Latina Transgender Women’s Interactions with Law Enforcement in Los Angeles County

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Abstract To date, very few researchers have explored transgender women’s interactions with law enforcement agencies and officers. Addressing this research gap, this study examines the interactions of Latina transgender women with law enforcement. The investigators conducted semi-structured interviews of 220 low-income Latina transgender women recruited from a variety of community-based organizations and sources across Los Angeles County, California. The findings lend support to the conclusion that transgender women, and especially transgender women of colour, are common victims of verbal harassment, physical assault, and sexual assault perpetrated by law enforcement officers. The findings also lend support to the propositions that many transgender women perceive their personal interactions with law enforcement officers negatively, and view reports of crime against them as mishandled or ignored. The findings are discussed in light of the implications for law enforcement’s interactions with transgender women and transgender communities of colour in particular.

Introduction

A number of unpublished surveys (GLBT Health Access Project, 2000; Reback et al., 2001; Grant et al., 2011) and published studies (Lombardi et al., 2001, 2009; Gangé and Tewskbury, 1998; Xavier et al., 2005) have reported that transgender people face pervasive discrimination in the most basic aspects of daily life, including housing, employment, family, education, and health care. This existing body of research provides very

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limited insight into transgender people’s interactions with law enforcement. Although some unpublished surveys on transgender discrimination have included questions on experiences with the police (e.g. Grant et al., 2011), no published study has focused specifically on transgender people’s interactions with, and perceptions of, law enforcement.

Conducting empirical research on transgender people’s interactions with, and perceptions of, law enforcement is meaningful for a number of reasons. This research can provide insight into the circumstances under which transgender people come into contact with the police. It can also increase police transparency and accountability by examining whether: (1) law enforcement agencies and officers are responding to, and investigating, crime against transgender people effectively, (2) and law enforcement agencies and officers are respecting, or alternatively, facilitating and perpetuating discrimination and abuse against, transgender people. In addition, this research is useful to learn about transgender people’s attitudes towards law enforcement, and their motivations for reporting or not reporting crime to law enforcement agencies. Narrowing this research gap, the current study is a preliminary study of the law enforcement interactions of 220 low-income Latina (Hispanic) transgender women interviewed in Los Angeles County.

**Terminology**

Gender identity ‘encompasses our own personal awareness, i.e., our core internal knowledge of who we are as masculine, feminine, or other’ (Sheridan, 2009, p. 35). There is no universal definition of ‘transgender’ (Stotzer, 2009). The term, however, has been used as an umbrella term to refer to many different people who do not identify completely with or express their gender according to the social expectations for their assigned sex at birth (Spade, 2008). Transgender individuals may or may not have had hormonal or surgical interventions to express and present the gender with which they identify (Factor and Rothblum, 2007). In the current study, ‘transgender women’ refers to individuals who were assigned a male sex at birth, but experience and present themselves as female (Factor and Rothblum, 2007; Stryker, 2008).

**Literature review**

**Race, ethnicity, and policing**

Investigations of Latina transgender women’s interactions with law enforcement cannot be separated from broader issues involving the policing of racial/ethnic minority communities. Two interrelated themes that provide context for the current study emerge from the vast body of empirical research in this area. First, race is one of the most reliable predictors of public attitudes towards law enforcement (Weitzer and Tuch, 2005; Wu, 2013). Most of the US-based studies that have investigated the connection between race and public attitudes towards law enforcement focus on Black individuals, and report that they have much less favourable perceptions of the police than whites (Brown and Benedict, 2002).

Second, many scholars have called attention to police practices of racial profiling in minority communities (Weitzer and Tuch, 2002, 2006; Carbado and Harris, 2011). Studies show that: personal experiences of racial profiling, and individual perceptions that racial profiling occurs in one’s community are associated with more negative attitudes towards law enforcement (Weitzer and Tuch, 2002; Tyler and Wakslak, 2004).

