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## **The Perceptions and Attitudes of Hispanics toward Law Enforcement Officers**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Perceptions and Attitudes of Hispanics toward Law Enforcement Officers

by

Brittany Pugh

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
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in Partial Fulfillment  
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## Abstract

Relationships between racial / ethnic minorities and law enforcement officers in the United States have long been a topic of concern. Given that Hispanics represent the largest racial / ethnic minority population in the United States, the nature of their collective and individual relationships with law enforcement is a topic worthy of empirical examination. Surprisingly, however, there is limited research specifically focusing upon the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics regarding law enforcement officers. This exploratory study examines the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of 101 Hispanics in South central Mississippi toward local law enforcement agencies and officers. Furthermore, the study examines the willingness of Hispanics to report various forms of crime. The findings of this study indicate that respondents manifested generally positive beliefs, perceptions and attitudes regarding law enforcement officers and indicated a willingness to report serious crimes. The study also indicates that more work needs to be done to enhance the relationship between members of the Hispanic immigrant community and law enforcement officers and agencies. The study also indicates a need for further empirical exploration of the topic and advanced methods of statistical analysis.

Key Words: Hispanics, perceptions, attitudes, law enforcement officers

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my great grandmother and my uncle. May you both rest in peace.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my honors thesis advisor Dr. Thompson for always encouraging me and giving me great advice. Without your words of encouragement, I would have not gotten my honors thesis completed. You went beyond your duties and helped me in areas that did not involve honors college. For that I am forever thankful. I would also like to thank my fiancé for always supporting me and pushing me to finish strong.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A major concern that exists in American policing is the conflict between law enforcement and minorities (Herbst & Walker, 2001). Studies have shown that minorities have less favorable attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement than their white counterparts (Peck, 2015). Specifically, Hispanics have less favorable attitudes toward law enforcement than whites, yet more favorable attitudes than African Americans toward law enforcement (Ekins, 2016). Although many law enforcement agencies have implemented programs intended to improve police-community relations with certain minority communities and ethnic groups, the relationship between the police and Hispanics remains in need of improvement. Understanding the various factors that influence the perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics may serve to enhance this relationship.

According to Menjívar & Bejarano (2004, p. 124), “Perceptions of and experiences with police authorities are central, for these determine whether people will be likely to report crime.” To the extent that perceptions and experiences affect willingness to report crime, it seems both reasonable and necessary to explore such beliefs among members of the Hispanic population. Fortunately, there exists some measure of research in the domain of criminal justice, albeit limited, that focuses upon the perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics toward law enforcement. However, that research primarily compares African Americans to Hispanics (Roles, Moak & Bensel, 2015). The influence of Hispanics’ perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement on their willingness to report crime is thus a somewhat neglected topic of inquiry in the domain of criminal justice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research examining the perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics regarding law enforcement in the United States is limited (Cheurprokobkit, 2000), although some information does exist that compares the views of Hispanics to those of other ethnic and racial groups such as Caucasians and African Americans. This is a problem because the vast amount of research relating to Hispanics' attitudes and perceptions does not solely focus on Hispanic immigrants. Additionally, existing studies focus on areas with a large Hispanic population to the exclusion of geographic areas and regions where their representation within the larger population is experiencing growth. In the research most scholars agree that there are many factors that influence an immigrant attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement. It is important that law enforcement agencies and officers understand the various factors that influence Hispanics' perceptions and attitudes in order to improve relations between the two groups. These factors can include, but are not limited to: prior contacts, trust levels, country of origin, type of neighborhood, and age, each of which is topically explored in turn below.

### *Prior Contacts with Law Enforcement:*

A significant factor influencing the attitudes and perceptions of Hispanics toward law enforcement is, not surprisingly, the quality and nature of their recent or past experiences and contacts with the police. Past experiences and contacts with law enforcement falls within the realm of external factors that influence one's attitudes and perceptions, whether they are negative or positive in nature. Generally, it stands to reason that past positive experiences and contacts with law enforcement will result in positive attitudes and perceptions while negative experiences and contacts will result in negative attitudes and perceptions. Many studies show that the contacts one has with the police influences their attitudes and perceptions. In one study,

