

Beyond the Racial Divide: Perceptions of Minority Residents on Coalition Building in South Los Angeles

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers at the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) sought to examine, at a community-level perspective, the major factors that foment inter-ethnic or inter-racial tensions in an urban subsection of a city that has undergone rapid and extensive demographic and economic transformations over the last two decades—South Los Angeles. The study’s objectives were to: 1) ascertain the major factors that contribute to tensions or conflict among African Americans and Latinos in South Los Angeles; 2) explore the nature and extent to which racial or ethnic stereotypes affect tensions; 3) assess the potential for inter-group collaboration on specific substantive issues; and 4) develop strategies to improve inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations among youth in South Los Angeles.

Overwhelmingly, the most important factors contributing to ethnic or racial tensions were considered to be poverty and inequalities in access to resources and living wage jobs.

Numerous recent events reflect the critical challenges posed to safety and harmonious relations in the area’s neighborhoods and schools, including but not limited to several brawls involving Latino and African American students at local high school campuses, a series of freeway shootings of African American motorists in the Southland allegedly by Latinos, several days of large-scale violent riots between incarcerated Latino and African American prison inmates, and a month of emotionally charged Latino mobilizations across the nation in opposition to HR 4437,

the proposed Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005.

KEY FINDINGS

The most important findings included cross-group agreement on several key issues. Overwhelmingly, the most important factors contributing to ethnic or racial tensions were considered to be poverty and inequalities in access to resources and living wage jobs. A common source of frustration was the lack of opportunities for community members to interact despite having common goals on education, safety, and economic development. Participants overwhelmingly considered violence to be gang or drug-related rather than race-based, yet many were critical of the imposition of gang injunctions in their communities because they felt that youth are often harassed indiscriminately.

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Women from both groups were more likely than men to indicate experiencing racial slurs and they perceived male chauvinism to be a major factor in the deterioration of family values within both communities. Prejudice or racism was not considered a serious problem among youth, but both groups perceived the older generation to pass negative stereotypes onto youth. Prejudice or racism were primarily viewed in a white/non-white context and considered to be perpetuated by social and educational institutions.

The most important differences between groups were in perceptions of economic competition. African American participants perceived competition for jobs and resources with Latinos; Latino participants agreed with this perception but did not perceive competition with African Americans. Neither group perceived themselves to be prejudiced towards the other, but both groups perceived the other to be prejudiced towards them. The groups also differed in their approach to collaboration. African Americans perceived that neither group could empathize with the other, thus, they felt that the unique challenges of each community must be addressed first before meaningful collaboration could progress. Latinos, on the other hand, felt that both communities should work toward common goals and avoid alienating the other.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public schools are a key setting for conflict because they are among the first institutions to be affected by a wide range of age cohorts from diverse populations. Thus, schools are also the likely venue for implementing the following recommendations:

- Incorporate multicultural history into American History courses as early as elementary school and develop and integrate coursework that emphasizes mutual respect, conflict resolution, and mediation skills.
- Develop an informal leadership program that utilizes natural peer leaders representing a broad range of socio-cultural groups in multiethnic high schools.
- Implement a controversial dialogue program that brings together a diverse group of students to discuss factors that create tensions in their school, including stereotyping, bias, harassment related to race, ethnicity, and immigration status at the middle-school level.

Human Relations Commissions also have an important role to play in developing strategies and implementing programs

to increase inter-ethnic and inter-racial cooperation. The following recommendations are offered to increase the effectiveness of these commissions:

- Local Human Relations Commissions must be adequately funded to design and implement educational and intervention programs that seek to change negative stereotypes.
- Human Relations Commissions should focus on coalition building and agenda setting around issues of common interest and concern and increased efforts should be made to work more closely with local neighborhood councils and community organizations.
- Human Relations Commissions and local community organizations engaged in collaborative efforts to address community needs should make focused efforts to develop a media campaign to counter negative stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

In 1970 approximately 50,000 Hispanics were residing in South Los Angeles neighborhoods, representing ten percent of the area's total population. By 1980 that number had doubled to approximately 100,000 (21 percent of total population). By 1997 Latinos comprised roughly half the population in South Los Angeles. During the same time period, the area lost more than 300,000 high-wage heavy manufacturing jobs, which were replaced by minimum-wage or lower competitive sector industry jobs that rely primarily on immigrant labor (e.g., garment manufacturing and hospitality jobs). Local small businesses (e.g., liquor stores and small corner groceries) also shifted ownership from primarily African American to Latino and Asian immigrants (Johnson, Farrell, & Guinn, 1997). Additionally, welfare reform in the 1990s forced many former welfare-dependent families into low-wage jobs without health care benefits or childcare subsidies. The combination of these factors along with recurrent wide-scale police brutality culminated in the second largest outbreak of violence in South Los Angeles history in 1992, spreading "from the riot epicenter at the intersection of Florence and Normandie...north and west into Koreatown and Hollywood, to the outskirts of Beverly Hills and West Los Angeles, and into the San Fernando Valley" (Marks, Barreto, & Woods, 2003).

Today, in 2006, on the heels of several brawls involving Latino and African American students at high school

campuses, including Jefferson, Crenshaw, Manual Arts, and Jordan high schools, a series of freeway shootings of African American motorists in the Southland allegedly by Latinos, several days of large-scale violent riots between Latino and African American Los Angeles County prison inmates, and a month of emotionally charged Latino mobilizations across the nation in opposition to HR 4437, the proposed Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, concerns and allegations of racism and black-brown violence in South Los Angeles are being voiced by policy makers, the media, and the public at-large.

The goals of the study are to provide policy makers and the general public an intimate look into community member perceptions about important issues affecting the increasingly diverse South Los Angeles community and increase the potential for harmonious racial and ethnic relations.

As a response to recent events, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) undertook an exploratory study to examine, at a community-level perspective, the major factors that foment inter-ethnic or inter-racial tensions in neighborhoods and on middle and high school campuses in South Los Angeles. The goals of the study are to provide policy makers and the general public an intimate look into community member perceptions about important issues affecting the increasingly diverse South Los Angeles community and increase the potential for harmonious racial and ethnic relations in communities and on school campuses that have suffered from disproportionate amounts of violence. TRPI also hopes to bring attention to new areas in need of exploration in the ever-evolving study of human relations.

