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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Doing the Real Work": Latina Women, Resistance, and State Surveillance in a Border County

Erica Salinas Thomas[1] and Julissa Muñiz[2]

[1]Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, Newark, USA and [2]School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, USA
Corresponding author: Erica Salinas Thomas; Email: est61@rutgers.edu

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Abstract
The experiences of Latina women and girls with state surveillance, and their responses to unfair policies and practices, remain underexplored. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Latinas—primarily of Mexican descent—living in San Diego, we examine how encounters with local police and immigration enforcement shape their political practices. Participants described repeated negative encounters with police and immigration enforcement agencies over the life course. These cumulative experiences fostered distrust of police and critical views of surveillance practices designed to restrict the mobility of immigrants and other systematically minoritized groups. In response, many of the women engaged in community organizing and adopted counter-surveillance strategies. Our findings show how patterned experiences with state surveillance generate political critique and action.

Keywords: Latinas; gender; surveillance; policing; immigration enforcement; political participation; resistance

Introduction

In early March 2018, plainclothes United States Border Patrol (USBP) agents forcibly arrested Perla Morales-Luna, an undocumented Mexican woman and single parent of three daughters, on a busy street in National City, California (Morrissey and Solis 2018). The incident was recorded by one of her daughters, who captured agents pulling Morales-Luna into a Border Patrol vehicle, while the girls were left screaming on the side of the street. After the video was posted and widely circulated on social media, there was widespread community support: residents rallied around the family, schools organized resources to assist the daughters, and a city councilwoman publicly demanded answers about the arrest. In the days that followed, federal authorities faced scrutiny for the violent, public separation of a

mother from her children. Under growing pressure, the San Diego Branch of the USBP released a statement alleging Morales-Luna was involved in a human smuggling network operating out of East County San Diego, but these charges were later dropped. This moment of public, forcible separation reveals how Latina women, especially mothers, are uniquely vulnerable to the violent impacts of immigration enforcement.[1] This case also highlights how Latina women and girls resist state violence by documenting immigration enforcement and using social media to hold authorities accountable. Despite the visibility and emotional impact of incidents like Morales-Luna's arrest, the experiences of Latinas with surveillance and punishment remain underexplored (Crenshaw 2012; Hitchens, Carr, and Clampet-Lundquist 2018; Huerta Adrian, Howard, Howard, 2020; Rios 2011; Ida, Antin, and Hunt, 2021).

A growing number of scholars aware of the invisibility of Latina women and girls in this research have started to address this omission (Diaz-Cotto 2006; Lerma 2023; Lopez and Pasko 2021; Richie 2012; Salinas 2023). For example, in a recent study, Veronica Lerma (2023) examines how formerly incarcerated and system-impacted Chicanas living in the Central Valley of California navigate criminalization linked to their relationships with boys and men.[2] She finds that many women are criminalized repeatedly across their lives in connection with male family members, friends, and intimate partners. In response, some of the women in Lerma's study defiantly protected loved ones by refusing to cooperate with police, even when it resulted in their own criminalization. Lerma's research underscores the gendered dynamics of state surveillance and everyday forms of resistance that Chicana women develop in response.

Still, the experiences of Latinas who are not formerly incarcerated or systems-impacted remain underexamined. Much of the existing literature focuses on incarcerated (DeHart 2008; Flores 2016; Lopez and Pasko 2021), formerly incarcerated (Diaz-Cotto 2006; García-Hallett 2022), or systems-impacted women (Lerma 2023; Salinas 2023), leaving gaps in our understanding of how Latinas affected in less direct but still meaningful ways interpret and respond to social interactions with legal authorities. Walker and García-Castañon (2017) find that proximal contact can mobilize Latinas, offering insight into how women of color uniquely experience and respond to state power. Yet more research is needed to explore how Latina women make sense of these encounters and transform that meaning into political action against unjust policing practices.

In this article, we contribute to social science research by bridging insights from political science, sociology, and criminology. We explore two central questions in this paper: What salient experiences shape the perceptions of Latinas toward the police and other legal authorities? How do Latinas respond to negative personal and vicarious experiences with the state? To address these questions, we draw on 24 semi-structured interviews with Latinas, primarily of Mexican descent and working-class backgrounds, in San Diego, California, who reported negative experiences with legal authorities. Using this methodological approach, we seek, in the words of Woodley and Lockard (2016, 324), "to allow participant life stories to be told in their own voices and on their own terms, thus creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard." In doing so, this paper offers a much-needed intervention by focusing on how Mexican women make sense of their experiences, not in isolation, but as individuals embedded in local contexts. Our approach also aligns with recent studies

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in political science, such as Weaver, Prowse, and Piston (2020), which highlight the importance of listening to "how people theorize the state and argue for and against particular courses of action" (606).

In our analysis, we found that Chicana women described cumulative experiences with legal authorities throughout their lives. By cumulative experiences, we refer to the ways women linked multiple, often distinct encounters with authorities—across schools, neighborhoods, and family life—into broader, coherent interpretations of state power. These layered encounters shaped a persistent orientation toward the state, often marked by mistrust, critique, and a sense of exclusion and injustice. In response to the exclusionary practices embedded in surveillance institutions, many women turned to community organizing and counter-surveillance as strategies of resistance. For some, the strategies they used were limited by legal status: women who were US citizens or permanent residents engaged in overt forms of resistance, such as physically intervening or questioning authority, likely due to the protections their legal status afforded them. In contrast, undocumented women or those with uncertain status adopted more cautious forms of resistance that they could practice from a distance.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we review the literature that informs our study, including Latinas and life course criminalization, Latina activism and resistance, and Black women's witnessing strategies. Next, we detail our methodological approach, including recruitment strategy, participant demographics, study setting, and data analysis approach. In the findings section, we focus on two key themes that emerged from our analysis: 1) the cumulative experiences that women reported with legal authorities across their lifespan, and 2) how those experiences, in turn, shaped their political engagement. We conclude by discussing differences in the political strategies used by documented versus undocumented women, gendered experiences with state surveillance, and directions for future research.

