

Human Targets: Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth

By Victor M. Rios
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Reviewed by Yuriko Doku

Public and social institutions, such as police departments and schools, continue to punish young people, especially those from marginalized communities, by responding to their struggles with increased discipline and even police violence (Berry-James et al. 2021; Zeiders et al. 2021). In *Human Targets: Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth*, Victor M. Rios helps the readers understand the complexity of this issue in an authentic and powerful way that few other works achieve. Drawing from both his personal lived experience and an ethnographic approach, Rios illustrates the realities faced by marginalized Latino youth and the challenges they encounter growing up in the United States. Rios argues that public institutions impose negative identities on marginalized Latino youth, treating them as “human targets” to be controlled rather than individuals to be supported (Rios 2017, 6).

Victor M. Rios is a professor and MacArthur Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research examines how social control and education shape the lives of marginalized youth, documents the impact of punitive systems, and highlights young people’s resilience (Garcia et al. 2022; Rios et al. 2020). He uses these perceptions to advocate for equitable policies and develop programs that support marginalized youth.

Overview of the Book

In *Human Targets*, Rios (2017, 6) clearly illustrates how police and schools treat gang-associated youth, espe-

cially Latino youth. Instead of offering meaningful support or opportunities, these institutions often respond with “stigma, disrepute, and punishment.” Rios’ analysis shows how such responses criminalize young people rather than help them, reinforcing ongoing cycles of inequality.

Rios argues that institutional practices rooted in misunderstanding and bias criminalize Latino youth behavior. He demonstrates how authorities’ misinterpretations of Latino youth culture lead to labeling, exclusion, and increased contact with the criminal justice system, reinforcing broader patterns of social inequality. Central to this argument is his concept of cultural misframing, which explains how institutions misread the “symbols, language, expressions, and actions” of marginalized Latino youth, viewing them through a lens of suspicion and danger (76). By exposing these misinterpretations, Rios reveals how cultural expression becomes a site of surveillance and punishment rather than recognition and empowerment.

To ground these claims, Rios employs a grounded theory that allows concepts to emerge directly from participants’ lived experiences. This approach ensures that his analysis remains grounded in lived realities rather than preconceived assumptions, strengthening his interpretation of cultural misframing and institutional bias. Methodologically, the book draws on five years of ethnographic research conducted between 2007 and 2012 in a Southern California community that Rios calls “Riverland,” a pseudonym used to protect the study’s participants. He describes Riverland as a

community shaped by race and class tensions between wealthy White residents and low-income Latino populations. Rios and his student research team engaged in extensive participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups across multiple settings, including street corners, two high schools, a courtroom, a community center, and police ride-alongs. This multisite qualitative approach provides real-time insight into how Latino youth navigate institutions that simultaneously surveil and marginalize them. Rios' positionality as a former gang-involved youth further strengthens the study, allowing him to build trust with participants and interpret their experiences with nuance and credibility.

Book Content

Across the book, Rios illustrates how schools and law enforcement institutions consistently misread the cultural expressions of marginalized Latino youth, leading to criminalization rather than care. In chapter 1, "The Probation School," Rios examines Punta Vista, an alternative school created to support students facing academic or legal challenges. Instead of providing meaningful assistance, the school routinely labeled Latino youth as gang members, creating a hostile and punitive environment that pushed students away from formal education and toward street-based networks where they found belonging and recognition. In chapter 2, "The Liquor Store and the Police," Rios provides an overview of how the liquor store becomes a safe space where these young people feel secure and build friendships. The store owner also offers advice and guidance to them. In contrast, the police view the corner of the liquor store as dangerous. Ongoing patterns of criminalization, police harassment, and incarceration lead to these young people being treated as if they are potential offenders. In chapter 3, Rios introduces the concept of *cultural misframing*, explaining how institutions assign negative identities to Latino youth based on their clothing, speech, and behavior. He uses the example of the term *cholo*, often labeled by police and schools as a criminal style. While this look—shaved head, baggy clothes, and tattoos—is frequently misread as gang-related, Rios shows that it represents a complex and empowering cultural identity rather than one inherently tied to crime or violence.

In chapter 4, "Multiple Manhoods," Rios examines how male-dominated institutions enforce narrow definitions of masculinity through verbal abuse and

unnecessary use of force, while also highlighting youth resistance through more flexible and synthesized expressions of manhood that foster resilience and self-worth. In chapter 5, "The Mano Suave and Mano Dura of Stop and Frisk," Rios focuses on two contrasting policing styles. Some officers engage with youth using a soft-handed (*mano suave*) approach, while others respond with a hard-handed (*mano dura*) approach. These distinctions often stem from cultural misframing during police-youth interactions. Finally, in chapter 6, "Immigration Targets," Rios further demonstrates how immigrant and Latino students experience routine disrespect, exclusion, and surveillance in educational settings. These everyday interactions weaken students' attachment to school and contribute to higher dropout rates, reinforcing patterns of educational inequality.