Researchers have warned against assuming that the policing of people of colour and minority perceptions of law enforcement are the same within and across racial/ethnic minority groups (Cheurprakobit and Bartsch, 1999). A more thorough understanding of police attitudes towards law enforcement in Latino communities is especially relevant today given that Latinos are one of the largest and fastest growing racial/ethnic minority groups in the USA (Pew Hispanic Centre, 2011).
The few studies on perceptions of law enforcement in Latino communities have reported that Latinos view the police more negatively than whites, but more positively than Blacks (Skogan et al., 2002; Ong and Jenks, 2004; Miller and Davis, 2008). Weitzer and Tuch’s (2005) survey of 1,792 white, African American, and Hispanic adults in the USA reported that African Americans and Hispanics were more likely than whites to consider police bias as a problem—Hispanics, however, were less likely than African Americans to actually perceive police bias, net other factors.

Moreover, there is a very limited body of research on Latino immigrants’ perceptions of law enforcement in the USA. Menjivar and Bejarano’s (2004) study, which is one of the most comprehensive studies on this topic, reported that the experiences of Latino immigrants in their countries of origin shaped their attitudes towards police in the USA. Studies also suggest that Latino immigrants who immigrate to the USA from countries with higher levels of police corruption are more prone to distrust law enforcement in the USA (Davis and Miller, 2002; Menjivar and Bejarano, 2004; Correia, 2010). Transitioning from different cultural systems, language barriers, and fear of deportation may further shape Latino immigrants’ perceptions of, and interactions with, law enforcement in the USA (Skogan et al., 2002; Culver, 2004).

Discrimination and transgender populations

Few published studies provide insight into transgender people’s experiences with discrimination beyond harassment and violence. The existing studies report that transgender people experience frequent and ongoing discrimination throughout their lifetimes (Lombardi et al., 2009).

The bulk of the existing empirical research on discrimination against transgender people comes from unpublished community-based survey research (e.g. GLBT Health Access Project, 2000; Reback et al., 2001; Grant et al., 2011). Generally, these studies have found that transgender people experience widespread discrimination in housing, employment, family, education, and health care. Recently, the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force released the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (‘the NTDS’)—the most comprehensive existing survey on transgender discrimination in the United States—which included 6,450 transgender individuals across the USA (Grant et al., 2011). The NTDS reported that transgender people were four times more likely than the general population to live in extreme poverty with an annual household income of less than $10,000. Transgender individuals had a rate of unemployment that was double the rate of the general population; this rate was nearly four times as high for transgender people of colour. Ninety percent of the participants reported experiences of harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination at work for being transgender. Respondents reported having been refused a home or apartment (19%), and having been denied health care services (19%), because of their gender identities. Moreover, 57% experienced serious family rejection for being transgender.

Violence, policing, and transgender populations

Official crime data provide little to no insight on transgender people’s criminal victimization because gender identity is largely excluded from most official crime reports, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report (Stotzer, 2009). Gender identity is also omitted as a demographic characteristic from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which is the largest ongoing victim survey in the USA conducted jointly by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Census Bureau. A number of empirical studies have examined the criminal victimization of transgender people. Most of these studies focus on sexual violence, and report that transgender people suffer higher rates of sexual assault, especially at a young age (Wyss, 2004; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006;
Perpetrators of sexual assault often have a personal connection to transgender victims, such as through a primary-partner relationship or a family relationship (Risser et al., 2005; Xavier et al., 2007). Researchers have also documented transgender people’s experiences of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Studies have reported that transgender people—and as discussed above, transgender sex workers in particular—are common victims of isolated and repeated acts of physical and sexual violence (Valera et al., 2000; Cohan et al., 2006; Xavier et al., 2007). Transgender individuals are also frequent victims of harassment and verbal abuse (Witten, 2003; Xavier et al., 2005; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Dang 2007; Grant et al., 2011).

Currently, no published study has focused specifically on transgender people’s interactions with law enforcement. The few published studies that have touched peripherally on this topic have found that many transgender victims do not report their crimes to the police (Witten, 2003). In the NTDS, almost half (46%) of the 6,450 respondents reported that they felt uncomfortable seeking help from the police and only 35% reported that they felt comfortable (Grant et al., 2011). Researchers have suggested that transgender people’s low level of trust in law enforcement might be a strong factor that is driving their underreporting of crime against them to law enforcement agencies (Stotzer, 2009).

