Dos Mundos

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Chapter 8

INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM AS PART OF THE EXPLOITIVE MODEL

I tell you, God could care less about the poor. Tell me, why must we live here like this? You're so good and yet you have to suffer so much. . . . Each step that he took toward the house resounded with the question, why? About halfway to the house he began to get furious. Then he started crying out of rage. . . . And without even realizing it, he said what he had been wanting to say for a long time. He cursed God. Upon doing this he felt that fear instilled in him by the years and by his parents. For a second he saw the earth opening up to devour him. . . . He thought of telling his mother, but he decided to keep it secret. All he told her was that the earth did not devour anyone. . . . Not yet, you can't swallow me up yet.

—Thomas Rivera

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the social institutions of Middlewest and how they function to exclude Mexican Americans from full participation in local society, thereby maintaining them in a colonial status. More than a decade ago sociologists developed the concept of institutionalized racism—a situation where a social institution operates, intentionally or unintentionally, to deny opportunities to minority groups. Such a situation assists in the maintaining of minorities in a subordinate position (Feagin 1989).
The radical exploitive theorists contend that the structure of the economy in a society is crucial in determining the social status of a person in the society. One's social class is determined by his/her position in the local economic structure. The owners (capitalists) have immense power to determine the quality of life of other people in the society.

Primary questions to be answered are: what insights can be gained by using the radical exploitive model? and what aspects of the theory are misleading and erroneous? Throughout the writing of this book, my attention kept returning to these questions. From the examination of the race relations in Middlewest I have come to the conclusion that the insights provided by the radical exploitive model outweigh its limitations. It will be necessary here to examine the contribution of each social institution to the maintaining of the racial minority in a semi-colonial status.

I have modified the radical exploitive model to emphasize its ideological component. The ideology of the Anglo community explains its indifference to the social conditions of Mexican Americans and its lack of concern about existing race relations. The ideology facilitates negative attitudes about the Mexican American population on the one hand while it maintains that all Americans have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Some Mexican Americans in Middlewest become assimilated and some succeed economically while retaining their ethnicity—a situation predicted by those supporting the pluralistic model. However, I believe that the structural barriers to economic advancement for the Mexican Americans of Middlewest and Farm County are extensive enough to warrant my use of the exploitive model. Only the radical exploitive model adequately portrays the essential nature of the subordinate position of the Mexican American people of this study.

Marilyn Frye (1983), in her essay on oppression, provides an important insight into the nature of institutionalized racism:

Cages. Consider a bird cage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. . . . You will be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere.
Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one. And take a macroscopic view of the whole cage.... It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.

The Local Newspaper

My analysis of the newspaper utilizes the work of Spector and Kitsuse (1987) and that of Best (1989), all of whom use a constructionist perspective for understanding social problems. This perspective recognizes the complex nature of social problems, and these authors reject the idea that only objective conditions define social problems. From their perspective, social problems have a subjective nature; in other words, they must be constructed by "claims makers." The constructionists examine the process of how certain social conditions come to be recognized as social problems.

In Images of Issues (Best 1989), a book of readings from the constructionist perspective, many of the researchers found that newspaper and television accounts and claims about a putative social condition were crucial in transforming that phenomenon into a social problem. The claims makers not only make assertions about some social behaviors as being problematic but they also make observations regarding the causes of the problem, which lead to a set of solutions for the designated problem.

Reinarman and Levine (Best 1989) examine the construction of the crack (drug) problem in the inner cities, and they have drawn a particularly relevant set of conclusions from their analysis of the local newspaper. They believe that the media influences politicians and other moral entrepreneurs to join a group of crusaders in vilifying the deviant behavior of minority groups and calling for a crime control approach to the
perceived problem. American society is manipulated into making scapegoats of the victims instead of examining the social and economic problems that underlie their deviant behavior.

As part of my field research, for six months I conducted a content analysis of the local daily newspaper to assess the amount and type of coverage of the Mexican American population in comparison to the coverage of the Anglo population. The analysis of the *Daily News* reveals that the Mexican American community is correct in believing that the paper has an anti-Mexican American orientation. One example is found in the weekly coverage of the arrests and sentencing of criminals. Many papers do not print this type of list. The *Daily News* accurately lists Mexican American names, but the list includes a disproportionate number of Mexican American offenders. Also, the printing of the list continuously reinforces a negative image of the Mexican American community. This practice is unusual because the data seems to be of little intrinsic interest; it would be comparable to list the number of houses sold each week. The *Daily News* also repeats or continues the stories relating to Mexican American offenders much more than is typical for newspapers.

Herein lies an example of modern racism. The paper accurately reports the crimes in Middlewest and Farm County; but why does it select those government statistics? The paper does not question the actions of law enforcement and the courts, which could be seen as selectively enforcing laws against Mexican American offenders.

A feature that clearly illustrates the negative orientation of the *Daily News* toward Mexican Americans is the paper's coverage of criminal arrests in other states. The paper frequently presents crime stories with pictures that involve a Mexican American offender. Why would the Middlewest subscriber be interested in run-of-the-mill crimes by Mexican American offenders in other states? The Boise daily newspaper did not carry any of these stories. I doubt that this practice occurs unintentionally.

The primary method by which the *Daily News* presents and creates a criminal image of Mexican Americans is by printing a higher proportion of negative columns and stories than positive
stories. Approximately 15 percent of the articles about Ang­los in Middlewest report on their criminal activities, whereas 85 percent of the paper's stories report on positive or neutral accounts of the Anglos in Middlewest. The paper's treatment of Mexican Americans is just the reverse: 75 percent of the stories examine criminal activities of Mexican Americans in Middlewest while only 25 percent of the stories carry a positive or neutral image.

Institutionalized racism is not often challenged, because few people understand that a newspaper not only reports on but also creates social realities. It would be possible to be a reporter for this paper and not have any prejudicial attitudes toward Mexican Americans and yet still be participating in these racist practices. The inaccurate image presented by the crime reports in the newspaper is magnified because most Anglos are not aware that Middlewest has more Mexican Americans among its pop­ulation than is generally believed. In the summer, the number of Mexican Americans may approach 35 percent of the county's population.

The Daily News faithfully reports the crime but not all the positive activities within the Mexican American community. For example, I attended a dinner sponsored by Mexican American Catholics to honor the migrant workers. The paper did not cover the dinner and entertainment, but the arrest of a Mexican American received front-page coverage. The unbalanced coverage of the violent, drug-related, and criminal acts by Mexican Americans is exacerbated because law enforcement officers also arrest Mexican Americans for crimes of poverty such as not having car insurance.

Criminologists (Quinney 1977) recognize that people from mi­nority and lower-class backgrounds generally have higher arrest rates. A poverty environment reduces legitimate opportunities and enhances deviant opportunities (Cloward and Ohlin 1960). The creation of minority criminals also occurs because of the tendency of police to apprehend members of racial minorities (Haskell and Yablonsky 1974). Criminologists have developed a large body of research indicating that racial minorities receive biased treatment at every stage of the criminal justice system.
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(Platt and Cooper 1974). Adding to this class bias in Middlewest is the view of the *Daily News* that the wedding of a local banker's daughter has social interest whereas that of a migrant couple lacks reader appeal. The negative image created by the *Daily News* may be partially unintentional, but it contributes significantly to the negative perceptions most Anglos in Middlewest have of the Mexican Americans in their community.

During the period in which my content analysis of the newspaper was conducted, four editorials criticized the local Mexican American community. One called bilingual education a "stupid idea." Another concluded that the Mexican American Caucus's plan for redistricting "is absurd." The paper did not print a single editorial supporting a Mexican American issue.

Of those Middlewesterners who subscribe to the local paper, approximately 85 percent of the Mexican Americans and a majority of middle-class Anglos I interviewed believe that the *Daily News* focuses on the negative—especially on criminal activities of Mexican Americans in Middlewest. Does the mass media shape or does it reflect social sentiments? Many Anglo subjects specifically said that the paper narrowly presents the Mexican Americans as criminals, but later they too affirmed the criminal nature of Mexican Americans. Can people be influenced even when they know the media is attempting to influence them? Certainly the advertisers think so.