OBJECTIVES

This study specifically examined perspectives among African American and Latino community members about the major factors that foment inter-ethnic or inter-racial tensions in the South Los Angeles urban area. The research objectives were to: 1) ascertain the major factors that contribute to tensions or conflict among African Americans and Latinos in South Los Angeles; 2) explore the nature and extent to which racial

or ethnic stereotypes affect tensions; 3) assess the potential for inter-group collaboration on specific substantive issues; and 4) develop strategies to improve inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations in communities and on school campuses throughout South Los Angeles.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the complex and highly sensitive nature of the topic of inquiry, and a number of recent highly publicized events in the local and national media, it was considered prudent to utilize qualitative research techniques that would allow for an in-depth and personal exploration of feelings, perceptions, attitudes and experiences among a purposively selected target population, that would likely have the greatest extent of exposure to inter-ethnic or inter-racial conflict or violence. The utilization of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with key city officials, high-school law enforcement personnel, locally elected community leaders, and community organization representatives, and a series of focus groups with South Los Angeles residents provided an ideal setting to ascertain a sufficient level of detail in study data. The research was conducted in four primary phases, which included a final review of findings from several participants who contributed to earlier phases of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive literature review of the major hypotheses that seek to explain inter-group relations, the impact of stereotypes and prejudice on inter-group relations, and identity formulation among minority adolescents was performed as background for this study.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A series of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with city human-relations officials, high school campus probation officers, elected neighborhood council board members, and community organization representatives throughout South Los Angeles. All interviewees were identified using a snowball sample technique, in which one individual was asked to identify two or three other individuals who had particular knowledge about either inter-ethnic/racial relations or youth relations on local campuses in the South Los Angeles area. The interviews helped to highlight the major issues that create tensions in the South Los Angeles community and to place relations between African Americans and Latinos into the context of the last few decades of history in South Los Angeles. The interviews also served to develop and refine the focus group topics.

FOCUS GROUPS

A total of four focus groups were conducted—two groups of African Americans and two groups of Latinos with separate groups for males and females. Males and females from both communities were interviewed separately because research has shown that females tend to censor themselves when discussing sensitive topics in mixed discussion settings with males present (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Research has also revealed important differences between minority males and females in collective attitudes toward and stereotypes of other minority groups, perceptions of competition with other minority groups, perceptions of prejudice and racism, and perceptions of gender discrimination (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002).

The groups were conducted in a professional facility and participants were identified through surname lists and screened by the facility staff. All participants were residents of South Los Angeles between the ages of 18 and 30 years old to ensure familiarity with local high school environments, and from diverse economic backgrounds. A professional researcher of the same ethnic and racial background as the participants and experienced in ethnographic research moderated each focus group. The findings of the focus groups were coded and analyzed for major themes.

ANALYSIS

A review of findings and development of recommendations was completed by TRPI researchers. Stakeholder interviewees were re-contacted to participate in the review of key findings. Where appropriate their recommendations were included in the final set of recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

I. GREATEST SOURCES OF INTER-ETHNIC/RACIAL TENSIONS IN SOUTH LOS ANGELES

POVERTY

“The economic situation is one of the biggest roadblocks to anyone who is lower middle-class or down. There is a lack of the kind of jobs that create the middle class. These jobs make someone want to buy into the system. It’s a situation where it’s a bad neighborhood and people come in with a bad attitude.” —City Official

African American and Latino participants shared common perceptions of major challenges facing South Los Angeles community members: a lack of job opportunities that offer

African American and Latino participants shared common perceptions of major challenges facing South Los Angeles community members: a lack of job opportunities that offer a living wage; broken homes; lack of valuable community resources such as affordable housing, safe green spaces, activity centers and programs for youth, and basic entertainment such as shopping malls and restaurants.

a living wage; broken homes; lack of valuable community resources such as affordable housing, safe green spaces, activity centers and programs for youth, and basic entertainment such as shopping malls and restaurants. A Latino woman participant explained, “There’s nothing in South L.A., no malls. We have to spend our money outside to make other communities better.”

Participants tended to agree that the impact of poverty on South Los Angeles is so extreme that any efforts to improve inter-ethnic or inter-racial relations would have limited success unless community residents could realize tangible gains in their quality of life. Additional research supports this perception. Branton and Jones (2005) have determined that poorer socio-economic contexts exacerbate racially intolerant attitudes. Latinos, African Americans, and Asians who reside in poorer and economically depressed contexts also reside in areas where racial tensions are the highest and thus have the dual challenge of overcoming socio-economic disparities as well as racial animosity.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION

Both African American and Latino participants felt that neighbors from different ethnic groups lack appropriate opportunities to interact with one another to discuss the conditions of their neighborhoods or schools or even just to get to know each other. All perceived that limited English language proficiency poses the greatest obstacle to interaction among older community members.

“Our parents probably feel that they don’t have a reason to interact with other groups and might even avoid it. Language is most likely the biggest barrier. If

my mother goes to the store and the clerk is black, she will speak English the best that she can, but that's [her English proficiency] not very good."

—Latino Participant

Negative racial stereotypes were also considered to be an obstacle to interaction, but to a lesser extent than language. Many participants expressed frustration at the lack of interaction because they felt that the two communities face similar problems, such as few economic resources, inadequate education in public schools, poverty, and gang violence, and both equally desire to find solutions. African American male participants, however, expressed that the two communities also face separate and unique challenges of which the other is not aware. Many felt that neither community was aware of or concerned about the unique challenges faced by the other.