The omission of gender identity from official crime reports also makes it difficult to ascertain how many transgender people come into contact with the police. The NTDS reported that 54% of participants stated that they had interacted with the police as a transgender person (Grant et al., 2011). Almost one-fifth (22%) of those participants reported being harassed by police officers, with even higher rates being reported by participants of colour (Asian 29%, Black 38%, Latino/a 23%). Moreover, 6% of participants who had interacted with the police reported being physically assaulted by police officers, and 2% reported being sexually assaulted by police officers. These percentages were also much higher for transgender participants of colour who had interacted with the police—15% of Black and 9% of Latino/a participants reported being physically assaulted by police officers, and 7% of Black and 8% of Latino/a participants reported being sexually assaulted by police officers.

Policing and sex work
Several authors have argued that law enforcement officers commonly stereotype transgender women as sex workers (Moran and Sharpe, 2004; Amnesty International, 2005; Spade, 2008). According to the NTDS, 15% of transgender women have ever engaged in sex work (Grant et al., 2011). This common misconception puts all transgender women at risk of being unfairly classified as law-breakers by law enforcement on the sole basis of their gender identity.

The few studies that focus on transgender people’s involvement in sex work have found that barriers to economic opportunity pressure many transgender women to resort to sex work for survival (Wilkinson, 2006; Grant et al., 2011). This result is consistent with studies on sex work generally that have reported that individuals who engage in sex work (especially street-based sex work) are disproportionately from low-income backgrounds, and that economic necessity is the strongest factor motivating them to engage in this line of work (Whelehan, 2001; Murphy and Venkatesh, 2006).

Transgender people who actually engage in sex work are also at heightened risk of criminal victimization and police abuse (Valera et al., 2000; Nemoto, et al., 2004; Cohan et al., 2006). Cohan et al.’s (2006) study of 783 sex workers found that 53.2% of transgender female participants experienced violence related to sex work. Transgender participants were also at significantly higher risks of customer violence (42.9%), police violence (17.5%) and violence from employers/managers/pimps (8.7%) than non-transgender participants. Valera et al.’s (2000, 2001) study provides some
insight into the struggles of transgender women of colour who engage in sex work. Of the 100 study participants, 26 identified as transgender, and 88.5% of those transgender participants identified as African American. Since entering sex work, about 65% of the transgender participants reported being physically assaulted, 88% reported being threatened with a weapon, and about 35% reported being raped. These findings are consistent with existing studies on sex work generally that have reported that: individuals who engage in sex work are at heightened risk of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Farley and Barkan, 1998; Farley and Kelly, 2000; Campbell and Kinnell, 2001; Raphael and Shapiro, 2004); and law enforcement officers are common perpetrators of this abuse (Miller, 1993; Nixon et al., 2001; Thukral and Ditmore, 2003; Thukral et al., 2005; Williamson et al., 2007).

Some researchers have also found that transgender people who engage in sex work lack confidence in law enforcement (Sausa et al., 2007). Sausa et al.’s (2007) qualitative study of 48 transgender women of colour reported that participants often considered violence an inevitable part of sex work and lacked confidence that police officers would provide protection from this violence. This result is consistent with studies on sex work generally that have found that people who engage in sex work are often deterred from reporting abuse committed by law enforcement officers and others against them because they fear arrest, secondary victimization, or that their reports will be ignored/not taken seriously (Campbell and Kinnell, 2001; Thukral and Ditmore, 2003; Thukral et al., 2005).

Methodology

The current study examined participants’ personal interactions with law enforcement personnel during their lifetimes. Second, the study examined participants’ personal interactions with law enforcement personnel in the past year.

Recruitment and eligibility

Study participants were recruited from the City of Los Angeles and surrounding communities in Los Angeles County through various community-based organizations (CBOs), support groups, social events, outreaches, and referrals. Study interviewers asked prospective participants whether they had interacted with the police, regardless of whether this interaction was positive or negative. Study participants were eligible if they were: over the age of 18; considered themselves to be Latina/Hispanic; considered themselves to be a male to female transgender person; and spoke either English or Spanish.

