A PLAN OF ACTION FOR A SAFER MEMPHIS COMMUNITY:

*Latinos, The Community and Police Relations*

By Fuerza Latina Unida

MARCH 2003
FUERZA LATINA UNIDA is a group of concerned Memphis residents determined to address three primary concerns and challenges of the Latino community: crime, access to health care, and employment. Our mission is to unify Latino leaders and organizations in order to work toward obtaining justice and equal opportunity for all Latinos in Memphis. Recognizing that our concerns and challenges are similar to those of other Memphis residents, we are always looking to develop alliances with other racial and ethnic groups.

For more information, please contact:
Rolando Rostro
Phone: 901.494.4572
Email: rostroo2000@yahoo.com
Nationally, crime is on the decline, but many members of the Memphis community still do not feel safe. Fuerza Latina Unida is concerned about crime in Memphis and the police department’s ability to efficiently respond to calls for service. Our concern is illustrated in the following story of one Latino resident who we will call Alex:

In November 2002, Alex returned home from a hard day of work. He lived in an apartment complex in East Memphis with his wife and two children, for whom he worked hard to support. When he arrived home that day, Alex noticed three men staring at him as he parked his car. As he exited his car, they called him over. Alex was afraid because many members of the community had been victims of robberies. Fearful, he ran into his apartment where several friends, his wife and two children were waiting. The men, all of whom carried guns, pursued him. They forced themselves into the apartment.

One man grabbed Alex by the throat, held a gun to his head, and demanded, “Give me your money”. The two men struggled as Alex’s wife began screaming and crying out in a panic. Then it happened: a shot was fired. Alex looked in the direction of the shot and saw his wife lying on the floor. She had been shot. She was moving slightly. The robbers ran out of the apartment, leaving Alex stunned.

Alex rushed to dial 911 but there was no dial tone, the robbers had disconnected the phone. Alex called 911 on his cell phone instead. Thankfully, the call was answered... but the operator did not understand him. The operator did not speak Spanish. Alex did the best that he could to ask for help in English but they needed a translator. Alex waited and waited for the AT & T language line... Meanwhile precious time for his wife wasted away. Some 25 minutes later, he was connected to a translator. Only then could he ask for help—Ayudenme!

Minutes later, the police and paramedics arrived. His wife was taken to the hospital, while the officers asked Alex to explain what happened. They did not speak Spanish nor could they understand his English. Once again, Alex was unable to communicate. He needed a translator. He did not want to wait again, so he asked a neighbor to serve as a translator. Alex’s wife died that night. The bullet had pierced her heart.

While we will never know whether or not Alex’s wife would have survived had the police and paramedics arrived sooner, we do know that the language barrier delayed response to the shooting incident. Fuerza Latina Unida proposes this plan of action as a blueprint for improving communication between the police and the Memphis community, particularly the Latino community, as one way to help eliminate crime. We must take steps to build a safer Memphis community.
Part I

**Introduction**

The City of Memphis has been described as a “melting pot.” Once inhabited by only Black and White residents, Memphis is now attracting a growing immigrant population. Included in this immigrant influx is the Latino population, which is increasing at a consistent rate. However, with the growth of the Latino population in Memphis has come a disturbing increase in the incidences of crimes in which Latinos are victims. We are experiencing certain crimes in disproportionately large numbers, and we are unable to receive adequate police services because of language barriers.

Latinos make up 3% of the population in Memphis, yet in 2002, they were 11.2% of the number of individual robberies reported by victims. In that same year, Latinos were 5.4% of all homicide victims. Other communities of color are being hard-hit by crime as well. For example, African-Americans represent 61.4% of the Memphis population, yet in 2002 they accounted for 79.6% of all homicides. We are reaching out to the African-American community to combine our efforts to promote a safer Memphis.

As the number of Latino immigrants in the Memphis community grows, we must ensure that our police department is responsive to the changing demographics and needs of the city. While we acknowledge efforts made by the Memphis Police Department to build trust with the Latino community, more must be done. Fuerza Latina Unida respectfully presents this plan of action to Mayor Willie Herenton and our new Police Director James Bolden.