Latinas and Criminalization

The impacts of criminalization have been well documented in the last several decades, mainly as it afflicts and constrains the lives of Black and Latino boys and men (Brunson 2007; Huerta Adrian, Howard, Howard, 2020; Rios 2011). Criminalization refers to the "constant surveillance, harassment, and discipline" (Lerma 2023, 312) of individuals at the hands of multiple interlocking systems (Cox 2018). These studies show that involuntary or unwanted attention from law enforcement agencies is not predicated on criminality. Instead, people, particularly those racialized as Black, Latina/o/x/e, and Indigenous across genders, are stopped and questioned based on presumptions of criminality closely tied to racial stereotypes (Lerman and Weaver 2014; Rios 2011). For this reason, the police and the criminal legal system, more broadly, have been dubbed race-making institutions (Lipsitz 1998; Soss and Weaver 2017). Criminalization also occurs across multiple spaces, such as the home, schools, social services, and the broader community, and often daily in what some have come to understand as the *carceral continuum* (Shedd 2015).

Criminalization, however, does not exclusively affect men. Scholars have argued that an intersectional framework would better capture the reach and implications of the carceral state, specifically illuminating how women of color are policed and punished (Crenshaw 2012; Lopez and Pasko 2021; Richie 2012; Salinas 2023;

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Wilson, Antin, and Hunt 2021). Intersectional criminalization as a framework proposes "that gender, sexuality, and race matter differently for girls and women than for boys and men within the context of a social structure that is comprised of interlocking systems of oppression" (Lerma 2023, 314). Studies that adopt an intersectional approach find that Latinas experience an overlap of interpersonal and state violence (Diaz-Cotto 2006; Lerma 2023; Salinas 2023). For instance, in interviews with formerly incarcerated Latinas in California, Salinas (2023) argues that structural conditions in carceral communities render Latinas vulnerable to passive (e.g., food and housing insecurity) and active violence (e.g., sexual abuse and domestic violence). In response, Salinas finds that Latinas use coping strategies that are criminalized by the state, leading to their incarceration.

Studies that draw on a life course perspective show that formerly incarcerated and systems-impacted Latinas experience numerous negative encounters with legal authorities throughout their life spans (DeHart 2008; Lerma 2023; Maldonado-Fabela 2022; Salinas 2023). A life course approach underscores that for some women, criminalization occurs not as a discrete event but as recurring moments where legal actors exert state control. Life course criminalization studies also show that formerly incarcerated and systems-impacted Latinas are not passive bystanders but rather resist their criminalization and that of loved ones by refusing to comply with law enforcement agencies even at their own risk of further criminalization (Lerma 2023, 327). Studies focusing on Black men and boys also signal the importance of the accumulated impacts of negative social interactions with the police (Brunson 2007; Feagin 1991). In in-depth interviews with Black men and adolescents living in St. Louis, Missouri, Brunson (2007) finds that youth had numerous experiences with police harassment and violence, which shaped their collective distrust toward the police. In drawing attention to "accumulated police experiences," Brunson emphasizes the broader impacts of discriminatory experiences, given that individuals who experience police misconduct share these stories within their social networks. We build on these accounts by recognizing that Latinas may accumulate a multitude of harmful experiences, direct and indirect, with legal authorities throughout their lives. To capture the accumulation of harm these experiences engender, we describe them as *cumulative experiences* throughout the paper.

Latinas, Political Agency, and Resistance

Political science research has not consistently recognized Latinas as agentic political subjects in US politics (Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and García 2000). The neglect of Latinas in American politics research is attributable to various factors, including stereotypes of Puerto Rican and Mexican women as passive and submissive, the focus of mainstream political science research on men, and narrow male-specific definitions of politics (Hary-Fanta 1993, 19–22). Instead, early accounts portrayed Latinas as victims of "triple oppression," or racism, sexism, and cultural traditions referred to as *machismo* (Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and García 2000). Since then, scholars—many of them Chicana and Latina women—have transformed how we understand political life by attending to the growing numbers of Latinas in Congress and state legislatures (Bejarano 2013; García et al. 2008; Hardy-Fanta 1993), their leadership in grassroots organizing (Blackwell 2010; Delgado Bernal 1998; Pardo

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1998), and advancing intersectional thought and praxis (Anzaldúa 1987; Delgado Bernal 2011; Montoya and Seminario 2020; Zinn and Zambrana 2019).

Latinas engage in politics distinctly from their male counterparts, focusing on interpersonal relationships, cooperation, and broad-based participation (Hardy-Fanta 1993). In her study of politics in Boston, Hardy-Fanta found that Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Central American women were active in electoral politics and were the majority of participants and activists in political events. In contrast to Latino men who viewed politics through the lens of positions and status, Latina women in Boston "reveal as their alternative vision connecting people around issues of survival" (1993, 46). Hardy-Fanta found that Latinas, many of whom were *alcaldesas del barrio* ("women mayors" or informal advocates) and staffers at community agencies, enacted a more participatory vision of politics by connecting personal problems to government (in)action, building and maintaining relationships, and encouraging participation among community members. Other studies find that Latinas mobilize their gendered roles and responsibilities to solve community problems. In Pardo's (1990) case study of Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), Mexican American women transformed their "traditional" responsibilities, including as caregivers overseeing their children's educational progress, into political resources to oppose the construction of a prison in Boyle Heights (Pardo 1990). The women in Pardo's study used their existing roles and expertise from their involvement in parent organizations and churches to advance their political goals.

The strategies Latinas use to respond to unfair encounters with the police or USBP agents in the contemporary moment are understudied. Existing accounts suggest Latinas are mobilized by the exposure of loved ones—especially men and boys—to the criminal legal system, prompting their engagement in nonvoting political activities (Walker and García-Castañon 2017; Walker 2020). According to these studies, Latinas' political responses are shaped by their positionality within families and communities deeply affected by surveillance and punishment. The political labor that emerges is frequently rooted in care work, efforts to protect, support, and advocate for those targeted by state violence. Walker and García-Castañon also suggest that individuals responding to carceral injustice may view nontraditional political activities as immediate methods for expressing community outrage and advancing solutions. Neighborhood residents of marginalized communities also perceive formal political institutions as part of the problem, rather than a solution (Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2020). Building on this scholarship, our study examines how Latinas translate their encounters with surveillance into actions that contest state power, even if at times only temporarily.