Informed consent was then obtained in either English or Spanish. Participants were given a $20 grocery gift card upon completion of the interview as compensation for their time. Approval for the current study was provided by the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science Institutional Review Board.

Measures and procedure

The questions for the survey were developed internally and also taken from validated instruments of prior mental health studies (Williams et al., 1997; Wittkampf et al., 2007). Appropriate modifications of the survey instrument were made based on a pilot test with a small group of transgender volunteers, cognitive interviews, and expert reviews by two medical sociologists, a health service researcher, and two social workers.

The survey instrument included questions on the following topics:

- Experiences of arrest—with an emphasis on how the participants’ gender identities factored into those experiences.
Experiences of sexual, physical, and verbal assault perpetrated by law enforcement.
Experiences within the past year of being stopped by law enforcement without violating any laws.
Complaints of mistreatment by law enforcement and the handling of those complaints.
Criminal victimization, the reporting of crime to law enforcement agencies, and the handling of those reports.
Overall impressions of law enforcement’s interactions with transgender people and how those interactions could be improved.

The current study differentiated among study participants’ interactions with police officers in uniform, undercover police officers, and sheriffs. All three types of law enforcement personnel have identical police powers under the California Penal Code (Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, 2013). Although the participants’ descriptions of their law enforcement interactions could have involved law enforcement personnel outside of Los Angeles County, an overview of the types of law enforcement agencies in the Los Angeles area is useful for context. The Los Angeles Police Department is responsible for providing law enforcement services in the City of Los Angeles. There are also various municipal police departments that provide services to other cities in Los Angeles County. The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department is responsible for providing municipal police services to unincorporated communities throughout Los Angeles County (Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, 2013).

The quantitative questions were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics, chi-square test of association, and logistic regression. Logistic regression models were used to examine the relative influence of socio-demographic factors on abuse by law enforcement. Abuse by law enforcement was a composite variable created by combining verbal harassment, physical assault, and sexual assault. Only those variables that were significantly related to the outcome variable (abuse by law enforcement) at a significance level of $P < 0.20$ at the bivariate level were included in the multivariate models. A check for multicollinearity was conducted prior to multivariate analysis. All of the variance inflation factors were below 1.50, signifying that multicollinearity was not a serious problem in the analysis.

The open-ended responses were analyzed using an open coding-strategy (Strauss and Corbin, 1999). The researchers identified and coded common themes in the open-ended responses to estimate their frequency.

The study sample consisted of 220 low-income Latina transgender women, ages 18 and above. Face-to-face interviews with individual participants were conducted between December 2010 and June 2011 in private rooms at CBO locations. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 min. The interviewers were three bilingual Latina females (a master’s level social worker, a master’s level graduate student in education, and a transgender health educator).

**Results**

Table 1 presents socio-demographic data on the study sample. A few demographic features of the study sample are especially noteworthy. Ninety-five percent of the participants had national origins other than the USA, 53% were undocumented residents (without legal documentation for being in the country), and 91% spoke Spanish as their primary language. Eighty-seven percent had been in the USA for five or more years. Only 28% had full-time employment, and 52% reported less than $10,000 of annual income. In terms of involvement in sex work, 45% percent reported that they currently engaged in sex work for money, shelter, food, or drugs. Eighty percent of the participants reported ever having engaged in sex work for money, food, shelter, or drugs.
Criminal victimization and crime reporting

Over half (55%) of the participants reported ever having been a victim of a crime as a transgender woman. Moreover, there was a significant positive association between history of sex work and being a victim of a crime by others at the bivariate level ($x^2 = 19.37, P < 0.0001$).

Only 56% of those participants who reported ever having been a victim of a crime reported any of the crimes to the police. Most of the participants who reported crimes had negative experiences during the reporting process—35% responded that they were treated poorly, and 22% very poorly, by law enforcement personnel during the reporting process. Only one fifth of the participants who reported crimes had positive experiences—15% stated that they were treated well, and 5% excellently. About one quarter of those participants (23%) had no opinion about their treatment by law enforcement during the reporting process.

