

# Beyond the Fear of Deportation: Understanding Unauthorized Immigrants' Ambivalence Toward the Police

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## Abstract

This article draws on in-depth interviews and ethnography to examine unauthorized Mexican immigrants' perceptions of and experiences with police in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Most existing research focuses on immigrants' fears of deportation as the primary determinant of negative attitudes toward the police. We add to this body of work by arguing that police interactions serve as important moments of legal socialization that also contribute to undocumented immigrants' legal attitudes. Our findings reveal that undocumented immigrants express a great deal of ambivalence about American police, believing them to be both trustworthy and overly punitive. Ultimately, the ambivalence that undocumented immigrants feel about the police mirrors the tension between inclusion and exclusion that characterizes immigrant life in the United States.

## Keywords

policing, immigrants, immigration enforcement, legal attitudes, Philadelphia, Los Angeles

The tension between inclusion and exclusion is the defining feature of immigrant “illegality” in the United States. While unauthorized immigrants are formally excluded from the United States insofar as the federal government does not sanction their presence, they are partially included in American cities as residents entitled to rights and

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services. In an effort to provide some protection to undocumented immigrants and their families, some U.S. cities have declared themselves “sanctuaries” (Ridgley, 2008). Symbolically, “sanctuary” cities recognize unauthorized immigrants as valued residents and workers who “belong” in the places where they have taken up residence. Materially, “sanctuary” cities limit police cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) by disallowing police queries into one’s immigration status or declining to honor immigration detainers (requests from ICE to detain people so that ICE may assume custody).

Over the past two decades, the federal government has strategically used criminal justice institutions, such as jails, courthouses, and law enforcement agencies, to identify removable immigrants to deport them. These new strategies make contact with the criminal justice system, and police, particularly risky for undocumented immigrants (Stumpf, 2006).

Police interactions with unauthorized immigrants are complicated by a patchwork of laws, policies, and practices that may simultaneously allow, mandate, and/or prohibit collaborations with ICE (Ridgley, 2008; Varsanyi, Lewis, Provine, & Decker, 2012). Local law enforcement agencies work in divergent regulatory contexts, but they are ultimately responsible for providing police services to all residents, regardless of residents’ legal standing in the country (Armenta, 2016; Provine, Varsanyi, Lewis, & Decker, 2016). At the same time, law breaking is a feature of daily life for unauthorized immigrants because many mundane daily activities (e.g., working or driving) are illegal for residents who live in the country without permission. As a result, even when law enforcement agencies aspire to protect immigrants, unauthorized immigrants are vulnerable to fines, tickets, and arrest because they violate laws that police feel obligated to enforce (Armenta, 2017).

Today, fear of deportation is presumed to be the master frame through which unauthorized immigrants understand their interactions with legal authorities (Menjívar, 2011; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Indeed, numerous studies have found unfavorable attitudes toward the police among undocumented immigrant populations, that these perceptions stem from law enforcement’s real or perceived ties to immigration enforcement, and that immigrants are therefore unwilling to call on the police for help (Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004; Nguyen & Gill, 2015; Theodore & Habans, 2016). While we do not discount the powerful role that the fear of deportation plays in undocumented immigrants’ everyday lives, we seek to foreground the role of policing practices in shaping immigrants’ perceptions and attitudes about police contact.

There are hints that unauthorized immigrants’ relations with the police may not be as uniformly negative as the literature implies. First, some research suggests that immigrants have a surprising amount of trust in U.S. police, especially when compared with police in their countries of origin (Correia, 2010; Kirk et al., 2012). Second, the broader sociological literature on policing shows that people who do not hold the police in high regard may still call them for help under specific circumstances (Bell, 2016; Hagan, McCarthy, Herda, & Chandrasekher, 2018). More generally, police bureaucracies are service agencies as well as regulatory ones (Marrow, 2009).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with undocumented Mexican immigrants in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, this article examines how undocumented Mexican

immigrants perceive the police, how these perceptions are shaped by police practices, and how immigrants' perceptions of the police shape their decisions about calling for help. We show that undocumented immigrants express a great deal of ambivalence about U.S. authorities. Compared with police forces in Mexico, our respondents believe that U.S. police are honest, hardworking, and trustworthy. Still, even respondents who do not believe that contact with the police results in deportation can be hesitant to engage with this surveilling institution. We argue that police interactions serve as moments of legal socialization that contribute to undocumented immigrants' legal attitudes. Sometimes these interactions underscore that immigrants are regarded with suspicion, such as when interviewees reported that police stops feel arbitrary, punitive, and coercive. Other times, the police treated respondents respectfully, making respondents feel recognized as legitimate community residents. Ultimately, the ambivalence that undocumented immigrants feel about the police mirrors the tensions between inclusion and exclusion that characterizes immigrant life in the United States.

