border into the United States (Mares, 2021)

A cross-sectional study was conducted regarding Latino immigrant families in a healthcare facility (Lee et al., 2021). A total of 45 surveys were conducted, and 40 interviews were conducted based on those surveys (Lee et al., 2021). The purpose of the study was to examine the impact on immigrant families seeking pediatric services and to identify the best ways to support Latino families (Lee et al., 2021). The study identified two key themes: barriers to pediatric care and concerns about deportation for accessing medical assistance (Lee et al., 2021). The theme that is important for this research is the assistance provided to Latino families through medical facilities. Medical facilities are viewed as trusted figures, and Latino families want more information regarding therapy services, immigration policies, and education while at the medical facilities (Lee et al., 2021).

Change for the Next Generation

Lovato-Hermann (2017) interviewed 10 Mexican immigrant youth that was reunified with their parents once they crossed the border into the United States (Lovato-Hermann, 2017). In this qualitative study, Lovato-Hermann investigated the adjustment of immigrant youth into the United States (Lovato-Hermann, 2017). The study found that males were more likely to have less success in school and lower levels of familial and

social support (Lovato-Hermann, 2017). Females were more likely to have social and familial support and do better in school (Lovato-Hermann, 2017). This research shows that males and females handle trauma differently, but also shows how their support systems view how males and females should handle trauma (Lovato-Hermann, 2017).

In 2022, Zamora researched the case of *Doe 4* ex rel. *Lopez v. Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center Commission* concerning unaccompanied minors and their rights to medical treatment, more specifically to mental health treatment and trauma-informed care (Zamora, 2022). This case is significant because it involves three distinct identity groups: detainees, migrants, and children (Zamora, 2022). The court determined that the facility's therapeutic staff must determine whether trauma-informed care is part of their standard of care (Zamora, 2022). Medical care is a necessity for immigrant children because they are being detained for their well-being and not as a punitive measure (Zamora, 2022). The court's decision is critical because, as mental health providers, the standard of care should include trauma-informed care; however, the court left the final determination to legislation (Zamora, 2022).

Programs for Inclusion/Adjustment/Criminal Justice Education for Immigrant Youth

The police may be the best way for the Hispanic community to experience the inclusivity or exclusivity of being in the United States and to develop their own new identity within it (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). This is especially true since local law enforcement and immigration enforcement are two of the strongest legal forces that can cause strong emotions within the Hispanic community (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). The

more children receive support to cope with fear and the unknown in the United States, the higher the chance of positive brain development (Knopf, 2017). This will have a positive impact on the future of the legal system and our country (Chen & Jiang, 2020). The Hispanic immigrant population in the United States copes with legal vulnerabilities every day (Blackburn et al., 2025). The Hispanic community has cultural origins in Central America (Lopez, 2023). This difference includes not only immigration status but also diversity acculturation, legal vulnerabilities, and generational status (Rodriguez et al., 2018).

Understanding the Generational Views of Immigrant Youth on Law Enforcement

Even though there are resources here in the United States, often the Latino population stays to themselves for fear of people finding out their immigration status and possible deportation (Theodore & Habans, 2016). This fear adds to the already shaky perception that children have of the criminal justice system (CLASP et al., 2023). Even though the police might be able to help when a crime occurs, they are aware that their parents, guardians, or family members could also be taken away (Torres, 2023). Learning and understanding the generational views on law enforcement can change how the Latino population views the criminal justice system (Han et al., 2020). Once there is a better understanding of why children view the criminal justice system in a certain way, the police department, courts, and corrections centers can learn how to interact and build trust within the Hispanic community (Han et al., 2020).

Methods of Inclusivity and Adjustment

La Voz Juvenile de Caminar Latino conducted a semi-structured interview with participants in a domestic violence program (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Hispanic men, women, and youth were interviewed in this qualitative study (Rodriguez et al., 2018). The participants answered questions about anti-immigration policies in Hispanic communities intersected with other family stressors like domestic violence (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Anti-immigrant policies impacted the stressors of life for the Hispanic community (Rodriguez et al., 2018). The stressors that concerned the immigrant participants were not only emotional, but also impacted their day-to-day lives, as well as their social and economic insecurities (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Both children and adults stated that peers, strangers, and coworkers harass them regardless of their stated immigration status (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Immigration stress, family conflict, and societal stressors were increased reasons women stated they were impacted by domestic violence (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Youth and adult distrust of support and police are some of the reasons why survivors of domestic violence do not seek help (CLASP, 2023). Policy that creates anti-immigration sentiment is a barrier for survivors of domestic violence and violence in the Hispanic community to seek formal help from police (Rodriguez et al., 2018).

Researchers conducted a qualitative study in Chicago of Mexican American urban youth, exploring their perspectives on neighborhood stressors and psychosocial difficulties (Deane et al., 2020). An immigrant-based organization participated in the research, which involved speaking with 32 Hispanic immigrant youth aged 12 to 18 years

(Deane et al., 2020). Participants were asked to discuss various topics, including family, cultural experiences, psychological functioning, youth empowerment, connection to school, community, and neighborhood characteristics and experiences (Deane et al., 2020). Themes emerged related to stress and coping strategies that included violence, police, gangs, poverty, aggression, avoidance, and coping (Deane et al., 2020). Stress was a consistent factor across all groups; however, coping styles and psychological impacts varied across all participants (Deane et al., 2020). It is essential to incorporate culturally relevant strategies for the Hispanic population, which can include reframing, engaging, developing interventions, and providing support (Deane et al., 2020). Social support, such as mentors and supportive peers, should be a focus for youth in neighborhoods with a high Hispanic population (Deane et al., 2020).

