The responsibility is ours, and the search for solutions is one which must be pursued with urgency and vigor.

Violence Prevention and the Latino Population:
An Analysis of Patterns and Trends and Prescriptions for Effective Intervention

by Pedro Antonio Noguera, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The increase in violence and crime in Latino communities throughout the United States has generated considerable alarm among health and social service professionals, researchers, policy makers, community members and others, who recognize the dangerous implications of current trends. The increase in the number of violent crimes committed in predominantly Latino communities, and the steady rise in the number of Latinos convicted of violent crimes nationally, provide an indication of what can be expected if the tendency toward violence at the community level is not abated. However, while there is general consensus on the need for intervention in the form of policies, programs and services that would reduce the extent of the problem and begin to address its causes, there is presently insufficient agreement about the approach to be taken in devising an effective strategy.

The goal of this paper is threefold: 1) to briefly document the extent of the problem and to identify trends and patterns which characterize the nature of the problem, and in particular, provide some insight into who are most likely to be the victims and perpetrators of community based violence; 2) to identify the causes of the relative increase in violent behavior by focusing on relevant historical antecedents as well as socio-economic conditions that positively influence its occurrence; and 3) to outline the components of a community based strategy for violence prevention that can potentially serve as a national model.
While the forthcoming analysis may seem theoretical and somewhat abstract, its goal is to assist in the development of a strategy that will be both practical and useful in the near future. Most importantly, it is based upon a realization that we can not afford to merely think about the problem, nor sit back and allow others to find solutions for us. The responsibility is ours, and the search for solutions is one which must be pursued with urgency and vigor.

Part 2

**Analysis of Current Trends**

The first thing that must be recognized when we discuss violence in Latino communities is that it is a problem primarily concentrated among young males. Disproportionately, both the victims and the perpetrators of violence in the Latino community, are males, generally between the ages of 16 and 30.(1) Additionally, violence among Latinos is primarily an urban phenomenon. In cities possessing significant Latino populations, the rates of violence are substantially higher than in suburban and rural areas.(2) Furthermore, incidents of violence are far more likely to occur in low income, economically depressed areas. Again, both the victims and the perpetrators share common characteristics in that they are most likely to be low income and poorly educated.

For many years now, violent crime has been on the increase in the United States. For Latinos in particular, the increase has been dramatic. Nationwide, Puerto Rican males have the highest homicide rate in the country (114.2/100,000).(3) This is an alarming statistic, not only because of the relatively small size of the Puerto Rican population, but also because so little attention has been given to the problem. While the high homicide rates among young African American males has been considerable attention recently, there has been no comparable outcry about the extent of this problem among young Puerto Rican males.

The chart below (4) illustrates trends with respect to the homicide rate among segments of the Latino population. Data for this study was based upon Latino immigrants rather than the U.S. born population due to continuing problems in identifying the Latino population through census data, and the resulting unreliability of that information. Despite this limitation, the trends illustrated below are informative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>Puerto Ricans</td>
<td>114.2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>26.0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Blacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dade County</td>
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<td>Whites</td>
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Blacks 145.5  
California Mexicans 52.0  
Whites 18.0  
Blacks 87.1  
Texas Mexicans 88.9  
Whites 22.4  
Blacks 98.1  

The charts demonstrate quite clearly that there is substantial differentiation among the Latino population, based both upon nationality and region. While Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans have homicide rates that exceed those of the white population in all of the regions identified, only Puerto Ricans in New York City have a homicide rate that exceeds that of Blacks. Moreover, even within the Mexican population there are regional differences; Mexicans residing in Texas are nearly twice as likely to be victims of homicide as compared to Mexicans residing in California.

