Examining Strain Among Latino Youth Using Latinx General Strain Theory

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Abstract: Criminological research indicates that the Latinx population disproportionately commits crime. Latinx youth represent nearly 30% of the juvenile justice system. In 2008, Pérez and colleagues examined ethnic-specific differences that affect Latinx in the strain delinquency relationship. The authors used Latinx General Strain Theory (LGST) to identify the distinctive strains Latinx experienced as a result of their unique socio-cultural and ethnic experiences. However, the impact Latinx negative perceptions of police have on Latinx delinquency has yet to be fully identified. This study examines the impact police perceptions have on Latinx delinquency. Results suggest that Latinx youth who reported negative perceptions of police were likelier to report delinquency. Future research should examine more measures of police perceptions or police racial discrimination in the Latinx delinquency relationship.

Keywords: Police Perceptions, Latinx, Latinx Delinquency

In 2003, Hispanics were pronounced the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003; PBS, n.d.). Furthermore, Urbina and Alvarez (2018) indicate that "by the year 2060, 31% (about 128.8 million) of the U.S. population will be of Latino heritage, and Latino children will become the largest youth population by mid-century, surpassing White children" (p.7). For the past several decades, the U.S. Census Bureau has predicted the Latinx population to grow substantially and be younger, but what was unexpected is that the Latinx population has increased throughout the criminal and juvenile justice system. For example, nearly 60% of Latinos have had contact with the criminal justice system. Among youth, roughly 70% of students who fall victim to the school-to-prison pipeline are Latinos (League of United Latin American Citizens, 2022).

In 2013, 38,400 juvenile arrests involving Latinx youth were reported to NIBRS by more than 5,000 police departments, and of the Latinx juvenile arrests, nearly 27% involved females, and 54% concerned youth ages ranging between 16 and 17 (OJJDP, 2013). In 2018, the U.S. juvenile courts handled approximately 750,000 delinquency cases, and more than 29 million adolescents were under juvenile court jurisdiction (OJJDP, 2018). Of these, 60% were younger than 16, 5% involved juveniles younger than 13, and cases involving Latinx youth were 55% more likely than Whites to be petitioned for formal processing (OJJDP, 2018). The Coalition for Justice (2010) argues that in 14 states, the Latinx youth population is three times more likely to be incarcerated compared to White youth. Seroczynski and Jobst (2016) indicate nearly 20,000 Latinx youth in the U.S. are incarcerated annually. (Villarruel et al., 2021). The overrepresentation of Latinos in the juvenile justice system, to some, reflects deep-rooted racial and social problems that exist in America. (Muñoz, 2000; Rios, 2011). Criminological scholars are continuing better to understand Latinx delinquency and the importance of Latinx scholarship.

Although empirical research concerning Latinos has increased, research on the Latinx population is still understudied in criminology compared to other racial/ethnic groups, such as Whites and Blacks'. Furthermore, Latinos are usually assumed in the study of crime only in comparison with other groups. The impact institution strain (i.e., police) have on Latinx delinquency has yet to be fully identified (Isom Scott et al., 2021; Isom Scott et al., 2020; Thaxton & Agnew, 2018). This paper builds upon Latinx general strain theory by further examining and understanding the impact police perceptions may have on Latinx delinquency. The findings bring insight into the Latinx literature, which remains understudied compared to other racial/ethnic groups. In the following sections, the Latinx population is brought to the forefront by further discussing Latinx general strain theory and institutional strains.

Overview of Latins General Strain Theory (LGST)

Early versions of strain theory examined general differences between groups (i.e., adult, youth, men, women) and raised the "prospect that group differences might play a role in the types of strain" people encounter and further exacerbates future delinquency (Agnew, 1992, p. 545). Pérez and colleagues (2008) examined ethnic-specific differences that affect Latinx in the strain delinquency relationship. The authors use Latinx General Strain Theory (LGST) to identify the distinctive strains Latinx experience due to their unique socio-cultural and ethnic experiences. LGST considers Latino's ethnic identity and sociocultural experiences as potential stressors "that undermine psychological well-being, increasing one's vulnerability to delinquency" (Pérez et al., 2008, p. 545). Specifically, LGST agrees with the traditional strains most individuals face within their family, school, and economic settings to impact delinquency. However, LGST proposes

that Latino youth experience distinctive strains that influence delinquency due to their unique racial identity (p. 546). While traditional aspects are important for Latinos, other ethnic strains are also vital and integrated to bridge Latinos into traditional GST explanations. The authors suggest Latinos are more likely to be delinquent when they undergo acculturation (Pérez et al., 2008). The acculturation process implies Latinos are more likely to encounter unique strains from adapting to a dominant culture change or the "status quo" (Pérez et al., 2008). Acculturation as a process then exposes Latinos to racial discrimination and negative emotions. Racial discrimination experienced in the neighborhood and school settings are considered ethnic-specific stressors due to several "different dimensions along which cultural change will occur" that may also involve a change in Latinos' attitudes and behaviors (p. 548).