Research was conducted regarding immigrant juveniles and border/non-border schools (Varela et al., 2024). In this qualitative study, data were collected from 2000 to 2002, and the study followed these students until the 2016-2017 school year (Varela et al., 2024). This qualitative study included 618,307 students, with demographics comprising 38% White, 45% Hispanic, and 14% Black or African American (Varela et al., 2024). The Texas juvenile justice system records each interaction youths have regarding an arrest (Varela et al., 2024). The information from Texas records includes probation, confinement, and prosecutorial referrals (Varela et al., 2024). The study focused on juvenile justice referrals for students in 6th grade and below (Varela et al., 2024). By investigating the strictness of the school, effectiveness, and juvenile justice referrals, research suggested that understanding the challenges and barriers faced by

immigrant children and their educational experiences helped drive improved outcomes for these children (Varela et al., 2024). The findings reinforce previous conclusions regarding school strictness policies and their disproportionate negative impact on students of color (Varela et al., 2024). It is worth noting the disproportionate impact strict school policies may have on immigrant families (Varela et al., 2024). Researchers found that the immigrant student population is growing rapidly, and more services are needed (Varela et al., 2024). Even though immigrant children are less likely to engage in delinquency and school misbehavior, studies have shown that immigrant children are disproportionately punished in schools (Varela et al., 2024). Punishment and juvenile justice referrals for immigrant children are often higher in non-border schools (Varela et al., 2024).

Prevention for Future Criminal Justice Involvement with Youth

Another research study was conducted on 22 undocumented mothers using semi-structured interviews (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). The questions in the interviews focused on their experiences of raising children within the United States while being undocumented (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). Two themes were present in this research: fear and stress, and the need to avoid others and follow the law (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). Parents chose to have a safety plan ready in case of deportation after the 2022 elections (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). They also chose not to include their children when discussing incidents within their communities to avoid adding additional stressors to them (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). This study offers valuable insights into undocumented individuals and sociopolitical adversity (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022). This suggests that law enforcement and other

professionals working within the immigrant community should utilize their networks to support the immigrant population, as there is already a shortage of available resources (Cross, Rivas-Drake, & Aramburu, 2022).

The Pathways to Desistance Study is a qualitative study that included 330 self-identified Mexican Americans (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). The purpose of the study was to examine whether individuals' self-identification changed in response to changes in the procedural justice evaluations of law enforcement (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). The outcome revealed a change in self-perceptions following significant changes in procedural justice (Thompson & Wilson, 2022). This is particularly important for the immigrant community, which is a key focus of social learning theory. When an individual is in an environment that affects various aspects of their life, cognitive changes will occur.

The future of Hispanic immigrants and their acclimation to the United States relies on aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT focuses on how lived experiences can influence individuals who hold a negative view of law enforcement and how, by modifying their thought processes, they can alter their views on the police (Schermer, 2021). If an individual thinks negatively about a specific event or situation, there are ways to rewire their thinking (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). With the assistance of a professional, over time, they can view the situation in a different light (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). Suppose the victim can learn to process or think about the event or situation positively or differently, rather than solely in terms of fear or trauma. In that case, they will be able to function more effectively, even if the event is similar or triggers an

emotional response (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). Utilizing various aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy can bring about change for children who suffer from trauma and have negative views of the criminal justice system (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). These researchers created a cognitive model of PTSD where cognitive behavioral therapy can change the traumatic memories, making it so individuals who suffer can now function in a different capacity (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). This could lead to fewer interactions with law enforcement among older immigrants if they receive treatment upon arrival in the United States, particularly when they are young (Ehlers & Wild, 2021). Educating police about PTSD and CBT can bring about change. Educating law enforcement could help make them more sensitive to the mental health of younger individuals. Particularly in cases involving traumatic events, such as leaving their home countries, this can influence future law enforcement interactions (Ehlers & Wild, 2021).

Gaps in Understanding and Education of the Criminal Justice System

Qualitative data collected over 4 years included 70 in-depth interviews with immigrant youth aged 18-31 (2012-2016) who immigrated from Central America and Mexico as unaccompanied minors aged 11-17 (2007-2013) (Canizales, 2022). The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of undocumented and unaccompanied youth and their social incorporation into the United States (Canizales, 2022). There were severe economic pressures for the undocumented immigrant youth and their families in their home countries (Canizales, 2022). Additionally, the financial necessities in the United States added more pressure on young immigrants (Canizales, 2022). The necessity of work as a priority in a youth's everyday life during their transition into adulthood means

that their social environments are most impacted by the youth's later behaviors (Canizales, 2022). If law enforcement can gain a greater understanding of the social environment the youth were in when they immigrated and were cognitively growing and assimilating to the United States, then law enforcement can better facilitate the relationships between youth immigrants and law enforcement.