GANG ACTIVITY

Violence was considered by both groups to be overwhelmingly gang or drug-related rather than race-based. One African American woman participant referring to the presence of gangs in her neighborhood said, "I don't even feel comfortable taking my son out to walk for leisure or exercise." Many participants expressed that gang membership is a logical choice for impoverished youth that lack parental supervision and normal constructive outlets in their neighborhoods. They pointed out that children quickly learn the immediate benefits of gang membership—money, protection, and respect. The alternative, they explained, is more or less constant harassment by gang members in their neighborhoods to and from school or at the park. Other research has identified gang activity as the most important factor contributing to tensions between the two communities (Sears, 2002).

FRUSTRATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Despite widespread agreement that gang violence is a serious problem in the South Los Angeles community, most African American participants expressed discontent or anger at law enforcement activities. One African American woman participant said, "Discrimination by police affects both communities, they beat both of us [African Americans and Latinos]." Some African American participants even indicated that the police at times use violence to incite reprisal attacks between rival gangs in their neighborhoods. Latino participants did not indicate as much discontent with law enforcement, which is consistent with other research that has determined Latinos to be more tolerant of law

enforcement activities than African Americans. It has been suggested that Latino immigrants in general lack the history of negative experiences with law enforcement that African Americans share and that they might be used to law enforcement having less concern for the civil liberties of citizens in Mexico and other immigrants' countries of origin, thus increasing their tolerance for police activities in the United States (Sears, 2002).

It should be noted that participants from both groups considered recent gang injunctions to permit arbitrary abuse of authority by police officers in their neighborhoods. One particularly serious problem, participants pointed out, is that many innocent youth have been picked up simply for hanging out with friends and their names listed in police files as gang members, which increases the likelihood of further harassment.

ECONOMIC COMPETITION

Many African American participants expressed that the rapidly increasing Latino population has created a sense of being "overrun" among African American residents who live in the area. For example, the visual changes of Spanish-language storefronts and billboard advertisements. One participant explained, "There's a difference between a black community and a Latino community. Latino communities change business fronts, everything. In Florence there are taco carts on every corner;" another said, "If you look at El Pollo Loco, Payless Shoes, Taco Bell, McDonald's, gas stations, they're all Hispanic." Some African American participants thought that immigrants have easier access to financial resources, such as private business loans, which is enabling them to take over local businesses.

Nearly all Latino participants felt that as a community they were succeeding, but not to the extent to which they felt that African Americans perceived them to be succeeding. They expressed awareness that African Americans [and other non-Hispanics] perceive immigrants to be taking valuable resources that would otherwise be channeled to families in need or to community development in general, but that this stereotype is both unrealistic and unfair.

"I've spent time living in east and west L.A. Some of the tensions [between African Americans and Latinos] come from the resources that Latinos bring to their own communities. I think for some reason they feel that accomplishments within their [African Americans'] own community don't rise as far as those from the Hispanic community."

—Latino participant

African American participants also perceived their local economy to be dominated by small family-run establishments and restaurants owned or operated by either Latinos or Asians. Strong feelings were expressed that both Asians and Latinos discriminate against African American employees in their hiring practices. One participant said, "They [Latinos] come in here and hire their own. We [African Americans] hire them and then they start thinking they're better than us. Not only do we have to fight with other races, but now Latinos are in front of us too."

Many also felt that the low wages typically offered by these establishments deter many potential African American employees from applying. The perception was that African Americans have struggled too much for equal opportunities to settle for minimum wage jobs. Most felt that Latinos' willingness to work for low wages has a direct negative effect on African Americans' socio-economic situation. This finding is consistent with other research that shows similar perceptions among African Americans toward Latinos (Sears, 2002).

Latino participants also expressed that the lack of quality living-wage jobs in the South Los Angeles community created tensions between the two communities, but that all minority families are equally burdened regardless of race or ethnicity. For example, many Latino women participants were in agreement that the lack of decent job opportunities makes African American and Latino youth disproportionately easy targets for military recruiters, which they felt should be a concern for both communities. One participant pointed out, "ROTC hits our communities hard. Recruiters offer kids bonuses, \$2,000 to \$3,000 in our areas, in addition to college tuition. This is a lot of money if you're poor."

ADVANTAGES OF SPANISH PROFICIENCY

African American participants perceived being significantly disadvantaged in the local job market because of the value employers place on Spanish proficiency and expressed a high level of resentment at having to know Spanish in order to qualify for a job in their own neighborhood. Some indicated that Latinos do not even have to speak English to have an advantage in the job market because of the increasing prevalence of monolingual Spanish speakers. Many considered the economic vitality of the Latino community to be sustained by Spanish-speaking immigrants who serve as a captive consumer market. Some participants felt that African American youth should receive an equal amount of resources to learn Spanish that are offered to immigrants to learn English in order to be able to compete for local jobs in their community.

Latino participants, on the other hand, acknowledged that being bilingual provides them an advantage in obtaining employment, but that the jobs they tend to work are labor intensive jobs, such as plumbers, cleaners, and construction workers—jobs that African Americans, they feel, would not be willing to work. Some explained that immigrants are merely doing the same type of work that they do in their native countries, offering manual labor or selling fruit on street corners. One Latino woman said, "We have the jobs nobody wants. I don't know any white or black person who wants to scrub a toilet for eight hours and get paid less than minimum wage." Many considered African Americans to be advantaged in the job market over immigrants due to their citizenship status and English language skills.

Latino participants did acknowledge that negative stereotypes of African Americans among employers could serve as a disadvantage for African Americans compared to Latinos. Latinos, they felt, have a reputation for being hard workers, whereas African Americans tend to be stereotyped as being lazy.

HOUSING TURNOVER

Tenant turnover in apartments and houses was a sensitive issue for African American participants. Most perceived that African American families are being displaced by Latinos as housing and rents have become increasingly expensive. One participant said, "They're marching out of schools over the illegal immigration issue. They're taking over California, trying to overpopulate Los Angeles and force us out." Another said, "They're all Hispanics on my block now. When I moved there 13 years ago, it was all black people. Now there's like one white guy and five black people; the rest are Hispanic." Participants also expressed that Hispanic property managers treat African American tenants inequitably. One participant said, "My friend lives in a low-income apartment and the Latino manager gives her a hard time, but not the other Latinos in the building."