Behavioral acculturation refers to adaptations such as "participating in the cultural activities of the new culture (e.g., holidays), adoption of the host country's language, and incorporation of new foods and dietary habits (Pérez et al., 2008, p. 548). Attitudinal acculturation can be regarded as modifying an individual's affiliation or pride in their culture (Pérez et al., 2008). The authors indicate that the level of acculturative strain differs "dependent upon social and psychological resources of the acculturating individual" (p. 549). Acculturation strain experienced is suggested to increase substance use, binge drinking, cigarette use, and depression in youth and adults (Alvarez-Rivera, 2014; Cobb et al., 2017; Cortes, 2003; Kam et al., 2010) who adapt to American culture. LGST indicates delinquency is likely among individuals with poor coping skills, little to no social support, and low social control (Pérez et al., 2008).

LGST is instrumental in addressing the void in ethnic-specific theoretical explanations of Latino delinquency by attempting to bridge the gap in understanding how ethnic-specific strains may impact Latinos' disproportionate delinquency. Although Pérez and colleagues (2008) did not specifically examine police experiences/ perceptions, they discuss the importance of future research to include the effects of racial discrimination experienced in other areas, such as law enforcement. In 2020, Isom Scott and colleagues sought to better understand and investigate specific stressors in the Latino experience. In the study, ethnic-specific strains included acculturation, racial discrimination, police injustices, economic, direct, and vicarious victimization experienced over twelve months. Direct victimization consisted of the number of times threats and violence were experienced in the past year. Racial discrimination was measured by asking respondents if they were discriminated against in or outside their neighborhood, when they needed service, or when they met someone for the first time. Police injustices were measured through a single item asking whether the police had discriminated against participants. Findings suggest direct and vicarious victimization are primarily related to offending, and police injustices and racial discrimination were

less likely to lead to offending when Latinxs experienced direct or indirect victimization (Isom Scott et al., 2020). In 2018, Thaxton and Agnew examined the effect of several criminogenic strains (e.g., perceptions of police, school environment, and victimization) and criminal behavior and overall gang membership among Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. Police perceptions were measured by asking respondents to answer Likert scale questions regarding police, such as the police are dishonest, rude, unfriendly. Results from their study found support for GST and propose strains (i.e., police, school) "on delinquency is much stronger for those who self-report membership in a gang" (Thaxton & Agnew, 2018. p. 912). Overall, ethnic specific stressors among Latinos that lead to delinquency have been documented, However, the impact strain Latinos may experience in other arenas (i.e., police) has yet to be fully identified.

Institutional Strain

During the 1990s, researchers began to consider the views of Latinx attitudes and perceptions of police misconduct, specifically noting "a racial-ethnic hierarchy exists as to perceptions of police, with African Americans exhibiting the most negative attitudes, Whites the most positive, and Hispanics holding more intermediate attitudes" (Graziano & Gauthier, 2019, p. 657). Agnew (2006) indicated vicarious strains are relevant in GST. Vicarious strain implies "real-life strain experienced by others around the individual; directly witnessed by the individual but experienced by others; may hear these others experience strain; or may hear about the strain of these others" (Agnew, 2006, pp. 603-604) can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of police if seen as unjust (Hagen et al., 2005; Thaxton & Agnew, 2018; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011).

Research suggests that "differential treatment by police due to race and ethnicity has existed since the formation of professional police in the United States" (Nuño, 2018. p. 2), and experiences with police authorities should be considered in understating the strain and delinquency relationship (Pérez et al., 2008).

The Current Study

Research indicates the Latinx population disproportionality commits crime. LGST provides a theoretical approach and framework to examine the unique strains that may exist in the strain delinquency relationship and is the first step in addressing disproportionality. However, the impact police perceptions have on Latinx delinquency has yet to be fully identified (Isom Scott et al., 2021; Isom Scott et al., 2020; Thaxton & Agnew, 2018). This study will further examine LGST by assessing the impact acculturation and negative police perceptions have on delinquency.

The following research question and hypotheses guided this study:

RQ1 Does acculturation strain impact the likelihood of Latinx youth committing status offenses and delinquency?

H1 Acculturation strain will increase the likelihood of Latinx youth committing status offenses and delinquency.

RQ2 Does negative perceptions of police impact the likelihood of Latinx youth committing status offenses and delinquency?

H2 Negative perceptions of police will increase the likelihood of Latinx youth committing delinquency.