The following comments by a Middlewest businessman reflect the Anglo view on Mexican American crime.

I am probably going to be called prejudiced for this. It's because of the Mexicans. The crime is, regardless of what people say, when you read it in the paper, that is who is committing these crimes. The bulk of them; yes, a few Anglo kids. From what I read, know about, 80 percent of the crimes are by those people. I am not saying all Mexicans are bad. I know some nice Mexicans. The migrants come in and out, then they have those gangs, and I am sure a lot of drugs are involved. . . . I don't know why the Mexicans—they go to same schools as my kids. They have jobs.
Several major stories in the *Daily News* during the time of the content analysis examined the programs established to reduce gangs, drug trafficking, and vandalism in Middlewest. Following a rash of burglaries and acts of vandalism for which the police had arrested Mexican American suspects, the newspaper reported on the Chamber of Commerce's establishment of a crime-prevention program. The paper ran a story on the Department of Health and Welfare when it received a grant with which it hired a Mexican American to work with at-risk and gang youth. This article followed months of other reports on Mexican American gangs. The reports in the newspaper left little doubt that these problems existed because of the Mexican American population of Middlewest. The community's institutions appear to be concerned about Mexican American crime, yet nobody knows, understands, or cares to learn why the Mexican Americans have a higher proportion of criminal activity.

There is a circular nature to institutionalized racism. The chief of police of Middlewest told me in an interview in the fall of 1990 that the newspaper had created the Mexican American gang problem. A year later, in an interview with a *Daily News* reporter, he said that Middlewest did have a Mexican American gang problem. This chapter will describe how various institutions participate in and reinforce the deviant image of Mexican Americans.

A racially sensitive newspaper operating in a community that has a significant Mexican American minority very likely would reverse the proportion of positive to negative articles on the Mexican American population. This could be accomplished by having a Mexican American section of the newspaper with a majority of the articles portraying Mexican Americans in a positive light. It would hire Mexican American reporters and present the Mexican American perspective on community issues. Some articles might be printed in both Spanish and English. A sensitive paper would attempt to educate the Anglo community about Mexican American culture and issues.

The Mexican American community in Middlewest has the responsibility of informing the newspaper concerning upcoming social, political, and cultural events and to request coverage of
these events. A crucial way to modify this situation would be for the Daily News reporters to be required to seek out Mexican American leaders whenever they plan to write an article that in some way reflects negatively on the Mexican American community. When the Daily News begins to question why Mexican Americans participate in deviant behavior, instead of just reprinting police reports, it could sensitize the community regarding the causes of minority crime. This approach might lead to investigative reporting on the housing problem, discrimination, unemployment, and lack of medical assistance to impoverished Mexican Americans.

**The Economic Institution**

A key component of the radical exploitive perspective of race relations is the inequity in employment where Anglos are systematically employed in higher paying and higher status positions. One’s social class and race play a role in determining what type of employment that person can secure. In a capitalistic industrial economy it would be expected that first-generation Mexican American immigrants would be primarily employed in low-paying jobs that do not require education, training, or fluency in the English language. The fact that immigrants can only earn a poverty wage says something about how capitalism functions in general and affects all workers.

The radical exploitive model holds to the position that a capitalistic economy will take advantage of any group of workers that society perceives as being subordinate to the dominant group. In America, women and racial minorities regularly fill the necessary requirements because a tradition and ideology exist to legitimize the payment of lower wages to them.

The economic position of the Mexican American population in Farm County reveals that they are exploited. More Mexican Americans work in the fields as migrant or seasonal workers than work at any other type of employment in Farm County. The majority, even second- and third-generation Mexican Americans, do farm labor and factory work. This is the secondary job market, and it includes many part-time jobs as well as lengthy
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periods of unemployment. Mexican Americans for the most part do not have access to the better paying blue-collar and white (Anglo)-collar jobs that require only a minimum education. Idaho government statistics (Department of Commerce 1992, Department of Employment 1991a) show that Mexican American unemployment is double that of the Anglo population. Their poverty rate of 33 percent is three times that of the Anglo community.

During the period of my field research I toured and interviewed managers and workers of the local area factories. Several companies have factories located in Middlewest or in communities close to Middlewest. They include food processing plants, trailer factories, seed companies, and companies that cater to the needs of a farm economy. Large numbers of Mexican American men and women work in these factories. In the two area potato-processing plants, a sugar beet factory, and the seed companies, almost 30 percent of the work force is Mexican American.

Most Mexican American factory workers earned $6.00 an hour or less at the time of this study. The women, as a group, earned the lowest wages. At all of these factories, even at the trailer factories, the work is seasonal. The workers face layoffs for a significant period during the year. For example, the sugar factory has a fall processing period called a "campaign" that lasts for approximately five months, and during this period the company hires several hundred additional workers. This means that most Mexican American workers there fall below the government guidelines for poverty although they work what would be considered full-time for this company. Of course, many Anglo factory workers also experience poverty as a result of the structure of the capitalist economy. A tour of the sugar factory revealed that Mexican Americans primarily are employed in the packaging section of the plant, which requires the hardest manual labor and pays the lowest wages. Throughout the rest of the plant Anglos predominate. The manager leading the tour openly acknowledged that there existed a "Mexican Section" of the plant.

The management, white-collar, clerical, and professional workers in these plants generally are not Mexican American.
Some Mexican Americans have reached a supervisory level, but not in proportion to their numbers in those workplaces. In one potato processing plant, only one Mexican American holds the advanced position of supervisor, manager, or lead worker although there are fifty such positions. The local dairy has more than 100 employees and most of the positions do not require university training; however, only two of the dairy's employees are Mexican American. Another example of the racial division of jobs is found in a large corporation that operates several businesses. Approximately 500 Mexican Americans work in the company's food processing plant, but the other divisions have no Mexican American workers. Mexican Americans are seldom employed at the higher-paying blue-collar jobs such as driving a truck or rebuilding railroad cars. The local hospital has 600 employees but only four percent have Mexican American surnames; most of them work at housekeeping, records, and clerical tasks.

I also interviewed people in many smaller businesses in Middlewest—banks, clothing stores, furniture stores, drug stores, department stores, grocery stores, restaurants, auto dealerships, and smaller specialized businesses. These businesses had few Mexican American employees; those few were found in entry-level positions. For example, the largest store in town has approximately fifty employees, only two of which are Mexican Americans. One of these two holds the position of custodian.

Some businesses and governmental agencies do have several Mexican American employees, especially those entities that have many female employees in traditional secretarial and clerical positions. One telephone marketing business employs women as sales personnel; several Mexican Americans work there for a wage slightly above the legal minimum. Some departments within the local criminal justice system have less of an imbalance of Mexican American workers although the pattern of having few Mexican American employees also occurs in governmental offices located in Middlewest. Affirmative action policies have not transformed Middlewest, but it is extremely difficult to prove a racist policy held by a business. The city, county, and state governmental agencies all had few Mexican American employees. The 1990 census reports that Mexican
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Americans represent 20 percent of Middlewest’s population, and demographers believe that minority populations are generally undercounted. Mexican Americans account for three percent or less of the work force in most Middlewest government offices, and most of these hold the lowest paying positions. The city government has two Mexican American employees out of 125 workers.

Many jobs in these local businesses and governmental agencies do not require a college degree. The Middlewest Post Office has fifty-one employees, none of whom is Mexican American. According to the postmaster, the qualifying examination can be passed without a high school diploma. Few Mexican Americans living in Middlewest have a college education, which means that few work in the professional sector of the economy. Less than two percent of public school teachers are Mexican American.

This data depicts a pattern similar to that faced by Mexican Americans throughout the United States. Feagin (1991) examines census data that illustrates that Mexican Americans have significantly higher unemployment, higher concentration in low-income jobs, and a median income that is approximately 70 percent that of Anglos.

Middlewest has several firms that employ ten to forty workers. Many of these businesses exist because of the farm economy; they involve constructing or repairing farm machinery and farm equipment. Again, not many Mexican Americans work in these blue-collar positions except at a horse-trailer factory. I interviewed two owners of businesses who said that they would not hire Mexican Americans. The owners claimed that they are not good workers. For example, the owner of a farm equipment manufacturing company that employs forty-five workers said: “I will tell you this, though, they are not a reliable people. The ones that come in and out, even the young ones. They are not reliable; come good to work for a week or two, pretty soon they do not come to work…. No, I don’t know why they stop coming to work. I just don’t hire them anymore.”