The suicide rates among the Latino population are almost equally alarming. Cubans in the Dade County area of Florida, have one of the highest suicide rates in the country (30.2/100,000). This fact is particularly noteworthy given that the Cuban population does not demonstrate many of the characteristics that are normally associated with tendencies toward suicide (i.e. high incomes, high levels of education, high degree of alienation and isolation, etc.) For Latinos generally, only Mexicans residing in California have a lower suicide rate than either Blacks or Whites. While self inflicted death is generally not seen as a major problem among Latinos, the trends represented on the chart below indicate that perhaps it should be.

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<th>Area</th>
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<td>New York City</td>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
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<td>Blacks</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
<td>Mexicans</td>
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In addition to homicide and suicide, Latinos are disproportionately more likely to die as a result of an accident (highest among Mexicans residing in Texas); are more likely to be incarcerated for violent crimes; are more likely to be victims of violent crimes; and our children are more likely to be expelled or suspended from school as a result of violent or disruptive behavior. (6) Violence is clearly a major problem for the Latino community, and most trends indicate no sign of reduction in the near future.

**Part 3**

**Understanding the Causes of Violence in the Latino Community**

**The Link to Socio-Economic Conditions**

Most studies on violence in low income communities link violence and violent behavior to social disorder - the break down of community institutions. (Kornhauser, 1978; Thrasher, 1928; Yablonsky, 1966) Since the mid nineteenth century, there has been a recognizable trend toward a reduction in the influence of community institutions such as churches, schools, social organizations, in most urban areas. (7) This is due both to the anonymity and anomie which characterizes life in many urban areas, as well as a high degree of neighborhood instability and transience which is common to many communities where new immigrants settle. Given that the past role of the social institutions listed above was to impart values and create a basis for community cohesiveness, in areas where these institutions have broken down, only the family remains as an effective agent of socialization. Whereas previously such institutions reinforced values that were deemed important by the members of a community, in their absence families are left on their own to impart and maintain these values.

The progressive decline of the nuclear family as the standard household unit in American society, has contributed to the current state of social disorder present in most American cities. (8) It is not that single parent households are inherently less capable of rearing children, but the added financial burden born by such families contributes significantly to the hardships endured by family members. Moreover, most studies on single parent households clearly demonstrate that such families are more likely to be impoverished, more likely to have children that drop-out of school or do poorly academically, and have a greater likelihood of dependence on public assistance, not only for the head of the household, but for future generations as well. (9)

Available evidence suggests that violent behavior tends to increase when there is both an increase in social disorder and a decline in living conditions. (10) Economically depressed areas that lack sufficient jobs and services, are more likely to have high rates of violence than communities that have greater resources. While the correlation between poverty and crime is high, in recent times there has been resistance to the notion that the condition of poverty itself is responsible for high rates of crime. During the 1980's there was an increase in research that attempted to connect violence and criminal behavior to
intelligence (Murray, 1983; Danziger and Gottschalk, 1983), the family (Garfinkle and McLanahan, 1986; Cell, 1982; Ellwood and Summers, 1986) and culture (Jones, 1988; Loury and Loury, 1986). The neo-conservative orientation of such views tends to reinforce the prevailing thinking of policy makers, who over the last ten years, have been more likely to stress punishment over prevention as a way of addressing violence and crime. The tendency to blame the victims of poverty for their entrapment, has become the most popular and fashionable explanation of poverty, violence, crime, drug use and other social ills associated with the condition of poverty.(11)

However, there is substantial evidence to support the notion that the lack of economic opportunities in many impoverished urban communities creates conditions that are conducive to the occurrence of crime and the development of an underground economy. Using Robert Merton's analytical framework for understanding deviant behavior, several scholars have suggested that crime and violence are directly related to the absence of opportunities to achieve social mobility through legitimate channels. (12) In many poor communities, the traditional avenues to mobility are inaccessible, either due to perception or the sheer lack of opportunity. Education and employment, the two routes that have most often been prescribed as the way out of the barrio, often lead to dead ends for aspiring young people. In light of this reality, young people are faced with four basic choices: they can conform - accepting the dead end job; they can escape - to drug or alcohol addiction; they can innovate - finding ways to circumvent the law to achieve personal goals; or they can rebel - rejecting the system that limits their opportunities.