Studies of Black women's resistance to state surveillance further inform our analysis. A recent study by Gonzalez and Deckard (2022) found three short- and long-term witnessing strategies, including physical, virtual, and institutional witnessing, that Black women used to protect themselves during police interactions. These included calling on others to witness an incident, livestreaming interactions, and strategically leveraging ties to institutional actors for protection. We extend this work by attending to the everyday strategies Chicana women employ to undermine and renegotiate state surveillance in San Diego. In doing so, we highlight the distinct contributions of Chicanas to a pressing political issue often rendered invisible in contemporary political science scholarship.

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Methods

In this article, we draw on a subset of interviews from a larger study focused on the experiences of self-identified Latinx individuals with legal authorities, including immigration enforcement agencies, in San Diego County, California. Data collection for this study took place between 2018 and 2020. The first author conducted 61 semi-structured interviews with Latinx individuals between the ages of 16 and 80.[3] Here, we focus on 24 semi-structured interviews with participants who reported critical views of law enforcement to understand how they interpret their interactions with legal authorities in a militarized and high-surveillance region.

Research participants were recruited through flyers and multiple-entry snowball sampling. The first author recruited participants at community colleges, public libraries, and community centers. The first author strategically identified recruitment sites in neighborhoods with a high concentration of Latinx individuals. One of the sites was a community resource center that offered neighborhood residents free assistance with food, housing, and educational services. Participants were also recruited through a human rights organization that provided free-of-charge workshops, including ones focused on Know Your Rights, which some participants referenced during the interviews. The flyers stipulated, in addition to the age range and place of residence, that participants should self-identify as Latinx, Hispanic, or a national origin group such as Puerto Rican or Mexican. The first author's positionality as a first-generation Mexican American and Chicana raised in a working-class immigrant household in San Diego facilitated access to and rapport with participants in the study. The second author identifies as a Black Latina of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent who also grew up in San Diego, which informed the data analysis process.

Most interviews occurred face-to-face at public libraries, coffee shops, restaurants, and city benches. On average, interviews lasted 1–2 hours. At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewer asked questions about their perceptions of neighborhood problems and if they were involved in addressing these issues (See the appendix for the complete Interview Guide).[4] Participants were then asked about their interactions and perceptions of the local police department, the USBP, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). At the end of the interview, the researcher would ask participants about their formal political participation with questions such as "Have you ever attended a city council or school board meeting?" and about specific practices related to legal authorities by asking "Have you ever filmed the police or Border Patrol?" This paper focuses on responses to the following questions: "Have you ever been stopped or questioned by the police?" "Have you ever been stopped by a federal immigration agent?" and "Have you participated in any political activities regarding criminal justice or immigration?" Research participants received a $20 Visa Gift Card for their time. All transcripts were audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date.

Research Participants

In the larger study, participants varied in age, gender, legal status, socioeconomic status, and occupation.[5] A broad age range was selected to understand how Latinxs across generations experienced and perceived legal authorities in the region. However, for this subset of participants, the girls and women who held critical views

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of legal authorities were typically younger, of Mexican heritage, US citizens, and most often second-generation immigrants. Twenty of the 24 participants were 30 or younger during the interview. Twenty-three women identified as Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/Chicanx, and Indigenous Mexican, all of whom were grouped under the category of Mexican heritage, and 1 participant identified as Guatemalan. Additionally, while 19 of our interviewees were students or professionals in their adult lives (*see* Table 1 for occupation details), most of our participants indicated that they grew up in working-class households. Working-class status was often described in relation to living in a mixed-status home with undocumented parents or relatives, parents working multiple low-wage jobs, living in single-parent households, multiple families in one home, working to financially assist their families, attending Title I schools, or descriptions of growing up in hyper-policed and under-resourced communities. In this paper, we attend to class and its intersections by highlighting, where appropriate, how social class shaped participants' experiences with legal authorities. Fifteen research participants were US citizens, 6 were permanent residents, 2 were Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, and 1 was undocumented. Six disclosed that they were previously undocumented before applying for DACA or permanent residency.

Further, of the 24 participants, only 2 reported having been previously arrested for charges of driving under the influence (DUI). While our participants did not report a history of incarceration, most participants shared stories of being indirectly impacted by carceral systems. For this reason, many of our participants would fall under the category of *systems-impacted* defined as "individuals who have, at some point in their lives, had sustained direct and indirect experiences with carceral systems, including the criminal and juvenile legal systems, child welfare system, foster care system, immigration system, and other punitive branches of public institutions" (Muñiz and Huerta 2025, 262). Many of our participants reported direct and indirect criminalization through their personal experiences navigating immigration checkpoints, inspections at ports of entry, or sobriety checkpoints, or indirectly by being subjected to police raids and probation and parole checks directed at loved ones in their home. Table 1 includes detailed demographic information for each participant. When writing specifically about any of the girls or women, we use the racial or ethnic identification they provided during the interview. All listed names are pseudonyms.

Transcripts from the 24 interviews were analyzed collaboratively in the spring of 2023. To analyze the interviews, we used Dedoose, a data analysis software. We applied grounded theory coding to identify recurring ideas, themes, and theoretical constructs (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). We also utilized analytic memos to reflect on our data and construct emerging themes. This process involved applying descriptive and in-vivo codes to systematically capture participants' language and experiences.[6] We then grouped these codes into parent codes that reflected overarching patterns across the interviews. Two key themes emerged from this analysis. The first, *cumulative experiences with surveillance institutions* included codes such as "burdens of fines and fees" associated with sobriety checkpoints, "drug-sniffing dogs in school," and "school searches," "abuse of power," and "fear of police." The second theme, "*resisting state surveillance*," captured actions that Latinas took to challenge state surveillance. Codes linked with this theme included