Even though there are resources here in the United States, the Latino population stays to themselves for fear of people finding out their immigration status and possible deportation (Morales & Curry, 2021). This fear adds to the already shaky perception that children have of the criminal justice system (Chen & Jiang, 2020). Even though the police might be able to help when a crime is committed, they are aware that their parents, guardians, or family could also be taken away (Cordero, Feldman, & Keitner, 2020). Learning and understanding the views of the generation on policing can change how the Latino population perceives law enforcement (Ruehs-Navarro, 2023). Once there is a clearer understanding of why children view law enforcment a certain way. The police department, courts, and corrections centers can learn how to interact and build trust with the third-largest population in Delaware (Han et al., 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The specific research problem that will be addressed through this study is whether immigrants can change their perceptions of law enforcement after immigrant youth interactions with law enforcement in the United States and the immigrant youths' home countries. This study has the potential to be significant in that it will address a gap in the research, allowing for a greater understanding of the perception that youth immigrants

have of the criminal justice system, particularly about their impressions of police and policing in their home countries. This can enable better services and support for young immigrants, as well as better-prepared law enforcement.

Chapter 3: Research Method

There is a large Hispanic community in Southern Delaware. Within this large community, there is a lack of understanding by the Hispanic community of what law enforcement does to protect the Hispanic immigrant community. The specific research problem addressed in this study was how the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceives law enforcement from the time they came to the United States as youth to now. These interactions with law enforcement have occurred in both the immigrants' home country and the United States. The Hispanic immigrants participating in the research will have come to the United States as children but are now adults.

Research Design and Rationale

RQ: How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive law enforcement from the time they came to the United States as youth to now?

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the perceptions of adult Hispanic immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala regarding law enforcement in the United States and whether these views were influenced by their immigration to the United States as children. Additionally, I looked at whether the interactions and experiences with law enforcement in the United States were impacted by their experiences as child immigrants.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted six interviews using three open-ended questions. I excluded any family members or individuals known to me. As a certified victim advocate and sexual assault therapist, I am committed to maintaining neutrality. To ensure this, a journal was

maintained throughout the interview processes, recording my thoughts after each interview to identify and address any potential biases.

Methodology

For the specific research design, I employed a qualitative approach, grounded in a phenomenological perspective, to address the research question. This design included interviews with immigrants who crossed the border into the United States at a younger age but are now adults. This qualitative study may help professionals in education, mental health, and law enforcement. I focused on the perceptions of adults regarding law enforcement who initially immigrated to the United States as children.

Participants

The participants were recruited using purposeful sampling; they must be at least 18 years old and have immigrated from Mexico or Guatemala. Participants must have been residing in the United States for at least 5 years and be fluent in English. Individuals who have shown interest in participating in the research were contacted once the interview process started. Individuals who wish to participate were contacted by telephone to confirm their continued interest. Once the individual confirmed they still wanted to participate, an email with the informed consent was sent to their email address. This informed consent outlines the expectations for both the participant and me. After confirming receipt and understanding of the informed consent form sent via email, the participant was asked to respond by email with the words ‘I consent’. Once the consent email was received, the interview was scheduled. Each participant was given a P and a number to maintain anonymity. This participant number was used throughout the entire

interview process. An appointment was scheduled for the individual to speak with me over Zoom. Each participant received a list of individuals who can assist them with low-cost or no-cost therapeutic services if they were distressed by any of the questions.

Instrumentation

A list of open-ended questions were developed based on the research literature and feedback from the dissertation committee. The focus of the questions was on how Hispanic immigrants perceived law enforcement prior to coming to the United States and how they currently perceive law enforcement in the United States. Questions were asked regarding both positive and negative interactions with law enforcement.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Hispanic immigrants were recruited through a flyer distributed via social media. The flyer was posted on online discussion boards and chat rooms. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants through word-of-mouth. The flyer contained information regarding the research, including the number of participants, participation requirements, and my contact details (email and phone number) for further inquiries. I selected six participants to be interviewed. Three open-ended questions were asked of the individuals participating. Individuals were selected based on their interest in the research topic. Each interview was audio-recorded and conducted over Zoom. I conducted the interviews in a private room, where the information will be kept confidential. All information obtained was kept on a password-protected laptop and in a password-protected file. The participant identification code given was the defining information regarding each interview. The data

will be kept secure for 5 years after the interview and then appropriately destroyed after that.

Data Analysis Plan

Obtaining data, ensuring its safekeeping, and verifying that the interviewee understands their information were secure are priorities. All information collected during the interview remained confidential, with access restricted to myself. All recordings were made on a password-protected computer. The interview was transcribed by the online platform REV.com and then transferred to NVivo. The software, NVivo, assisted me in identifying themes. Both the software and the online platform will keep the interviews password-protected.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to an individual's ability to demonstrate competency, integrity, and ethics throughout the research and writing process of their study (Langtree, Birks, & Biedermann, 2019). To establish trustworthiness in research, I focus on four key components: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lim, 2025). These four components are used to show strength in a qualitative study.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, I am to share their findings with the participant to verify accuracy (Subedi, 2023). Each interview will be conducted over Zoom, enabling me to record it and have it transcribed. Once the transcription is received, I will send it to the participant. The participant will be asked to review the transcription to confirm that the information accurately reflects the information the participant wants to share. Participants

will be asked to add or remove any information that does not accurately reflect their intended responses. Information obtained will be contained on a password-protected laptop. The dissertation committee will review the information gathered through the interviews for feedback.