The average annual income in Farm County is significantly below the state average. The county also has the highest crime rate per capita. Farm County has by far the most Mexican Americans
of any county in the state of Idaho. Sixty percent of the Mexican Americans work in three categories: agricultural work, production work, and general labor (Idaho Department of Employment 1991a). This is a grim set of statistics for the Mexican American population of Middlewest and Farm County. However, these numbers provide empirical support for the radical exploitive model of race relations. The fact that Mexican Americans face more periods of unemployment and significantly lower wages than the average worker supports the view that Mexican Americans are an economic underclass in Middlewest and in Farm County.

It is useful to examine the process of recruitment and selection of employees. It was not uncommon from my interviews to find that a worker had been informed of an opening by relatives and friends who work at that business. It certainly helps if that person has friends who will vouch for his character to the boss or supervisor. Friends and relatives also can help prepare a prospective worker for the job skills required and the attitudes expected by the personnel department. If no Mexican Americans are employed in a business, the “good old boy” tradition often excludes potential Mexican American workers. Some Anglos confirmed that this network helped them obtain their job. Conducting the field research, I discovered that some Mexican American families had as many as six to ten relatives working in the same factory. These people acknowledged that their relatives assisted them in obtaining their positions.

The fact that two separate communities exist in Middlewest means that many Mexican Americans do not apply for positions because “Mexican Americans do not work” in that particular business. They assume that the company or business will not hire Mexican Americans. Additionally, potential Mexican American workers usually will not have the information and inside knowledge necessary to acquire the position.

Farmers are the recipients of many support programs from the government. To alleviate the poverty and oppressive conditions of Mexican American farm laborers will require increasing the minimum wage, supplementing the income of part-time workers, and providing health insurance to all workers. Currently
neither public sentiment nor the political will exists to establish government programs to diminish poverty in America. Idaho farmers cannot solve this problem because they are in competition with other farmers. However, you might think that because the farmers have observed the poverty of their workers they might be leading a political movement on behalf of farm workers. But such is not the case. It will take a national program to assist farm labor. Sociologists and others including Robert Bellah et al. (1985) have warned the American public about their lack of social responsibility and their undue focus on their own self-interest.

The Oppression of Female Mexican American Factory Workers

I listened to seven Mexican American women who work for a food processing plant present their grievances to lawyers of a prestigious Boise law firm. The factory employs 350 workers, approximately fifty of whom are Mexican American. The women felt that they did not receive promotions because of their ethnicity. They presented several examples of Anglo women who had less education, work experience, and seniority receiving promotions instead of them. They claimed that Mexican American women are not considered for supervisory positions, and said they face constant harassment by their supervisors, who force them to work during their lunch and coffee breaks. They said that they had to do jobs without proper training and that they face the constant threat of suspension.

These Mexican American women felt that their supervisors think that Mexican Americans are not good workers. They claimed that the supervisors yell and scream at them and said that they feel left out and unwanted. The Mexican Americans work in the three lowest-paying positions in the plant. Helen Flores has worked for the company for sixteen years and earns $12,500 a year. She said she has applied for seven better-paying positions in the company and has yet to be promoted.

Maria Torres works part-time on Sundays doing cleanup work, a job she has been doing for several years. An opening
for full-time cleanup occurred and she applied for it; however, the company hired an Anglo woman with no experience with the company.

The women complained that the company doctor forces Mexican Americans to work while injured yet allows Anglos to collect workmen's compensation. The women told of Mexican Americans continuing to work with serious injuries for fear of losing their jobs if they did not. Valencia Salinas said, "The Anglo workers and management all stick together. They make us feel like we're not wanted there." The women feel that their problems increased six years ago when the company hired a new plant manager, who they believe hires and promotes Anglos. If they go to the personnel department about it, they not only receive no assistance but they get labeled as troublemakers. The women said that many other Mexican Americans have similar problems but fear doing anything because they think they will be fired.

A most serious complaint came from Jane Carranza, who recently went to the company credit union to withdraw the $5,000 she had saved through the company's payroll deduction plan. She was told that she had no money and no account. The women believe the company will cheat them in every way that is possible.

The comments above do not represent a full review of these women's work circumstances. Still, their lawyers wonder if they should sue the company, because of the risk of losing the case and the company firing the women. The many complications that could make it difficult for the women to win their case include the following: industrial workers frequently have conflicts with management that do not have merit; other workers often will not testify on their behalf; the women claimed that two other Mexican American women will testify against them in order to ingratiate themselves with the bosses; some of the incidents occurred years ago, so they would be hard to substantiate; several of the women do not write or speak English, which fact could be used against them; and the women might not be able to articulate their grievance when testifying in a court setting.
The case of these Mexican American women is significant because it illustrates how racism continues in America. Their lawyers doubt they could win this case. Whose word has the most influence in our society: the manager of a company or uneducated minority women? The problem arises out of the dehumanization created by our capitalistic economy. Capitalists often exploit workers because it is profitable to do so. We allow poverty to exist because minorities have little power. Political institutions, the media, and the corporate world have not placed Mexican American poverty and underemployment on the agenda. This climate creates an atmosphere of indifference to and invisibility of the exploitation of Mexican American workers. Many people in Farm County and Middlewest see the employment status of Mexican Americans as a consequence of their deficiencies and culture. Few Anglos appear to have an understanding of the role played by the structure of the economy in creating and sustaining the economic inequality of the Mexican American community.

Political Institutions

Farm County has the reputation of being the most Republican district in the state. The conservative Republican rhetoric in Farm County calls for a reduction in the size of government, lower taxes, and fewer regulations on business. However, the Mexican American community needs just the opposite in order to overcome their disadvantaged economic, political, and social position. The political barrier between the Anglos and Mexican Americans is large and difficult to breach.

Farm County elects few Democrats. In 1990 the Democrats fielded a full slate of candidates for the first time in years, but the political rhetoric of most Democrats who ran for office had considerable similarity to that of the Republicans. The Democratic candidates ran a much stronger race than usual—the five Anglo Democratic candidates, running against strong Republican incumbents, nearly got elected. Although all lost their bid for election, four of the five received from 45 percent to 47 percent of the vote.
Two Mexican Americans ran for the state legislature as Democrats. They received 33 percent of the vote in Farm County. An interesting race was the contest between Juan Celedón, the director of the Idaho Migrant Council who ran against John Carter, a non-incumbent Republican. Carter resides in Middlewest, where he is a practicing attorney; the IMC has its headquarters in Middlewest although Celedón lives in a nearby town.

Celedón had a large group of volunteers who worked on his campaign, yet he only received 27 percent of the Middlewest vote. Carter spent $10,000 on the primary election, because the winner of the Republican primary generally wins a seat in the legislature. When I interviewed Carter in the fall, he was serene and confident; he had no doubts about winning the election. He had raised $5,000 for the general election but only spent $3,000 of those campaign contributions.

Celedón should have been a strong candidate because he heads a large organization and a staff of one hundred. Nearly all the Mexican American leaders in southwestern Idaho supported his candidacy. He has considerable experience as a public speaker, having been a Mexican American leader for many years. Yet Celedón's vote total was approximately eighteen percentage points below those of Anglo Democratic candidates who ran against incumbents. The eighteen percent deficit probably reflects an anti-Mexican American vote.

The Celedón campaign strategies and tactics did not significantly differ from those of the other Democratic candidates. I believe that the governor's office, the state Democratic party, and the Idaho Education Association did not support the Celedón campaign with endorsements, campaign workers, or finances as much as they did the campaigns of the Anglo Democrats in Farm County. Few Anglos in Middlewest ever attended any of Celedón's campaign activities, especially fund raisers.

Celedón waged a comprehensive campaign that matched that of any candidate in Farm County. He attended all the political forums and his presentations did not differ in quality from those of the other Democrats. He knew that most Mexican Americans in Farm County either do not or cannot vote. He did have a
few Anglos on his campaign committee, but the fact that there is a gap between the Anglo community and Mexican American community in Middlewest meant that Celedón did not have a network of relationships within the Anglo power structure and the Anglo middle class.