**We call on city leaders to:**

a. Create a fully-staffed and funded Latino liaison outreach office,

b. Recruit, hire and train bilingual police officers and 911 operators by offering pay incentives, increasing outreach to the Hispanic community, and offering language training to police services staff, and

c. Increase the number of officers patrolling “hot spots” for crime.

Recognizing that the police alone can not prevent crime, Fuerza Latina Unida pledges to encourage the Latino community to work with the Memphis Police Department.

**We will:**

a. Facilitate the creation of a neighborhood watch group to work in tandem with the Latino liaison office,

b. Work in partnership with Hispanic businesses and the police department to create strategies for decreasing robbery incidents,

c. Raise public awareness about crime in the Memphis community and solicit support from residents who are also affected by crime and are ready for a change.

It is our hope that this plan of action will build a safer Memphis by strengthening community-police relations.
The Problem: Community-Police Relations in Memphis

During the 1990’s, Tennessee experienced a 278% increase in the Hispanic/Latino population. As in other states, most Latinos emigrated to Tennessee for economic reasons – better paying jobs or more favorable employment conditions. However, this hope for a better life has been bittersweet for Hispanics in the City of Memphis where they are disproportionately the victims of crime.

Of immediate concern, to our community, is the increase in robbery and larceny crimes within the Latino community. Statistics released by the Memphis Police Department indicate that in 2001, Latinos were victims in 9.7% of individual robberies, while in 2002 this number increased to 11.2%. Although at first glance the increase in individual robberies may not seem significant, closer examination of these statistics causes concern. When one examines the number of Latino victims within the Latino community alone, the increase in robberies from 2001 to 2002 is actually 19.1% (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Hispanic Cases 2001</th>
<th>Hispanic Cases 2002</th>
<th>Total Increase</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery Individual</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even more alarming is that when one examines the increase in individual robberies of Latinos from 2001 to 2002 versus the increase in all cases of individual robberies from 2001 to 2002 the actual percentage of change is a 57.3% increase (See Table 2). What the previous statistic indicates is that from 2001 to 2002, Latino victims accounted for 57.3% of the increase in individual robbery crimes in the City of Memphis. This dramatic increase in the number of Latino robbery victims is both significant and astonishing because this community only accounts
for approximately 3% of the population in Memphis.

**Table 2:**

*Total Change in Hispanic Larceny and Robbery Cases Versus Total Change in All Cases of Larceny and Robbery Crimes as Reported by Hispanic Victims*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Total Hispanic Case Increase</th>
<th>Total Increase in All Cases</th>
<th>Hispanic % of Overall Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery Individual</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**IN ADDITION**, we believe that the statistics that we have received significantly undercount the actual number of individual robberies in which Latinos are the victim. There are two reasons for our assertion: First, we know that many Latino victims are reluctant to report crimes to the police due to language barriers, among other reasons. Second, we believe that not all Latino victims, who do report crimes, are being identified as Hispanic, but are instead classified as another race. Indeed, one Latino male victim has advised Fuerza Latino Unida that in his police report, he is identified as “White – Non-Hispanic” instead of Hispanic. This makes it entirely possible that the problematic trends in crime increase that we are seeing within the Latino community are worse than we have indicated above.

**OTHER COMMUNITIES** of color are also being hard hit by crime. For example, it has been reported that two of every three victims of homicide in 2002 were African-American males. African-American’s represent 61.4% of the Memphis population, yet in 2002 they accounted for 79.6% of homicides. We are reaching out to the African-American community to combine our efforts to promote a safer Memphis. Similarly, the Latino community has homicide statistics that exceed their representation in the Memphis population. In 2002, 5.4% of all homicides involved Hispanic victims while Latino’s only represent 3% of the Memphis population.