immigrants from Costa Mesa were asked about their previous contacts with and resulting perceptions of the police. That study revealed a pattern of increased negative perceptions and attitudes with law enforcement, especially over police involvement in enforcing immigration laws (Vidales, Day, & Powe, 2009). The study tested these attitudes and perceptions before and after the controversy of police involvement with enforcing laws on immigration. Although the study focused upon the impact of immigration laws, it also focused greatly on individual perceptions of and contacts with police. When examining police-citizen contacts, it is most important to focus upon the relative voluntary or involuntary nature of the contact. Thus, police contacts can be categorized into “citizen-initiated” or “police-initiated” as was done in Cheurprakobkit’s (2000) study. Citizens who initiate contact are more likely to view the police as favorable (Cheurprakobkit, 2000). The relative voluntary or involuntary nature of citizen contact with the police is therefore a critical factor in exploring the attitudes and perceptions of Hispanic immigrants regarding law enforcement officers and agencies.

*Trust Levels:*

Clearly, the dimension of “trust” is an important factor in building and maintaining positive relationships between law enforcement and Hispanic immigrants. Clearly, there are many different dimensions and varieties of trust in law enforcement as indicated by the available existing research. Lai and Zhao (2008) defined trust in relation to police work. Their results also indicated that the sources of “Specific Trust” in the police were closely related with daily police work (Lai & Zhao, 2008). Another study conducted by Correia (2009) defined and measured the level of trust among groups of non-immigrants and immigrants in terms of relationships between neighbors and public officials.

Research also shows that Hispanics', specifically Latinas', fear of deportation influences their perceptions of the criminal justice system and American police officers. In Messing, Becerra, Ward-Lasher, and Androff's (2015) study of Latina perceptions of law enforcement, the researchers found female Hispanics had "very little confidence" that police officers would not use excessive force on a suspect. This perception, combined with a generalized fear of deportation, ultimately affected the levels of trust and confidence Latinas have in the police.

Recent research indicates the fear of deportation among Hispanic immigrants is rapidly growing as a direct effect of the presidential election of Donald Trump. With the election of a new president, many immigrants are fearful of deportation which is also linked to their fear of law enforcement officers. According to an article from USAtoday.com, Rosa Pastrana, liaison and president of Neighborhood Watch, stated the community has a lot of fear regarding the election (Jeong, 2017). Pastrana also indicated that the community is "traumatized" (Jeong, 2017). Trust in the police is a vitally important dimension to developing and maintaining police-community relations and it appears as though the element of fear within the Hispanic population may threaten such relationships. Philip Wolgin, Director of Immigration Policy at the Center for American Progress, stated: "If you have a population that isn't willing to come forward and interact with police, you've got a disastrous problem" (Jeong, 2017).

#### *Country of Origin:*

While research conducted by scholars such as Correia (2010) focuses on basic factors influencing attitudes toward law enforcement, Menjivar and Bejarano's (2004) research explores a unique aspect of the topic – country of origin. Specifically, Menjivar and Bejarano (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with Hispanics from different countries. A unique finding from this study was that attitudes and perceptions among immigrants about American police are influenced by their attitudes and perceptions of police in the country of origin. That is, immigrants relate their experiences with American law enforcement agencies and officers to past

experiences in their home country. For example, Menjívar and Bejarano (2004) asked a 19-year-old Guatemalan if she could “count on the police” and she replied that the U.S. police are more helpful than the police in Guatemala. This illustrates the influence that one’s country of origin can have upon their perceptions of police in the United States. Given this unique consideration, additional research is warranted.

*Type of Neighborhood:*

According to previous research, there exists a relationship between certain neighborhood-related factors and the attitudes of Hispanics toward law enforcement agencies and officers (Lai & Zhao, 2010). For example, the type of neighborhoods Hispanics live in can affect their attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement. Common indicators are a resident’s experiences in the neighborhood, fear of crime, and concentrated economic disadvantages (Lai & Zhao, 2010). Generally, Hispanics who live in neighborhoods with less disorder, have high income, and low fear of crime have more favorable perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement officers and agencies (Vogel, 2011). Conversely, Hispanics who reside in neighborhoods with high population density and high ratios of officers to citizens typically have more negative attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement officers and agencies. Similar results were found in Dowler and Sparks’s (2008) study on victimization, police contact and neighborhood conditions. They found that perceived neighborhood conditions were closely associated with law enforcement satisfaction. Residents who had a higher chance of witnessing serious crime and were fearful of crime in their neighborhoods were less satisfied with the police than those who had a more positive quality of life in their neighborhoods (Dowler & Sparks, 2008).