Our study contributes to two major bodies of research. First, it contributes to research on immigrant–police relations. To date, most research on minorities' relationships with the police focuses on the experiences of African American citizens (Bell, 2016; Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Gau & Brunson, 2010). Considerably less is known about the experiences of Latinos, particularly Latino immigrants (Martínez, 2007). Second, this research sheds light on undocumented immigrants' legal attitudes. Legal attitudes are important because they predict people's willingness to call and cooperate with the police and to comply with laws more generally (Tyler, 2006). Understanding the role of the law in undocumented immigrants' daily lives is central to understanding “illegality” (Abrego, 2014; Coutin, 2000; Menjivar, 2011; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012), but to date, few studies have examined legal attitudes among undocumented immigrants. This is an important omission since irregular legal statuses create “legal hyperawareness,” an extreme attention to the law and its potential effects on one's everyday life (Menjivar, 2011). The nascent scholarship in this area suggests that unauthorized immigrants' experiences with immigrant detention is leading to the development of legal cynicism among detained immigrants (Ryo, 2016, 2017). In contrast, our study shows how experiences with the police affect unauthorized immigrants' legal attitudes and how these legal orientations shape their willingness to engage with the police.

## Latino Immigrants and the Police

The tangle of inclusion and exclusion that characterizes unauthorized immigrants' daily lives creates fraught relations between undocumented immigrants and the police. Against this backdrop, a growing body of research shows that U.S.-born Latinos, Latino immigrants, and undocumented Latinos generally distrust law enforcement agencies.

One body of work addresses how variation *within* the Latino community affects perceptions of the police; however, these studies present inconsistent findings. For example, a 2002 survey of Latino immigrants and nonimmigrants in Reno, Nevada,

found that immigrants held police in higher regard than U.S. born Latinos (Correia, 2010). In contrast, a 2004 study of Latinos in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, and Phoenix found that immigrants expressed more fear of the police than did U.S. citizens, and that unauthorized immigrants expressed greater reluctance to contact the police than their legally present and citizen counterparts (Theodore & Habans, 2016). In this study, researchers found that legal status was a more important determinant of police perceptions than age, gender, and education (Theodore & Habans, 2016). In contrast, a quantitative study relying on the 2008 Pew Hispanic Center National Survey of Latinos documented few significant differences between citizens' and non-citizens' perceptions of the police but found that respondents who reported they feared deportation also expressed the greatest reluctance to report crime and the greatest skepticism that the police would treat them fairly (Becerra, Wagaman, Androff, Messing, & Castillo, 2016). More recently, Menjivar, Simmons, Alvord, and Valdez (2018) identified variation in respondents' inclination to call the police by both legal status *and* local context. The authors find that U.S.-born Latinos were more inclined than immigrants to call the police in Houston and Los Angeles. In immigrant-friendly Chicago, however, immigrants were as inclined to call the police as U.S.-born Latinos, whereas in Phoenix, U.S.-born Latinos were as reluctant to call the police as immigrants.

Qualitative work contextualizes some of these findings. In their thorough examination of Latino immigrants' perceptions of the police in Phoenix, sociologists Cecilia Menjivar and Cynthia Bejarano (2004) show that immigrants are hesitant to interact with law enforcement because of experiences with corrupt police in their countries of origin, fear of immigration enforcement, and reports from friends and family about negative experiences with police in the United States. Respondents also described language as an obstacle, expressing doubt about their ability to communicate effectively with officers in Spanish. In a more recent study conducted in two North Carolina counties that implemented a local immigration enforcement program called 287(g), Nguyen and Gill (2015) found that local immigration enforcement produced a "chilling effect," whereby immigrants expressed reluctance to report crime as a result of local law enforcement's close ties to ICE.

The type of contact that residents have with the police also affects their perceptions. Police primarily interact with Latino immigrant residents through nonvoluntary enforcement activities such as vehicle stops and checkpoints that may result in arrest, detention, or deportation (Armenta, 2017; Culver, 2004; Stuesse & Coleman, 2014). As a result, Latino immigrants believe that police engage in racially discriminatory policing practices, participate in immigration enforcement, or otherwise treat immigrants unfairly (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015; Theodore & Habans, 2016). These negative encounters also make respondents fear future contact (Theodore & Habans, 2016).

Taken together, the literature strongly suggests that lack of legal status is the primary determinant of unauthorized immigrants' negative perceptions of the police, that fear of deportation drives these negative perceptions, and that unauthorized immigrants are therefore unwilling to call the police for help. While we do not disagree with the broad strokes of these findings, we believe that these characterizations belie the

complexity of immigrants' legal attitudes. Thus, we join an interdisciplinary group of scholars who call for multidimensional and situational conceptualizations of legal attitudes (Bell, 2016; Boutros, 2018; Hitchens, Carr, & Clampet-Lundquist, 2018).