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Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Occupation*	*Citizenship Status*	*Nationality*	*Prior Arrests*
Ana	24	Teacher	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Amelia	27	Student	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Sara	30	Debt Collector	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Christina	30	Nurse	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Elena	24	Student	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Carla	23	Art/Theater	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Cassandra	16	Student	Undocumented	Mexican	No
Amie	17	Student	Permanent Resident	Guatemalan	No
Flor	21	Student	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Ximena	28	Union Representative	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Valerie	30	HR Specialist	Permanent Resident	Mexican	No
Yesika	28	Student	DACA	Mexican	No
Mayte	28	Research Coordinator	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Marissa	67	Retired	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Mar	28	Stay-at-home mom	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Barbara	48	Housekeeping	Permanent Resident	Mexican	Yes
Gris	43	Caregiver	Permanent Resident	Mexican	No
Andrea	51	Housekeeping	Permanent Resident	Mexican	No
Lupe	27	Health Specialist	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Marisol	28	Health Specialist	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Aracely	30	Student	DACA	Mexican	Yes
Tatiana	25	Health Specialist	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Brenda	18	Student	US Citizen	Mexican	No
Aurora	27	Social Worker	Permanent Resident	Mexican	No

"resisting authority," "protesting a sobriety checkpoint," and "engaging in counter-surveillance."

Study Setting

Our research site, San Diego County, is what sociologist Robert K. Merton (1987) described as a "strategic research site" in that it "exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such an advantage and in such accessible form that it enables the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems . . . " (10). In 2020, the U.S. Census estimated that 33.9 percent of San Diego residents identified as Latinx, making it an ideal site to study Latinxs' experiences with criminal legal systems. Since the turn of the century, overt aggression and state violence toward

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Mexican immigrants (Lytle-Hernández 2022; Patiño 2017; Griswold del Castillo 2007) have given way to more disguised forms of surveillance, such as the use of sobriety checkpoints by local police departments. San Diego police departments use sobriety checkpoints, or "randomized" driver's license checkpoints, allegedly to apprehend impaired drivers and educate the public about the dangers of driving while intoxicated. In practice, until 2015, they served to limit the mobility of undocumented residents in the county and extract resources via fines and fees imposed on drivers without a valid driver's license (Salinas Thomas 2023; Buiza and Yusufi 2012).[7] Other forms of surveillance include random USBP screenings along interstate highways, which make it difficult for undocumented residents to travel outside the county. San Diego's history of anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant discrimination and its present-day systems of surveillance have the potential to uniquely impact the region's more than one million residents who identify as Latinx (Lytle-Hernández 2010). To illustrate that impact, we now turn to narrative accounts of Chicana women and their experiences navigating state surveillance in their communities.

Findings

Through our analysis, we found that Chicana women described cumulative experiences with legal authorities across their life span—beginning in childhood or adolescence and continuing into adulthood. These experiences held lasting significance because they were frequent and embedded in multiple contexts from family life to schools and neighborhoods, making them key sites of political learning and critique. Another feature of these cumulative experiences was that they involved multiple state agencies and occurred in different places throughout the county. For instance, given the proximity of the Mexico-US border, several US-born women had their first negative encounter as young children with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers while crossing the border into the US. These same women also described subsequent interactions with police officers during adolescence in schools, neighborhoods, or homes. As adults, many women continued to have negative encounters with police and CBP officers. Through these recurring experiences, the women described becoming increasingly distrustful and critical of not only the police but also of broader governing institutions, such as city councils.

In the following analysis, we highlight selected examples that reflect the broader theme of cumulative experiences with surveillance institutions across the life course. These accounts span from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, demonstrating how experiences with legal authorities accumulate and compound over time. In line with life course research (Lerma 2023; Maldonado-Fabela 2022), we view the experiences related by participants as socially embedded events shaped by women's relationships to family, neighborhood, and the broader socio-political landscape. In the following section, we present examples of how women adopted community organizing and counter-surveillance strategies to resist state surveillance.

Cumulative Experiences with Surveillance Institutions

Although none of the women in our study were incarcerated and most had never been arrested, they recounted cumulative experiences with legal authorities across

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their lives. For US.-born Chicana women, some of their earliest harmful experiences occurred in the context of crossing the Mexico-US border. For example, Ana, a 24-year-old Chicana and public school teacher, shared a traumatic experience that occurred with a CBP officer when she was 10. Ana was born in the United States but lived in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico at the time. Growing up, she frequently crossed the border into San Diego to visit her godmother. She recalled:

> I was 10, crossing with my aunt to go to my godmother's, and they sent me to second revision. They actually took me out of the car by myself, and it was a white Border Patrol officer, and he asked me questions that, as a 10-year-old, I'm never going to forget. He asked me, "Where are you going?" "Who's this lady?" "Do you know them?" I answered all his questions in Spanish because he was asking me in Spanish, but it got weird when he started asking, "Who is your godmother?" I told him her name, and he's like, "Who is she married to?" I told him my *nino* [godfather], and he asked, "Where were they born?" "When did they get married?" . . . I remember I started crying because I felt very attacked.

Ana emphasized that she would "never forget" the officer's disturbing interrogation about the real identities of her aunt and godparents. In hindsight, she explained that the encounter was traumatic because of her age and limited fluency in English, which left her feeling helpless. As we explain later in the section, Ana had many more encounters with legal authorities, but this example marked the beginning of her cumulative experiences.

Other respondents recalled similar moments involving young children and border enforcement agents. Ximena, a 28-year-old US-born Chicana and union organizer, recounted an interaction involving her 5-year-old niece while crossing the border into the US. Like Ana, her niece is a US citizen. Ximena recalled that the CBP officer repeatedly asked her niece, "What is your name?" and "What is your name really?" Confused and unsettled by the interaction with the CBP officer, the child later asked the adults in the vehicle, "What is my name?" Ximena said the interaction was unnecessarily harmful and explained, "At the time, I think it impacted her that a person of authority wouldn't believe like that's really your name, right. Like, there must be a real reason to question it. Like maybe it isn't you." For Ximena, the encounter highlighted how children's identities are destabilized in these moments. Even when such questioning is intended to identify victims of trafficking, young children cannot grasp the rationale or assert their rights, leaving them uniquely vulnerable to the psychological harms of state scrutiny.