African American participants also perceived that crowding multiple families into single-family dwellings is Latinos' strategy for economic success because it allows them to save money to purchase large property lots in their country of origin or to buy out local businesses in the community.

II. PERCEIVED CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND STEREOTYPES

Participants' perceptions of cultural differences and values between African American and Latinos were surprising, as

participants from both communities demonstrated a keen awareness of the perceptions held of them by members of the other community. In fact, many acknowledged and agreed with the perceptions, negative or positive, held of them by members of the other community. Although some of the perceptions are positive, they were discussed in the context of differences that could create tensions among community members, even if not among the participants themselves.

FAMILY VALUES

African American women participants, in particular, expressed admiration for Latinos as being highly family-oriented. Many pointed out that Latino men tend to spend most of their free time with their wives and children. They did not perceive African American men to share this same trait. As expressed by one participant, "They [Latinos] stick together more and are more family centered. The whole family goes places together, men, women, and children. I don't see blacks doing this. They're [Latinos] trained to get married and be with families."

Latino participants generally did not consider African American culture to be distinct in any significant way from mainstream U.S. culture. For example, participants attributed differences in family values to the culture of individualism that is promoted in mainstream U.S. society, whereas Latino culture is highly family oriented. One woman participant said, "We [Latinos] celebrate holidays differently, with our whole families and kids. They [African Americans] mostly hang out for football. Christmas and Thanksgiving are very important for us as a family—they don't care."

Latino women participants admitted that Latino parents hold negative stereotypes of African American parents, but felt that many Latino parents tend to have a double standard when it comes to responsible parenting and some considered their own parents to be hypocrites.

"When I grew up, you have to wait for sex. You're supposed to be a virgin for your Quinceñera, but Latino parents have a double standard. If an African American has kids, it's bad—she's going to take welfare. 'Why do they [African Americans] give their kids condoms? They should be virgins.' Even if their [a Latino parent] own daughter is knocked up at 15. My cousin was pregnant at her prom."

—Latino woman participant

Many pointed out that Latino mothers, either refuse to admit or do not believe that their own children are involved

in destructive or illegal activities such as gang membership or drug use to the same extent as African American youth. A Latino woman participant said, "There are lots of families whose kids are gang members but they deny it."

COMMUNITY COHESIVENESS

Both African American and Latino participants perceived Latinos to have strong community cohesiveness, which they felt helped Latinos to succeed as a community. One African American participant said, "I wish our race thought like theirs. There could be like 80 of them in a three bedroom and they'll have brand new cars. They help each other get established. We [African Americans] can't create that kind of stability." There were mixed perceptions among African American participants about the reasons for Latino community cohesiveness, thus sentiments tended to vary between admiration and resentment.

African American participants generally attributed Latino solidarity to strong ethnic and national identities and a shared language. While most considered it to be a positive cultural trait, many perceived Latinos to have little consideration for non-Hispanics, especially African Americans. This, they felt has less to do with a strong ethnic and national identity, and more to do with a sense of superiority over African Americans. African American participants perceived themselves as a community to be more likely to welcome members of other ethnic or racial groups into their environments. One participant said, "We [African Americans] are more accepting of other peoples' cultures. We nurture them and bring them into our families. They [Latinos] don't accept us into theirs."

Those African American participants who were able to speak some Spanish felt that their language ability facilitated their acceptance into Latino social circles, but most participants resented having to learn another person's culture and language just to be treated as an equal; one participant pointed out, "It's an issue of respect. I'm accepted [by Latinos] because I speak Spanish or because I eat Mexican food. But if I don't, it's a problem. Why do I have to meet you [Latinos] half way? Why can't we meet each other in the middle?"

African American participants overwhelmingly perceived that Latinos are able to more fluidly assimilate into white-dominated middle class society. Bonilla-Silva (2004) hypothesizes that the new system of racial stratification in the U.S. includes a class of "honorary whites," which includes light-skinned Latinos and some well-to-do Asian groups. He argues that this group, which is not to be

considered completely white in status, should nevertheless be in the process of developing white-like racial attitudes towards the "collective black," which includes blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, and new immigrant Asian groups. This perception may in part explain why many African American participants considered Latino cohesiveness to be based on a sense of superiority.

Latino male participants did not express the perception of community cohesiveness among African Americans, but Latino women participants expressed that African Americans and Latinos equally support their own communities. One participant said, "Both cultures share a solidarity behind their own in extreme situations, like now [Latinos] with the immigration issue; just like [African Americans] when Rodney King got beat up." All Latino participants felt that opposition to HR 4437, the proposed Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 had significantly heightened the sense of Latino solidarity and all felt that their struggle for legalization would benefit all minorities, including African Americans. African American participants expressed mixed feelings about the proposed legislation.

INCONSIDERATE BEHAVIOR

African American participants expressed the sentiment that Latinos have little regard for the law and rules in general, that they take advantage of opportunities for themselves without regard for the potential consequences to others. Nearly all African American women felt that Latino parents are either unable or unwilling to control the behavior of their children. One woman complained, "Their children have no manners, they'll just bump into you and keep going. They'll walk in front of your car in the parking lot at the market." Another said, "They rush in front of you on the bus." Latino mothers, in particular, were considered to pamper and spoil their male children no matter how disturbing their behavior; according to one woman, "Their moms cater to their sons."

Latino participants perceived African Americans to generally have a proclivity for loud and physically aggressive behavior, even among one another. One participant said, "I hear all the time from others [Latinos] that blacks are too loud. It seems like they are always arguing or fighting. Other friends or family members have said that their black neighbors cause the police to come around all the time because they are always fighting." This perception by Latinos that African Americans are loud and aggressive has been highlighted in other research (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002).

Participants perceived African American community members to act aggressively in order to intimidate others. They provided examples, such as getting angry or yelling when waiting in lines for services, or arguing loudly in front of their homes as a display of strength to other non-African American community members.