## **Understanding Unauthorized Immigrants' Legal Attitudes**

Research on undocumented immigrants and the law has tended to focus on legal consciousness, which refers to how ideas about the law circulate as cultural schemas that sustain the law's hegemony (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). For example, Gleeson (2010) draws from the literature on legal consciousness to reveal that fear of deportation discourages injured, undocumented Latino workers from reporting on-the-job injuries and filing workers' compensation claims. In an examination of variation in legal consciousness, Abrego (2014) argues that undocumented immigrants who arrive as adults experience illegality as fear, whereas the 1.5 generation (those who came to the United States as children) experience it as stigma; both legal orientations make it challenging for immigrants to claim rights. Menjivar and Lakhani (2016) find that the process of naturalization changes immigrants' legal consciousness, encouraging them to undergo long-lasting and permanent life changes to demonstrate their "deservingness" and moral worth. Last, Ryo (2015) shows that unauthorized immigrants view U.S. immigration law as illegitimate and that immigrant detention is leading to the development of legal cynicism among those who are incarcerated (Ryo, 2016, 2017). Our research adds to this burgeoning area of scholarship by applying insights from research on legal attitudes to unauthorized immigrants' perceptions of the police.

Encounters with the police are central to shaping people's legal attitudes (Gau & Brunson, 2010; Tyler, 2004, 2006). When police stops seem arbitrary and overly punitive, people may develop legal cynicism, an orientation in which individuals view the law and its agents as unfair and unresponsive (Gau & Brunson, 2010). In contrast, when people feel that police are respectful and fair, they are more likely to believe in the legitimacy of the legal system and its agents (Tyler, 2004). The literatures on legal cynicism and legal legitimacy have largely developed separately from one another, but new research shows that these legal orientations are not mutually exclusive (Bell, 2016; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Gau, 2015). For example, research shows that many 911 calls come from neighborhoods characterized by high levels of legal cynicism, contrary to scholars' assumption that legal cynicism precludes cooperation with the police (Hagan et al., 2018). Indeed, even individuals with hostile views of the police may endorse "law and order" policies and advocate for an expanded police presence (Carr et al., 2007). In response, Bell (2016) developed the concept of "situational trust" to explain why poor African American mothers make strategic decisions to occasionally rely on the police, despite their high levels of legal cynicism. The present study adds to this literature, which has previously focused largely on African American citizens, to examine the nature and origins of legal cynicism and legal legitimacy among undocumented Mexican immigrants.

## Method and Context

To theorize how police interactions shape undocumented immigrants' legal attitudes, we draw on data gathered through two separate studies of undocumented Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Both Philadelphia and Los Angeles are home to sizable undocumented Mexican populations. Los Angeles represents a traditional immigrant destination for Mexican immigrants, whereas Philadelphia represents a re-emerging immigrant gateway (Singer, 2004).

One author (Armenta) draws on 50 semistructured in-depth interviews conducted from 2015 to 2018 with unauthorized Mexican men and women living in Philadelphia. Respondents were referred to the study via snowball sampling. Interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours, examined each respondent's migration history, work history, contact with legal institutions and bureaucracies, attitudes about the law, and perceptions of and decisions about police contact. Interviews took place in a location of the respondent's choosing, including public parks, front stoops, and private homes. Each participant received \$50 for participating in the study. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed. These transcriptions were coded for emergent themes using a qualitative data analysis program.

The other author (Rosales) draws from 22 in-depth formal interviews, field interviews, and participation-observation work with undocumented immigrant street vendors in Los Angeles, conducted from 2006 to 2012. Rosales embedded herself within a network of fruit vendors, shadowing and working alongside vendors as they prepped their fruit carts and sold their products. Rosales's formal interviews ( $n = 17$ ) ranged between 30 minutes and 2 hours and examined respondents' migration history, social networks, work history, and work experiences. Five informal interviews, which covered the same themes, were conducted while prepping carts in the morning or on street corners during the vendors' workday. Rosales conducted all the fieldwork and interviews with street vendors in Spanish. Formal interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated verbatim. Informal interviews were reconstructed from memory, with notes taken on site. Formally interviewed participants were compensated \$30 for their time; informally interviewed vendors were not compensated. Field notes and interviews were coded into themes for analysis. Coding, organizing, and analyzing of data were based on grounded theory methods.

While we conducted these two research projects independently, we bring them together to underscore the similarities and differences in undocumented immigrants' perceptions of the police across local contexts. The studies included comparable respondents—undocumented Mexican nationals, predominantly from the state of Puebla, who arrived in the United States as economic migrants. The majority of respondents in both studies had lived in the United States for less than 10 years at the time of data collection. While all the respondents in the Los Angeles sample work informally as fruit vendors, the majority of respondents in the Philadelphia sample are employed in the restaurant or service industries. We pooled our data to analyze every mention and interaction with police authorities that appeared in our respective

samples, and we used the similarities and differences across our data to draw conclusions about how immigrants' interactions with the police inform their legal attitudes.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion in Philadelphia and Los Angeles*

Philadelphia and Los Angeles have some of the most progressive immigration policies in the United States. However, while numerous policies limit local participation in federal immigration enforcement, undocumented immigrants remain vulnerable because protections have developed unevenly. In Table 1, we document the distinct immigration policy contexts of Philadelphia and Los Angeles, identifying when important policy changes occurred. Although some policies changed during the period in which we conducted our research, these changes did not have immediate discernable impacts on immigrants' perceptions of law enforcement. We provide additional information about both contexts below.