In Latino communities, we see all four responses. Those who work tirelessly at dead end jobs, deriving neither personal fulfillment nor adequate incomes from their labor; those that retreat to drugs and alcohol and cease to function as competent members of the community; those that turn to crime or lead dual lives - one straight the other crooked - as their way of "getting over"; and those who reject the system altogether and demand radical change. Of course there are the success stories, the kids who prevail against the odds, who pick themselves up by their bootstraps and make it big. But too often, such kids are rare. They are the exceptions, the ones we hold up as role models, but too often they leave their communities to pursue their careers in their quest for upward mobility. The sad truth is that those who have been successful often feel that they must leave because they perceive their opportunities for personal advancement are limited in the environment from which they were spawned. More often than not, however, most of our youth must choose between variations of the four options just described.

Crime and violence, like other forms of social behavior, are not random phenomenon, but rather follow patterns. In many Latino communities, crime is organized through gangs and structured underground organizations. The transactions and "business" that takes place within the underground sector of the economy are by their nature illegal. Hence, the participants can not appeal to official channels for arbitration or regulation. If someone refuses to pay for some drugs that have been delivered, or if the fence for stolen goods sets prices that are considered too low, the only recourse available for resolving such disputes is violence. Consequently, there tends to be a high degree of violence associated with the underground economy, much of which is often gang related.
Impoverished urban communities are often relegated as zones where the underground economy and certain forms of crime, particularly vice, (i.e. drugs, gambling, and prostitution) are tolerated and allowed to flourish by the police and official authorities as long as those who control such activities confine their business to those areas. Police are less likely to be visible in such communities, and the officers are less likely to be recruited from there. Furthermore, they are more likely to respond slowly to requests for service, and often tend to possess negative stereotypes of the residents and are therefore often indiscriminate in their treatment of them. Their lack of familiarity with such communities provides them with no basis for distinguishing between hardened criminals and law-abiding citizens. As a result, not only do such communities have higher rates of violence, they also experience greater incidents of police brutality and harassment.

A final environmental factor that must be cited due to its link to violence is the fairly widespread abuse of alcohol and drugs, and the marketing of those substances in Latino communities. Recently, there has been considerable attention drawn to the practice of alcohol and tobacco companies who target their products specifically to minority communities. Such advertising practices, combined with the concentration of liquor stores in many Latino communities, contribute directly to consumption patterns, and substance abuse. The link between substance abuse and violence has been well established, and while we cannot place all of the blame on the liquor and tobacco companies who are responsible for sale and distribution since no one can be forced to consume, controlling their operations in Latino communities must become part of our effort to confront one of the major causes of violence.

**Social and Psychological Factors**

In addition to the structural factors that contribute to the occurrence of crime and violence, there are also social-psychological factors that foster and promote such behavior. The dominant values in American society place great emphasis on materialism and power. These are conveyed to us on a daily basis through the media, the primary socializing agent for many young people today. Throughout our society, there are examples of individuals who are able to get their way and achieve success merely because they possess power and wealth: politicians who commit crimes but escape punishment because of their connections; bankers and junk bond dealers who squander the savings of others and then get bailed out by the tax payers; wealthy individuals who perpetrate crimes, including acts of violence, but avoid jail sentences or "hard time" in prison because they can afford lawyers or can appeal to judges for mercy.

