



BY GREGORY RODRIGUEZ:

Our Latino allies against gangs

Don't ignore the homegrown residents who may aspire to clean up crime in their own neighborhoods

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IN THE OPENING sequence of Martin Scorsese's Oscar-contender "The Departed," Jack Nicholson's gangster character recalls that when he was young, the priests used to tell the Irish American children of South Boston that they could either become cops or criminals.

The movie, which is essentially an urban morality tale played out between Irish American gangsters and cops, is only the latest in a long line of American films featuring the rivalry between good and bad in ethnic enclaves. (Think James Cagney and Pat O'Brien in the 1938 classic "Angels with Dirty Faces.")

Such intra-ethnic competition is an overlooked drama within the recent spike in racially-motivated gang violence that has Angelenos increasingly concerned about gang crime, not to mention "black/Latino" relations. No, I don't mean the rivalry between gangs of the same ethnicity, but the largely overlooked everyday struggle among neighbors who break the law and those who obey and even grow up to uphold it.

Indeed, the good news in the fight against Latino gang crime is that the number of Latino law enforcement officers has skyrocketed over the last 15 years. According to a 2004 study out of the University of Texas at San Antonio, between 1990 and 2000, the number of Latino officers in the nation's 50 largest municipal police forces jumped from 9% to 14%. Not surprisingly, the biggest gains came in cities with larger, more established Latino populations, places where growing political power can influence hiring practices.

But Cynthia Perez McCluskey, the study's coauthor, says that although the sharp jump may reflect a growing organizational commitment to Latino recruitment, it may also be evidence that more Latino men and women want to help solve the problems they experienced when growing up.

Of course, Latino gang crime is not the exclusive problem or province of Latino police officers. But history suggests that cops can sometimes go the extra mile when dealing with criminals from their own ethnic community. We remember the names of men such as Italian American FBI agent Joe Pistone (a.k.a. Donnie Brasco), whose undercover work led to the arrest of 120 members of the Bonanno crime family. Potential Republican presidential candidate Rudolph Giuliani first made his reputation as a federal prosecutor in New York for indicting the heads of the region's five major Mafia families. Giuliani's father, who owned a small pizza joint in Brooklyn, instilled in him a resentment of the mobsters who tarnished the reputation of millions of hardworking Italian Americans.

Lt. Roy Garivey, president of the National Latino Peace Officers Assn. and a 21-year veteran of the Houston Independent School District Police Department, says that a lot of Mexican American officers do take Latino gang crime more personally. "It's disappointing because they're your own people," he said. "I was one of six kids raised by a single mom who worked three jobs. We were poor, but we were good."

Police Lt. Frank Balkcom of Glendale, Ariz., says that Mexican American officers often have family who've been "impacted by gang culture."

He adds that it's just as important to have officers who identify with the neighborhoods in question. He prides himself on being in charge of the very barrio he grew up in and contends that having a cop as an uncle or cousin can change an entire family's view of law enforcement.

Of course, taking it personally can cut both ways. While cops like Garivey and Balkcom encourage participation in scholarship and mentorship programs, some think that Latino officers can come down harder on their own.

Either way, it's indisputable that Latinos are playing an ever-expanding role in U.S. law enforcement. As of 2002, fully 17% of full-time federal officers with arrest and firearm authority were Latino. Here in Los Angeles, it took a 1992 consent decree to get the percentage of Latino officers in the Los Angeles Police Department to 36% by 2005. That number stands at 32% for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The challenge now in many departments is to make sure that Latinos are promoted to leadership posts.

It's a good thing that the city's political leadership is finally turning its attention to fighting gangs, the majority of which are made up of Latinos. But they shouldn't forget that their greatest allies might be Latinos themselves. Just like in the movies, every Irish gangster needs an Irish cop.

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