A traditional immigrant gateway, Los Angeles has been an important destination for Mexican immigrants for more than a hundred years (Singer, 2004). Today, Los Angeles has the largest immigrant population of any metropolitan area in the United States, and Mexicans constitute the largest foreign-born group in the city (Singer, 2004). Los Angeles law enforcement agencies have a long history of ambivalent policies and practices toward Mexican immigrants. Through the 1970s, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) routinely helped the federal government deport Mexican residents (Maya, 2002). To improve its relations with the city's Latinos, in 1979, the LAPD implemented Special Order 40, barring queries about individuals' immigration status (Maya, 2002). Still, Special Order 40 did not preclude the department from cooperating with federal immigration enforcement efforts in other ways. For example, in 1992, the Los Angeles Webster Commission examined complaints that the LAPD collaborated with federal immigration officials to detain and deport hundreds of suspected undocumented immigrants during the Los Angeles riots (Berger, 1992).

The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD), which patrols unincorporated areas of the city and maintains the county's jails, has a long history of cooperation with immigration authorities. Immigration authorities have had nearly unfettered access to local jails, databases, and arrestee lists. Between 2005 and 2015, the LASD also participated in 287(g), a federal program that deputized LASD employees to enforce immigration laws. Today, the LASD has scaled back its collaborations with ICE to comply with California state law, but reports suggest that cooperation still occurs informally (Huntsman, 2017).

In contrast to Los Angeles' enduring relevance as an immigrant destination, immigration to Philadelphia had nearly ceased by the mid-20th century (Singer et al., 2008). Philadelphia's robust manufacturing sector collapsed, and the city began losing population and its tax base as more middle-class residents fled to the suburbs each decade (Singer et al., 2008). New streams of immigration to Philadelphia in the 1990s and 2000s halted the city's population slide and ushered in growth for the first time in 50 years (Ginsberg, 2018). The city actively encouraged this population growth, and local

**Table 1.** Inclusionary and Exclusionary Immigrant Policies in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

Policy	Description	Philadelphia	Los Angeles
State identification and driver's license	<i>Undocumented immigrants are eligible for state identification and driver's licenses</i>	No	Since 2015
Police directives	<i>Police prohibited from asking about immigration status and/or sharing information about immigration status</i>	Since 2009	Since 1979
ICE detainer policies	<i>Jail honors requests from ICE to hold immigrants in custody up to an extra 48 hours so that ICE may assume custody</i>	Prohibited since 2014 <sup>a</sup>	Prohibited since 2014 <sup>a</sup>
Secure communities program	<i>County participates in an ICE interior enforcement program that identifies incarcerated removable immigrants through arrest databases</i>	2008-2014	2009-2014
Priority enforcement program	<i>Successor program to secure communities</i>	No	2015-2017
287(g)	<i>Program deputizes local law enforcement agents to enforce immigration laws in county jails</i>	No	2005-2015
ICE access to arrest databases and jail resources	<i>ICE officers have access to real-time county arrest information, which they can use to take immigrants into custody</i>	Yes, but access revoked August 2018	Yes

Sources. Safe and Responsible Drivers Act Assembly Bill 60 (Stats. 2013, Ch. 524), LAPD Special Order No. 40, Avila, Bello, Graber, and Marquez (2018), Graber and Marquez (2016), and Huntsman (2017). Note. ICE = Immigration and Customs Enforcement; LAPD = Los Angeles Police Department.

<sup>a</sup>Except for certain serious offenses.

leaders discussed plans to attract and support immigrant residents who might revitalize neighborhoods and fill labor needs (Hing, 2002).

Given the relatively recent arrival of Mexicans to Philadelphia, the police do not have a long history of contact with Mexican immigrants, but the department has a long and troubled history with the city's African American and Puerto Rican residents (Whalen, 2001). The department had no official immigration policy until 1992, when Directive 5.8 instructed detectives to notify Immigration and Naturalization Service of "any alien who is arrested for any crime" (Philadelphia Police Department, 1992). In 2001, the department released a memorandum to clarify the department's immigration policy. The memo affirmed that all immigrants are entitled to police services and prohibited sharing information about immigrant victims but left standing the requirement



that officers share information about immigrants “suspected of criminal activity” (Philadelphia Police Department, 2001). Since 2009, all municipal employees, including police personnel, are prohibited from inquiring about residents’ immigration status. An early participant in ICE’s Secure Communities program, Philadelphia, stopped honoring ICE detainer requests in 2014 and ended ICE’s access to the city’s arraignment database in 2018.

## **Findings: Legal Attitudes About the Police**

Immigrants to the United States do not develop their legal attitudes solely in the United States; they also stem from experiences in their country of origin (Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004). Few of our respondents had positive opinions about Mexican police or the Mexican legal system. While they conceded that the laws in Mexico and the United States were not that different, they insisted that getting “justice” in Mexico required bribing Mexican officials. Respondents described Mexican police as corrupt, lazy, and dishonest. Several informants shared stories of attempting to report crimes in Mexico, before being rebuffed by officers who were disinterested in doing their jobs. Indeed, only one Philadelphia-based interviewee had a positive story to report about Mexican police officers.