**IT IS INTERESTING** to note, however, that when we examined the homicide statistics for White residents in 2002-11.2%, it was substantially lower than their representation in the Memphis population-34.4%. It appears that some communities are experiencing safer and more peaceful conditions. We want all communities to feel safe and secure. To make matters worse, many of the homicides that occurred last year remain unsolved, which further devastates communities of color. The Latino community still mourns the unsolved case of Manuel Ramirez Campos, a young soccer player originally from México, who was shot and killed on August 2, 2002 in an apartment in Raleigh which is located in the North Precinct.

**IN LIGHT OF THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS** that demonstrates the disproportionate representation
of Latinos as victims of robberies and crimes of the like, we must examine why this problem exists. We believe that one of the primary contributors to the increased victimization of Latinos is the inability of Latinos and police officers to communicate with each other. Many Latinos find that when we attempt to contact the police, we are misunderstood, or not understood at all, due to language barriers.

Although Mayor Herenton has stated that his mission “is for Memphs to be recognized for its zero tolerance for crime as well as its compassion and responsiveness to the needs, rights and expectations of all its citizens,”17 the Latino community has found that when we call for assistance, the Memphis Police Department is ill equipped to respond to our needs. For example, currently, 911 calls from Spanish-speaking residents are forwarded to the AT & T language line. Consequently, many emergency responses are delayed and victims report that some calls are never answered. One Latino resident of the Prescott Apartment complex in East Memphis explained that “there is no security at the apartments and the police do not always go to the apartments when they are called.”18 In cases where police officers do respond to calls for service, many of them do not speak Spanish, therefore emergency assistance is delayed until a Spanish interpreter is located. The Memphis Police Department’s inability to adequately communicate with our community is distressing and leads to frustration for all parties involved.
Part III

“A Solution:
A PLAN OF ACTION FOR A SAFER MEMPHIS
THE ROLE OF THE MEMPHIS POLICE DEPARTMENT

The Role of the Memphis Police Department

1. Create a fully staffed and funded Latino liaison outreach office.
2. Recruit, hire and train bilingual police officers and 911 operators.
3. Increase the number of Officers patrolling "hot spots" for crime.

THE ROLE OF THE LATINO COMMUNITY

1. Facilitate the creation of a neighborhood watch group to work in tandem with the Latino liaison office.
2. Work in Partnership with Hispanic businesses and the police department to create strategies for decreasing robbery incidents.
3. Organize a march to raise public awareness and support.

1. Create a fully-staffed and funded Latino liaison outreach office.

Although the Memphis Police Department boasted the creation of a “Latino liaison unit” in 2000, that position consisted of a single bilingual police officer working a full shift on patrol, who received no extra pay, had no staff, and no office to address the concerns of the Latino community. We have been told that the Latino liaison resigned from the position in 2002. We request that a proper Latino liaison outreach position and office be created. This would require staff and a budget. This office would exist to respond to concerns of the Latino community.

2. Recruit, hire and train bilingual police officers and 911 operators.

Of the 1,878 current commissioned officers, only about 13 are known to be bilingual – 0.7%. Therefore, only 0.7% of the force was equipped to handle 11.2% of the individual robberies committed in Memphis in 2002. The percentage of bilingual officers and 911 operators should be increased to reflect the bilingual population of Memphis – reported to be at least 3%. In order to attract more qualified bi-lingual applicants, we recommend the following measures be taken:

“[If the police would] pay more attention to the Latino community, listen and follow up on incidents, the community would feel better.”
- A Latino male victim who was shot in the foot during a robbery attempt.
• Bilingual Pay Incentives

**We propose** that the Memphis Police Department actively recruit bilingual officers through bilingual pay incentives. Based on our research, it appears that the Police Department already offers educational incentive pay of an extra 5% of base salary for 85 semester hours of college level courses and 7.5% for a 4-year degree. Likewise, the Memphis Police Department should offer similar incentives to bilingual officers. Other police departments have done so.

**For example**, the Santa Ana Police Department offers a 5% salary increase to police applicants who are bi-lingual. Additionally, Santa Ana has implemented a “bi-lingual only” hiring policy which requires entry-level police applicants to be proficient in English and either Spanish, Vietnamese, or other languages. Additionally, the Los Angeles Police Department offers a 2.75-5.5% salary increase to bi-lingual officers.