MALE CHAUVINISM

Both African American and Latino women participants felt that males from both communities behave inappropriately towards women and that their behavior deteriorates family relations. Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez (2002) have highlighted the importance of differentiating the experiences of minority women from men, as women are also the victims of sexism from both within and outside of their own ethnic and racial groups. Many felt that women themselves are in part responsible for this behavior because they speak inappropriately to and about one another. Other research has highlighted similar perceptions among minority women that regularly speaking inappropriately to one another facilitates inappropriate behavior by males (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006).

African American women participants expressed the most negative stereotypes in accounts of the behavior of Latino males. Specifically, they considered Latino adult males to be sexually aggressive towards underage girls; this was considered to be a cultural trait for Latino men because, as some believed, in much of Latin America it is acceptable to marry girls when they are very young. One participant said, "Lots of Hispanic males would whistle at me when I was younger. In their country they can date 12 and 14 year-olds and marry them." Many recounted past unpleasant encounters with adult males while walking to school or riding the bus.

STANDARD OF LIVING

African American participants' comments indicated the perception that Latinos have low standards of cleanliness and do not value the appearance of their property. Participants also expressed that Latinos have a propensity to crowd extended and multiple families into single-family dwellings. One participant joked, "On my street they [Latino neighbors] have roosters and chickens, mini farms," while another said, "Everyone [Latinos] has like ten cars all parked on the street and most of them don't even run." Latino participants were well aware of these perceptions. Some made jokes about the propensity for Latino families [even their own] to exhibit these behaviors.

Latino participants considered African Americans to be selfish and more concerned with material goods, such as jewelry, expensive clothing and cars, rather than about addressing the problems of their community. Similar to Latino participants, African American participants were aware of these perceptions and some made jokes in agreement.

“People tend to think that blacks are drug dealers, because even people with no money that work at McDonald’s will drive a Cadillac. But this doesn’t make them drug dealers. I think people just don’t realize that they might only work at McDonald’s, but they’ll spend their whole paycheck on a Cadillac.”

—Latino Participant

III. PERCEPTIONS OF PREJUDICE/RACISM

“We both experience racism across the board, but as far as long-term racism is concerned, only blacks experience this. My color doesn’t change no matter how much I assimilate—I’m always black. After a couple of generations, I have trouble discerning whether Latinos are White or Latino. I don’t know about Latinos at their dinner table, but blacks don’t talk about it [racism]—it hurts too much.”

—Neighborhood council board member

WHITE/NON-WHITE PARADIGM

It is important to point out that both Latino and African American participants understood and discussed racism in the context of a white/non-white paradigm. Most felt that in the absence of systemic and institutional socio-economic disparities that disadvantage non-whites in the U.S., the factors that create tensions between African Americans and Latinos would constitute, at worst, minor annoyances. Systemic race-based inequality has been highlighted in other research. Allen and Chung (2000) argued that the persistence of systemic social inequality in the U.S. is evidence that race constitutes the “bedrock of our nation’s past and present.” Kim (2004) and Bonilla-Silva (2004) describe a kinder and gentler form of white supremacy that is perpetuated socially, economically, and politically through institutional, covert, and ostensibly non-racial practices.

“African Americans are the victims. It’s [discrimination] not so much the Hispanics, but it’s white people. Caucasians are showing them how to discriminate against us. They’re going to get Affirmative Action

too, the only thing we do have. Hispanics are doing it to keep up with white people. We’ll never get ahead.”

—African American participant

IMMIGRANT ATTITUDES

Most African American and Latino participants felt that immigrants come to the U.S. with pre-existing racial stereotypes. This perception is supported by other research, which highlights both that foreign-born Latinos hold more negative stereotypes towards blacks than native-born (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002) and that Spanish culture has traditionally denigrated dark skin (Johnson, Farrell, & Guinn, 1997) (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, and Swanson (2002) have highlighted that prejudice against dark skin is even stronger in Latin America than among Hispanics in the U.S. A few African American participants felt that immigrants acquire racist beliefs the longer they are in the U.S., that they learn to negotiate their status above African Americans. One participant said, “They get more racist as they adapt to U.S. culture. When they first arrive, they’re treated like crap. Once they adapt, they treat blacks badly so they can fit in with the people at the top.”

The majority sentiment among African American participants was that African Americans would not be received in Latin American countries as readily as Latinos are received in the U.S., the current anti-immigration sentiment notwithstanding. Participants considered this to be an advantage for Latinos, that they have the option of living in either the U.S. or their country of origin. One African American participant said, “We’re not able to go and move to Mexico and have the luxury they have here. We don’t have anywhere else to go to. This is all we’ve got.”

African American women participants indicated regularly being the targets of racial slurs from other ethnic and racial groups. All African American participants felt that prejudice and discrimination based on skin color is an injustice unique to black people and that Latinos, despite being exploited as immigrants, could never understand the extent of the psychological impact that racism has had and still has on African Americans. Participants described intense feelings of being hated or considered sub-human by other racial groups. One participant said, “They don’t even refer to us by a name, but as ‘that black you know what.’” This perception of “black exceptionalism” has been well documented in other research (Sears, 2002) (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002) (Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

"I was driving with my boyfriend and a Hispanic made a wrong turn and cut in front of us. He called us [a racial insult]. We're all minorities. None of us can find good jobs or get good educations. But they [Hispanics] don't realize how deep it is for us. We feel it [racism] more in depth."

—African American woman participant

Latino participants expressed experiencing ethnic discrimination from non-Latino groups, but not to the extent or as overtly as immigrants experience it. Some Latino women indicated having had racial slurs directed at them. One Latino woman expressed that African Americans regularly use derogatory slurs towards Hispanics and that African American girls become violent or verbally aggressive if they witness a Hispanic girl speaking to an African American male.

Latino participants also felt that African Americans take advantage of immigrants when they are in a position to do so. Latino women participants, in particular, felt that when African Americans are employed in positions that deal with the public, they show little regard for the needs of Latinos and regularly mistreat them; as one woman pointed out,

The majority of African American and Latino participants did not perceive that relations between the two communities are becoming tense enough that a widespread racially charged outbreak could occur.

