



**Latino USA
Learning Resources
Lesson Plan
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Michelle Garcia

**POLICE AND LATINOS
By MICHELLE GARCIA**

In at least 12 urban police departments across the country, African-Americans make up the majority of officers on duty. In one of these communities, Washington, D.C., the predominantly black police force has, for the last several years, been the focus of police harassment charges from the Latino community. From Washington, reporter Michelle Garcia examines the relationship between black, brown, and blue.

POLICE CHIEF CHARLES RAMSEY: I cannot promise to you tonight that there will never ever again be an incident where we don't have conflict between the police and members of the Latino community.

MICHELLE GARCIA: One night, in an area of Washington not located on any of the tourist maps, Latino residents gathered at the Centro de la Paz Church hall. Some 100 teenagers, families, and elderly convened in the old wooden

building to share their concerns with the department's new chief, [Charles Ramsey](http://wp6.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/dc/dcpolice/stories/ramsey.htm) (<http://wp6.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/dc/dcpolice/stories/ramsey.htm>), an African American.

RAMSEY: And if there's any allegations of misconduct on the part of our officers, we're going to investigate it very, very quickly.

MICHELLE GARCIA: Evelio Riveria recalled what happened when he called 911 for help after a white woman fell on the sidewalk.

RIVERIA: And we tried to help the woman, to raise the woman to help her up, and the policeman arrives and he's coming out of his car. He draws his weapon, and he says, 'don't move!'

MICHELLE GARCIA: For nearly one hour, Latinos testified about their experiences with the police, citing repeated cases of officers illegally asking Latinos for their immigration documents and of **racial profiling**.

After listening to a string of similar stories, one resident stood and concluded: "Most Latinos feel that in an encounter with the police, it's up to the Latino to demonstrate their innocence." He then continued directing himself to Chief Ramsey, who arrived earlier this year from Chicago. "I know you're hearing the problems that began before your arrival. But when will we see real change?"

RAMSEY: I don't have a magic formula here. It takes time to change attitudes. But I think it starts with me, and the fact that I'm sending a clear message that that kind of behavior is unacceptable.

MICHELLE GARCIA: The [D.C. Police Department](http://www.mpdc.org/frame.htm) (<http://www.mpdc.org/frame.htm>) is somewhat unique in that a majority of the police force is African American. Of the approximately 3,600 officers, 70 percent are black, 26.5 are white, and five percent are Latino. This year (1998), the Latino Civil Rights Center has filed seven police harassment complaints—a very low estimate, they contend, because many in the community avoid the authorities. Accurate numbers are hard to obtain, because the D.C. Police Department, like many others across the country, resists releasing information. Residents and human rights groups have pushed for the formation of a citizen review board to investigate police harassment complaints, including those against Latinos.

Chief Ramsey, though, shies away from admitting that a specific problem exists between black cops and Latino residents.

RAMSEY: I think that these things get blown out of proportion. I mean, we could have a meeting tomorrow, and I could give you 100 police officers in a room to give you horror stories about their contacts with the public. I mean, you can't say that it represents everything that's going on, because it doesn't. But it is a microcosm of it, and it does point to some issues that need to be seriously addressed so we can avoid larger problems in the future.

MICHELLE GARCIA: Ramsey suggests intensifying the **culture sensitivity** courses already required for officers to help educate them about the communities they police. Last spring, Luis Cardona, director of a local advocacy group, conducted one of these courses. He says that like anywhere else, some officers have racist tendencies. But, Cardona points out, most are simply uninformed about the people they serve and protect, and says it comes out in officers' comments.

LUIS CARDONA: The most prevalent one that I've dealt with is: **why don't these people go back to their country?** And then, I'm like, you want to take it there. Then, we start taking it to another level, because then I'll start talking about how U.S. foreign policy is responsible for bringing these people here in the first place. And had not the normal, traditional imperialistic nature of this country intruded on these people in their country, a lot of them wouldn't be here in the first place.