*Age:*

Previous research also indicates that the demographic characteristic of age affects the attitudes and perceptions of Hispanics regarding law enforcement.. Rengifo and Fratello (2014) conducted research involving immigrant youth (18-25) and their attitudes toward law enforcement. In this study, which was conducted in New York, the researchers found that repeated stops by the police were commonly reported among immigrants 18-25 and that these stops yielded low trust levels and negative attitudes toward police officers (Rengifo & Fratello, 2014). This finding may, in part, be attributable to the more frequent contact that younger individuals have with law enforcement officers and agencies. The findings of Rengifo and Fratello (2014) helps shed light on the attitudes of first and second generation Hispanic immigrants in particular. The study measured the general attitudes of youth immigrants by asking them about police effectiveness and police legitimacy. Their study revealed that opinions regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of police officers tends to vary between first generation and second generation immigrants (Rengifo & Fratello, 2014). Additionally, negative attitudes among Hispanic immigrants were linked to strained contact with police officers (Rengifo & Fratello, 2014).

*Positivity:*

While much of the available research indicates that Hispanics manifest generally negative attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement officers and agencies, other studies reveal that at least some portion of the immigrant population possesses favorable attitudes toward American police. This body of research includes Davis' and Hendricks' 2007 study which reveals that Hispanic immigrants, when compared to other racial and ethnic groups, manifest more favorable attitudes and perceptions toward law enforcement. In this particular study, conducted in Seattle,

immigrants felt more positively about the police in preventing crime. Although the influences were the same in this study as the rest of the studies, the results were very different.

When trying to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Hispanics toward law enforcement, one should only focus on Hispanics and no other ethnicities. Comparing other ethnicities in the research takes away from the importance of the Hispanics' attitudes and perceptions. Also it is important to not only research areas with a high Hispanic 'population, but also research areas with a growing Hispanic population. Knowing and understanding Hispanic immigrants' attitudes and perceptions in growing areas can be vital to changing and improving relationships and problems between Hispanics and law enforcement.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### *Instrument Development*

The survey instrument developed for use in this research project was a mixture of adaptations from existing scales found in previous research as well as several originally-conceived items. Many of the survey items were based upon a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" as well as several dichotomous "yes" or "no" questions. In sum, the instrument consisted of 30 survey items divided into four different sections. The first section consisted of demographic questions. The second section focused upon participant encounters and experiences with law enforcement officers. The third section consisted of items generally intended to assess participant perceptions of and attitudes toward law enforcement officers. The final section consisted of items designed to assess the relative willingness of respondents to report various forms of crime to the police.

The instrument was created in a format that required participants to complete the survey using a writing utensil. A "pencil and paper" written format was chosen over an electronic format because of concern that the participant population would not have broad access to computers. The survey was first written in English and then translated to Spanish. A faculty member in the Department of Foreign Languages helped to review and translate the survey items before they were finalized.

### *Study Participants*

Study participants were recruited by various methods, which included word of mouth, entering restaurants and businesses where Hispanics worked or engaged in commerce, and by traditional door-to-door solicitation. Participants who were solicited through word of mouth were introduced or referred by previous participants using an informal snowball sampling strategy. For example, once an initial participant agreed to complete the survey, s/he then assisted in recruiting other participants by going door-to-door with the researcher and facilitating personal introductions so that others would feel comfortable also completing the instrument. Participants who worked at or were present in Mexican food restaurants and culturally-themed convenience stores also completed the survey. A number of Hispanic students attending the University of Southern Mississippi were solicited through various clubs and activities. In light of these participant recruitment and selection methods, the sample upon which this study is based is purely non-probabilistic (convenient), which poses certain considerations for external validity which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

### *Statistical Analyses*

This project used basic descriptive and univariate statistical analyses to explore the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of Hispanic participants regarding law enforcement officers and agencies. Descriptive statistics were used to present the demographic characteristics of study participants. Univariate analyses were used to examine the pattern of responses to the various Likert-type and dichotomous survey items.

### *Missing Data*

As is common with many data collection initiatives of this type, there were limited occurrences of missing data where, for example, a study participant inadvertently skipped a survey item when completing the instrument. In such instances the modal response was entered for the dichotomous (e.g., yes / no) survey items. For the Likert-type items, the mean response (rounded to the nearest whole number) was used to replace the missing value. If the survey contained substantial amounts of missing data, it was excluded from the analysis.