Method

Data and Sample

This research analyzed the Gang Resistance Education Training (GREAT) data set. This data set originally sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the GREAT program by surveying five distinct groups, which included: eighth-grade students in a cross-sectional design (Wave1), law enforcement officers (Wave 2), educators (Wave 3), parents (Wave 4), and students in a longitudinal design (Wave 5) (Esbensen, 1999). This study utilized the students in the longitudinal design and examined the first and second waves of youth surveyed. The student portion of the survey initially examined changes in attitudes and behavior relevant to gang activity and delinquency over time. The total study is comprised of 11 cities. The cities sampled for Wave 5 in this study include Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Portland, Oregon; Phoenix, Arizona; Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska; and Las Cruces, New Mexico (Esbensen, 1999). The original sample for Wave 5 comprised 22 schools, 153 classrooms, and roughly 1,500 students of diverse backgrounds (e.g., African Americans, Latinos, Whites) between the ages of 13 and 18.

Measures

Dependent Variables. The general delinquency measure was a combination of non-violent delinquency, violent delinquency, illegal substance use, and status offense measures. *Non-violent delinquency* was measured using four items by respondents self-reporting the number of times they had: (1) "destroyed property," (2) "ever spray painted," (3) "stolen or tried to steal something worth less than $50," (4) "stolen or tried to steal something worth more than $50."

Violent delinquency was measured using five items by the respondents self-reporting the number of times they had: (1) "hit someone," (2) "attacked someone with a weapon," (3) "committed armed robbery," (4) "been involved in gang fights," (5) "shot at someone." Violent delinquency had a mean of $M=2.80$ and $SD=11.9$. *Illegal substance*

use was measured using four observed measures capturing the number of times each individual used the following substances: (1) "alcohol," (2) "marijuana," and (3) "other illegal drugs." Illegal substance use had a mean of $M=1.83$ and $SD=8.87$. *Status offenses* were measured by respondents answering the number of times they have (1) "skipped class" and (2) "smoked tobacco." According to Bynum and Thompson (2002), status offenses, while not criminal in the usual sense, are acts such as school truancy, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, or acts illegal due only to the age status of the juvenile. Status offenses had a mean of $M=3.19$ and $SD=33.84$.

Independent Variables. Perceptions of police were measured by students answering on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very strongly agree" to "very strongly disagree." to what extent they agreed that (1) "police are respectful to people like me." (2) "police officers are usually rude," (3) "courteous," (4) "friendly," (5) "prejudice against minorities." ($\alpha = .784$). Items one and five listed below were reverse coded. Lower scores indicate negative perceptions of police racial discrimination.

Control Variables. Parental monitoring was measured by respondents answering the extent to which they "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) with the following statements: (1) "my parents know where I am," (2) "if I am not at home my parents know who I am with," (3) "when I go someplace, I leave a note for my parents," (4) "I know how to get in touch with my parents if they are not at home." ($\alpha = .701$). *Risk Seeking Behaviors* response options were on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), where students indicate to what degree (1) "do what brings pleasure now," (2) "test myself by doing something risky," (3) "take risks for fun." ($\alpha = .756$). *Impulsivity* response options were on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very strongly disagree" to "very strongly agree," where students indicate to what degree (1) "I often act on the spur of the moment," (2) "no effort in planning for the future," (3) "I often do whatever brings me pleasure here and now." ($\alpha = .556$).

Analytical Strategy

The current study utilized count data for delinquency, illegal substance use, and status offenses. Negative binomial regression models accounted for count data (Coxe et al., 2009; McLean & Wolfe, 2016) and were utilized for this study. According to Tabachnick & Fidell (2019), deleting a variable with missing data is acceptable if the pattern is randomly missing. Missing data for this analysis was determined missing at random (MAR), and therefore, listwise deletion was utilized to account for missing data throughout the sample. After listwise deletion, the total sample size for the current research consisted of a sample population of $N=1167$, of which 242 represent Latinx, 169 African Americans, 563 White, and 193 combined other racial/ethnic groups. Males

comprised roughly 46% of the population, and females represented approximately 54% of the sample. Youth were between the ages of 10-14 years old.

Table 1 (Model 1-3) analyzed the relationship between police perceptions, control variables, and general delinquency in Wave 1.