Credibility

To ensure credibility, I will allocate as much time as necessary for the participant to answer the questions asked. This will enable participants to share the information they wish to share. The interviews will be semi-structured, with open-ended questions that will be adjusted as needed.

Transferability

Transferability in a qualitative study should involve a complete description of the participants lived experiences (Subedi, 2023). I will gather the participants lived experiences in as detailed a description as possible. To ensure the participant's comfort, I will suggest that interviews be conducted in a private area for confidentiality.

Confirmability

Confirmability in a qualitative study concentrates on I staying unbiased regarding the information gathered (Lim, 2025). Information gathered will be included in the research analysis, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. I will use NVivo to assist with identifying themes in the research and store all data on a password-protected computer. After each interview, I will record their thoughts in a journal to maintain neutrality during the data-gathering process.

Ethical Procedures

Consent will be obtained from participants at the beginning of the process. During the interview process, participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants will continue to be reminded that everything they say will be confidential. I will use language that the participant can understand, ensuring there are no misunderstandings regarding the questions. The participant will also be informed that they can ask for clarification about any question. If at any time the participant feels uncomfortable, the interview will end, and they will be provided with a list of accessible, low- or no-cost therapists. I will remind the participants that their information will remain anonymous. Participants will be assigned a number. Data will be kept on a password-protected computer. I will do their best to minimize harm to the participant. Checking with the participant to make sure they are 'OK' during the interview process. I will be open with the participant regarding how their responses and information will be used. I will not guide or influence the participant in any way. All information gained will be included in the research findings and reviewed by the dissertation committee. I will continue to journal throughout the entire process to maintain a neutral perspective. I will continue to be culturally aware and understand the sensitivity of the topics and questions being asked.

Concerns regarding traumatic interactions for the Hispanic immigrant with law enforcement, both before and after the interview, are significant. All participants will be offered a resource list that will include therapists who assist individuals with trauma, domestic violence, familial violence, and or sexual assault. These therapists work with

multiple insurance companies and offer services at a sliding fee or no cost, depending on individual circumstances.

Summary

The answers gathered from the interviews will provide the information needed to help law enforcement assist the Hispanic community. Information from the participants will help Hispanic immigrants better understand their perceptions of law enforcement, as well as assist law enforcement in their future interactions.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate Hispanic immigrants from Central and South America's views of law enforcement in the United States and whether these views changed after immigrating to the United States as children. Additionally, I looked at whether their interactions and experiences with law enforcement in the United States were also impacted by their experiences as child immigrants. This was done by identifying their perceptions of law enforcement in their home country and in the United States. I used one-on-one interviews of Hispanic immigrants. Increasing understanding of how Hispanic immigrants view law enforcement enables law enforcement, corrections, and therapists to learn how to interact with and build trust among the third-largest population in Delaware (Han et al., 2020).

The research question that guided this study was, “How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive the criminal justice system from the time they came to the United States as youth to now?”

Hispanic immigrants’ perceptions of law enforcement may impact the interactions the Hispanic community has with law enforcement. These interviews can lead to better training created that will benefit law enforcement. These resources may demonstrate how law enforcement training can foster a better understanding of law enforcement and the Hispanic community's relationship with each other. This could allow law enforcement to better understand the Hispanic community's perceptions of law enforcement. The research question was designed to show how the six Hispanic immigrants' perceptions are necessary for law enforcement.

Phenomenological interviews were conducted to examine the Hispanic immigrant community's perceptions of law enforcement. In this chapter, I address the findings from the comprehensive interviews with six Hispanic immigrants. Through semistructured interviews, I investigated Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries and in the United States. I also explored participants' feelings about law enforcement in the United States when they first immigrated. This allowed me to examine the change in perceptions.

In Chapter 4, I outlined the six major categories of research: (a) Settings, (b) Demographics, (c) Data Collection, (d) Analysis, (e) Trustworthiness, (f) Results, and a summary. In the Settings section, I look into the research settings and the steps taken to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Demographics show the participants' demographics. In Data Collection, I present the collected data, and the Analysis section includes the process of analysis. In Trustworthiness, I show the transparency of the study conducted. I present the results to show the themes the research found during the process. The final section is the summary, where I present the study's findings and explain how the results answered the research question.

Settings

The research setting ensured participants' privacy and confidentiality. The participants were informed of the safekeeping practices for the information shared throughout the interview process, ensuring its confidentiality and security. The participants were verbally informed a second time about consent and the process before each interview. The participants then gave verbal consent before the interview started.

Interview settings were provided to each participant when the consent form was emailed, indicating that Zoom would be used for confidentiality and security. Once participant consent was established, an interview time and date convenient for the participant were set. During the interview, I was secluded from interruptions and ensured the interviews were conducted without interruption.

Demographics

The participants in this study included six Hispanic immigrants living in Delaware who immigrated or returned from Central or South American countries. These six Hispanic immigrants were invited to participate and to share their perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries, how they perceived law enforcement when they first came to the United States, and their current perceptions of law enforcement. For confidentiality reasons, the study did not include gender or age.