MICHELLE GARCIA: In the 1980s, increased immigration from war-torn Central American countries caused the D.C. Latino population to surge. Many refugees fled countries where the police are often the military, and provoke fear.

Hiram Rosario, president of the D.C. Hispanic Police Association, says many of those immigrants also brought their own biases.

HIRAM ROSARIO: I know a lot of the Central and South American people don't get along with the blacks. You know, a lot of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, and Panamanians and Colombians DO get along with the blacks. See, **you have some places down in Central and South America where there are very few blacks.** So I think that creates right there some type of disagreement, and maybe in the past that there was a lot of Latino victims of crimes where the suspects were blacks. So this type of thing takes a trend where they see and judge the whole black community as being bad.

MICHELLE GARCIA: One night in May of 1991, a rookie black cop shot a Latino man in Mount Pleasant, a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Two

days of rioting followed that ended with significant property damage but no deaths. The riots woke up city officials to the friction between blacks and Latinos in D.C.

Ron Hampton, president of the National Black Police Association, and a former D.C. cop:

RON HAMPTON: There's an expectation that people of color-black and brown-women on the police force would also, at least to some degree, understand some of the problems as a result of having experienced them themselves. But that's not the case, because the culture and the value system of the institution that these individuals work for has been one still now that operates from a white male dominance.

MICHELLE GARCIA: After the riots, the city government helped start up the Latino Civil Rights Task Force. The task force recommended the department recruit bilingual emergency operators, Latino police officers, and promote those already on the force. The city did much of this but often recruits from as far away as Puerto Rico. And residents urge the department to recruit from the Washington, D.C. area.

Last year, the Hispanic Police Association filed a complaint with the U.S. Justice Department, accusing the Police Department of discrimination and fostering a hostile work environment. They charge the department often lost or failed to act on officer complaints.

On the street, Officer Pedro Garcia walks the main avenue in a Latino neighborhood known as [Mount Pleasant](http://www.lcsystems.com/mtp/) (<http://www.lcsystems.com/mtp/>).

Garcia transferred to the Mount Pleasant area approximately six years ago and says it takes more than speaking a common language to communicate with people. Like in this case, where a woman tries to earn a few extra dollars selling a rice drink on the sidewalk without a permit.

OFFICER PEDRO GARCIA: I normally would assume that somebody understands the law, but now I take more time and explain things to them. Like that young lady over there. I didn't actually see her selling, so I couldn't lock her up. But I understand what she's doing out here, so I told her, "Look, the law says this. You can't be doing this out here, and if you get caught, you'll get locked up like everybody else.

MICHELLE GARCIA: D.C. Police Chief Ramsey has begun implementing the Foundation for Community Policing, like the kind Officer Garcia is doing.

After arriving in Washington, Ramsey formed an advisory committee made up of various community groups, including the Latino Civil Rights Center.

But people familiar with the local situation, like former D.C. cop Ron Hampton, stress that **in order to ease tensions, city officials and community leaders must address the basic needs among residents:** adequate city services, access to social services, and enforcement of non-discrimination laws.

RON HAMPTON: I believe that all of those kind of things, and the lack of the proper response to those kind of things lead to the buildup of tensions in the community. And still, **it would only take one situation that would spark the fuse in this community, as well as the other African-American poor communities. One spark would set it off again.**

Chief Ramsey shows a lot of promise, but he's up against an attitude larger than one cop, because as one criminal expert put it, "No matter what color you are when you enter the force-black, brown, or white-in the end, everyone turns blue."

For LATINO USA, I'm Michelle Garcia in Washington.

Michelle Garcia reports for LATINO USA and [Pacifica Network News](http://www.pacifica.org) (<http://www.pacifica.org>).

We asked Michelle how she got the idea for this story.

"I began thinking about this story walking around my neighborhood, Mount Pleasant. I began wondering how, if at all, the neighborhood's Central American immigrant community related to the police. We often assume that if you are a member of a 'minority' group, you automatically have some sensitivity to the circumstances of others. The majority of D.C.'s police force is African American, but does that make a difference?"