The Anglo power structure of Middlewest, which includes the corporate owners, the plant management, businessmen, and large farmers, pledged its money and support to Celedón's Republican opponent. However, an Anglo Democrat who ran for the state legislature from Middlewest knew many members of the Anglo power structure socially and some of these people supported his campaign.

Carter's candidacy benefitted because his law firm represents many in the local power structure. He also belongs to several legal organizations that assisted his campaign. Carter belongs to the Kiwanis Club and has served as president of that organization. This provided him with a set of influential supporters, each with a network of politically active friends. His father had a long and distinguished medical career in Middlewest. His wife serves as a local judge, creating another set of supporters. The Carter family belongs to a church that has a high status congregation, thus enabling Carter to build additional influential friendships.

Carter had many built-in advantages because of his social and professional network. These relationships and contacts did not develop as part of a political strategy on Carter's part but were merely the result of his social position in the community. At times Carter looked out of his element—he did not seem to enjoy the political process and he did not seek out the limelight. He did not campaign with the intense ideological conservatism of most Republican candidates. He ran a low-key campaign and he was hardly visible in the hoopla of election campaigning.

The landslide political victory of Carter was not a conspiracy; on the contrary, it is how American politics works. It relates to who you know and how much money you can raise. Celedón obviously was deficient on both counts. The result was inevitable—Carter received 73 percent of the vote in Middlewest. Carter undoubtedly would have won if his opponent had been an Anglo Democrat; however, the victory probably would have
been of a lesser magnitude. Most of the Anglo business and civic leaders I interviewed accurately predicted that it was impossible for Celedón to win. Their confidence came from knowing that Celedón did not know the Anglo business/civic leaders and did not belong to any of their community organizations. The gap between the Mexican American and Anglo communities must be of considerable proportions if we consider that Celedón has led the most influential Mexican American organization in the state for twenty years. How is it that the Anglo power structure does not know him?

Most Mexican Americans in Farm County cannot vote because they either are migrant workers, lack citizenship, or have not registered to vote. Most who can vote do not participate in the political process even when Mexican Americans are on the ballot. Mexican Americans do not have sufficient numbers by themselves to win an election even if they all voted. Their minimal participation in the electoral process may be because they have a separate community, or they may be intimidated by the process, or they may see political elections as an Anglo domain. Mexican American culture itself may inhibit political participation. Many Mexican American subjects I talked with perceived all politicians as corrupt and as not addressing the concerns of the Mexican American population. This attitude might derive from experiences with the undemocratic politics of Mexico.

Armando Aguirre, the deputy director of the IMC, created a Mexican American political organization in an attempt to politicize the Mexican Americans of Farm County. However, the organization only has a dozen active members. The organization did recruit several volunteers to assist in a Mexican American voter registration drive that was undertaken with little success prior to the elections in the fall of 1990. The Mexican American leaders are a determined bunch, however; they just keep trying no matter the odds or the past failures.

The limited role of Mexican Americans in Midwest politics appears to reflect the role of social class in elections. My field research confirmed that both lower- and working-class Anglos and Mexican Americans do not vote to the extent that do middle-
class people. The limited education of the working class is a significant factor in their absence from political participation; many lower-class Anglos and Mexican Americans said they did not understand the political process.

The implication of the fact of having no Democrats and no Mexican Americans in local and county governments is that political officials and governmental entities may ignore the needs of the Mexican American population. The treatment of Mexican American children in the schools and the establishment's often harsh response to Mexican American gangs may not be regularly questioned because no Mexican American politician is in office who can come to their defense. If the Mexican American community had political power they could more effectively challenge the institutional racism in Midwest and Farm County. Additionally, the Mexican American community also then could benefit from an expansion of social services and programs to expand employment and other opportunities.

An example of the consequences of the political powerlessness of the Mexican American community can be seen by examining the state legislature's creation of a reapportionment plan. The Mexican American leaders of Idaho created the Mexican American Caucus because they could find no legislative support for their reapportionment plan. They requested that the legislature establish three minority electoral districts. Both political parties ignored the plan. A federal civil rights law has made it illegal to gerrymander minority districts, and since the largest concentration of Mexican Americans in Idaho is in Farm County, the Mexican American Caucus has now filed suit in federal court requesting that minority districts be established in Idaho.

A prime example of the political subordination of Mexican Americans was found in a recent political campaign in Midwest. In the late 1980s the Anglo business and civic leaders wanted to elect a new city council because of the turmoil created by the current office holders. The continued media coverage of the petty attacks of one set of city officials against another was becoming an embarrassment. Community leaders decided to run three of their candidates in order to return decorum to the
city council. One of their candidates was a Mexican American businessman who had lived in Middlewest less than a year. The community leaders did not consult with the local Mexican American leaders, revealing their paternalistic attitude toward Mexican Americans. They believed they had done the Mexican Americans a favor but, in fact, this action was seen as an insult to local Mexican Americans since the candidate had no ties to the local Mexican American community.

The colonial status of Mexican Americans and their powerlessness can be appreciated by looking at the small-town politics of Farm County. Hop Town has a population of 1,500. Sixty-five percent of the population is Mexican American, yet not one Mexican American has been elected to the city council. In the election of 1990, the Anglo election officials refused to allow Mexican American voters to use a write-in sticker. Later in the day, the state attorney general's office issued a statement allowing voters to use stickers for write-in candidates, but the ruling came too late to assist the Mexican American candidate.

Since most the citizens of Hop Town are Mexican American, why are not at least some of the public officials Mexican American? The Mexican Americans of Hop Town feel intimidated and are afraid of offending the Anglos of the community because they work for Anglos in the nearby fields and factories. The absence of political power means that although 75 percent of the school children have a Mexican American heritage, the school operates with Anglo teachers and administrators. The curriculum is designed for white middle-class children. The mayor of Hop Town informed me that not a word of Spanish should be spoken in the local schools. The political control of Hop Town by Anglos also affects how the police operate in the community. The mayor appoints the board of directors to the Hop Town Labor Camp. Only Mexican Americans live in this part of Hop Town, but the Anglo board and manager function in the interest of the area's farmers.

Politics is more than elections; it involves the policies, programs, and administrative decisions of governmental entities. For example, the farmers, according to several sources, have influence with the Farmers Home Administration that allows them
to maintain control of the migrant labor camps. The implication of this arrangement is that Mexican American tenants will have an unsympathetic hearing for their complaints. Lawyers for Idaho Legal Aid informed me that Idaho farmers belong to the Farm Bureau, an organization of political influence which attempts to eliminate Legal Aid because of the assistance it provides to Mexican American farm workers.

A related issue to one-party control is how that control enables the dominant party to define social problems and the response to those problems. For example, the public school administrators do not define the Mexican American dropout rate as a problem but many Mexican Americans do. The politicians do not call for the creation of culturally diverse school programs.

Most political figures concentrate their attention on supporting and assisting economic growth. The Middlewest civic and business leaders also devote much of their energy toward this goal. In American politics special-interest groups support candidates who will protect their interests. Middlewest is no different; why should the community be concerned about ethnic issues and problems when Mexican Americans only constitute a minority of the population? Anglo candidates can be elected while ignoring the Mexican American constituency.

While I was conducting my research, the mayor did not mention one word about Mexican Americans in his yearly report on the state of the city, and the superintendent of schools had not read the task force report on problems of Mexican American education. One state legislator from Middlewest wanted to make English the official language of Idaho, though almost all of his Mexican American constituents oppose such a bill. Another legislator from Farm County fell asleep at a Mexican American meeting. The Anglo leaders of Middlewest do not adequately know the Mexican American people or their culture and they appear to have little desire to change this situation.

I asked the Mexican American leaders which Anglo leaders—business, civic, or political—they could turn to when problems arise that affect the Mexican American community. They responded that when the chips are down, when they challenge the Anglo establishment, no Anglo politician will come to their
assistance. For Mexican Americans to achieve parity, an inter­
connected colonial system of beliefs and institutions would 
have to be dismantled. Realistically, social justice for Mexi­
can Americans in Middlewest and Farm County is in the distant 
future.