The 44% of participants who decided not to report crimes to the police gave a variety of reasons for not reporting them. Many of these explanations stemmed from potential negative responses by law enforcement, including police not listening, helping or believing them (36%), fear or mistrust of police (18%), and language barriers (11%). Twenty-four percent conveyed that they did not report the crime because of bad treatment or discrimination from the police. Some participants also gave reasons that were connected to their personal circumstances, including not having legal documentation or personal identification (40%), and concerns that the police would tell family members about the crime (9%).

Personal interactions with law enforcement

**Lifetime personal interactions with law enforcement.** Most (71%) of the participants reported having been arrested at least once in their lives. Of those participants who had been arrested, 64% had been convicted of a serious crime or a misdemeanor. Just under two-thirds (64%) of the participants who had been arrested reported unjust treatment by law enforcement—35% reported having been treated unfairly and 29% very unfairly.
Figure 1 identifies three types of abuse that the study participants reported that law enforcement officers committed against them: verbal harassment, physical assault, and sexual assault. Over two-thirds (67%) of the study participants reported having been victims of at least one form of abuse by a police officer in uniform, undercover officer, or sheriff. Verbal harassment was the most common (65%) form of reported abuse by law enforcement personnel: 56% reported ever having been verbally harassed by police officers in uniform, 27% by undercover police officers, and 26% by sheriffs. Twenty-one percent of respondents reported incidents of physical assault by law enforcement personnel: 16% percent reported ever having been physically assaulted by police officers in uniform, 8% by sheriffs, and 7% by undercover police officers. Moreover, 22% of participants reported incidents of sexual assault: 15% reported ever having been sexually assaulted by police officers in uniform, 11% by undercover police officers, and 4% by sheriffs.

Table 2 presents the results of a multiple logistic regression model of the factors independently associated with abuse by law enforcement.

Individuals living with a roommate were more likely to report having been abused by law enforcement than those living alone [odds ratio (OR) = 2.76, 95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.22–6.26, \( P < 0.05 \)]. Individuals with five or more years of living in the USA had a greater likelihood of reporting abuse by law enforcement compared to those with less than five years (OR = 2.50, CI = 1.05–5.90, \( P < 0.05 \)). Similarly, those with a history of sex work had a greater likelihood of reporting abuse by law enforcement compared to those without this type of history (OR = 5.43, CI = 2.55–11.54, \( P < 0.001 \)).

**Personal interactions with law enforcement in the past year.** Twenty-nine percent of the participants reported having been arrested in the past year. Of those participants, 68% reported being arrested once, and 32% reported being arrested more than once, in the past year.

A majority (58%) of the participants who were stopped by law enforcement in the past year reported being stopped without violating any law.

### Table 2: Logistic regression model of abuse by law enforcement (\( n = 191 \))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( B ) (SE)</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alone (reference group)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>With relatives or family members</td>
<td>0.58 (0.47)</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.71–4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With spouse/partner/child</td>
<td>0.26 (0.44)</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.54–3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With roommates/other</td>
<td>1.02* (0.42)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1.22–6.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex work history (0 = no, 1 = yes)</td>
<td>1.69*** (0.39)</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>2.55–11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time in USA (0 = less than 5 years, 1 = 5 or more years)</td>
<td>0.91* (0.44)</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.05–5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.75 (0.59)</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo-( R^2 )</td>
<td>0.123</td>
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**Notes** *\( P = 0.05 \); **\( P = 0.01 \); ***\( P = 0.001 \).
Of those stopped, 31% reported being stopped once, 25% twice, 33% three times to five times, and 11% six or more times. Just over two-thirds (67%) of those participants reported that they were conducting commonplace and legal activities when they were stopped, such as walking on the street, waiting for a bus, coming back from the grocery store/shopping, or going to/coming home from a club or a bar.