Compared with the overwhelmingly negative perceptions immigrants had of Mexican police, their perceptions of U.S. police were decidedly more positive. All respondents believed that U.S. police would show up if called, would generally do their jobs, and could not be bribed. For example, Mauricio, a Philadelphia resident, explained,

With the police here, well, as long you don’t do anything wrong, they’re fine. I’ve seen that police here are more just because they have an honorable salary and they risk their lives to fight crime, no? It’s not like in our countries, with corruption and bribery. Here the police respect justice and the law, and they make people follow the law.

Mauricio’s comment suggested that he believed that American police behaved fairly, therefore compelling people to comply with the law. Indeed, research shows that people are more likely to comply with laws when they believe that the police are fair and impartial (Tyler, 2006).

Although immigrants uniformly favored the U.S. legal system over Mexico’s, they voiced diverse opinions about police in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. These opinions largely developed through respondents’ personal experiences and interactions with local authorities. Negative perceptions stemmed from respondents’ feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness during police interactions, particularly, when respondents felt unfairly scrutinized or disrespected. In contrast, when respondents had satisfying experiences with law enforcement, they were more likely to believe that the police could be called upon for protection. As we outline below, interactions with the police highlight immigrants’ exclusion and inclusion.

### *The Punitive Power of the State: Personal Experiences and the Development of Legal Cynicism*

At the time that this research was conducted, unauthorized immigrants were ineligible for drivers' licenses in both California and Pennsylvania, so respondents drove in contravention of the law. In both cities, respondents reported being pulled over for minor violations, including dark-window tint, inoperable blinkers, broken taillights, failing to make a complete stop, not wearing a seatbelt, and making an illegal U turn. During traffic stops, police scrutinized motorists and decided on appropriate sanctions. Although these stops did not typically result in arrests, respondents still felt that they were unfair because most officers chose to ticket respondents for driving without a license and would then impound their cars. This made "minor" traffic stops extraordinarily expensive, costing respondents an average of \$600 per stop. Traffic stops worried respondents, not necessarily because they were a route to deportation but also because they threatened respondents' livelihoods. Some respondents chose to abandon their cars in the impound lot, unwilling to pay exorbitant fees to recover their vehicles. Andres, in Philadelphia, summed up his opinion of the police this way: "Well, I don't like them very much because I've been stopped and it's expensive." Likewise, when Manuel's pickup truck was impounded in Los Angeles, it affected his livelihood not only because of the high cost of recovery but also because it prevented him from transporting his pushcart to his street corner to work.

As Manuel's experience suggests, police were a threat to the financial security of respondents in Los Angeles. In addition to driving violations fruit vendors might encounter, they also were prohibited from doing their work. Municipal ordinances prohibited street vending, so their informal work was always subject to police and health department scrutiny and enforcement. Ubiquitous but unauthorized, street vendors faced enforcement for violating city and county ordinances regulating sidewalk activity and public health. Officers could ticket vendors, force them to dump their merchandise, and confiscate their vending carts. Respondents felt like they were treated like criminals for earning a living. One respondent, Cristian, said in a conversation among vendors,

If they (police) really wanted to do their job they would go after the real criminals. They go after us who are working hard and are not doing anything wrong. There [are] a lot of *cholos* in my neighborhood who sell drugs and get into fights, but the cops never come for them, but I come to work and there they are harassing me.

Police interactions with vendors could also turn adversarial. For example, one morning an officer instructed Salvador to throw away all his fruit. Salvador did not immediately comply, attempting to negotiate with the officer to salvage his unused and unpeeled fruit. He told the police officer that he had a vending permit and attempted to hand it to the officer for inspection. Salvador also offered to leave but requested to keep his fruit. The officer chafed at Salvador's noncompliance, yelling at Salvador, who protested. Then, the officer raised the stakes, telling Salvador that if he did not do

as he was ordered (throw away the fruit), he would call ICE. It was this threat, not commonly made by officers, which scared Salvador into compliance. Salvador threw all his fruit away in a public trashcan, which soon overflowed. Fruit spilled to the sidewalk. Unmoved, the officer insisted that Salvador continue to dump his product, even though there was no place to put it. When Salvador was done, the officer ordered Salvador to place his box of trash on top of the patrol car's trunk. Salvador complied, and the officer peeled away, strewing the trash all over the parking lot. Humiliated, Salvador packed up his cart and cleaned up the mess, so that no one would blame it on him.

Respondents resented being detained and regarded with suspicion or contempt when they felt that there was no legitimate basis for doing so. For example, late one evening, Ricardo was detained for more than an hour on his way home from work at a popular Philadelphia restaurant because he fit the profile of a suspect. Ricardo explained,

The police stopped me because they were looking for a burglar that supposedly was wearing what I was wearing. . . . Luckily, I had the receipt that showed when I clocked in and clocked out of work. They took my fingerprints and took my picture to see if I was the person they were looking for, to show the owner of the house. He said it wasn't me and they let me go, but honestly, I don't understand why they took my fingerprints.

Ricardo was unsettled by this interaction because police did not immediately release him when he showed proof that he had just left work. Although they eventually let him leave, they retained his biometric information, and Ricardo worried that police possession of his fingerprints could negatively affect him in the future.