Religion

A community study would be incomplete if it failed to ex­
amine the role of religion. Middlewest has approximately fifty 
churches. I interviewed five Mexican American and five An­
glo clergymen. Few in Middlewest question the integrity of 
the clergy, whose position enables them to have more intimate 
knowledge concerning their congregations. Three of the An­
glo ministers had fathers who were pastors in the same church. 
The Anglo ministers believe that Middlewest rates high on its 
religious commitment compared to urban communities.

The Anglo ministers recognize that the politically conserva­
tive nature of their congregations is in part a consequence of its 
many elderly members. One Anglo minister depicted the politi­
cal orientation of Middlewest as a quasi-McCarthyism. The local 
churches have taken a strong stance on public decency; they 
helped to close down an X-rated movie house and an adult 
bookstore. In the schools, the sex-education class instructors 
must limit their discussion to abstinence as the only acceptable 
method of birth control.

Three of the Anglo ministers and three of the Mexican Amer­
ican ministers described their churches as having a pentecostal 
philosophy. These churches practice a religious fundamentalism 
that contends humans have lost their way. Their congregations 
are required to read the Bible and live their lives according 
to their denomination's interpretation of it. The congregations 
publicly confess and repent, and the churches demand that their 
members abstain from dancing, movies, and alcohol.

Four of the Anglo clergymen ministered in churches that had 
few or no Mexican Americans in the congregations. Three of 
these ministers said that race relations in Middlewest are a seri­
ous problem and that many of their members have prejudiced
views about Mexican Americans. One Anglo minister believed that the solution to the community's race problem will be solved by the assimilation of Mexican Americans.

One Anglo minister of a church with 400 members said:

Race relations are not good and I am not sure they are going to get any better. The churches are concerned, we try to move on it, but we are not having much success. The gang culture is such, makes it hard to crack. A lot of prejudice against the Spanish. I don't know what it will take to correct it. You hear a lot of things said like what you would hear in the South in reference to the blacks. People resent that a Spanish person would buy a house in their neighborhood or even rent to them. This fellow across the street, he is Spanish, he keeps his place immaculate. . . . It is clean, people comment about that, that he is unusual because he is a clean Mexican.

Another religion represents ten percent of the church-going population and has several congregations. One hundred Mexican Americans belong to this faith but have their own church and separate services. The few Anglo subjects I interviewed from this faith had particularly negative views toward Mexican Americans. Some members of this church's leadership adamantly support the English language law although their church has separate Spanish-language services for the Mexican Americans. One of this church's officials views Mexican Americans as troublemakers and he tells his children to avoid the Mexican children. The leader of the Mexican American services is Spanish and has extremely negative opinions about his Mexican American congregation. He considers Mexican Americans to be less intelligent than Europeans.

Another Anglo minister's experience provides insight into how Anglos view Mexican Americans. He said:

I was on a grand jury; this is probably something I am probably not supposed to tell. Last summer sixteen of us were on a grand jury. One lady was Mexican American.
We had a crime committed on the boulevard, a crime by a Mexican American man. The Mexican American stole six tapes from a pickup. He was in the pickup when the owner came out. He grabbed the six tapes and ran. The owner caught him and said, "Give me the tapes back." The Mexican American did not speak English. Another Anglo guy came up. He said, "Are you going to let him get away with this?" The other guy said, "I am going to leave this alone." The other guy had been drinking, he also knew karate. He took a kick at the Mexican American, hit him in the head. Knocked him out. He fell on a rock and he died. The testimony was that the Anglo guy was using racial slurs, you Mexican so-and-so. The grand jury did not indict, only minimal charges. Only me and the Mexican American woman voted for anything stronger. . . . That is something that will always stand in my mind; I consider myself a good persuader, first time I ran up against racism and could not sway the argument. This guy was a murderer, that is what he was. Things were said like, who committed the original crime. Stupid; no, misguided. I was a very disturbed human being. I met it face to face. This is what it would be like, to live in the South. The man should have been locked up. He didn't even call 911. . . . It was plea bargained down to probation, no jail time.

I interviewed two Mexican American Catholic priests, one from Middlewest and the other from a small town near Middlewest. Both Catholic churches have large parishes with Spanish language services for Mexican Americans. Both priests said that the majority of their Anglo parishioners are prejudiced against Mexican Americans. The priests remarked that the Anglo parishioners complain about the Mexicans, such as: "Father, why are they dirty, why are they speaking Spanish, and why don't they go back to Mexico?"

Both priests have attempted to integrate the services but the tensions became such that the integrated services were canceled. The priests both said that they feel remorse because of the unwillingness of Anglos to assist Mexican Americans
living in poverty. Father Acuna shared with me many examples of racial intolerance in his community. He believes that Anglos sometimes act to undermine Mexican American culture. The businesses, police, schools, and churches attempt to subordinate Mexican Americans. Father Acuna believes that the Catholic church in Idaho has less concern for its Mexican American members, and he thinks that Anglo priests do not appreciate Mexican American culture. The Mexican American churches do not receive a proportional share of the church’s resources.

Father Acuna was born and educated in Mexico. He said that the Anglo priests do not appreciate that Mexican Americans come from an Aztec heritage where “religion is in the bones” of the people. He thinks many Anglo priests see their Mexican American members as uneducated and unchurched. The Anglo priests push the English language instead of learning Spanish themselves. Mirande (1985) confirms Father Acuna’s view of the negative role of the Catholic church in supporting the dominant class at the expense of Chicanos.

Most Mexican Americans in Middlewest belong to the Catholic faith; however, I found there were also several small Mexican American churches. I interviewed three Pentecostal ministers: Jose Delgado, the Assembly of God minister with a congregation of eighty; John Flores, a Pentecostal minister with seventy members in his church; and Jesús Pérez, also a Pentecostal minister, with a congregation of fifteen members. The Assembly of God’s pastor works full time as a minister, whereas the two Pentecostal ministers have factory jobs. Each of the three has a limited education.

I discovered that Mexican American Catholics are more likely to be stable, working-class people. The Mexican American fundamentalist churches have more members who are in a lower-class position because of the unstable nature of their employment. As I interviewed several members of these fundamentalist churches, it became apparent that many of them had in the past, or were currently coping with, personal problems.

Mexican Americans who find themselves unable to deal with poverty, unemployment, divorce, family violence, alcohol, or drug abuse have neither the financial nor the cultural inclination
to seek professional psychological assistance. For many, their way of coping with their problems is to join a fundamentalist church that will assist them in bringing order to their lives. The ministers of these churches understand this and focus their preaching on human weaknesses such as womanizing, drinking, and family violence. They visit the jails and the homes and the bars to assist the members of their churches.

Alcohol abuse is the most common problem. The fundamentalist ministers function by having the sinners admit their shortcomings and the need for a power beyond themselves. The practice is not dissimilar to the "twelve steps" program used by Alcoholics Anonymous. The practice includes attending church services several times a week in a small, intimate, familylike congregation. The minister recognizes the weaknesses of the flesh and has time to address each person's problem.

Many Mexican Americans perceive God as part of their daily lives. They referred to God in the interviews more than did the Anglo subjects. The churches play a significant role in maintaining Mexican American culture in Middlewest. The Catholic church fosters Mexican American culture through ceremonies such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, and the Virgin of Guadalupe Mass.

The Criminal Justice Institution

Many Mexican Americans in Middlewest believe that the criminal justice system discriminates against them. I conducted twenty interviews with criminal justice personnel and spent a month observing various aspects of the criminal justice system in Middlewest. My field research involved personnel from both the city and county; I conducted interviews with policemen, probation officers, lawyers, an assistant prosecuting attorney, judges, a court interpreter, and a public defender.

The state of Idaho report *Crime in Idaho* (Bureau of Criminal Identification 1990) shows that Mexican American youth and adults account for approximately 40 percent of the arrests in Farm County. If we recall that for much of the year the Mexican American population for Farm County may approach 30
percent, then the Mexican American crime ratio is not nearly as disproportional as most Anglos believe. My field research and interviews suggest that some of the problem of crimes by Mexican Americans is the result of the perception of some in the justice system that Mexican Americans have a criminal nature. Some of the problem is also a consequence of the severe poverty facing many Mexican Americans in Farm County.