Such vulnerability to state power was not new to Ximena. One of her earliest cumulative experiences occurred when she was a child in elementary school. She recalled that at the time, it was common practice for the Oceanside Police Department (OPD) to implement sobriety checkpoints during afternoon hours, near schools, which coincided with after-school pick-up. School had just ended, and Ximena was walking toward her mother's vehicle when she noticed a police officer talking to her mother. What gets her angry to this day is that the officer was asking her mother if she was an "illegal." That day, her mother's vehicle was towed and impounded for 30 days because her mother was driving without a driver's license.

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The experience left her resentful, especially because her mother had to pay over 1,000 dollars in fines and fees to get her vehicle back. She emphasized how unfair this practice was, stating, "When you're a low-income working-class family like my parents. Honestly, they used to make like 12,000 a year. When you're trying to charge a thousand to get the car out, that's like a month's worth of income." The emotional and financial burdens of this interaction, along with a separate incident when her mother's vehicle was towed again on the way to Goodwill, left Ximena deeply distrustful of legal authorities and shaped her activism later in life, as we detail in the next section.

That early distrust deepened during adolescence, as Ana and Ximena described ongoing negative encounters with police in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Ana recounted a traumatic raid on her home when she was 16. At the time, multiple families lived in her house, and police came with a warrant to arrest her cousin, who was involved in selling drugs. Ana recalled waking to the sounds of officers tearing down the front door. At first, she had assumed someone was breaking in. She said, "They literally broke my door, and the gun was 3 inches from my face. There was two of them. The one [officer] pointed at my face was just like I think this is the person we are looking for." The police raid on Ana's home was a traumatic and disorienting experience. Although she had done nothing wrong, she was woken up by force, held at gunpoint, and misidentified. This moment was a turning point for Ana, who said, "It was a reality check. They [the police] are not here to protect me. They weren't even here to try to talk to me. They were just here to get what they needed." Ana's experience supports Lerma's (2023) finding that Latinas experience criminalization through their interpersonal relationships with men and boys, whether family members, friends, or romantic partners.

Other participants, including Ximena, also described cumulative experiences with police, but in institutional settings like schools. Several recalled a practice used in Oceanside Unified School District (OUSD) schools where canines were used to search students' belongings. For example, Yesika, a 28-year-old Mexican-born student and DACA beneficiary, shared that drug searches were common at her predominantly Latinx high school, stating:

> Mostly in high school, I saw it. We had security guards and cops. It's like, why do you need both? I remember one thing they would do. They would have all of us leave our stuff in the classroom. We all had to leave, and they would come in with the dog to sniff our backpacks.

During drug searches, Yesika worried that the canines would accidentally signal her belongings as suspicious because she had food inside her backpack. Even though she was not engaged in law-violating behaviors, she felt criminalized and worried she would get in trouble. Other participants in our study also mentioned this practice and its negative impact on their sense of safety in school. Amelia, a 27-year-old US-born Chicana and college student, said:

> They would take the whole class out. They would say leave your stuff in the classroom. Everybody get out. And they would line all of us up against the wall. The police would go in there with the dogs, and they would smell everything to

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> see if they found anything. Then they would pass by us, and they would have the dogs smell us.

In a school setting meant to foster learning and safety, Amelia described it as routine for students to be questioned, watched, or accused of using drugs. It was in high school where, in addition to police officers on campus, there were routine drug searches. Amelia and other participants attended schools where the student body was predominantly Latinx, suggesting these surveillance practices were shaped by race and class.[8]

Amelia also encountered concentrated policing in her neighborhood, adding to the cumulative weight of surveillance in her daily life. She grew up in Mesa Margarita, a neighborhood with a strong sense of community but one that was often stigmatized due to incidents of youth violence in the nearby Libby Lake Park. Growing up, Amelia became close friends with boys whom others—local residents, police, and even her mother—labeled as *cholos*, or potentially gang-involved. She recalled that police regularly stopped and questioned them without cause, often photographing them against white screens, without parental consent. When Amelia was with them, she was also stopped and interrogated. She emphasized that as a result, she feels police "*abusan*," or abuse their authority by profiling young people and documenting them as gang members simply for a style of dress. Her experiences reinforce the finding that adolescent Latinas are exposed to criminalization through their relationships with male peers in their schools and their communities (Lerma 2023).

In adulthood, experiences with legal authorities continued for participants, revealing how surveillance and mistrust are not limited to a single life stage but persist across time and context. Ana's initial encounter with CBP officers at age 10 was followed by many more as she crossed the Mexico-US border weekly to visit family while attending college in San Diego. As a college student, this routine crossing became a regular part of her life, exposing her to ongoing interactions with CBP officials. Much as she had as a child, Ana felt violated and harassed by officers who felt they could ask any and all questions, from whether she was taking produce or alcohol across the border to her relationship status and even her hair care routine. She recalled:

> I even had a Border Patrol officer once, I was wearing a jacket because it was cold, and I was crossing [the border] walking. Then, I even had him be like, oh what are you bringing? I wasn't bringing anything because someone was waiting on the other side with a car. He was like oh can you unzip your jacket? And then, when I did, he just stared at my breasts. He didn't do anything. Then he was like okay, you can go now.

Ana's experience reveals how gender-based harassment is embedded in the everyday operations of surveillance institutions. For Ana, speaking out at that moment was not an option—her ability to enter the country was contingent on that particular officer. Through this and countless intrusive encounters, she realized that institutions like the police and the USBP claim to exist for "our protection," but in practice, "they criminalize our people." Her account shows how cumulative

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experiences are politically consequential, informing how women develop critical orientations toward surveillance institutions over time.

Ximena also shared examples that reflect how surveillance persists and is partly shaped by the nature of border enforcement in San Diego. She regularly drives along Interstate 8, where an immigration checkpoint in Pine Valley requires most motorists to slow down or stop when active. She explained, "More often than not, they always stop me. When I drive with my coworkers, I have one who is African American and one who is white. They never stop us, so it pisses me off." At one interaction, a USBP agent asked if she had someone in her trunk—an accusation that shocked and offended her. She recalled asking the agent if other motorists, namely, white motorists, are asked this question. Ximena's account reveals her perception of immigration checkpoints as racialized encounters, not neutral security procedures. Now, as an adult, her tolerance for these subtle aggressions has diminished, as we detail in the next section.