## Chapter 4: Results

The results that follow are based upon survey responses provided by 101 study participants. Table 1 provides a general summary of demographic characteristics for all participants.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of survey participants**

Gender	Male: 48 (47.5%) Female: 53 (52.5%)
Age	Mean: 34.8 Median: 33 Mode: 30, 37 Range: 45
Employment Status	Employed: 61 (60.4%) Self-Employed: 3 (3.0%) Out of Work but Looking: 8 (7.9%) Out of Work Not Looking: 2 (2.0%) Retired: 1 (1.0%) Student: 17 (16.8%) Unable to Work: 3 (3.0%) Other: 6 (5.9%)
Nationality	Mexico: 43 (42.6%) United States: 21 (20.8%) Honduras: 13 (12.9%) Other: 9 (8.9%) Guatemala: 4 (4.0%) Puerto Rico: 4 (4.0%) Spain: 3 (3.0%) Colombia: 1 (1.0%) Brazil: 1 (1.0%) Uruguay: (1.0%) El Salvador: 1 (1.0%)
Years Residing in U.S.	Mean: 15.7 Median: 15 Mode: 11 Range: 44

As the foregoing table indicates, there were more female (53, 52.5%) than male (48, 47.5%) participants in this study. The mean age of study participants was 34.8 years and the median age was 33 years. There was a bimodal distribution for age, with the two most common ages being 30 and 37 years. The range of participant ages was 45 years. The largest portion of study participants was from Mexico

(43, 42.6%). The next largest portions were from the United States, Honduras, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Spain, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, and El Salvador, respectively. Three out of every five participants (61, 60.4 %) reported being employed and 17 (16.8%) were college students. The mean length of time that participants reported living in the United States was 15.7 years and the median was 15 years. The modal response was 11 years with a range of 44 years.

**Table 2: Pattern of responses to survey items regarding reported contact with law enforcement officers within the last five (5) years.**

<b>Wording of Survey Item: “Within the last five years...”</b>	<b>Yes n(valid%)</b>	<b>No n(valid%)</b>
...have you been stopped by a law enforcement officer while driving a vehicle?	26 (25.7%)	75 (74.3%)
...have you been approached by a law enforcement officer other than while driving a vehicle?	11 (10.9%)	90 (89.1%)
...have you reported a crime to a law enforcement agency?	14 (13.9%)	87 (86.1%)
...have you reported neighborhood concerns or problems to a law enforcement agency?	18 (17.8%)	83 (82.2%)
...have you witnessed a crime and reported it to a law enforcement agency?	9 (9.8%)	92 (91.1%)
...have you been involved in an accident and reported it to a law enforcement agency?	20 (19.8%)	81 (80.2%)

The first section of the survey instrument included six dichotomous “yes” or “no” items that focused upon participant contacts with law enforcement officers within the last five (5) years. Each question was prefaced by the phrase “have you...” The pattern of results associated with responses to these survey items are presented in Table 2. With regard to having been stopped by a law enforcement officer while driving a vehicle, roughly one-fourth (26, 25.7%) of participants answered in the affirmative while the majority (75, 74.3%) answered that they had not. Similarly, a very small portion of participants (11, 10.9%) reported having been approached by a law enforcement officer other than while driving a

vehicle, whereas the majority (90, 89.1%) had not. Roughly 14% of participants had reported a crime to a law enforcement agency within the past five years, while the majority (87, 86.1%) had not. Slightly less than one out of every ten respondents (9, 9.8%) had witnessed a crime and reported the occurrence to the police. Only 18 participants (17.8%) had reported a neighborhood concern or problem to an agency, whereas the remaining portion of respondents (83, 82.2%) had not. Similarly, two out of every five participants (20, 19.8%) indicated that they had been involved in an accident and reported the occurrence to a law enforcement agency. Across all such survey questions, greater than three-fourths of study participants indicated they did not have any such contact with either a law enforcement officer or an agency within the last five years.