According to the chief of police, city leaders, business leaders, and the mass media, crime in Middlewest is “out of control.” Yet these same community leaders also state that the community is quiet and peaceful. This seeming contradiction is not as strange if the reader understands that Anglos do not really accept Mexican Americans as part of Middlewest. The image of Mexican Americans as criminals has done more to separate the Mexican American and Anglo communities of Middlewest than has any other factor.

One reason for the concern among Anglos about Mexican American crime is that the number of Mexican Americans has increased dramatically in Middlewest. Mexican American crime that used to be confined to the labor camps has moved into Middlewest and become more visible. In the summer of 1991 the cumulative frustrations of Mexican Americans erupted in acts of crime. A series of murders, assaults, robberies, burglaries, drive-by shootings, and incidents of Mexican American gang violence has convinced Middlewest that it has a serious crime problem.

The initial response of the Anglo leaders and the criminal justice system was to build a new jail and establish a crime commission. The chief of police announced a “get tough” policy: “If they [Mexican Americans] spit on the sidewalk, we will arrest them.” The Anglo community leaders also supported the chief’s creation of a special team of officers to target Mexican American gangs.

Criminal justice personnel from the local to the state level focus on Mexican American drug trafficking in Idaho. Law enforcement personnel often publicize drug busts of Mexican Americans and show videos of drug paraphernalia and the armed raids. However, certain criminal justice personnel informed me of the biased nature of drug enforcement. An
Anglo public defender and an Anglo district judge each told me that a priority of drug enforcement was to apprehend Mexican Americans. The judge said that law enforcement goes after Mexican Americans because “the Mexicans are the only ones dumb enough to sell drugs to a narc.”

The Anglo police officers I interviewed claimed that their department does not target Mexican American offenders, although three of the five Mexican American officers I talked with believed that their departments do practice selective enforcement. All of the Mexican American officers felt that racist jokes have become part of their work environment and are used by Anglo officers to keep them in their place. One Mexican American officer said, “The patrol officers do pick on Mexican Americans. They do look for them. The Mexican Americans get stopped for not having a valid driver’s license and for not having insurance. I’ve done it a few times myself.”

Three of the Mexican American officers believe that some of their fellow officers and supervisors dislike Mexican Americans. They believe that certain judges render harsher sentences on Mexican American offenders. The chief public defender made the following comments: “Look, this is a redneck county and the court reflects that attitude. The judges give harsher sentences. An Anglo and a Mexican American committing the same offense, say a felony—the Anglo guy will get probation while the Mexican American gets from three to ten years. The racism is in all aspects of the system, from bail to sentencing. . . . If a group of Mexican American males get together, they believe that they are going to start fighting or get into some kind of trouble.”

During the year of my field research there was a steady escalation of concern on the part of Middlewest’s social institutions about Mexican American juvenile delinquency. Initially many Anglos and Mexican Americans thought the Daily News was exaggerating the seriousness of the gang problem. In the fall of 1990 several Mexican American youths were expelled from school for fighting. The news media decided to do a series of reports on Mexican American gangs in Middlewest. The mayor appointed a crime commission and it conducted a series of town meetings denouncing the crime problem, but without linking
it with any particular race. The police department received a
grant from the federal government to help solve the gang prob-
lem. The chief of police transferred a Mexican American officer,
who had a high school education and no special training, to
work with the youths to solve the problem. The Mexican Amer-
ican leaders predicted that the project would fail because of its
lack of a plan and resources to assist the many Mexican Amer­
ican youths who needed assistance. The city council passed
a curfew law—its penalty was to jail parents if their children
were on the streets late at night. Again, it appears to me that
the unnamed target of the program is the Mexican American
community.

Many Mexican American youths spend most of their time on
the streets because they do not have jobs. They soon begin
to be arrested for vandalism, burglaries, assaults, knifings, and
shooting incidents. The Department of Health and Welfare es­
tablished a position working with youths and hired an untrained
Mexican American. The only area in which Middlewest ap­
proaches being an equal opportunity employer is in the social
control agencies.

The mayor created a gang task force of Anglo and Mexican
American civic leaders, and they solicited advice from the Boy
Scouts and a young female high school graduate. This commit­
tee had good intentions but little expertise and no resources.
Their initial programs were somewhat superficial but nonethe­
less positive. They opened two school gyms in the evening and
have established a Mexican American boxing club. But these
programs and the committee's good intentions do not address
the institutional source of the problem.

Data released in 1992 from the juvenile detention center in
Middlewest reveals that nearly 50 percent of those detained are
Mexican American youth. One reason for the higher rate of
detention is probably that many Mexican American parents do
not vigorously come to the defense of their children. Recently, at
a junior high school in Boise, several youths were expelled from
school for wearing certain clothing and possibly being members
of a gang. Their Anglo middle-class families rallied to challenge
the school's authority. As a result, the school administration
reconsidered its position. Mexican American parents often are not familiar with or even aware of the strategies that could be used to prevent the negative labeling of their youth.

Most citizens in Middlewest believe that the community has a gang problem. One sociological theory (Eisner 1969) of juvenile delinquency is called "labeling theory." It sees adolescence as a process during which youth develop their identities and experiment with various persona. Labeling theory contends that despite their basically good intentions, schools and police sometimes negatively label youths as delinquent and that this may be the key ingredient in creating the very behavior they hope to contain. This can occur because the definition of self depends to a considerable extent on how significant others see us. During 1991 the establishment institutions, the newspaper, the schools, the police, and the city council of Middlewest perhaps helped to create Mexican American delinquents by their systematic negative labeling of the youths.

Sociological research on juvenile gangs for the past fifty years indicates that youths turn to gangs for status, support, friendship, and loyalty. The problem is particularly acute for second- and third-generation minority groups. A recent very good account of Mexican American gangs is James Vigil's book *Barrio Gangs* (1988). He uses the term "multiple marginality" to help explain Mexican American gangs. Mexican American youths have few opportunities because they live in poverty. The consequences of poverty can include family instability, family violence, alcohol abuse, and divorce. The young males have generally been unsuccessful in school and have had negative interactions with the police. They elicit discriminatory behavior. They have few or no successful role models and sometimes feel ashamed of their parents because they lack education and are considered unsuccessful by modern American standards.

Vigil examines the need of these youths for respect and acceptance. With their comrades, they share society's rejection; they respond by banding together to create a subculture in which they dress, talk, and act alike. These under-class Mexican American kids want to be recognized and respected; when they cannot find that in their family and schools then the socialization
process moves to the streets. Proving their masculinity and challenging authority become a strategy by which young males search for respect. The more they fail, the more anti-social their behavior becomes.

All of Vigil’s “multiple marginality” factors are at work for the two Mexican American gangs in Middlewest. The War Lords and the Crips together include from fifty to seventy-five Mexican American youth. Two of the Mexican American gang members I interviewed were attending night school—the Middlewest high school had expelled them. Their mothers, who spoke little English, had values and a life-style closer to that of traditional Mexican culture. These mothers have little ability either to assist or control their sons, who exist within two cultures, succeeding in neither.

Only two of the Anglo subjects I interviewed seemed to understand the predicament of young Mexican American males in Middlewest. One older Anglo policeman aptly observed, “Kids are like dogs. If you kick them enough they are going to bite you.” A teacher at the vocational school remarked, “If you treat these Mexican American boys with respect and let them know you think they are intelligent, you find out that they can be darn good students.” This Anglo teacher used to be in the public schools where he observed that, although it was unintentional, it was unbelievable how most teachers failed to work with the Mexican American young people because they believed they could not do the work.

It is not just a few but the majority of Mexican American youth who remain in the barrio under-class. The school administrators, teachers, mayor, city council, and chief of police all insist that they want to assist the Mexican American community and that they are not racist. However, they seem to be unable and unwilling to recognize that the Anglo social institutions of Middlewest have to change. The educational and employment needs of Mexican American youth are not met, yet Middlewest keeps blaming the victim.