This section highlights Chicana women's experiences with legal authorities and how they accumulate across different settings and life stages. We also show how these cumulative experiences contribute to the women's growing awareness that legal authorities are exclusionary and unjustly target their communities for surveillance. In the next section, we examine two strategies participants used to challenge policing and surveillance in San Diego.

Resisting Everyday Forms of Surveillance

As a result of their cumulative experiences, many of the women in our study discussed various strategies they used to resist legal authorities and state surveillance. Most women in our subsample engaged in purposeful forms of resistance that involved community organizing and counter-surveillance strategies. In line with Gonzalez and Deckard's (2022) findings, we found that participants not only deployed these strategies for their protection, but also for that of others in their community. When and how participants mobilized was often contingent on what they perceived as unjust and unfair and was aimed at protecting communities that they perceived as vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

Community Organizing

One of the most widely discussed forms of resistance among our participants was their active involvement in what they described as community organizing, meaning actions aimed at mobilizing Latinxs, immigrants, and other minoritized groups within their communities. The participants saw such organizing as one of the few solutions available for addressing socio-political issues affecting their communities. For example, Marisol, a 28-year-old Mexican American woman and health specialist, explained:

> [B]ecause of my background as a community organizer, I see a lot more strength as far as communities being their own sense of protection, if that makes any sense . . . I used to do a lot of, like going to city council meetings and

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> city buildings and things like that and they always seem just very not helpful or rude or maybe that's how I took it.

Marisol went on to explain that on numerous occasions when attending city council meetings, she often felt that if, and when, there were police officials present, they would "side" with more conservative—read white residents—or what she described as "minute men type folks." Without explicitly naming race, part of Marisol's frustration was rooted in police officers, whether intentionally or not, aligning with white residents' demands and prioritizing their safety.

Marisol explained that on a separate occasion, also at a city council meeting, a white woman got in her "face with a camera" and told her to go back to her "home country." Fearing for her well-being, she approached the police officer overseeing the meeting for support and protection.

> I said [to the police officer] this woman is like in my personal space um this is a city building, and I don't think that kind of behavior is appropriate. He literally waved it off . . . he didn't do anything.

Marisol laughed, perhaps in disbelief, at the police officer's response or lack thereof, and exclaimed, "I guess in the back of my head too, I was always just like well that's what's expected, you know, or I didn't expect any different. Like what were they going to do." While the interaction was not life-threatening, the fact that the police officer did not intervene, or even take her concern seriously, reinforced what Marisol already believed to be true about legal authorities. Marisol, like many other women with negative cumulative experiences, ultimately felt that she could not rely on the police to represent her interests, much less keep her and others in her community safe.

Relatedly, Ximena, the U.S.-born Chicana mentioned in the previous section, shared her vision of organizing, stating:

> I think trying to get our community more involved is my goal because nothing that we can do is ever going to fix it if we're just doing it alone. So my thing is organizing the community, the parents to advocate for their kids. Letting them know that we have rights. We have a venue to be able to voice ourselves.

A key component of community organizing for women in our study involved community-based political education. Multiple research participants, like Ximena, led and taught "Know Your Rights" workshops that were open, free of cost, and accessible to the public. Several women saw the workshops as intergenerational interventions that could influence entire families and their extended networks. Carla, a 23-year-old Mexican American woman who worked in art and theater, shared that as part of her organizing efforts, she participated in and taught "Know Your Rights" workshops geared at "If they encounter ICE, if they encounter immigration or police, and they're scared or something." Equipping community members with the metaphorical tools needed to advocate for themselves if they were ever unfairly stopped and questioned by law enforcement was one way women collectively resisted state surveillance and power.

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Community organizing for Chicanas was part of a larger vision of what justice, agency, and advocacy could look like when community members are leading, or at least, a part of the decision-making process. For many of our participants, it was also imperative that women be at the helm of change and that they assume leadership roles because, as Mayte, a 28-year-old self-identified Mestiza and research coordinator, passionately stated:

> Most of us have been involved for a long time but it was always like we were doing the support roles or we were doing [it]. And it just got to the point we are doing the real work. Why aren't we sending the message we should be the ones at the table? So I think that's where we are at right now, its women like taking that leadership position . . . I think we as women are used to doing the work right, no one is going to give us credit for anything so we got to work for it.

As Mayte notes, women have always done the work of uplifting and supporting their communities, even if they were not always recognized as leaders. According to Mayte, women are at a place where they no longer want to play supportive roles; they want a seat at the table and to hold leadership positions to push forth actual community change. This aligns with extant research demonstrating that for decades, women of color have wanted and, in some cases, have actively pursued leadership positions in local political organizations and social movements (Hardy-Fanta 1993; Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and García 2000; Montoya and Seminario 2020). In addition to using community organizing as a tool for resisting the unchecked power of law enforcement, we also found that Chicanas used counter-surveillance strategies to protect themselves and others.

Counter-Surveillance

In the last several years, there has been a marked increase in people using cell phones and social media platforms to capture incidents of police violence and killings, including the infamous video that captured the last living minutes of George Floyd's life. Individuals use counter-surveillance strategies to de-escalate interactions between police and community residents, to document and gather evidence, and to protect themselves and/or others from potential violence. Communities of color often rely on counter-surveillance, whether physical, virtual, or institutional witnessing, to protect and document interactions with legal authorities (Gonzalez and Deckard 2022). In our study, we found that Chicanas employed *physical* and *virtual witnessing* when engaged in counter-surveillance. Physical witnessing, as defined by Gonzalez and Deckard (2022), refers to the "act of mobilizing observers in the vicinity of police contact to influence officer behavior, deescalate violence, and avoid becoming invisible victims of violence" (7-8). Other participants described incidents that constituted virtual witnessing, meaning they would video record and/or take pictures of law enforcement interactions, post on social media, and/or text people or organizations in their communities to alert them of potential immigration or sobriety checkpoints. For some women, participating in virtual witnessing was

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situational and happenstance, whereas for others, it was something they regularly adopted as a political strategy to resist legal authorities' unchecked power and surveillance. In the following sections, we highlight the two most commonly used forms of counter-surveillance, virtual and physical witnessing, that women reported in our study.