When immigrants responded in fear, officers could misinterpret this fear as proof that participants were involved in wrongdoing. In Philadelphia, Lara confessed that she was wary of the police because of the time they entered her house to search for a weapon after a neighbor called the police to report hearing shots fired from her apartment. The police pounded on the door, then barged inside with guns drawn when Lara's husband opened the door. Hearing the commotion, Lara's cousin refused to come downstairs and crawled under a bed in fear. The officers swept the house, rifling through drawers while insisting that Lara and her housemates turn in a weapon that they did not have. Officers were even more convinced that Lara's family had something to hide when they found her cousin under the bed. Finally, after turning the house upside down, an officer looked at Lara's bike, which was resting in the living room. Suddenly, Lara remembered that her bike tire had popped that evening, emitting a loud bang. She pointed it out, wondering if someone had mistaken it for a gunshot. The officers inspected the bike and began to laugh, realizing their error. Minutes later the officers left without an apology, still chuckling. Lara and her family cleaned up the mess the officers had left behind and moved out of the apartment the following month. In the following years, Lara was mugged twice, but she declined to call the police to report the offenses. Asked to account for her unwillingness to call the police, Lara explained that she had not seen the assailants clearly and doubted she could describe

or identify them. Thus, she did not see the point of calling the police, waiting for them to show up, and filing a report when it was unlikely to yield results.

While most research attributes immigrants' fear of the police to fear of deportation, we argue that negative appraisals of the police often stemmed from directly experiencing police interactions that immigrants regarded as unjust. This is an important addition to the literature, as it shifts the focus from the characteristics of immigrant populations to aggressive and punitive police practices. In both Philadelphia and Los Angeles, immigrants resented being punished for violating laws with which they could not comply, such as driving or vending without a license. Even when police behaved respectfully, immigrants did not regard these violations as real crimes, and their enforcement threatened respondents' economic subsistence (Prieto, 2018). Some respondents also experienced direct hostility and suspicion from officers. These experiences signaled that police officers viewed them as criminals and highlighted immigrants' vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of police authority. That is, negative exchanges served as moments of legal socialization in which respondents learned about their social standing. These feelings made respondents cynical about the police; they believed that police were unfair and unable or unwilling to help them.

### *Seeing the Possibility of Police Protection*

Although the previous section demonstrated that unauthorized immigrants may have negative experiences with the police, it is crucial to recognize that unauthorized immigrants' experiences and perceptions of the police are far from monolithic. In the aggregate, unauthorized immigrants may hold less favorable opinions about the police than U.S. citizens, but that does not mean that they hold uniformly negative views of the police. Indeed, a number of respondents had favorable attitudes toward the police because their personal experiences taught them that the police were fair and reasonable.

When Rosana arrived in Philadelphia at 19 years old, she was terrified of the police because she assumed that they functioned like immigration enforcement. After years of working at a taco truck and occasionally serving police officers, her fears began to subside. By the time Rosana was 25, she had experienced numerous interactions with local police and suffered no nefarious consequences. There was the time when Rosana found a phone in the gutter and took it home, only to be startled a few hours later by an officer pounding on the door. The phone belonged to a police officer, and he had used remote location tracking to find it. Rosana opened the door hesitantly, and the officer barked that he had tracked his phone to this location. Quickly, Rosana grabbed the phone off the table and handed it to him, explaining exactly where she had found it in the gutter. Realizing that he had dropped it, the officer's demeanor changed immediately. He thanked Rosana and tried to offer her a reward, which she declined. On another occasion, a "very nice" Puerto Rican police officer pulled over her husband in South Philadelphia while Rosana was a passenger in the vehicle. The car was registered and insured, but Rosana's husband was an unlicensed motorist. The officer declined to ticket Rosana's husband or impound his vehicle, telling him sternly in

Spanish, "I don't want to see you driving again." Rosana's positive experiences were proof to her that police officers in Philadelphia could be trusted. In fact, she longed for more frequent police patrols, believing that they might protect her from street harassment. "Honestly, I would like to see more police in my neighborhood so that I could turn to them when I'm getting harassed on the street," she said.

Benito, also in Philadelphia, recalled a time that he caused a minor car accident by changing lanes when a car was in his blind spot. The other motorist was furious and made snide comments about Benito's immigration status when the officer arrived to take a report. Benito had insurance, but he worried about how the officer would react when he learned that Benito did not have a license. The officer refused to engage with the angry motorist's accusations and told Benito not to worry because the police did not care about immigration matters. With some reluctance, the officer told Benito that he had no choice but to ticket Benito and impound his car. Benito thought this was fair, considering that he had caused an accident. He was grateful to the officer for deescalating the situation with the angry driver and left feeling that the police could be trusted. When Benito's house was robbed the following year, he decided to call the police to report the crime.