Data Collection

Data collection began after receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board. I emailed all six participants to set up a convenient day and time for the Zoom interview. Zoom was used for all semistructured interviews with the Hispanic immigrants. The semistructured interviews consisted of five open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted over 3 weeks. Periodic data analysis suggested that saturation was reached after the sixth participant was interviewed. Therefore, no further interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Each participant received a participant code upon consent to the interview to maintain confidentiality.

At the beginning of each Zoom interview, the study was briefly introduced. Each participant was reminded of confidentiality, that the interview was voluntary, and they could end it at any time. The participants were also informed that they could interrupt to ask for clarification or ask a question during the interview. The interview began after each participant acknowledged their understanding of the interview process. During the interview with each participant, I listened intently to their responses. When needed, I would ask for clarification of a comment, but did not probe concerning sensitive topics. After each interview, the recording was labeled with the participant's code. The recording was then saved to a password-protected hard drive. After completing this process, I listened to each recording in its entirety. The audio recordings were transcribed into a Word document using the Zoom Copilot app. Specific names, locations, and identifiers were removed to further protect each participant's confidentiality.

All six participants were eager to share their perceptions of law enforcement in their respective home countries as well as their current perceptions. Participants were straightforward concerning their thoughts and feelings regarding law enforcement. Some participants were more open and added more detail to their thoughtful answers than others. All participants provided information concerning law enforcement, based on their own perceptions. At the end of each interview, participants were thanked for their participation and given information about the next steps in the study.

Data Analysis

Throughout this research study, NVivo 15 was used to store and manually organize the data by creating codes and manually managing them into themes. After the

themes were established, I analyzed the data to produce the study's results. Analysis was completed in four distinct steps. The first step was to gather the information participants provided by identifying their perceptions of law enforcement. The second step was to share perceptions and identify critical, similar perceptions of law enforcement among all participants regarding the phenomena being studied. The third step was identifying the themes derived from the interviews with the participants. These themes were analyzed to determine the study's best approach and to support the research question best. The fourth and final step was to write descriptions of law enforcement perceptions from the data gathered during the interviews with participants. This included quotes from the participants to support the study by helping ensure their voices were heard.

After the interviews were conducted, I ensured that my thoughts and feelings were written down and did not interfere with the information provided. I did this by creating a journal and entering the information into it after each interview.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness in research, I focused on four key components: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lim, 2025).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, I allowed the participant as much time as necessary to answer the questions. This enabled participants to share the information they wanted. The interviews were semistructured, with open-ended questions that were adjusted as needed.

Dependability

Dependability was established by sharing my findings with the participants to verify accuracy. Each interview was conducted over Zoom, which enabled I to record the interview and have it transcribed. After the transcription was received, I sent the transcript to the participant. The participant was asked to review the transcription to confirm that the information's accuracy reflected the information the participant wanted to share. Participants were asked to add or remove any information that did not accurately reflect their intended responses. The information obtained will continue to be stored on a password-protected laptop. The dissertation committee reviewed the information gathered through the interviews and gave feedback as needed.

Transferability

I gathered participants' perceptions of their lived experiences in as detailed a manner as possible. To ensure the participant's comfort, I suggested conducting the interviews in a private area to maintain confidentiality.

Confirmability

Information gathered was included in the research analysis, regardless of whether it was positive or negative. I used NVivo 15 to identify themes in the research and continued to store all data on a password-protected computer. After each interview, I recorded my thoughts in a journal to maintain neutrality during data collection.

Results

The data analysis identified three distinct themes that capture Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in Delaware. The themes that came up are

(a) distrust, (b) good/bad in law enforcement, and (c) training. The themes noted came from the statements made by the participants and support the research question for the study:

RQ: How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive the criminal justice system from the time they came to the United States as youth to now?

Theme 1: Distrust

Distrust was the first theme to emerge. All participants noted distrust of law enforcement. Some participants noted distrust of law enforcement in their home countries and in the United States . Participant P002 stated, “gangs in home country were very violent” and “the gangs paid off law enforcement”. Participant P004 also stated, “police were paid off” when a murder happened in their hometown. One murder was of a neighbor, and another murder was when their friend was found dead with no internal organs. P001 states, “law enforcement enforces laws as they deem fit”. P001 also stated, “it was basically law enforcement. It was judge, jury, and executioner”. Fears from law enforcement in their home countries carried over to the US for five of the six participants. Participant P005 stated, “their home country law enforcement was corrupt”, but that they thought the news here in the United States, “embellishes the actual crimes that continue to happen” in their home country. Participants P003, P004, and P006 lived in countries with democratic governments, “similar to the U.S.”

As participants learned more about the United States and law enforcement, most of their perceptions changed over time. Five of the participants stated that they feared law enforcement in their home countries and are “not fearful” of law enforcement here in the

United States. Participants P004 and P006 stated that the law enforcement systems in their home countries do not resemble those in the United States. Participant P003 states that their perception of law enforcement in both countries, “will not change over time” and they are, “very apprehensive around law enforcement of people of authority”.

All participants felt that law enforcement in their home countries failed as law enforcement. Some participants noted, “law enforcement was nonexistent in their town” and they did not have close local law enforcement. “Even though there was a police station, law enforcement didn’t do their job”. All had law enforcement that could be bribed to ignore crimes, and all participants stated that gangs in their home countries influenced law enforcement. One participant, P005, stated that “respect for law enforcement does not happen” in their home country.