Physical Witnessing

Building on Gonzalez and Deckard's (2022) work, we found that while some women did use forms of physical witnessing to influence an interaction in which they were the primary person questioned by police officers, many also described intervening when they saw other people being interrogated by police. We found that it was mostly English-speaking women who were either US citizens or permanent residents who intervened if they perceived that the interaction was potentially unjust or targeted at individuals who were either racialized as Latinx, perceived as not speaking English, or were potentially undocumented. Unlike women who are undocumented, US citizens and permanent residents have more legal protections, even if only theoretically, that could protect them from unlawful arrest, retaliation, and grant them access to due process.

Elena, a 24-year-old US-born Chicana college student, shared a story in which she was driving and pulled over to witness an interaction between two people and a police officer. Elena shared that although she had her two children in the car, she pulled over because she saw that it was two individuals, whom she racialized as "raza," a colloquial term used to refer to Mexican heritage people, sitting on the curb, handcuffed, and being questioned by the police with no other witnesses present.

> I was driving by and I saw two people just sitting there *y eran raza* and I was just like what the fuck is going on? Like why are they pulled over? Why is the husband and wife now on the floor like handcuffed? And I get out of my car and I said it in Spanish and I'm like *que esta pasando*? And then they [the couple] were trying to tell me and then he [the police officer] was like "ma'am get in your car and go. This is none of your business." And I said . . . fuck I don't know if it was my business or not . . . (*sic*) I don't know to what extent they have power.

Elena went out of her way while driving with her two children to ensure that the two individuals knew they did not have to show any documentation and had the right to stay silent and not answer the officer's questions. While the police officer ultimately instructed her to get back in her car, which she eventually did out of fear that they might call Child Protective Services, Elena's actions demonstrate a commitment to helping others whom she perceived as vulnerable to police abuse.

Similarly, Valerie, a 30-year-old Mexican woman and HR specialist, described multiple incidents where she pulled over to observe police interactions with community residents. One of the interactions she had witnessed involved a Latino man and five deputies from the Vista Sheriff's Department. Valerie noticed that the

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deputies were questioning an older Latino man wearing a backpack and that they were all "crowded around" him. She described the interaction as follows:

> I couldn't hear but based on their gestures and based on the way they were looking at his bag, they were asking him what was in his backpack. And I just kept wondering what are they doing? So I stuck around there because that light takes forever to turn green, so I stuck around for a while, but then the light turned green. When I got a chance to come back around, they were already leaving, so it doesn't seem like they found anything, but just the fact that there was like 5 of them around him, and they were not like you know a few feet away from him. They were in his personal space, which is why I turned around because I'm like what are they doing?

Although the incident did not escalate any further, Valerie felt it was important that she stay for the duration of the incident to ensure they were not "intimidating people." Valerie's decision to partake in physical witnessing was partially rooted in her desire to hold legal authorities accountable for the harm they sometimes inflict. Valerie, like several of the other participants, shared several examples of negative cumulative experiences with legal authorities, one of which involved her father and brother being violently assaulted by police. As Valerie explained:

> . . . if somebody had done that for my brother and my dad maybe they could have avoided or they could have stopped the assault that happened to them which is why any time anyone asks me what I think about the incident I tell them, not only were the people that participated in physically assaulting my father and my brother guilty, but the people that saw it and did nothing including the officers that were there that clearly saw that these other officers were doing something that was unlawful and they just let it happen.

Valerie's decision to pull over and witness the interaction between the Latino man and the five deputies was as much about de-escalating and protecting a community member from potential harm as it was about reclaiming some of the power she and her family had lost during the assault. Following her family's experiences, Valerie had come to believe that the only way to fight police power and violence was to "look out for each other because no one else will." In addition to physical witnessing, some participants described using their phones to record or take pictures of law enforcement interactions. For some women, participating in virtual witnessing felt like a safer way to protect themselves or others from a distance.

Virtual Witnessing

Virtual witnessing served as another mechanism of counter-surveillance in which women either video recorded, took pictures of law enforcement interactions and activities, or alerted people of sobriety checkpoints. For some participants, virtual witnessing was something they did regularly, whether it was a routine traffic stop, passing through a checkpoint, or seeing an unmarked, suspicious car. Others described doing it once or twice before if something about the interaction felt

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unsettling. Having access to their phones and being able to record quickly reassured participants that if something unjust happened to them or someone else, they would have evidence of any potential wrongdoing.

Tatiana, a 25-year-old Mexican woman and health specialist, shared that recording or taking pictures of law enforcement and citizen interactions was her "first instinct." Tatiana grew up in a mixed-status home where she and others around her had experienced negative cumulative experiences with legal authorities, such that when she saw police or immigration vehicles, she felt "uncomfortable" or "unsafe." She goes on to explain that while she does not like confronting legal authorities face-to-face, being able to video record or take pictures at a distance is a safe alternative that still allows her to participate in counter-surveillance. Tatiana explained her thought process as follows:

> I feel unsafe when I see a police [car], because I'm always like, okay, a police car. When I see one, I'm like, am I going to have to step in at some point? If they had pulled somebody over, am I going to have to intervene and record? Or am I going to have to call on other folks because this person isn't being treated right? Very alert and cautious of policing the police.

Despite her fears, Tatiana did not question whether or not to record or take pictures. Instead, she participated, knowing that it was one of the few in the moment ways to hold the police accountable.

Ximena also regularly recorded legal authorities, sometimes for her own protection and other times to preemptively protect others. On one occasion, Ximena and her partner were home and heard "yelling in the alleyway" beside their home and, upon looking out the window, saw police officers with their guns drawn, chasing two people fleeing on foot. They immediately started recording the interaction through the window. Although the incident ended without a physical confrontation, or as Ximena described, "no shots," they started recording out of fear that someone could be shot and killed beside their home. This was neither the first nor last time that Ximena recorded interactions between legal authorities and community residents, in fact, she regularly did so to resist and document what she saw as excessive use of power and force by law enforcement.