The farm economy brought Mexican Americans to Farm County; however, instead of fulfilling its responsibility to educate, train, and pay living wages to Mexican American families,
the Anglo establishment maintains them in a colonial status. The Mexican American under-class position either is viewed as normal or it is ignored by Anglos. The dominant ideology says that all Americans have equal opportunities while it also maintains that “they” have a criminally oriented culture. The process of the criminalization of the Mexican American community thus works to justify their economic subordination.

I did not meet any Anglo villains in Middlewest. The Anglo community leaders sincerely want to solve the crime problem, but they fail to recognize that they have helped to create the crime problem by excluding Mexican Americans from equal participation in the social institutions of Middlewest. The solution to the juvenile gang problem is not a recreation room and a social worker but employment at a living wage for the parents and an education for their children.

Two particular shooting deaths occurred in the area during the summer of 1991. As mentioned earlier, a Mexican American youth was shot and killed at the labor camp during an altercation between two young Mexican American males over a woman. The boy who was shot was a bystander, one of several people who had gathered to observe the fight. The police arrested the assailant and charged him with murder. The other death occurred when a retired sheriff shot and killed a man. The circumstances involved a separated couple. The ex-sheriff was protecting the former wife of the man he killed. The prosecuting attorney declared the killing an act of self-defense. The altercation with the ex-husband prior to the shooting by the sheriff had occurred over several days. Mexican Americans asked, “Why were these deaths treated so differently by the criminal justice system?”

Mexican American leaders believe that the greatest systematic injustice to Mexican Americans comes from their arrests for traffic offenses. These include not having a valid driving license, driving with a suspended license, not having automobile liability insurance, and driving while intoxicated. The state’s 1991 annual crime report statistics on arrests in Farm County reveal that Mexican Americans account for approximately 50 percent of these offenses.
During the month I spent observing misdemeanor arraignments, I recognized that a disproportional number of Mexican Americans faced charges of no driver's license and no insurance, and that this was the extent of the charges against these offenders. A policemen cannot know that a person does not have insurance or a valid license until he has stopped a driver. A legal question arises because the officers lack probable cause to stop a vehicle on these charges. Why, then, do the police consistently arrest Mexican American drivers on these charges? Why don't the judges ask this question? An Anglo district judge for Farm County, who earlier had been the county's prosecuting attorney, when asked about selective enforcement against Mexican Americans replied, "Yes, for driving violations the probable cause is being a poor Mexican."

The lack of justice for Mexican American offenders also occurs in court. Neither the prosecuting attorney's office nor the public defender's office have any full-time staff who are Mexican American or who speak Spanish. The court does have available two Mexican American interpreters but these women have absolutely no training in the law. A not uncommon scenario is a Mexican American offender who speaks little or no English pleading guilty to a charge without understanding how the court system functions and without knowing his legal rights.

I witnessed a forty-six-year-old Mexican American man, with his wife in court, who pled guilty to shoplifting. He had taken a pair of overalls and some underwear, and he said he needed work clothes. Although the man had no prior criminal record, he received a substantial fine and three days in jail. A degradation process began as the judge asked him to explain the cause of his criminal behavior. The middle-class judge had no problem pontificating that one's economic circumstances are no excuse for breaking the law.

Another Mexican American male was charged with not having auto insurance and failure to appear on the date of his hearing. The man attempted to explain to the judge that he had no money and that he had gone to California to visit his sick mother. The judge rejected this account and kept telling the offender to plead "guilty" or "not guilty." With a sense of resignation, the man pled
guilty. He was fined $565 and sentenced to three days in jail. He told the judge that he did not have the money but did have a job, and the judge arranged for him to pay $50 a month and to serve the jail time on the weekend.

I interviewed this offender following his appearance in court. I asked about his reaction to the court proceedings. He did not know how he could make the $50-a-month payment to the court; he said that at times he has no work and that when he does work the family still has no extra money. I asked the man how much he earned the previous year. The judge had fined the man five percent of his gross income; for a person making $30,000 per year this would amount to a fine of $1,500.

I asked an Anglo district judge about the high fines for such low-income people. His response was that poor people frequently do not pay the full amount of their fines, and that this makes it necessary to increase the fine, in order to obtain what was wanted in the first place. Yet the informal policy almost forces the poor to be delinquent on their fines. I asked both the chief public defender and a district judge how the conservative views of Farm County affects the courts. The public defender said that the effect is essentially to overcharge the Mexican American offenders, who face larger fines and longer sentences. The judge told me that he tries to consider the community sentiment when preparing his sentencing remarks. This Anglo judge said that he places higher bail and sentences on poor Mexican Americans because they are more likely to be recidivist, whereas the Anglo middle-class person usually has a good job, which means to the judge that he or she is unlikely to be back in court.

My view of selective enforcement of the laws by the police received corroboration from many Mexican Americans who provided me testimony of how the police treated them. Many Mexican American teenagers reported that the police not only watch them whenever they are in a group but on occasion even make them leave the park although they have committed no offense. Others presented examples of what they thought to be unfair treatment by the police. Two Mexican American ministers and a Mexican American priest offered other
examples of the police mistreatment. They have observed inter-
racial disturbances in which the police only arrest the Mexican
Americans.

A Mexican American leader shared with me the circumstances
surrounding the arrest of a young Mexican American male. The
man had quarreled late at night with his wife; he left, but after
talking with his sister returned to apologize and make up with
his wife. An Anglo neighbor came out and fired five shots at
the brother and sister. When the police arrived on the scene
they arrested the Mexican American husband. He received a
$300 fine and a suspended sentence but the Anglo man was not
arrested.

Roberto Campa, a Mexican American lawyer, has for ten years
defended many of the local Mexican American offenders who
can afford a private attorney. Campa claimed that the entire
criminal justice system is racist. From his experience, he be-
lieves juries have less sympathy for Mexican American offenders
and that Anglo judges have no appreciation for the poverty and
cultural conflicts facing the Mexican American community. He
painted with words a portrait of the type of offender who re-
ceives the harshest penalty. The most important characteristic is
the person’s race (Mexican American), but the darker-skinned,
uneducated Mexican American who is not fluent in English re-
ceives the worst treatment in the criminal justice system. Roberto
Campa recognizes that lower-class Mexican American males live
in a social environment where an appearance in criminal court
almost becomes inevitable. He says that it is just a matter of time
after the police see a Mexican American male with the wrong
crowd.

An Anglo district judge I interviewed freely shared insider
information about the court system. He saw himself as sym-
pathetic toward Mexican Americans and as non-racist, yet his
words revealed that much of his decision making is race and
class oriented. The judge shared the following view of Mexican
culture: “The fact is adult males get drunk out of their minds
every weekend. The boys start getting drunk when they are
ten years old. Excessive drinking is just part of Mexican culture.
This explains why they are involved in criminal behavior.”
The findings of my research do not stand alone. Alfredo Mirande (1985) reviews the history of the criminalization of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. Leo Romero and Luis Stelzner (1992) find that not enough contemporary research has been done on the relationship between Mexican Americans and the criminal justice system. However, what is available also tends to confirm the findings of my research. Contemporary social science research reveals that Mexican Americans generally mistrust the criminal justice personnel and that the statistical data available confirms the discriminatory treatment of Mexican American offenders.

The following recommendations, if enacted, could reduce the amount of crime involving Mexican Americans in Middlewest. The criminal justice system should seek out and hire Mexican Americans in all professional categories. Court proceedings against a Mexican American should not proceed unless the offender is represented by a lawyer—preferably a Mexican American who speaks Spanish. The police should be instructed to cease arresting Mexican Americans without probable cause. The state should provide, at reduced cost, auto liability insurance for all low-income drivers. The courts should provide outreach educational programs to educate Mexican Americans about automobile laws and penalties. The fines for low-income people should be reduced, recognizing that unrealistic fines only induce nonpayment violations. Even then, most of these recommendations would be limited in their results, because only by providing decent wages can Mexican American crime in Middlewest be significantly reduced.

Social Services

The studies of Blea (1980) and Horowitz (1986) report that the Chicano communities in Pueblo and Chicago did not have adequate access to the social service programs in those cities, and the programs were found to be severely underfunded. Since most of the Mexican American population in Farm County live in poverty, I wanted to find out about the quality and the accessibility of social services for the Mexican American community
in Middlewest. I interviewed nine staff members and five administrators of social service agencies that have programs in Middlewest or in Farm County. The consensus of these people was that social services cannot provide adequate food, housing, and health care to local poor Mexican Americans and Anglos.