**Table 3: Pattern of responses to survey items regarding “comfort with” or “confidence in” law enforcement officers.**

<b>Wording of Survey Item:</b>	<b>Strongly Agree n(valid%)</b>	<b>Agree n(valid%)</b>	<b>Neutral n(valid%)</b>	<b>Disagree n(valid%)</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree n(valid%)</b>
If I were in trouble, I would feel comfortable asking a law enforcement officer for help.	51 (50.5%)	25 (24.8%)	17 (16.8%)	5 (5.0%)	3 (3.0%)
I worry that law enforcement officers will have me deported if I call for help.	16 (15.8%)	16 (15.8%)	30 (29.7%)	12 (11.9%)	27 (26.7%)
Most law enforcement officers are trustworthy	9 (8.9%)	35 (34.7%)	46 (45.5%)	4 (4.0%)	7 (6.9%)
Most law enforcement officers are respectful of people like me.	13 (12.9%)	27 (26.7%)	43 (42.6%)	9 (8.9%)	9 (8.9%)
Law enforcement officers are helpful to people in my community.	15 (14.9%)	34 (33.7%)	36 (35.6%)	8 (7.9%)	8 (7.9%)
Law enforcement officers are effective in preventing crime in my neighborhood.	15 (14.9%)	33 (32.7%)	41 (40.6%)	4 (4.0%)	8 (7.9%)
Law enforcement officers in my neighborhood are physically abusive.	7 (6.9%)	4 (4.0%)	39 (38.6%)	25 (24.8%)	26 (25.7%)

The second section of the survey instrument was based upon a five-point Likert scale with response categories that ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The items included within

this section focused upon the attitudes and perceptions of participants regarding “comfort with” or “confidence in” law enforcement officers. Three-fourths (76, 75.3%) of respondents collectively agreed that if they were in trouble, they would feel comfortable asking a law enforcement officer for help. Overall study participants tended to collectively agree with the survey items that expressed positive attitudes regarding law enforcement while at the same time collectively disagreeing with the survey items that expressed negative attitudes toward law enforcement. Stated differently, most study participants manifested positive views toward law enforcement as such attitudes were measured by the survey items reflected in Table 3 above. For example, one survey item regarding negative attitudes toward law enforcement officers stated: “I worry that law enforcement officers will have me deported if I call for help.” Of the 101 participants, (16, 15.8%) strongly agreed, 16 (15.8%) agreed, 30 (29.7%) responded neutral, 12 (11.9%) disagreed, and (27, 26.7%) strongly disagreed. Thus only a combined 32 (31.6%) of participants manifested a negative view of law enforcement on this dimension. Another survey item regarding negative attitudes stated: “Law enforcement officers in my neighborhood are physically abusive.” Of the total participants, 7 (6.9%) agreed, 4, (4.0%) agreed, 39 (38.6%) responded neutral, 25 (24.8%) disagreed, and 26 (25.7%) strongly disagreed. In this instance, only 11 (10.9%) participants endorsed this negative view of law enforcement officers.

A survey item regarding positive attitudes toward law enforcement officers stated: “Most law enforcement officers are trustworthy.” Ninety respondents (90, 89.1%) collectively agreed or responded neutral to this survey item. Only 11 participants (10.9%) collectively disagreed with the wording of this survey item. Another survey item regarding positive attitudes toward law enforcement officers stated: “Law enforcement officers are helpful to people like me in my community.” In this instance, 15(14.9%) strongly agreed, 34 (33.7%) agreed, 36 (35.6%) responded neutral, 8 (7.9%) disagreed, and 8 (7.9%) strongly disagreed. Based upon the pattern of response to these survey items, it appears that most study participants manifest either neutral or collective agreement regarding positive attitudes toward law enforcement.