"Hispanics would rather be served by a Hispanic teller at the bank. They'll let people pass by if the teller is black. I notice this a lot." This perception by Latinos is supported in other research (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002). Latino participants in general perceived anger or resentment from African Americans rather than hostility or hatred; they tended to express feeling unwanted or exploited as second-class citizens.

Latino participants also expressed that African Americans often assume that they are being discriminated against when in fact they are not, for example, if they do not receive service up to their expectations. One participant said, "At my service clinic African Americans will perceive discrimination when we are just following policy." Another said, "Injustice to African Americans is in the past but they feel like it's still embedded in the present time. It's like, 'let it go.'"

FEAR OF RACIAL VIOLENCE

Both African American and Latino participants perceived the other as being predisposed towards violence. That both Latinos and African Americans consider the other hostile is supported by other research (Mindiola, Niemann, & Rodriguez, 2002). A Latino woman said, "With men, their ego gets in the way. If someone disrespects you, you have to get in a fight. This is especially true for a black person." African American participants actually expressed the fear of being victims of race-based violence, but did not indicate specific fears of violence from Latinos, rather non-blacks in general. References to race-based violence were primarily made in the context of gang activity. Participants from both groups agreed that women from the two communities are as likely to be verbally and physically abusive in confrontations with each other as the men.

Many participants, women in particular, perceived that more crime, violence, and drug use actually occurs in predominantly white neighborhoods and that they would feel less safe walking alone in a white neighborhood. One Latino woman participant said, "I can walk my street at two or three in the morning and I feel safe, but in a foreign white neighborhood I'd be scared [expletive]. Familiarity is more important."

The majority of African American and Latino participants did not perceive that relations between the two communities are becoming tense enough that a widespread racially charged outbreak could occur. However, a few considered the potential for events such as those that occurred in Los Angeles in 1992 to be ever present as a sense of isolation, frustration, and helplessness still festers in South Los Angeles. This perception is consistent with other research that found nearly one in four African Americans and one in five Latinos consider it very likely that another riot will occur in the next few years, despite indications by a majority of African Americans (56 percent) and Latinos (61 percent) that race relations have improved over the last decade in Los Angeles (Marks, Barreto, & Woods, 2003).

NEGATIVE PORTRAYALS IN THE MEDIA

Both African American and Latino participants considered media, even ethnic media to disproportionately air negative portrayals of minorities and positive portrayals of whites. This shared perception has been confirmed in other research (Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez 2002) and Oliver and Wong (2003) highlight that negative portrayals in the media are likely to reinforce negative stereotypes. One African American woman participant said, "On the evening news, every time there's a problem it's a black or Hispanic person."

You'll never see white people on the news [portrayed negatively] unless something really tragic occurs." A Latino male participant said, "All you hear is negative about African Americans and Hispanics doing something wrong. You never hear about someone being a hero or doing something." Another pointed out, "Even in Spanish news they make their own people look bad. The news perpetuates stereotypes that are a lot worse than the way things really are." Latino participants also referenced the media portrayals of African Americans as looters during Hurricane Katrina.

Participants also faulted the entertainment industry for

Both African American and Latino participants considered media, even ethnic media to disproportionately air negative portrayals of minorities and positive portrayals of whites.

perpetuating negative stereotypes, particularly among immigrants. One Latino participant said, "Immigrants develop stereotypes from television. Movies such as *Boys in the Hood*, *American Me*, *Colors*, *American X*, *Training Day*, and *Monster's Ball* all promote negative stereotypes of blacks, and animated movies like *Ice Age II* use ethnic language for character stereotypes."

IV. PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH RELATIONS

"Nobody went to talk to kids at Jefferson [after the riots] to ask them if there was a problem with racism. I asked [African American] kids if they feel threatened because they are outnumbered and they said no. I asked if there would be a problem hanging out with their Latino friends any more and they said no."

—Neighborhood council board member

PREJUDICE/RACISM AMONG YOUTH

Both African American and Latino participants explained that youth commonly use racial slurs, but typically only among members of their own groups. Research investigating the nature of harassment among adolescents at ethnically diverse middle schools and high schools nationwide found that adolescents typically use derogatory language because they find the words funny, clever, or because they are looking for approval from peers, and at times because the words have taken on a lesser benign meaning. Few

understood that derogatory language could actually be hurtful to those who were the targets (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Nevertheless, some participants still considered the comments to be racially motivated with intentions to hurt. Women participants from both groups, much more so than male participants, expressed frequently being the targets of racial slurs by youth members of the other group.

GROUP SEGREGATION

Nearly all African American and Latino participants felt that it is a natural tendency for youth to segregate in high school, most often, they felt, based on social cliques and at times based on the neighborhoods in which they live as many are bussed from other areas of the city. One Latino woman participant speaking about racial tensions explained, "It depends, at Crenshaw High we had cliques based on popularity. You wouldn't talk to people who weren't popular. It wasn't necessarily racial." A few Latino women participants felt that racism is increasingly becoming a factor in student self-segregation on campuses. One participant said, "I went to Fremont and I didn't have any black friends. They didn't talk to me for racial reasons. They treated Latinas badly. Black girls think they're the [expletive]. They're much quicker to jump on you and start beating you." Participants considered tensions between African American and Latino youth to be more acute when one group distinctly outnumbers the other at school.

Participants also pointed out that ethnic tension is not a problem exclusively between African Americans and Latinos. One participant speaking about her high school experience said, "At Manuel Arts and L.A. High there were fights, Mexicans versus Latin Americans."

POOR PARENTING

Both African American and Latino participants considered undereducated adults and parents to be much more likely to hold negative stereotypes towards other racial or ethnic groups and to pass those on to their children. The research of Mindiola, Niemann, and Rodriguez (2002) supports the perception that parents, women in particular, have been found to play a key role in the formation and perpetuation of ethnic and racial attitudes in children and adolescents as caretakers of the family. Some research, however, has downplayed the influence of parent education level as a causal factor affecting minority adolescent racial attitudes when controlling for previous exposure to or "contact" with ethnic or racial diversity outside of school (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996) (Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997) (Oliver & Wong, 2003).