Friendly and informal interactions with the police allowed respondents to imagine calling the police for help. In both Philadelphia and Los Angeles, friendly exchanges in which respondents served the police as patrons chipped away at the idea that police were overly punitive. For example, Luis, a bartender in Philadelphia, knew that others were afraid of the police but explained that he had never had a problem with them. He surmised that his opinion was different from others' because he knew that police officers were regular people. One of the bar's regulars was a Puerto Rican officer with whom Luis had become friendly. "He doesn't really speak Spanish but we're both Latino. I met him at work and he gave me his card and told me to call him if I ever had questions or had a problem," said Luis.

It was harder for Los Angeles-based fruit vendors to believe that police were trustworthy because of their lingering anxiety that police might punish them for vending. Officers generally let vendors work undisturbed, but they occasionally intervened when people called the police to complain or when health inspectors enlisted the police to accompany them on their enforcement runs. Still, some officers patronized fruit carts, and many interactions between fruit vendors and officers were courteous and, at times, mutually beneficial. With their presence on street corners, vendors served as "public characters" who became police officers' "eyes upon the street" (Duneier, 2000; Jacobs, 1961). After an armed robbery at a convenience store nearby, officers reached out to José to ask if he had seen anything suspicious. José had not been working that day, but after that initial contact, police routinely rolled by José's pushcart to check in. "Everything calm?" an officer might ask. José responded with a nod signaling that all was well. Over time, José's familiarity with the police officers on his beat allowed him to see them as resources that helped protect his business.

Similarly, Carmen, a fruit vendor in Los Angeles, had a friendly relationship with two police officers who regularly bought fruit from her and lingered to talk. The conversations were mostly light and humorous. The Latino, Spanish-speaking cop

bantered with Carmen, and his Black, non-Spanish-speaking partner would interject by asking, “What did she say?” and “What did you say?” The police officers arrived with some regularity several times a week. When they did not stop for fruit, they often honked as they drove by to say hello. Other times, they pulled along the curb on Wilshire Boulevard to order fruit without leaving their patrol car. In addition to their lighthearted chatting, sometimes, serious information was exchanged. Once, Carmen explained to the officers that a storeowner was harassing her. While she did not want to file a report—and the cops did not appear eager to file one either—they gave her a business card with their phone numbers. They told Carmen that she could call them if anything serious happened. Carmen kept the business card in her wallet, pleased that the officers cared about her safety.

The informal and friendly relations that we document here have three common features. First, they describe moments in which officers could have been more punitive but, instead, exercised discretion that benefited immigrant residents. Officers’ decision to exercise discretion on immigrants’ behalf made respondents feel like the police were on their side. Second, immigrants described positive interactions with officers who were both on and off duty. Thus, getting to know officers as fellow community members or patrons helped break down the barriers between immigrants and the police. Last, several respondents mentioned specifically that these interactions occurred with Latino police officers. Thus, when substantive representation makes police respond more favorably toward minority community members, it can have positive effects on police–community relations.

### *Calling the Police: Los Angeles Versus Philadelphia*

While respondents in Los Angeles and Philadelphia had both positive and negative things to say about the police, when it came to actually *calling* the police for help, only Philadelphia-based respondents actually did so. We believe that this dissimilarity stems from differences in our sample populations and the types of occupations respondents held, rather than differences in the local environments. Consisting entirely of fruit vendors working in the informal economy, the Los Angeles sample was smaller and more socially isolated. Fruit vendors had few contacts with formal institutions, such as immigrant or worker rights organizations; instead, they relied extensively on their vending and hometown social networks to resolve problems. Respondents in Los Angeles attended weekly hometown association gatherings to pray the rosary, did not have children and therefore did not engage with the public school system, worked in a cash economy and did not have bank accounts, and routinely declined assistance from immigrant-serving institutions and community organizers. In contrast, Philadelphia respondents were formally employed in brick-and-mortar establishments; they had dense social networks and numerous contacts with local institutions. Many respondents in Philadelphia attended church, sent their children to public schools, deposited their paychecks at the bank, visited community health clinics, and knew of (or attended) meetings at an immigrant rights organization.

In Philadelphia, these institutional connections provided some respondents with a sense of efficacy and entitlement. Leo explains how his understanding of the police evolved during his years in Philadelphia as a result of “Know Your Rights” training at a community organization:

When I first got here, I wasn't well informed that I could trust the police. People would say that I couldn't do anything because I'm an immigrant and that means I don't have rights but one day I went to a meeting where I learned that we *do* have rights. I asked a lot of questions and they told me the laws and told me I could call the police because I have the same rights as anyone who lives in Philadelphia. People may think it's better not to call the police because they think the police will call ICE, but it's not true. ICE is separate from the police.

Armed with this information, Leo felt confident that he could call on the police for help because local police did not cooperate with ICE.

Even when respondents knew that calling the police would not result in their deportation, some elected not to call the police even after experiencing theft or robbery. Respondents cited not wanting to waste their own time when there was no chance of recovering their possessions. However, there were notable exceptions. For example, Noel had lived in Philadelphia for 3 years when he was surrounded by a group of teenagers who aggressively pushed him and demanded his wallet. Noel arrived home shaken, but unhurt, and decided to call the police. The police arrived promptly and offered to drive Noel around to see if he could identify his assailants. When they were unsuccessful, the officers drove him to the police precinct so he could speak to the detectives on duty. The crime went unsolved, but Noel felt that calling the police was important:

I called because I knew it was happening to many people. Daily we heard of people getting assaulted in the neighborhood . . . it has happened to so many others. So we called, and after that, it really felt like there were more patrols in the neighborhood and it was safer. Now, there are far fewer robberies. Things are calmer.