Five out of six participants came to the United States legally and those 5 still have a little distrust concerning law enforcement. Five out of six do have faith that law enforcement would be there to help them in an emergency if they needed them. All six participants still fear law enforcement in their home countries.

Theme 2: Good/Bad in Law Enforcement

All participants commented on how law enforcement has “bad apples.” Participant P001 stated that “bad ones lack training” and that there are “more good than bad people in law enforcement”. Participant P002, who worked in law enforcement, stated that “law enforcement perceived black/brown people as more on the criminal side” and “some law enforcement saw people as Hispanic/black by the color of their skin”. Both participants, P001 and P002, stated that law enforcement has biases towards

communities of color. P003 states that they are “never going to trust law enforcement” and that “there are no good law enforcement”. Participant P003 was the only participant who was in the United States as an undocumented individual for most of their life, until they became an adult and then became a citizen.

P004 stated that in her home country, “people were found dead and there was no investigation”. P004 compared law enforcement in the United States to their home country, stating that not investigating a murder “wouldn’t happen here”. P006 lived in Cuba during Castro’s reign as a dictator. The participant saw law enforcement “take my father away from my home and my mother would walk back and forth in the kitchen wringing her hands worried about my father.” Even though they saw this and feared law enforcement, they did not fear law enforcement in Havana; they feared it only when they were at their home in the country. The feeling of fear carried over when they immigrated to the United States.

Five of the six participants stated that there are good individuals in law enforcement and that law enforcement is there for people in need. P002 wanted to make sure people know “there are good people in law enforcement”, but the “bad apples” make it “harder for the good ones to do their jobs”. P005 states that, “United States respects the law and that law enforcement is part of the law”. Also adding that “law enforcement protects people every day”, regardless of how “scared” they may be.

Five out of the six participants stated that there are good and bad law enforcement. They feel that the good law enforcement does not receive the acknowledgement that they should because the news follows the stories about the bad

officers. Five out of six participants stated that law enforcement will be there to help them when they need them and that they would do their job. All participants feel that in their home countries there is more bad law enforcement than good law enforcement.

Theme 3: Training

Training was the third theme that came from the study. Five of the six participants stated that law enforcement needs more training concerning how to interact with people and communities of color. Understanding their own biases was a key point raised during interviews with participants P001, P002, and P004.

P001 has family in law enforcement and says that even their family members need training because there are “many people who are given a gun, they don’t have the education or the critical thinking skills to de-escalate situations”, “recognize biases”, and “more training to deal with communities of color”. P002 stated that training is very much needed in law enforcement due to “comments were made towards a majority of the group, such as the Hispanic or the African group”. P002 worked in law enforcement and heard comments that made them feel extremely uncomfortable as a Hispanic. Training would help bring these biases to the forefront at work.

Training also included understanding that there is a “lack of understanding from citizens and community regarding law enforcement”. Participant P005 stated that citizens in the community “need to listen and do not attack” law enforcement. That “law enforcement is in charge of peace and the law”. Participant P005 continued to state that “law enforcement has to fight for their lives everyday” and “law enforcement goes to work scared and it’s difficult”. Participant P005 thinks that creating a “safe space” for the

community and law enforcement to come together and learn from one another would help. Training for both sides regarding open communication and starting a conversation is important.

Five out of six participants mentioned training for law enforcement, especially concerning how law enforcement should handle situations in communities of color. Half of the participants noted biases that law enforcement faces in more rural areas of Delaware. Opening lines of communication was mentioned by one participant, who stated that it might help address misunderstandings on both sides.

Summary

This qualitative research study aimed to understand Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries and the United States. The research question was: How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive the criminal justice system from the time they come to the United States as youth to now? After analyzing the responses to the interview questions asked of the participants, three themes were identified: (1) Distrust, (2) Good and Bad in Law Enforcement, and (3) Training.

This study has shown that, though participants now feel they can call law enforcement in an emergency, there still needs to be research to determine the best way to build trust between law enforcement and the Hispanic population. The participants were all afraid of law enforcement in their home countries, distrusted law enforcement when they first came to the United States, believed there were both good and bad people in law enforcement, and believed that training would be key to building trust.

Chapter 5 will discuss the results, limitations, future research recommendations, and the impact of social change concerning this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the views of immigrants from South and Central America concerning law enforcement in the United States and whether these views were impacted when they immigrated to the United States as children. Additionally, I looked at whether the future interactions and experiences with law enforcement in the United States were also impacted by their experiences as child immigrants. There is a lack of Hispanic participants in research concerning Hispanic immigrants who immigrated as children and who grew up in the United States. There is a gap in the research relating to Hispanic immigrant youth and their later perceptions of law enforcement. This study was important for both law enforcement and Hispanic immigrants to increase their understanding of each other, to provide a foundation for law enforcement training, and to help start open conversations within the Hispanic community.

The theoretical framework used in this study is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1978). Social learning theory draws on constructs from Rotter's (1954) social construct theory , including expectancy, potential, behavior, and reinforcement value. These constructs are based on the measurement and prediction of behavior (Rotter, 1954). Analyzing the data consisted of using NVivo and manually creating themes from the one-on-one semistructured interviews. During the semistructured interviews, participants were asked questions to help answer the research question:

"How does the Hispanic immigrant population in Delaware perceive the criminal justice system from the time they came to the United States as youth to now?"