Table 1: Negative Binomial Regression Model for Wave 1 General Delinquency [a] (*N* = 1167)

	Model 1		Model 2	
Variables	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Latinx	.032**	.09	.222*	.09
Acculturation	-1.49**	.138	-.867**	.15
Ethnic Identity	.010	.01	-.016	.01
Police Perceptions	-.172**	.01	-.006	.01
Controls				
Self-Control			-.021**	.02
Age			.330**	.05
Gender			-.185**	.07
Gang Membership			.688**	.09
LR χ²	915.7**		2307.3**	

Note: Entries are regression coefficients (*β*), robust standard errors that adjust for general delinquency (*SE*), *Exp(β)* probability distributions.
a. Negative binomial regression models
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Results suggest Latinx youth who reported negative perceptions of police were likelier to report delinquency. Model 2 presents the negative binomial regression model, which includes control variables. Males were likelier to report delinquency than females; less parental monitoring increased delinquency, and less self-control also increased general delinquency. Interaction between factors occurs when the effects of one-factor change on different levels of the other factor and provide a better interpretation of the relationship between independent and dependent variables (Mertler & Vannatta, 2017). Although the interaction was insignificant in Wave 1 Model 3, it was in the expected direction.

Table 2 (Models 4-6) analyzed the relationship between police perceptions and general delinquency in Wave 2. Negative police perceptions increased general delinquency in Wave 2. Model 5 suggests that youth who had more self-control increased general delinquency. Less parental monitoring increased general delinquency. Older youth were likelier to report general delinquency, and boys were likelier to report general delinquency than girls. Results of the interaction effects examined in this study suggest Latinx youth who reported more negative police perceptions were likelier to report delinquency in Wave 2 Model 6.

Table 2: Negative binomial regression model for Wave 2 General Delinquency [a] (*N* = 1167)

	Model 3		Model 4	
Variables	*β*	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Latinx	1.547**	.08	1.57**	.10
Acculturation	-2.52**	.14	-.177**	.15
Ethnic Identity	.046**	.01	.065**	.01
Police Perceptions	-.218**	.01	-.066**	.01
Controls				
Self-Control			.036**	.01
Age			.724**	.06
Gender			-1.13**	.07
Gang Membership			.079	
LR χ²	915.7**		2068.4**	

Note: Entries are regression coefficients (*β*), robust standard errors that adjust for general delinquency (*SE*), *Exp(β)* probability distributions.
a. Negative binomial regression models
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Discussion

Implications from this study provide a better understanding of how police perceptions impact Latinx youth toward delinquency. With the continued civil unrest and racial injustices throughout the United States, it is essential to consider the influence police perceptions and police racial discrimination have on Latinx delinquency. Pérez and colleagues (2008) indicated the importance of examining other arenas (e.g., criminal justice) where Latinos might experience discrimination and other ethnic-specific stressors. Although outside of the scope of this study police perceptions may be assumed in the study of strain for Latinx youth. The arguments and analysis in this study demonstrate that negative police perceptions were likely to impact Latinx delinquency. Past literature assumes the importance and effect of an individual's perception of criminal justice injustices (Kaufman et al., 2008; Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Thus, this study is essential in identifying the effect negative police perceptions have on Latinx delinquency.

Limitations

The current study presents several limitations. First, the secondary data set utilized is older and was administered between 1995 and 1999. This could impact results needing to be more relevant. However, it seems that the results of this study (i.e., negative police perceptions) and how this impacts delinquency are still issues in the 21st century. Second, in this study, the Latinx population represented roughly 20% of the sample, making this

study less generalizable across the Latinx population. However, the Latinx population was the second-largest racial group within the overall data set. Further investigation and indicators of police perceptions and police racial discrimination should be examined in the Latinx strain delinquency relationship. An additional limitation of this study is the examination of only police perceptions instead of measuring experienced possible police strain (e.g., police harassment). Also, this study used self-report data, which presents limitations with memory and accuracy. This study only examined two waves in this study with youth who had a mean average age of 12, which may be a limitation of this study.

Future Research

Future research should consider recent data representative of the Latinx population. For instance, future research should include other sub-groups (Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Cubans, Colombians, Peruvians, Brazilians, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Bolivians, Ecuadorians, Panamanians) that are represented throughout the Latino culture. Additionally, all ethnic-specific strains should be assumed in the same study. For example, while beyond the present scope, future research should examine racial discrimination experienced or perceived in schools, the public, and police in the same study. It would be beneficial to examine all the waves in this study to better understand youth older than 17 or 18 years of age. Future studies should also control for deviant peers when examining youth delinquency in a study.

Conclusion

The present study garnered insight into the impact negative police perceptions have on Latinx delinquency. Notably, police perceptions were impactful on Latinx delinquency. Latinx youth who perceived police officers negatively were more likely to report delinquency. This finding extends Latinx research by examining other arenas Latinos perceive police and how this impacts delinquency. This is an important finding for both citizens and police. It implies that, as a community, we should work towards garnering more positive perceptions of police, whether that means more positive interactions between police and youth or the training of police and citizens for both gaining more insight into the ideas and concerns of both. The differential ways Latinos may experience strain are complex, as the Latinx population is not homogeneous. However, significant steps are being taken to continue research among Latinos.

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