Noel's interaction with the police made him feel like a valued Philadelphia resident. The police arrived quickly, they behaved professionally, and they showed an interest in identifying his assailants. Moreover, Noel felt that calling the police helped make the neighborhood safer. He wanted the police to know that immigrants were being victimized, so that they would increase neighborhood patrols.

Among Los Angeles fruit vendors, theft was considered a cost of working on street corners. Rather than call the police, vendors called others working in the area to provide descriptions of the assailants and warn them of possible danger. In some neighborhoods, gang members extorted fruit vendors into paying “rent” to work on public corners. Vendors believed that seeking police intervention would only serve to antagonize gang members who lived in the neighborhoods where vendors worked, leaving vendors exposed to retaliation. Thus, instead of seeking help from police officers who might complicate matters, fruit vendors looked to their trusted *paisano* [hometown] networks for safety.

## Concluding Discussion

Individuals' understandings and attitudes toward the law and legal authorities are shaped by their experiences with legal institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Interactions with legal authorities, like the police, *teach* people about their social standing and the extent to which they are valued members in society (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014). Legal attitudes matter because they are foundational to exercising civic and social membership in society. Negative experiences with the police may also lead to the development of legal cynicism, a cultural perspective in which individuals view the legal system (and the police) as ineffective and unable to help them. Moreover, even when negative police interactions are not experienced directly, they can be experienced vicariously and transmitted via social networks (Brunson, 2007; Menjivar & Bejarano, 2004).

As a predominantly low-income and minority group with precarious legal status, it is not surprising that many unauthorized immigrants have negative dispositions toward the police. Police subject minority communities to aggressive and antagonistic police tactics (Epp et al., 2014). Indeed, previous research finds that African Americans' negative perceptions of the police stem from the accumulation of negative personal and vicarious experiences with police authorities (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006). Our findings suggest that unauthorized Mexican immigrants' experiences with the police are quite varied, as police may alternately see unauthorized Latino immigrants as suspicious people who warrant scrutiny, as hard workers who commit legal violations out of ignorance or necessity, or as law-abiding residents who are vulnerable to victimization (Armenta, 2017). Although this article focuses exclusively on the dispositions and experiences of unauthorized Mexican immigrants, residents form part of larger mixed-status communities. Divergent police practices toward Latino immigrants may help explain why Latinos consistently hold more favorable opinions of the police than African Americans but less favorable opinions than do White Americans (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999, 2002).

Most research argues that "illegality" and the fear of deportation are the main determinants of unauthorized immigrants' negative perceptions of the police (Aranda & Vaquera, 2015; Theodore & Habans, 2016). This article adds to the existing literature by arguing that unauthorized immigrants' perceptions of the police are rooted not only in their "illegality" but also in their experiences, which are far from monolithic. Both positive and negative dispositions toward police officers are orientations that can be acquired in the United States. Negative encounters with police officers can reify an unauthorized immigrant's feeling of low social standing and create exclusion; meanwhile, positive encounters can increase feelings of worthiness and belonging.

In our study, those who were negatively disposed toward the police had experienced police stops that led to expensive fees and fines. Some endured police hostility, which left them scared and humiliated. Others felt that the police did not care about them and dismissed their concerns. Respondents with these perceptions were less likely to call the police for help. In some cases, calling the police for help only reaffirmed respondents' negative perceptions of the police, as police seemed uninterested in their reports.



However, reports about the police were not universally negative. Unauthorized Mexican immigrants described U.S. police, as compared with police in their country of origin, as professional, trustworthy, and interested in doing their jobs. Some respondents experienced favorable police discretion, which convinced them that police were not out to punish them. Other respondents became friendly with officers whom they saw regularly, enabling them to see the police as people they should call on for help.

Importantly, these findings are from Los Angeles and Philadelphia, two cities that formally prohibit police queries about immigration status and disallow cooperation with ICE. Our findings showcase both the promise and the limitations of policing in “sanctuary” cities. We show that while unauthorized immigrants may not distinguish between police and immigration enforcement officials on arrival, residents learn that contact with the police does not necessarily lead to deportation. What should be clear from our findings, however, is that living in a “sanctuary” city does not automatically mean that unauthorized immigrants will trust the police. Feelings about the police develop through experience. Even in “sanctuary” cities, police can do their jobs in ways that make unauthorized immigrants feel vulnerable. Police may behave aggressively, indifferently, or illegally. It is important to point out that this vulnerability is not solely related to immigrants’ “deportability” and that some respondents felt comfortable interacting with police authorities. Thus, positive interactions with the police can shape immigrants’ legal attitudes such that they feel empowered to call the police for help. Future research should continue examining how undocumented immigrants’ dispositions toward the police vary across and within local contexts.

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