Just over four in five (82%) of the participants stopped by law enforcement in the past year reported negative interactions, including law enforcement officers: referring to participants as male, even when they asked to be referred to as female in some instances (65%); being rude or calling them derogatory names (7%); and assuming that they were sex workers (8%). Only a handful of participants reported positive interactions, which included officers asking and using the name that they wished to be called.

**Overall impressions of law enforcement’s interactions with transgender populations**

Most (71%) participants described their overall impressions of law enforcement’s interactions with transgender people in negative terms. The most common negative response (57%) was that law enforcement officers are aggressive, insensitive, rude, or disrespectful when interacting with transgender people. Participants also responded that law enforcement is biased against transgender women (33%)—especially undocumented transgender women (17%), and that law enforcement officers assume that transgender women are sex workers (10%). In addition, 5% of participants thought that law enforcement lacked basic knowledge about transgender communities, and were in need of education and trainings. Fewer than one in ten (8%) participants described law enforcement’s interactions with transgender people in positive terms. A slightly higher percentage (14%) described interactions in mixed terms, recognizing that some law enforcement personnel treat transgender women with respect and others do not.

Generally, participants were optimistic that the interactions between law enforcement and transgender communities could be improved. More than one third of participants (36%) recommended that law enforcement receive more education and training about transgender people and issues. Nine percent of participants recommended that law enforcement increase communication with transgender women to learn about who they are and to see that they deserve equal respect. A very small percentage of participants (3%) believed that it was either too difficult, or that nothing could be done, to improve the interactions between law enforcement and transgender communities.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The current study findings are consistent with the existing unpublished surveys that have reported that transgender people are common victims of discrimination and abuse in policing contexts (Witten, 2003; Stotzer, 2009; Grant et al., 2011). Factors independently associated with law enforcement abuse included living in the USA for five or more years, having a history of sex work, and living with a roommate. One possible interpretation of the analysis is that Latina transgender participants were more likely to come into contact with the police on account of being in the USA for a longer period of time. The heavy policing of sex work may also create more opportunities for law enforcement to abuse transgender people who engage in sex work in particular. Although it is unclear why living with a roommate was significantly associated with a greater likelihood of police abuse, this result could have been driven by the individual circumstances of the transgender participants who lived with roommates. Given that the set of potential variables to include in the logistic regression model was defined by the socio-demographic characteristics that we explored in the study, we encourage future studies in this area with more comprehensive variables and sophisticated modelling techniques.
Critical race scholars have stressed the importance of considering the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and class in explaining violence against women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991). Building on this intersectionality framework, the current study findings provide support for the conclusion that Latina transgender women in particular are common victims of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse committed by law enforcement officers and others. They also show that race/ethnicity, gender, and class matter when evaluating the law enforcement interactions of Latina transgender women. For instance, negative perceptions of law enforcement, language barriers, and lack of legal documentation deterred many participants from reporting and proactively seeking law enforcement assistance when a crime was committed against them. Just under one fifth of the participants reported perceptions that law enforcement was biased against undocumented transgender women, and just under one tenth reported that law enforcement officers assumed that they were sex workers in the past year. Although more detailed studies are needed to explore the prevalence of racial profiling in transgender communities, these findings are consistent with overarching themes in the existing literature that feelings of police distrust and law enforcement practices of racial profiling are prevalent in many racial/ethnic minority communities.

Furthermore, one noteworthy difference between the findings of the current study and the NTDS was that participants in the current study reported higher levels of harassment (56% versus 23%), physical abuse (16% versus 9%), and sexual abuse (15% versus 8%) than Latino/a participants of the NTDS. Dissimilarities in the gender and national origins/resident statuses of the participants in the current study and the NTDS might account for these differences. The current study included transgender women only, whereas the NTDS included both transgender women (63%) and transgender men (37%). Furthermore, 53% of the current study sample reported being undocumented and 5% was born in the USA, whereas only 2% of the NTDS sample reported being undocumented and over 95% were US citizens. It is impossible to rule out the possibility that these differences reflect sampling shortcomings of one or both studies. The current study, however, lays the groundwork for more targeted studies in the future to explore these differences.