**Table 4: Pattern of responses to survey items regarding willingness to report various forms of crime.**

Form of crime committed:	Absolutely Yes n(valid%)	Probably So n(valid%)	Maybe n(valid%)	Probably Not n(valid%)	Definitely Not n(valid%)
Murder	60 (59.4%)	10 (9.9%)	3 (3.0%)	4 (4.0%)	24 (23.8%)
Rape	59 (58.4%)	10 (9.9%)	3 (3.0%)	5 (5.0%)	24 (23.8%)
Aggravated Assault	55 (54.5%)	14 (13.9%)	4 (4.0%)	3 (3.0%)	25 (24.8%)
Robbery	53 (52.5%)	14 (13.9%)	7 (6.9%)	2 (2.0%)	25 (24.8%)
Arson	50 (49.5%)	15 (14.9%)	6 (5.9%)	4 (4.0%)	26 (25.7)
Kidnapping	60 (59.4%)	9 (8.9%)	5 (5.0%)	2 (2.0%)	25 (24.8%)
Drug Trafficking	45 (44.6%)	14 (13.9%)	10 (9.9%)	7 (6.9%)	25 (24.8%)
Child Abuse	61 (60.4%)	10 (9.9%)	4 (4.0%)	1 (1.0%)	25 (24.8%)
Hit and Run	47 (46.5%)	21 (20.8%)	3 (3.0%)	5 (5.0%)	25 (24.8%)
Shoplifting	53 (52.5%)	12 (11.9%)	9 (8.9%)	3 (3.0%)	24 (23.8%)
Harassment	39 (38.6%)	24 (23.8%)	7 (6.9%)	4 (4.0%)	27 (26.7)
Vandalism	33 (32.7%)	19 (18.8%)	10 (9.9%)	11 (10.9%)	28 (27.7%)
Nudity	25 (24.8%)	16 (15.8%)	13 (12.9%)	15 (14.9%)	32 (31.7)

The next section of survey items contained in the survey instrument was also based upon a five-point response continuum that included the categories: “Absolutely Yes,” “Probably So,” “Maybe,” “Probably Not,” and “Definitely Not.” The items contained within this section were designed to assess the relative willingness of study participants to report various forms of crime to the law enforcement.

Thirteen different forms of crime ranging in severity from murder to public nudity were of interest.

Examination of the results presented in Table 4 above reveals that greater than one-half of all participants would either absolutely or probably report 12 of the 13 forms of crime listed to the police (public nudity being the exception). Perhaps most interesting to note is the fact that across all 13 forms of crime listed, at least one-fourth of study participants indicated that they would “definitely not” report such an occurrence to the police.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to topically explore the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics regarding various dimensions of their contact and relationship with law enforcement officers and agencies. It is generally hoped that the information gathered as part of this study can be used to better

understand perspectives within the Hispanic population regarding law enforcement officers and agencies as well as help to improve the nature and quality of relationships between both groups.

One particular area of interest to this study was determining whether or not participants had experienced various forms of contact with law enforcement officers within the past five years. Analysis of the data revealed that study participants had little to no previous contact with law enforcement officers or agencies within the past five year period. Across all such items, greater than three-fourths of respondents indicated that they had not had contact with law enforcement officers or agencies during the past five years.

A second area of inquiry sought to gauge study participants' level of "comfort with" and "confidence in" law enforcement officers and agencies. Respondents tended to manifest general comfort with and confidence in law enforcement officers and agencies. Their attitudes were more neutral and positive than negative regarding comfort with and confidence in law enforcement. Respondents collectively agreed or responded neutral more than they disagreed with survey items regarding their comfort in contacting officers if they were in trouble. Respondents also reported being more neutral than negative in their views that officers are respectful, trustworthy, and helpful.

A third area of focus was to assess the relative willingness of study participants to report various forms of crime to law enforcement. Respondents were more willing to report serious crimes such as murder and rape than they were to report less serious crimes such as harassment and public nudity. Law separates serious crimes and less serious crimes into felonies and misdemeanors. While participants manifested a collective willingness to report felony crimes, a certain portion indicated some level of reluctance to do so. There is some other factor holding respondents back from contacting law enforcement officers to report various forms of crime which will be discussed below.

Overall, analysis of the survey data collected for this study indicates that study participants were more likely to manifest generally neutral beliefs, perceptions and attitudes in the responses to most of the survey items. Although the respondents were more likely to manifest neutral views, they were more likely to agree with the positively-worded survey items than they were to disagree. Respondents disagreed to

one survey item regarding law enforcement officers as physically abusive. The analyses also indicated that respondents had a little or no contact with law enforcement officers in the last five years.

With regard to various forms of crime, respondents appeared more willing to report serious offenses (e.g., murder, etc.) and less willing to report arguably minor crimes (e.g., public nudity). Roughly three-fourths of the respondents collectively indicated a willingness to report serious crimes while roughly one-half of respondents collectively indicated a willingness to report less serious forms of crime. The results associated with the survey items contained within this section of the instrument indicated that the nature of the crime, whether serious or less serious, was an important factor in their willingness to report the offense to law enforcement. If the crime was less serious, the respondent was less willing to contact law enforcement, presumably because they deem such situations to not be absolutely necessary.