Participants' answers to the questions were grouped into three themes based on the collected data. The themes that came up were (a) distrust, (b) good/bad in law enforcement, and (c) training. From these themes, three subthemes have been identified: changes in perception with growth, types of law enforcement, and biases.

Interpretation of the Findings

Participants in this study expressed their perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries, when they first came to the United States, and in the United States today. The findings show how the participants' individual experiences impacted their perceptions of law enforcement. There was a mix of results from the participants. The mix ranged from fear concerning all law enforcement to fear in their home country, but less fear in the United States, to no fear in the United States but still fear of law enforcement in their home country.

Theme 1: Distrust

From this theme, one subtheme emerged from the data: changes in perception with growth. Five out of six participants reported that their perceptions of law enforcement in the United States have changed over time. P006 stated, "I pretty much trust them, but I honestly try to avoid having any interactions with them. The less the better." Whereas P005 stated, "I respect the law, and to me, the police enforcement is just, it's part of the law." Participants stated that, as they grew up in the United States, their first interactions were usually "scary" just from seeing law enforcement doing their jobs. Now, participant P004 has "trust in the police that they're gonna do something about it, and or at least have a data". Participant P003 does not trust law enforcement.

They stated, “My perception of law enforcement has remained the same. I don’t trust them as far as I can throw them, and yeah, I can’t imagine that that’s going to change.”

Theme 2: Good/Bad Law Enforcement

From this theme, one subtheme emerged from the data: types of law enforcement. : Four out of six participants reported that law enforcement in their home countries was very different from that in the United States. Two stated that in their home countries, there were dictatorships, and two others stated that the cartel/gangs were in control of law enforcement. P001 stated, “under a pretty harsh dictatorship and law enforcement could basically do whatever they wanted to citizens during that time”. P006 stated that during the Batista years running their home country, they were not scared of law enforcement, but “after Castro took over,” they were terrified, and “that had to do with the Cuban Revolution with Castro”. P002 stated that “gangs were paying law enforcement to work for them”. They stated that law enforcement was not trustworthy and that the cartel or gangs running law enforcement are a type of dictatorship because the cartel and gangs are “judge, jury, and executioner”. P004 states that law enforcement in their home country is working with the cartel. They emphasized that “no one wanted to mess up things with the cartel, and it was just kind of on the border [of Mexico and Guatemala]”. P004 added that obtaining a police report “would never happen in my country”.

Theme 3: Training

From this theme, one subtheme emerged from the data: biases. All participants stated that law enforcement shows biases towards communities of color. P001 specifically stated that “bad (in law enforcement) comes from lack of training and

particularly in the areas of biases". P001 added "I kind of suspect that a lot of people perceive that law enforcement could use better training, particularly in communities of color". P002 states that when they worked with law enforcement, "they saw people by their color, as we know, immigrants and, on the African culture, African American culture, they're a little more on the criminal side". P005 added that law enforcement must balance "two sides of a coin". That law enforcement must keep themselves in balance to do their job, but also not to lose themselves. Stating that it is very hard, "that they have to try to balance it".

Limitations of the Study

In this study, I examined Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in their country of origin and upon immigrating to the United States. I identified three themes: distrust, good and bad people in law enforcement, and the need for training. There were limitations to this study. First, not all participants were born in their home countries and came over as youth. Some participants were born in the United States but moved to their home countries before they were a month old. Second, not all of them came from Mexico and Guatemala. Law enforcement in each country was different, and how they compared to law enforcement in the United States was different as well. Some grew up under dictatorships, while others had a government structure similar to the United States but one that was ineffective. Lastly, some participants were recruited by other participants through a snowball effect. This may have impacted that study because these participants came from other countries other than Mexico and Guatemala.

I focused on Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries and their current views of law enforcement in the United States. My biases may have been one limitation. I journaled thoughts after each interview to make sure biases and personal feelings did not influence the study.

Recommendations

There is a need to gain a better understanding of how Hispanic immigrants perceive law enforcement in their home countries and how those perceptions translate into their perceptions of law enforcement in the United States. The perceptions of law enforcement by the Hispanic immigrant are one of distrust and fear. These perceptions have come from personal experiences as well as what they heard and saw in their home countries. These fears and distrust are then carried with them when they immigrate to the United States. Until there is an understanding and/or a change in perception of United States law enforcement, the Hispanic immigrant will continue to distrust law enforcement.

All participants stated that distrust and bias were their concerns with local law enforcement. Continued training to address concerns about distrust and bias would likely help build trust between the Hispanic immigrant community and law enforcement. Yearly training with a Hispanic/Latinx instructor on biases may assist law enforcement in understanding biases and distrust of law enforcement within the Hispanic community. These training courses could open communication on both sides.

Sensitivity training could help explain why the Hispanic community may have negative perceptions of law enforcement. These trainings should address the type of law

enforcement that the immigrants faced in their home country and ways to help the law enforcement officers communicate with Hispanics in the community during an emergency call.