Given San Diego's proximity to the Mexico-US border, it was just as common to see people pulled over by USBP, so Ximena made it a habit to also record and snap pictures when she saw USBP officers questioning people on the side of the road. Ximena described her activities as follows:

> I've seen a lot of like *migra* [U.S. Border Patrol] pulling people over on the side of the road like cars and workers, and I always take pictures or document it. I always put my phone on my dashboard, and have my camera ready, so when I see one [referring to law enforcement] I just move it and press record. And I'll like slow down so a lot of like the videos that the organization has of like Border Patrol activity on the 5 a lot of them I've taken them.

For Ximena, being a virtual witness means documenting every interaction she can to gather evidence in case someone reports any type of law enforcement

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misconduct or potential violation of their rights. While Ximena is an outlier example of someone who uses virtual witnessing to protect herself and others, virtual witnessing as a practice has grown increasingly popular among younger generations.

Conclusion

Scholars have called for increased attention to the everyday forms of state surveillance and carcerality that people experience, navigate, and negotiate in their lives. In response, our study examines how Latinas, primarily young, US citizens of Mexican descent, described their encounters with legal authorities. We found that Chicanas experienced repeated interactions with legal authorities across their lives and institutional settings, which shaped their perceptions of power. In particular, women's cumulative experiences highlighted how surveillance institutions subjected their communities to financially predatory and racially-biased practices. As a result, many of the participants in our study described a desire to resist law enforcement power and surveillance, which they did through two main political strategies—community organizing and counter-surveillance. This finding confirms and extends recent studies suggesting that in response to state surveillance, marginalized communities mobilize for self and community protection (Gonzalez and Deckard 2022; Walker 2020; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2020). Our findings also demonstrate that during Donald Trump's first presidential term, Chicana and Mexican American women were actively involved in challenging one of the most immediate ways their communities experienced state coercion and predation.

Another significant dimension of this research is the role of space and policing. San Diego is a prime example of a "carceral geography" composed of physical and metaphorical walls that govern the lives of San Diegans (Moran and Morin 2015). This is especially true for disenfranchised communities, including Latinx, Black, Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, and Indigenous populations that live in hyper-policed and hyper-criminalized parts of the county. San Diego alone is the site of 7 jails and reentry centers, 2 detention facilities, 8 USBP stations, 20 San Diego Sheriff's substations, 9 city police departments, and 60 linear miles of boundary with Mexico surveilled by USBP agents.[9] San Diego is unique in that multiple agencies work simultaneously towards the larger racial project of social control (Omi and Winant 1986). Participants were highly conscious of how social control manifested in immigration checkpoints along Interstate 5, 15, and 8. They were also aware of the dangers that sobriety checkpoints posed to themselves and their undocumented family members. Our findings demonstrate mechanisms by which individuals become politicized on issues of policing and surveillance. The women in this study experienced institutional practices (e.g., sobriety checkpoints) directly and indirectly that shaped their understanding of the operations of the state. In the short term, their political responses to pervasive surveillance focused on building individual and community capacity to undermine state surveillance. Future research might explore how Latinas in distinct geographies experience and resist surveillance. Similarly, future studies should consider how Black, Latina, and Native women work together to address similar and distinct experiences with the carceral state.

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Here, we also find it important to reflect on gendered patterns in participants' experiences. Women in our study often encountered criminalization relationally, by way of the men in their lives, whether male family members, friends, or intimate partners. In other cases, the vulnerability of loved ones to immigration enforcement shaped their critical perspective toward legal authorities and elected officials advancing anti-immigrant measures. Scholars have noted that this proximity to the direct targets of aggressive enforcement uniquely positions Latinas—and women of color more broadly—to resist state surveillance (Walker and García-Castañon 2017). Our findings build on this insight by showing how Chicanas mobilize to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. While outside the scope of this paper, our data suggest that emotions, such as fear and anger, play an important role in shaping how women interpret their experiences and decide to take political action. We recommend that future studies continue to investigate how Latinas interpret their everyday encounters with legal authorities and how emotional responses motivate and sustain political engagement, particularly amid ongoing crises in policing and immigration enforcement.

Supplementary material. For supplementary material/s referred to in this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.10029.

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Notes

1 In this paper, we use Latina to describe women and Latino to describe men. When referring to the pan-ethnic group, without gender distinctions, we use Latina/o/x/e at first mention to acknowledge that the term remains contested. Thereafter, we use Latinx, which we settled on after considering alternatives such as Latine.

2 Chicana refers to women and girls of Mexican descent and is often used to signal cultural pride and group-based solidarity.

3 The researcher implemented additional Institutional Review Board protections to safeguard research participants who were adolescents during the study. For example, the researcher used a Parent Permission Form (in English and Spanish) where parents granted their child permission to participate in the study. Adolescents reviewed and completed a Child Assent Form.

4 The questions for the interview guide were designed for the larger study and were informed by the researcher's knowledge of San Diego, California and existing research on policing. For example, sobriety checkpoints are a common enforcement tool in the region, thus, the interview guide includes questions about personal and vicarious experiences with DUI checkpoints.

5 The most notable difference between the demographic profiles of participants in our analysis and the larger sample is along gender. The larger study consists of 40 women and girls and 21 men and boys.

6 Our approach aligns with established criteria in qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Specifically, the credibility of our analysis is grounded in how participants describe their experiences, with multiple individual accounts informing the themes identified. Additionally, sustained field observations further strengthen our analysis.

7 The Safe and Responsible Driver's Act extended driver's licenses to Californians regardless of citizenship status beginning in January 2015.
8 Based on data for OUSD schools available through the California Department of Education official website. In the 2018-2019 school year, more than half of students at Oceanside High School were on free and reduced lunch and 65% were classified as "Hispanic or Latino."
9 Based on information gathered from the websites of the San Diego Sheriff's Office, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and San Diego County Government.

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