#### *Consistency / Inconsistency with the Available Existing Literature*

The available existing literature tends to indicate that Hispanics possess mostly negative beliefs, perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement agencies and officers. However, the results of this study do not completely align with these prior research findings. The existing available literature also indicated that there was a relationship between prior contact with law enforcement officers and negative attitudes toward officers and agencies. While this study did not undertake such analyses, informal examination of the survey results does not indicate such to be the case. Another dimension indicated by the available existing research suggests that there is a relationship between age and attitudes toward law enforcement agencies and officers. Specifically, prior studies indicate that younger Hispanics manifest more negative attitudes toward law enforcement officers than do older Hispanics. Again, while this study did not include such analyses, informal temporal examination of the survey results does not indicate such to be the case insofar as the present sample is relatively young but seemed to manifest generally positive attitudes overall.

### *Dimensions in Need of Further Exploration*

The purpose of this study was to assess the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of the Hispanic population regarding law enforcement officers and explore their willingness to report various forms of crime. While this research project yielded important findings, it only explored the perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics toward law enforcement officers. Advanced analyses were not conducted in order to explore the causal nature of certain variables. Advanced analyses (bivariate and multivariate) should be further explored to determine if a relationship exists not only between the question stated above but also between other variables regarding this research project.

While the results of this study revealed that most participants manifested generally positive attitudes toward law enforcement officers and were generally willing to report various forms of crime, the question remains: Why did roughly one-fourth of study participants indicate an unwillingness to report certain serious crimes such as murder? Whether an individual's attitudes toward law enforcement are relatively positive or negative, it seems reasonable to expect that most people would nonetheless report serious crimes such as murder and rape to the authorities. Future research should further explore this dimension and seek to identify the relevant factors or forces that deter individuals from reporting such serious offenses.

Although this study indicated that most respondents have neutral to positive beliefs, perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement, additional research should be conducted in order to fully understand the nature of interpersonal relations between individual law enforcement officers and members of the Hispanic population. This research should be longitudinal in nature and perhaps focus upon specific cohorts of individuals over the course of several years to determine if such attitudes vary over time.

Given the findings of previous research regarding the presumed relationship between one's age and attitudes toward law enforcement, future research should continue to explore this dimension. Such research should focus upon all ages from young to older Hispanics. Although respondent age was recorded as part of this particular study, such analyses were not conducted. Such inquiry and resulting

findings may help law enforcement agencies target appropriate age groups when trying to enhance police-community relations.

### *Policy Implications*

Despite the relatively positive and encouraging findings of this study, more work and research remains to be done in order to further enhance relations between law enforcement and the Hispanic population. In order to accomplish this objective, law enforcement officers could become more fully immersed into Hispanic communities as a means of building the trust and confidence of residents. When law enforcement officers patrol neighborhoods with a high Hispanic population, they can interact with them and practice community policing. Agencies and officers could create different interactive programs for children and young adults in order to enhance the image of law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers could also become more involved with schools ranging from kindergarten to high school. Interactive programs can be started in schools or even as after school activities for youth. Because there is a language barrier between many law enforcement officers and the Hispanic population, more programs could be created where members of the Hispanic population teach officers Spanish. This is important because not only can officers learn to speak traditional Spanish, but they can also learn colloquial terms that can easily be used by criminals.

Police departments could also recruit more Hispanic officers. Such recruitment efforts could start as early as high school where officers should be showing children a more positive image of law enforcement officers. Training and preparation for police academy for the Hispanic community is another thing law enforcement officers could try in order to enhance its relationship with this growing segment of the population. If law enforcement agencies were more diverse and proportionally represented the Hispanic population more, relations between the two groups may show improvement.