The inequity of our system of justice encourages moral ambivalence among many young people. The message that they receive about crime is a relative one; an act is only wrong if you get caught, and punishment only occurs if you don't have the money to defend yourself. In their pursuit of wealth and power, many young people react to their lack of access to opportunities by searching for alternative means. For some, drug dealing and other forms of crime become legitimate alternatives as a means to acquire power and wealth.
On a day to day basis, violence is often seen as a legitimate means for resolving conflict. Since they have learned at an early age that "might makes right", and that the strong generally get their way, violence becomes an acceptable way of maintaining the pecking order or social hierarchy that exists within the community. Studies on community violence show that acts of violence are most likely to be committed by people who know each other.(14) Domestic violence is the most vivid example of this, but so to is the fratricide - Raza killing Raza - that is widespread in Latino communities. The frustration and despair that festers in low income areas is often manifested through violence, which more often than not, is directed by members of the community at their neighbors and loved ones.

Peer groups, particularly when they are formalized into units referred to as gangs, can provide support for violent tendencies. Such groups can be effective in countering the alienation and powerlessness that accompanies social disorder in low income communities. The peer group or gang often provides protection and a sense of security that may be lacking in a violent environment. It also serves as a powerful socializing agent, particularly in communities where families and other social institutions are no longer viable. The persistence of gangs over generations is generally made possible in communities where other forms of social organization are not effective in providing support, protection and a positive value orientation to the young.(15)

Violence is therefore, both a social phenomenon that can be traced to certain kinds of social and economic conditions, as well as a behavioral response that is conditioned by certain values and attitudes. In the final section of this paper, we shall explore how to devise a strategy for confronting both aspects of this problem.

Part 4

Toward An Effective Strategy for Violence Prevention & Recommendations

It is not surprising that the rising tide of violence has caused many to become overwhelmed, and to assume that nothing can be done. The causes of the problem are multidimensional, and therefore can not be solved with "quick fix" solutions. Unfortunately, policy makers tend to look for quick fixes and simple answers, in part because most politicians sell themselves to the public by promising immediate solutions to problems that are complex and deeply rooted.

However, for those of us who have not given in to pessimism and who remain committed to finding solutions, there is good reason to remain encouraged. Recent research by Professor David Hayes-Bautista, provides valuable insight into the social processes of Latino communities that give concrete reasons for hope. In response to some of the recent research that has been done on the so-called "underclass", Bautista has argued that the tendency to "use the deficit model of the underclass to explain the existence and
persistence of poverty” in Latino communities may be inappropriate. Unlike other groups that experience high rates of poverty, Latinos exhibit few of the characteristics that are generally cited as causes of poverty. Among all ethnic groups, Latinos are: the least likely to be dependent on government assistance programs (due in part to the fact that immigrants are ineligible for welfare); are the most likely to be employed (In 1980 72.3% of Latino males were employed compared to 69.8% of Whites and 55.3% of Blacks); and have the highest rate of family formation (Latino families are more than twice as likely than Whites or Blacks to be composed of a married couple). In addition, Latinas have low rates of maternal drinking and smoking, both of which are known to contribute to birth defects and high infant mortality.(16)

The resilience of the Latino community in the face of extreme hardships, is made possible to a large extent by the steady flow of Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Latino immigrants have a strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, no dependence on government programs, high rates of family formation, and virtually none of the negative social behaviors associated with other impoverished groups (For example, the infant mortality rate among Latina immigrants is identical with that of White women.)(17)

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that the longer Latinos remain in the U.S., the more likely they are to cultivate the negative traits associated with poverty. This is most apparent when we look at the situation with Latino adolescents, both immigrant and non-immigrant, who have high drop-out rates (over 50% nationally) and high rates of incarceration. Moreover, according to Bautista and others, Latino youths demonstrate increased rates of smoking, drinking and substance abuse, lower rates of family formation and increased rates of dependence of government assistance programs.(18)

The implications of these trends are mixed: while we can be encouraged by evidence of strong survival tendencies on the part of the immigrant population, it is clear that the acculturation process is damaging to the future well being of the Latino population generally.

The question for those of us concerned with violence prevention and the general upliftment of our communities is: how do we build on our strengths and reduce the negative trends associated with acculturation? What follows is a list of policy recommendations that could be pursued to begin to address the problem of violence in Latino communities. These are intended as a starting point for ongoing discussion of solutions, for clearly an all encompassing answer, much less a "quick fix", will not be attainable in the near future. Nonetheless, there are steps that can be taken now that will enable us to influence the direction of public policy affecting Latino communities.