SCHOOLS AS INITIAL MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Both African American and Latino participants pointed out that high school often provides the first environment in which economically disadvantaged youth actually interact with youth from other races and ethnicities. This perception is consistent with other research that has suggested that middle school may provide the first setting for some youth to experience inter-ethnic behavioral contact (Carlson, Wilson, & Hargrave, 2003). Many also emphasized that lacking parental guidance, youth tend to base their opinions and behavior on those of older siblings and peers and are more susceptible to racial and ethnic stereotypes.

There was wide agreement that schools are failing to adequately educate youth about tolerance and value for diverse cultural beliefs and practices.

There was wide agreement that schools are failing to adequately educate youth about tolerance and value for diverse cultural beliefs and practices. Latino male participants actually felt that holding cultural events at school at times creates tensions between youth from the two communities. One participant said, "Sometimes there are problems [with African American students] during Cinco de Mayo, but I don't know why—they get a whole month [referring to Black History Month]." Although this participant perceived that African American students would likely be the ones intolerant of an alternative cultural event, other participants' reactions indicated that some intolerance might exist among Latino students as well.

PREJUDICE/RACISM AMONG TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Both African American and Latino participants perceived that teachers regularly, albeit at times inadvertently, exhibit prejudicial or discriminatory behavior toward students. This was considered to be a significant factor in shaping the confidence and self-esteem of youth and in creating divisions and tensions in schools. These perceptions are consistent with other research that has shown student perceptions of ethnic injustice in schools to lead to discounting the validity of academic outcomes and to psychological disengagement from the academic arena (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001).

Most African American participants felt strongly that teachers from all races and ethnicities tend to be prejudiced against African American youth. They felt that teachers quickly learn who the interested students are in their classes and then cater to those students—usually non-black students. One woman participant pointed out, "At Locke High School in Watts the teachers don't care. They get these teachers straight out of grad school who get into a routine of not caring about students. But if your kids go to a white school, they're going to get a much better education." Another said, "Some teachers are very negative if you're not the brightest. They'll say, 'Girl, you're never going to amount to nothing,' right there in class."

Many Latino participants expressed that African American youth are overly sensitive to prejudice or racism in the classroom. A few Latino women participants, however, acknowledged that discrimination from teachers and administrators does tend to occur more frequently with African American students. Some also felt that African Americans were more likely to be discriminated against by school policies.

"I was in a magnet program and they showed favoritism towards us [Latinos]. We had a Hispanic counselor from the magnet school, and the black students had a black counselor from the regular school. We [the student body] were one half black and one half Hispanic. We had more field trips."

—Latino woman participant

Another Latino woman said that she would never get in trouble for skipping class even though her counselor knew that she was doing it, but that she would always see African American students getting reprimanded by their counselors for similar behavior.

GANG ACTIVITY

Both Latino and African American participants felt strongly that gang activity in and around school campuses is the primary factor that creates tension among youth, especially when youth gang members are transferred to a school from a different neighborhood.

"I went to Hamilton on the west side and now my sister goes there. There's much more gang activity now because the kids are transferring from Crenshaw and the inner city neighborhoods. When I was there, the school population was ethnically mixed but there weren't any problems within the school. There were problems with kids from other schools, like Fairfax."

—African American woman participant

In general, participants did not feel that recent outbreaks of campus violence are a realistic indication of deteriorating African American-Latino relations.

Both Latino and African American participants also pointed out that when violence occurs in the County's jails, it usually spills over into the neighborhoods and then onto school campuses. According to probation officers at two local high school campuses, it is common for campuses in South Los Angeles to be placed on high alert when problems occur in County jails for this very reason; during the recent inmate riots, this was definitely the case.

MEDIA SENSATIONALISM

Most African American and Latino participants expressed that rioting has only occurred at a few campuses and that the media has ignored the majority of campuses where relations remain amicable. In general, participants did not feel that recent outbreaks of campus violence are a realistic indication of deteriorating African American-Latino relations. These perceptions are consistent with other research that indicates an overall improvement in relations between ethnic and racial groups in Los Angeles since 1992, despite being much more diverse today. For example, Dreier (2003) highlights the importance of recognizing that casual amicable interactions between people of different races in every conceivable context occur each day and that there are many resources and programs in place now to address tensions that were non-existent in 1992.

V. DISCUSSION

There are obvious limitations to this study. Due to the qualitative nature of the research and the small number of focus groups conducted, the findings can not be generalized to the population. But the most important shortcoming of the study is the complete omission of Asian participants in the focus groups. Asian community members in South Los Angeles play a key role in the overall nature of relations in the area and were referred to several times during interviews and discussions. The study was limited to the resources available and thus, our picture of the community dynamic is incomplete. Asian community members' perceptions and experiences must be included in future research endeavors.

An additional omission is a discussion of how the structure of institutions such as schools can create an environment that conditions youth to oppressive societal norms and stigmatizes and isolates those who resist conformity. References were made to this phenomenon during the interviews, but focus group participants did not discuss it.

The finding that there was cross-group agreement on several key issues is encouraging. The importance placed on poverty as a factor explaining inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations, although not surprising, is revealing of the growing level of frustration of community members. Also revealing is the perception that community members lack opportunities to interact, despite having common goals, because participants' comments indicated a real desire for substantial interaction.

Although participants indicated that violence is a significant problem in the South Los Angeles community, it was considered gang or drug-related rather than race-based, shedding doubt on the overwhelming amount of media attention focused on deteriorating race relations. Perhaps more attention should be focused on the effectiveness of law enforcement intervention currently employed in the area's neighborhoods to combat gang violence. All indications are that people perceive the activities of law enforcement to be adding to the problem rather than alleviating it.

The finding that prejudice or racism was primarily viewed in a white/non-white context and considered to be perpetuated by social and educational institutions is important. Although the existence and perpetuation of negative stereotypes contributed to fomenting tensions between the two communities, the perception that societal institutions play a significant role in perpetuating racist behavior appears to support the notion that threats are perceived based on relative positions in the hierarchy of social status. It is positive that participants primarily perceived prejudice or racism to be a problem among the older generation rather than the youth because it provides hope that upcoming generations will value and tolerate diversity more than the last. Both groups also perceived that adults pass negative attitudes onto youth, thus, additional research would be useful in examining more closely the interaction between minority parent and youth ethnic and racial attitudes and stereotypes.