### **Limitations**

Although this study revealed several interesting findings regarding the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics toward law enforcement officers and agencies, there are some limitations to the applicability of its findings. First, the results of this study are based upon responses provided by only 101

participants. A larger number of respondents might yield results with greater external validity. Second, there was a short amount of time allotted in order to travel to areas of Mississippi with high concentrations of Hispanics. In order to conduct advanced analyses, a study such as this would ideally have been conducted over a longer period of time. There were additional challenges confronted by the researcher. First, the political climate and recent presidential election affected the Hispanic population and this is a direct reason for some people declining to take the survey. Many potential participants were admittedly fearful to participate in the survey due to concern for personal and legal consequences. Second, the method by which the data was collected must be taken into consideration. For example, some individuals indicated that they wanted to complete the survey on the computer. Another challenge for the researcher was having to be physically present while participants took the survey. Many participants wanted to take the survey to give to an acquaintance or family member and return it at a later date and time. This was not allowed due to IRB requirements and because of this many potential respondents could not participate.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research project was to explore the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of Hispanics regarding law enforcement officers and agencies as well as the willingness of such individuals to report certain forms of crime. Although the final sample size and the methods of statistical analysis of this research project were admittedly limited, the findings of this study were nonetheless important and worthy of consideration. As previously stated, there is a need for further inquiry into this particular topic. Ideally, this research project will serve as a catalyst for other researchers to more extensively explore the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the Hispanic population regarding law enforcement officers and agencies.

As many factors continue to affect Hispanics today in the U.S., law enforcement agencies can benefit from the findings of research projects such as this. The results can be useful to any law enforcement agency, especially ones located in areas with a growing Hispanic population. Although on a small scale, the results of this study present officers with knowledge of how the Hispanic population feels

toward them in regards to their attitudes and perceptions. From this, they can take the negative attitudes and other negative findings and attempt to improve relationships and enhance the willingness of respondents to report various forms of crime. While officers had some knowledge from previous research, they were lacking a study specifically for the Hispanic population. Also the Hispanic population is rapidly growing and a need for a better relationship is growing as well. The Hispanic population will also benefit from this study. Seeing how others view law enforcement in a positive light can persuade other Hispanics to change their perceptions and/or attitudes toward law enforcement. When Hispanics have positive attitudes, there is a greater chance they would interact with law enforcement as well as report various forms of crime.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

**Beliefs, Perceptions and Attitudes of Hispanics Regarding Local Law Enforcement**

**The purpose of this survey is to obtain knowledge regarding your perception of and attitudes toward local law enforcement. I am conducting this study to fulfill requirements associated with my studies at The University of Southern Mississippi. I would be very grateful if you would participate.**

**First, please tell us about yourself by completing the following items:**

1. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
2. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many children under the age of 18 live in your house? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your employment status?
  - Employed
  - Self-employed
  - Out of work but looking for work
  - Out of work and not looking for work
  - Retired
  - Student
  - Not able to work
  - Other
5. Were you born in the United States?
  - Yes
  - No
6. If not, in what country were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many years have you been in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Have you ever been arrested?

Yes

No

**The following section asks questions about your past interactions with law enforcement. Please check “Yes” or “No” for each question.**

In the last 5 years (since 2012) have you ....

	Yes	No
Been stopped by a law enforcement officer while driving a vehicle?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been approached by a law enforcement officer <b>other than</b> while driving a vehicle?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reported a crime to a law enforcement agency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reported neighborhood concerns or problems to a law enforcement agency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Witnessed a crime and reported it to a law enforcement agency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been involved in an accident and reported it to a law enforcement agency?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**The following section asks questions about your confidence in law enforcement. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
If I were in trouble, I would feel comfortable asking a law enforcement officer for help.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I worry that law enforcement officers will have me deported if I call for help.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Most law enforcement officers are trustworthy.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Most law enforcement officers are respectful of people like me	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Law enforcement officers are helpful to people in my community	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Law enforcement officers are effective in preventing crime in my neighborhood.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Law enforcement officers in my neighborhood are physically abusive.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**The following section asks how likely it is that you would report certain types of crimes to law enforcement. Please select the category that best describes your feelings:**

	Absolutely Yes	Probably So	Maybe or Maybe Not	Probably Not	Definitely Not
Public nudity	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Rape	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Assault involving a weapon	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Leaving the scene of a car accident	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Vandalism / damage to property	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Murder	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Shoplifting	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Robbery	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Child abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Arson	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Drug dealing	<input type="checkbox"/>				
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Please use the space below to share any other thoughts or information you may have:

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## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001 Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.

Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 16121901

PROJECT TITLE: Beliefs, Perceptions and Attitudes of Hispanics Regarding Local Law Enforcement

PROJECT TYPE: New Project

RESEARCHER(S): Brittany Nicole Pugh

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Science and Technology

DEPARTMENT: Criminal Justice

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 01/04/2017 to 01/03/2018

**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board**