"The issue of police brutality was often in the media this year but often framed in a white-on-black or brown context. Is there much of a difference if the situation changes?"

Using LATINO USA

Suggestions for school, home, and libraries

Grades: 7-12 and beyond

Subjects: Current Events, Social Studies, and Language Arts

We've developed these suggestions with the help of students and teachers, along with our reporters. We're even more interested in learning how you use the piece.

[Click here to share your ideas](mailto:deangraber@mail.utexas.edu) (deangraber@mail.utexas.edu)

After exploring initial reactions to the story, here are some ideas for further use.

CURRENT EVENTS: Explore the terms used in dialogue on race.

After listening to and/or reading Michelle Garcia's story, ask students to list the issues presented, and relate them to their own communities. What concepts come to mind when they reflect on the tension between Latinos and the police?

Terms that may surface include **racism, discrimination, prejudice, stereotype** and **ignorance**. How can these terms be defined? Give some examples from this piece and from everyday life. How are these terms and concepts interrelated? (How can discrimination be a product of racism? How does ignorance lead to racism and discrimination?) Explore how these terms are used in the story. What do **racist tendencies** and **racial profiling** mean? What do people mean in this story when they refer to **attitudes**?

For more ideas on these topics, visit [TEACHING TOLERANCE magazine](http://splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/tt-index.html) (http://splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/tt-index.html).

SOCIAL STUDIES: Analyze the players and circumstances that have produced the tension in Washington, D.C. Then, relate the situation to your own community.

Why is there tension between Latinos and the D.C. police force? What role does ignorance-as you define it-play in the tension between groups? How do comments such as the following represent the beliefs, biases and ignorance of the parties involved?

1. Cardona's example of police sentiments: "Why don't these people go back to their country?"
2. Rosario's comment that some Latino groups have little experience with blacks other than being victims of crimes committed by blacks.
3. Michelle Garcia's statement that many refugees from Central America fled countries where the police are often the military and they provoke fear.

Reread former police officer Ron Hampton's comment that to ease tensions, city officials and community leaders must address the basic needs of residents. Ask students how these remarks might explain some of the hard feelings between groups. What are possible solutions?

Ask students to localize and/or universalize the issues being discussed. What tensions exist in their communities? In our society? What are the reasons behind them? What are possible solutions?

LANGUAGE ARTS: Use passages in the story as the basis for discussion and writing assignments that involve analytical reasoning and conflict resolution.

How would students address the problems presented in Michelle Garcia's report? Ask them to write a position/persuasive paper suggesting actions and roles to be taken by the police chief, Latino community leaders, both groups, and other parties.

Ask the class to design a culture sensitivity course for police.

Reflect on Hampton's remark: "It would only take one situation that would spark the fuse in this community, as well as the other African-American poor communities. One spark would set it off again."

In discussion or a written essay, interpret the statement: "No matter what color you are when you enter the force-black, brown, or white-in the end, everyone turns blue."

RESOURCES:

[The Washington Post](http://www.washingtonpost.com/) (http://www.washingtonpost.com/)

[The Washington Times](http://www.washtimes.com/) (http://www.washtimes.com/)

[DCWatch](http://www.dctrack.com/) (<http://www.dctrack.com/>), an on-line magazine about D.C. politics and public affairs

[More information about the D.C. Police Department](http://www.dctrack.com/police/)
(<http://www.dctrack.com/police/>)

[Racism and policing](http://www.blackchronicle.com/newpage110.htm) (<http://www.blackchronicle.com/newpage110.htm>)

[Council of Latino Agencies](http://www.consejo.org/) (<http://www.consejo.org/>)

[Community Policing](http://www.communitypolicing.org/about2.html) (<http://www.communitypolicing.org/about2.html>)

[Community Policing Links](http://www.communitypolicing.org/links.html) (<http://www.communitypolicing.org/links.html>)

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