Collectively, these chapters demonstrate how interactions with public institutions generate either "positive resources," including mentorship, discretion, and access to education and employment pathways, or "negative resources," such as arrest, stigma, gang labeling, and exclusion. Rios argues that these institutional interactions are decisive in shaping young people's futures, influencing incarceration risk, educational outcomes, and long-term life trajectories.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the book's greatest strengths is its engaging and accessible writing style. Rios integrates vivid ethnographic descriptions with powerful participant quotes that bring the lived experiences of Latino youth to life. His ability to combine personal narrative with sociological analysis enhances the emotional depth of the book while maintaining scholarly rigor. The author's lived experience as a former gang member who later succeeded in higher education provides a unique and authentic perspective that strengthens the analysis. This positionality allows Rios to challenge deficit-based narratives and highlight the resilience of marginalized youth.

Another significant strength of this book is that, even though it was published nearly 10 years ago, it remains highly relevant today. Recent studies show that racial disparities persist. For instance, Padgaonkar et al. (2021) found that minority youth are represented at higher rates in the juvenile justice system, driven by racial disparities in entry and processing. Their study reveals that despite committing fewer or similar offenses,

Black and Latino youth are more likely to be formally processed, and Black youth face the highest rearrest rates. Recent data from the Sentencing Project show that Black, Latino, and Tribal youth still face disproportionately high incarceration rates (Rovner 2025). For example, Latino youth continue to face higher incarceration rates than White youth. In 11 states, they are at least twice as likely to be incarcerated, and in some states, up to three times as likely. Over the past decade, this gap has grown in many states, with West Virginia reporting the highest rate (Rovner 2025).

One limitation of the study is the limited inclusion of gang-involved Latina young women. Although the book acknowledges this gap by including some Latina participants, the author notes that, as a male researcher, he faced challenges in gaining their trust. A further exploration of Latina experiences would have added important gendered insight into how criminalization operates differently across identities. This limitation reflects a broader trend in research on Latino communities, where Latino men are often more visible than Latina women. Scholars have observed that Latina girls and women are frequently overlooked in criminological and sociological research, despite facing distinct forms of surveillance and punishment shaped by gender, race, and immigration status (Lopez and Pasko 2021).

Implications for Public Administration and Social Equity

Human Targets makes a significant contribution to the literature on social equity within public administration by demonstrating how everyday institutional practices reproduce structural inequities. As scholars argue, social equity must be central to public administration (Frederickson 2005; Meyer et al. 2022; Norman-Major 2022). Rios' analysis provides concrete examples of how policies, discretion, and institutional cultures can either perpetuate or reduce inequality.

The book also aligns with scholarship emphasizing the role of public institutions in dismantling structural racism that disproportionately harms Latino communities (Bearfield et al. 2023; Berry-James et al. 2021; Topel and Colvin 2025). By situating policing and education within broader systems of inequality, Rios underscores the responsibility of public administrators to adopt culturally responsive and equitable practices. His policy recommendations, such as cultural-recog-

nition training, mentorship programs, and greater investment in educational and employment pathways, offer actionable strategies for improving outcomes for Latino youth (Rios 2017). These proposals echo what other scholars have identified as a critical research gap: the need to consider police interactions when examining educational disparities (Zeiders et al. 2021). Discriminatory policing, as Rios and others demonstrate, can profoundly shape youths' lives and learning, disrupting academic engagement and achievement.

Human Targets further advances social equity scholarship by demonstrating how public institutions impose unequal administrative burdens on marginalized Latino youth through gang labeling, exclusionary discipline, surveillance, and punitive policing practices. By situating gang criminalization within the contexts of governance, administrative discretion, and policy implementation, Rios reframes gang involvement not as individual deviance but as an outcome of institutional decision-making and structural conditions. In doing so, the book contributes to broader public administration debates concerning accountability, street-level discretion, and the equity implications of punitive public policy (Herd et al. 2023; Moynihan et al. 2015; Portillos et al. 2025).

Human Targets would be well-suited for both undergraduate and graduate courses across the fields of Public Administration, Criminology and Criminal Justice, Sociology, Social Equity, and Latino Studies, including specific courses such as Social Equity in Public Administration, Latinos, Race, and the Criminal Justice System, Comparative Racial Studies, Juvenile Justice, and Policing and Restorative Justice. Its integration of theory, empirical evidence, and policy implications makes the book particularly valuable for both scholars and practitioners.

Conclusion

Overall, *Human Targets* offers a compelling and timely examination of how public institutions shape the lived experiences of marginalized Latino youth. Through rich ethnographic evidence and theoretical insight, Rios challenges public administrators to reconsider how institutional practices label, exclude, or empower young people. The book stands as both a significant scholarly contribution and a call to action, urging public institutions to move away from criminalization and toward equity, recognition, and support (Bearfield et al. 2023).

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Yuriko Doku (ydoku@unomaha.edu) is a PhD candidate in Public Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and serves as assistant director of UNO's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS). Her research interests include gender equity, leadership, mentorship, nonprofit governance, and public policy.