Law enforcement officers could work closely with Hispanic non-profit organizations and attend heritage/cultural festivals. It would be beneficial to have law enforcement present at happy events and to speak with the community about what their job entails; this would likely have a positive impact on the community and on how the immigrant community perceives law enforcement.

The last recommendation would be for more research to be conducted about the perceptions of Hispanic immigrants who immigrated without legal status concerning law enforcement in their country of origin and in the United States. The results of this research showed that five of the six participants immigrated to the United States with legal status. Those five participants had distrust for law enforcement in their home countries and with law enforcement in the United States when they first immigrated. Later in life, five of the six participants' perceptions of law enforcement changed, and they have trust that law enforcement will assist them in an emergency. The one participant out of the six who immigrated to the United States without legal status but later in life obtained legal status still does not trust law enforcement here in the United States. They stated that they still do not have confidence in the law enforcement or people in authority. Law enforcement and the Hispanic community would benefit greatly from more research done regarding undocumented individuals and their later perceptions of

law enforcement after they obtain legal status. The research garnered could help build trust between the Hispanic community and law enforcement.

Implications for Social Change

Social change that can come from this study includes law enforcement addressing their biases towards Hispanic immigrants and training law enforcement to serve the Hispanic immigrant community effectively, thereby fostering trust between the two. This study could provide information and help the Hispanic immigrant community understand the role of law enforcement and how law enforcement officers are present to assist in emergencies.

This study presents the lived experiences of Hispanic immigrants and their perceptions of law enforcement in their home country, and how those perceptions affected their perceptions of law enforcement upon immigrating to the United States. This study addressed a gap in the literature by examining how the Hispanic immigrant community perceives law enforcement in their home countries and in the United States later in life. The participants were eager to share their perceptions of how law enforcement can change their views of the Hispanic immigrant community. This openness has shown that there is a need to continue qualitative research concerning law enforcement's perceptions towards the Hispanic immigrant community and law enforcement's biases.

The results of this study may provide a deeper understanding of how the Hispanic immigrant community perceived law enforcement in their home country and how they currently perceive law enforcement in the United States. At the community level, this

study may provide law enforcement with a better understanding of how the Hispanic community perceives law enforcement upon immigrating to the United States. Law enforcement's better understanding of how the Hispanic community perceives them could also affect later perceptions, shifting their feelings from negative to positive or vice versa. This study aims to broaden approaches to address and build trust in the relationship between Hispanic immigrants and law enforcement. This study was geared toward describing how the Hispanic immigrant community perceives law enforcement in their home country and later in life within the United States.

The participants' most significant takeaway from their participation in this was their distrust of law enforcement, not only in their home countries but also in the United States. They wanted to mention that there are biases within law enforcement that have affected their relationships with law enforcement. Training was mentioned as possibly helping law enforcement understand their own perceptions and to build trust on both sides.

Conclusion

Building trust between law enforcement and the Hispanic immigrant community is important in Delaware, where Hispanics are the third-largest ethnic group. It is important for law enforcement to recognize that the Hispanic immigrant community distrusts law enforcement due to prior experiences. Hispanic immigrants have experienced multiple layers of distrust with individuals of authority prior to immigrating to the United States. Which law enforcement may not understand.

The literature review revealed a lack of scholarly research on Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in their home countries and in the United States. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand Hispanic immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement in the United States and in their home countries. None of the participants trusted law enforcement in their home countries. Law enforcement in the participants' home countries ranged from dictatorships to law enforcement with close ties to the cartels/gangs. When the participants first immigrated to the United States, they did not trust local law enforcement. Now, most participants in the United States trust law enforcement after many years of living in the United States.

Learning how the Hispanic immigrant community perceives law enforcement helps both law enforcement and the Hispanic immigrant community. If law enforcement understands the Hispanic immigrant community's perceptions, it will help. The Hispanic immigrant community feels safe to call law enforcement in an emergency and when law enforcement is needed. Due to the distrust the Hispanic immigrant community has toward law enforcement in their home countries, there could be many criminal cases that are not investigated because they are not reported. Building trust and bridging the gap could assist law enforcement with new criminal cases and safety concerns within the Hispanic immigrant community.

Addressing the biases within law enforcement will also help bridge the gap between law enforcement and the Hispanic immigrant community. Addressing the biases that might within law enforcement could close the gap on distrust and build a better sense of community between law enforcement and the Hispanic immigrant community. When

both sides come together for the community, it opens communication between law enforcement and Hispanic immigrants. It will also help educate the Hispanic community that law enforcement is there to protect them. It also helps the Hispanic immigrant community to understand that safety in the United States is very different from that in their home country.

This increased understanding of law enforcement will assist law enforcement in better understanding the trauma and distrust of the Hispanic community. With proper training concerning the perceptions of the Hispanic immigrant community, law enforcement could build trust quickly, instead of trust coming after years of the Hispanic immigrant being in the United States. This trust could benefit the immigrant community by improving safety. When the Hispanic immigrant community feels safe to call law enforcement, then the entire community, including law enforcement, will feel safe. Transparency within law enforcement and the community is essential to eliminating biases on both sides. This will also show that even though there is a perception of good/bad people in law enforcement, the Hispanic immigrant community will see that people are being held accountable for any mistreatment. Trust can be built through training, communication, hard work, determination, and empathy.

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