• Recruitment Outreach to the Hispanic Community

**City leaders** should recruit Spanish-speaking police officers and 911 operators from the Memphis community as well as other cities. The Albuquerque Police Department has demonstrated its commitment to recruiting a diverse police force by reaching out to members of the Hispanic and Native American communities and seeking their assistance in designing recruitment strategies. Additionally, the Memphis Police Department should recruit bilingual officers by submitting advertisements to Spanish radio stations or newspapers when positions are available.

• Language Training for Police Officers

**Not only has this city seen** a growing Latino community but also an increasing number of Asian residents. With this diversity, the police department has also been faced with the challenge of effectively communicating with residents for whom English is their second language. To this end, we encourage the Memphis Police Department to include language training in the curricula of its police academy and in-service training programs. Other cities have done so. For example, the San Diego (CA) Police Department has offered a 32-hour conversational Spanish course to its police officers.

3. **Increase the number of officers patrolling “hot spots” for crime.**

A recent poll conducted by the City of Memphis indicated that 47% of Memphis residents felt unsafe walking alone at night. The Latino community has similar concerns in the East Precinct, and other “hot spots” for crime against Latinos. East Precinct is one general area, but members of the Latino community know about many specific high-crime locations. The police station in Hickory Hill (East Precinct) has no bilingual officers on staff. Fuerza Latina Unida requests the addition of officers in general, not just bilingual, to patrol these areas. The role of the Latino liaison would be pivotal in identifying these problem areas.
Fuerza Latina Unida understands that we must also play a role in bringing an end to violence in the Latino community. As explained by one Latino robbery victim, “we, the [Latino] community should understand we should do things differently, so as not to tempt others.” Accordingly, Fuerza Latina Unida will encourage the Latino community to do the following:

1. **Facilitate the creation of a neighborhood watch group to work in tandem with the Latino liaison office.**
   In order to aid the Latino liaison, Fuerza Latina Unida is willing and eager to form Neighborhood Watch groups among Latino residents. Community members would volunteer to work hand-in-hand with the Latino liaison to alert the officer of specific concerns and collaborate with him/her on solutions of crimes not yet solved.

2. **Work in partnership with Hispanic businesses and the police department to create strategies for decreasing robbery incidents.**
   Many Latino residents are victims of what we call “crimes of opportunity.” For example, within the Latino community, we have recognized that many people are robbed after cashing their paychecks. According to an article in the Commercial Appeal, “[g]ang members and others believe the [Latino] residents are more likely to be carrying cash and are less likely to report crimes to police.” An essential partner in creating harmony between the Latino community and the Police Department is Hispanic businesses in Memphis. Fuerza Latina Unida will work with Hispanic businesses to develop strategies for decreasing robbery incidents. For example, steps may be taken for Latinos to open bank accounts so that they will not be required to carry money around.

3. **Organize a March to raise public awareness and support.**
   We plan to march in order to raise public awareness about this issue and to unite the Memphis community behind it. Through this public demonstration we hope to solidify our relationship with the broader Memphis community by helping concerned citizens understand the impact these problems have on all Memphis residents.
Fuerza Latina Unida
Endnotes


3. Id.


6. DeFeo, Todd. “Spanish Translators Coming to Local Courts.” The Leaf-Chronicle (Clarksville, TN) 11 Aug. 2002: 1C. We will use the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably.


9. Interview with male Latino victim (February 3, 2003).


18. Interview with Latino male victim of robbery (February 3, 2003).


21. Interview with Marcos Yzaguirre, former Latino Liaison and Memphis Police Officer.


24. “Community-Centered Policing” at 32.

25. Id. at 47.


27. Interview with male Latino victim (February 3, 2003).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the following individuals, businesses, or organizations for supporting this initiative:

- Sabor Tropical Restaurant
- Radio Ambiente
- Tennessee Immigrant Rights Coalition
- League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
- Bloomfield Baptist Church
- Riverview Kansas Ministers
- Advancement Project, Washington, D.C.

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