**Recommendations**
1. Education - Any serious violence prevention strategy must be linked to the schools. Efforts must be made to introduce conflict resolution and violence prevention training into school curriculum. Counselors and teachers must also be trained in this area.

In addition, the violence prevention strategy will inevitably be affected by the extent that we can reduce the drop-out rate and increase the number of young people who are either going on to college after graduation or gainful employment. There are effective models in place for achieving both of these goals at certain schools in California (Miramontes, 1989). These should be studied and utilized to provide a basis for expansion in other school districts.

Furthermore, bi-lingual education and efforts to promote culturally appropriate curriculum (i.e. Chicano/Latino Studies, and the inclusion of Latino writers and scholars elsewhere in the curriculum) will be a critical part of the effort to change the value orientation of young people. Respect of self is directly linked to respect of culture. Such attempts to improve self esteem will positively affect efforts to reduce violence among adolescents. Recruitment of more Latino teachers will also be central to the process of transforming public education so that it better suits the needs of our children.

2. Economic Development - At the local level there must be concerted efforts made to support small businesses and service agencies that operate in our communities. These resources provide jobs and services, as well as an anchor for community development. Studies on community revitalization show a clear link between a successful, locally controlled commercial district, and a safe and cohesive neighborhood. A part of this strategy must involve efforts to force local banks to fulfill their community reinvestment requirements and to monitor closely any efforts at redlining.

Public agencies, including the Federal, State, County and municipal governments, should be required to support neighborhood revitalization efforts. This can be done through the effective use of redevelopment and Community Development Block Grant funds. Low interest loans can also be made available to Latinos interested in establishing community businesses that will benefit the community.

3. Coordinate Services - Too often, there is a lack of communication between the various agencies that serve the community. Improvement of our approach to violence prevention at the local level can be made possible by increased communication between local hospitals and clinics, counselling services, schools, churches and other agencies that provide counseling services. Efforts must be made to share information so that all concerned about the problem of violence can be kept abreast of current trends and developments. Communication can also be helpful in preventing a duplication of effort and underutilization of existing services.

4. Political Power - The Latino community must be adequately represented at all levels of government. This is particularly true at the local level, where crucial decisions regarding community services are made. In areas where Latinos are present in leadership positions, efforts must be made to organize the community so that these representatives...
can be kept abreast of community needs and held accountable. Our elected leadership can serve as important role models for our youth, and insure that the kinds of public policies that are needed to address the proliferation of violence are implemented.

Efforts must be made to recruit Latinos into the police force and to have them assigned to serve our communities. Whenever possible we should strive for a cooperative relationship with the police department where possible in order to insure that community residents receive adequate protection and service, and to work toward a better relationship between the police and the youth. A caring and compassionate police force can assist in developing diversion programs for delinquent youth, and can assist in the development of safe recreational activities.

When the police department does not demonstrate the respect and courtesy that we demand and expect, we should be able to call on our elected officials for a change in personnel and approach. As tax payers we have the right to demand police protection as well as freedom from harassment and intimidation from police officers.

5. Cultural Action - We must actively explore ways of promoting the kinds of values that will reduce violence in our communities. We should enlist the help of artist and musicians in developing creative ways of conveying anti-violence messages. Concerts, athletic events, public meetings, and other social events, should be utilized to promote respect for the community, for our culture and for each other.

Churches and other social organizations should also be encouraged to develop activities aimed at young people that can provide an alternative to gang activity. We should attempt to cultivate and promote leadership in the struggle against violence from the youth themselves, and support them in their efforts to combat violence. Our goal must be to create a caring, compassionate and cohesive community, that looks out for the needs of all residents and takes responsibility for its future.