Given that sex work was not a large focus of the current study, more detailed studies are needed in this area. One notable result, however, was that there was a significant association at the bivariate level between history of sex work and criminal victimization. This finding is consistent with existing studies that report that transgender women who engage in sex work are at greater risk of being subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Valera et al., 2000; Witten, 2003; Xavier et al., 2005; Cohan et al., 2006; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Xavier et al., 2007; Dang 2007; Grant et al., 2011).

Limitations
The current study was not without its limitations. The most significant limitation is that the degree to which the findings are generalizable is unclear. Given that the current study was based on a convenience sample, its results are only reflective of these 220 participants. The study findings may not apply to the experiences of other transgender women in Los Angeles County, or to transgender women in other geographic locations. Moreover, given that all of the participants were Latina—and most were undocumented residents and/or from low-income households—the findings may not apply to transgender women of different races/ethnicities/national origins or economic statuses. Due to the preliminary nature of the current study, it was not feasible to explore these intersectional differences in greater detail. More thorough investigation of these differences is a promising area for future research.

It is also important to underscore that the reports of abuse by law enforcement agency type in the current study should not be interpreted to conclude that transgender women’s interactions with sheriffs are more or less positive than their interactions.
with police officers (either in uniform or under-
cover). Differences in reports of abuse by agency
type in the current study could reflect that partici-
pants were more likely to come into contact with
law enforcement personnel in jurisdictions of
police departments, as opposed to sheriff’s depart-
ments. Furthermore, given operational and cultural
differences among law enforcement agencies, it is
important to acknowledge that the study findings
do not necessarily apply to law enforcement agen-
cies across the USA or even in the countries of
origin of the participants. We encourage future
studies that explore differences in transgender
women’s interactions with law enforcement agen-
cies in different geographic regions, and that
investigate the circumstances under which law-
enforcement-agency type might influence the
nature of those interactions.

Implications for policy
The study findings have three general policy impli-
cations for law enforcement. First, the findings may
suggest that some police officers do not know how,
or refuse, to interact with transgender people sen-
sitively and respectfully on the job. As the findings
show, this insensitivity can manifest in many ways.
Some police officers might fail to address trans-
gender individuals with their preferred gender
pronouns or names. Other officers may make de-
rogatory comments to them. Moreover, police of-
ficers might rely on stereotypes to make categorical
assumptions that the transgender people who they
come in contact with are sex workers. Therefore,
the study findings indicate a need for increased
education and awareness within law enforcement
agencies on how to engage with transgender
people sensitively and appropriately.

Second, the current study findings lend support
to the notion that transgender people, and particu-
larly transgender people of colour, are frequent
victims of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse perpe-
trated by law enforcement officers. The study find-
ings also demonstrate that transgender people’s
complaints about police mistreatment and abuse
to law enforcement agencies are not always handled
properly or taken seriously. These findings are a
cause for concern given that law enforcement is
vested with the primary responsibility of enforcing
the law. They also speak to a need for law enforce-
ment agencies to evaluate their disciplinary proced-
ures to deter police officers from perpetuating such
abuse, and ensuring that any complaints of police
mistreatment by transgender people are handled
promptly and appropriately.

Finally, the current study findings are consistent
with the observations in existing research that many
transgender people and communities harbour a
sense of distrust towards law enforcement (Stotzer,
2009). The findings indicate that police distrust
often stems from prior negative interactions with
law enforcement that transgender people have had
or learned about from others. These negative inter-
actions can arise in a variety of contexts, from run-
ning mundane daily errands to approaching law
enforcement to report crime. Distrust of law en-
forcement can have powerful consequences on the
lives of transgender populations—it can cause trans-
gender people to rely less on law enforcement when
they need assistance and deter them from reporting
crime. These consequences detract from the ability
of law enforcement to ensure the protection of a
particularly vulnerable group.

The current study, however, also reveals promise
in the optimism and willingness to help that some
transgender people possess toward improving rela-
tions between law enforcement and transgender
communities. In building these liaisons, law en-
forcement can increase its communication with
transgender communities with the guidance of
transgender community members to avoid enga-
ging in insensitive behaviour that further harms
transgender people.

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