Women participants' indications about experiencing racist insults frequently should be considered grounds for further inquiry. The women's groups were the only groups to feel that racism was a significant problem among the youth.

Because women tend to have different interactions with each other than men, for example, in locations such as social and family service clinics, their exposure to youth in these settings may affect their perceptions. Research has shown that the interaction of gender, class, and race is complex and minority women have been shown to exhibit stronger negative attitudes toward other ethnic and racial groups and to play a key role in the transfer of those attitudes to their children.

It is important to note the differences between groups in perceptions of economic competition. African American participants perceived competition for jobs and resources with Latinos; Latino participants agreed with this perception but did not perceive competition with African Americans. The reasons for this remain unclear. Research has shown that perceived group threats are highly dependent on context. Recent Latino immigrants may perceive more direct competition with African Americans for resources and jobs than native-born Latinos. It is also notable that neither group perceived themselves to be prejudiced towards the other, but both groups perceived the other to be prejudiced towards them. Both groups freely admitted that members of their own communities held negative stereotypes, but would not admit to being prejudiced. Perhaps perceiving one's group to be the victim of prejudice or racism makes it more difficult to admit or recognize harboring similar biases against another group. More nuanced research into minority subgroups' perceptions of threat from and attitudes towards other minorities would add much to the dialogue of race relations.

The groups also differed in their perceptions about the potential for collaboration. African American participants perceived that neither group could empathize with the other's situation, nor were they concerned about the unique challenges facing each community. This they felt would prevent effective collaboration. Latino participants, on the other hand, expressed more concern about one group alienating the other by focusing on issues unique to each group. They perceived that it would be counter-productive not to focus solely on common issues first. This does not mean that African American participants did not perceive common grounds for collaboration or that they did not desire improved collaboration. African American participants provided positive indications of both. However, it does appear to give support to the notion that the maintenance of unique group identity is important, perhaps more for some groups than for others. Research has shown that more positive feelings about one's personal group

identity are positively related to attitudes about other groups. Thus, it would be worth further investigation to determine the extent to which acknowledgement of unique situational contexts or histories would have an affect on the potential for successful collaboration towards shared goals.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Public schools are a key setting for conflict because they are among the first institutions to be affected by a wide range of age cohorts from diverse populations. Moreover, research has determined that by age three, children may have constant, well-defined, and negative biases towards racial or ethnic counterparts so it is important to address the issue in school early on. The essential components of programs to improve inter-ethnic relations are: 1) to foster feelings of pride and commitment to one's ethnicity; Arbona, Jackson, McCoy, and Blakely (1999) determined that positive ethnic identity was associated with non-fighting attitudes when controlling for peer influence and parental involvement. Thus, positive ethnic identity is related to attitudes and skills in resolving conflicts with peers in non-violent ways; and 2) when facilitating cross-group dialogues, to encourage personalization, where participants recount personal stories as members of their ethnic or racial group rather than as individuals, and dialogic listening, where participants are encouraged to paraphrase, share similar experiences, and articulate their own thoughts and feelings about another's experience (Nagda, 2006) (Gurin & Nagda, 2006). Participants can achieve this, he says, through role-playing inter-group conflict situations and collectively testing active interventions.

Based on the study's findings, the following actions are recommended:

- Incorporate multicultural history into American History courses as early as elementary school to counter stereotypes and prejudice and develop and integrate coursework that emphasizes mutual respect, conflict resolution, and mediation skills. Students should also be educated about the heterogeneity of different groups rather than trying to prove false negative stereotypes (Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997).
- Develop informal leadership models that utilize natural peer leaders representing a broad range of socio-cultural groups in local high schools (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Students would participate in a series of workshops where they would discuss scenarios of conflict and cooperatively develop

strategies to mitigate the behavior. Having several workshops over an extended period of time would maximize acquaintance potential or the potential for friendships to develop and allow strategies to be tested in the school environment between workshops. Workshops would be held outside of the school environment to minimize the effect of situational identities around peers.

- Facilitate a controversial dialogue program (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006) that brings together a diverse group of students to discuss factors that create tensions in their school, including stereotyping, bias, harassment related to race, ethnicity, and immigration status in local middle-schools. These issues are already salient and contentious by this educational level. An initial focus group should be conducted to determine specific issues of importance to a particular location. The dialogue program would comprise a series of meetings over a set period of time. Students should be encouraged to share autobiographical stories of heritage and history to individualize and personalize the characteristics of out-of-group members and develop positive feelings of personal group identity.
- Ensure funding for local Human Relations Commissions to take an active role in mitigating the ethnic antagonisms that accompany demographic

change (Johnson, Farrell, & Guinn, 1997). They must be adequately funded to design and implement educational and intervention programs that seek to change negative stereotypes.

- Human Relations Commissions should focus on coalition building and agenda setting around issues of common interest and concern such as improving the public school system, reducing drugs and crime, and improving quality job opportunities in the local economy. Oliver and Wong (2003) argue that the best way to counteract the racial conflicts is to promote greater racial integration not just in neighborhoods, but in civic associations as well. Thus, increased efforts should be made to work more closely with local neighborhood councils and community organizations that bring knowledge of neighborhood-specific issues.
- Human Relations Commissions and local community organizations engaged in collaborative efforts to address community needs should make focused efforts to develop a media campaign in order to highlight role models and positive stories of cross-ethnic or cross-racial collaboration and use that exposure to counter the overwhelming majority of negative and stereotypical images of ethnic and racial minorities in the media.

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David Fabienke, MPP

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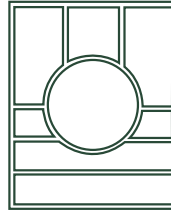
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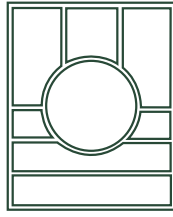
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