The O'Neill Health Clinic for low-income families is located in a town seven miles from Middlewest. Its founders established this medical facility to assist Mexican Americans; low-income Mexican Americans from all over Farm County and Middlewest patronize it. Half of the clinic's personnel speak Spanish; patients pay on a sliding scale, but many Mexican Americans informed me that they could not even afford the reduced fee.

Dr. Jones of the clinic recognizes the plight of Mexican Americans in Farm County. He said that the county board of health treats Mexican Americans in a condescending and paternalistic manner. He also said that county authorities sometimes deny payments for the care of indigent Mexican Americans. He thinks Middlewest would be a natural location for a low-income health clinic but the Anglo leaders of Middlewest will not support such services. Some of Dr. Jones's Mexican American patients have told him that they cannot obtain services from physicians or from the hospital in Middlewest. Dr. Jones said, "If you are a Mexican American living in Middlewest you have less access to medical care, there's no doubt about it."

Melissa Scheffer, a nurse at the O'Neill Clinic, has had hundreds of Mexican American women as patients for prenatal care. Scheffer has had first-hand information from countless Mexican American patients who have been denied services. She vociferously denounced area physicians, hospitals, and the county's health and welfare program for denying services to low-income Mexican Americans. I asked Melissa what additional medical services are necessary to serve low-income Mexican Americans. She said that the first priority should be to reduce the cost of services. She then said that Mexican Americans need the following services: an increased number of Spanish-speaking medical personnel, transportation to clinics, education regarding birth control, a reduction in the cost of prescriptions, and an increase in preventive health services.
The Salvation Army major in Middlewest reported that most of their services go to low-income Mexican Americans. The Army has a long list of programs: winter heat assistance, provision of food baskets and Christmas baskets; summer camps; and emergency assistance for rent, food, and gas. The major told me that the problems have intensified because of the number of unemployed and working poor in the Mexican American community. He said: “Things are getting so bad, I don’t know how they make it. At the end of the month they have absolutely nothing. . . . Even though the United Way budgeted this program $100,000 and we raise good money, it is just not enough. Almost 50 percent of those we serve are becoming permanently indigent.”

Arlene Jones, the director of the local community action program, had a similar story. Her program provides emergency assistance and food commodities. She said that it is the largest such program in the state but that the resources still do not meet the needs of the clients. She said: “You may think the state is having a booming economy but you wouldn’t believe the extent of poverty in Middlewest. . . . Yes, we serve a disproportional number of Mexican American families. . . . The housing situation is acute. . . . We just help them to survive. . . . It is the economy, not the people, that keeps them in poverty.”

I interviewed the director of the Department of Health and Welfare, Rubén García, who presented a bleak assessment of services to Mexican Americans. García confirmed that Farm County has the highest poverty rate in the state and that his department serves many Mexican Americans. When asked about the characteristics of the Mexican American clients, he said that they do not use many of the programs provided by the department. He emphasized that Mexican Americans basically do not use the counseling and mental health programs because in their culture a person should not discuss personal problems. He felt that the department needs more Mexican American social workers and also needs to recruit Mexican Americans from outside the state. The department has improved the number of its Mexican American support staff.
I talked to staff at the Idaho Migrant Council and at the Catholic church concerning their assistance programs for local Mexican Americans. These organizations provide emergency assistance for rent, gas, and food, but they said the demands for assistance exceed their resources. Francisco Garcia of the IMC captured the essence of the process: "These people just go around in circles trying to obtain assistance. We never have enough funds so we send them on to another agency. After awhile you can see the hopelessness and resentment."

I interviewed four staff members, including the director, of the Southwest District Health Department, located in Middlewest. Its programs include nutrition education; distribution of food commodities; and the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) program. The WIC program places its emphasis on improved prenatal assistance and also provides for the immunization of children and for family planning. Its health center has a grant to assist pregnant teenagers and to provide adolescent mothers with parenting classes—a program that already has enrolled 105 teenage girls.

Farming has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the state. To make matters worse, the state of Idaho has the lowest number of physicians per capita in the nation. The director of the Southwest District Health Department said, "We are in the dark ages! Many low-income people, especially the Mexican Americans, go without medical treatment. We have a growing clientele and nowhere near enough funding."

Lupe Esquivel, a Mexican American nurse, has worked for the district for seventeen years because she wanted to help her people. Approximately 40 percent of her patients come from poor Mexican American families. Lupe treats pregnant patients; she can recall many stories of low-income women being denied treatment by the private health system. She said that knowledge of the health district travels by word of mouth—many pregnant Mexican American migrant workers do not know that these services exist. She also said that many of her patients have little knowledge of the human reproductive system; the district office spends much of its resources educating clients.
The director of the district's teenage pregnancy program provided me with a recent report from the national Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations (1990). This report examines the root causes of Mexican American teenage pregnancies: low self-esteem; academic underachievement; a perceived lack of a good future; a sense of powerlessness; and parents who have a limited education and a low income. To reduce Mexican American teenage pregnancies would require a dramatic change in the social and economic relations between Mexican Americans and Anglos in Farm County. It was the same old song, spinning on and on, only the groove gets deeper. The recording was the same at each social service agency. How can this record be broken?

As part of my social services research, I also interviewed two establishment health administrators: one worked for the Middlewest Hospital and the other for the largest group medical practice in Middlewest. These men praised the quality of health care in Middlewest and did not believe that anyone is denied access to health care in Middlewest. They insisted that Mexican Americans received the same quality of medical care as Anglos. These people sing their own song; they do not listen to Spanish music. They do not hear the song of the poor, a melancholy tune filled with pain.

I interviewed Helen Kirkham, who works for a Boise consumer advocate organization. She informed me that Middlewest has no such agency. She has had a steady stream of Mexican Americans seeking her assistance. According to Helen, the auto dealers on the Middlewest boulevard are the worst offenders. She said that many Mexican Americans buy vehicles that become inoperative shortly after the purchase. She also discussed other problems Mexican Americans face, such as their vehicles being illegally repossessed or them unknowingly being charged excessive interest. One tactic used by car dealers involves selling the buyer a life insurance policy that will pay for the auto if the owner dies. Helen believes that Mexican American consumers face systematic abuse, and she said that they receive little or no assistance from the Better Business Bureau or the legal system. She also said that the bankers only care
about getting their money; they do not care if the consumer gets cheated.

I then interviewed Kay Simmons and Alberto Sánchez, who work as licensed DUI evaluators. In separate interviews they both agreed that Mexican Americans often do not receive fair sentencing, because there are not enough Mexican American evaluators. They both said that Mexican Americans do not receive adequate counseling due to the lack of Mexican American lawyers. Mexican Americans receive court sentences to attend an alcohol counseling school; however, these schools conduct their sessions in English. The Mexican Americans never participate in any of the class discussions. Kay Simmons concluded that Mexican American alcohol offenders receive unfair treatment by the criminal justice system. From her experience, she believes that the judges give Mexican American alcohol offenders longer sentences and that the jailers treat Anglo offenders better.

Conclusions

The Anglos of Middlewest generally are good people but their treatment of Mexican Americans is not adequate. Yes, Mexican Americans commit more misdemeanor crimes and some types of felonies, but nobody tries to understand why. America has developed an “invisible oppression.” Mexican Americans are not denied the vote, though few exercise this right. A powerful ideology extolling freedom and equality hides the reality of inequality. Indifference, denial, and ideological blinders work to impair the ability of Anglos to see racial injustice. Anglos in Middlewest honestly cannot understand the relationship between their behavior, the orientation of their social institutions, and the oppressive poverty of Mexican Americans. No one distorted this social reality any better than the U.S. Senator from Idaho who said at a Republican rally in Middlewest, “Essentially, the government is in the business of taking money from hard-working people and giving it to people who do not want to work.”
The majority of Mexican Americans live in or near the poverty level. They consistently face part-time jobs and periodic unemployment. The extraordinary degree to which Mexican Americans are denied participation in the politics, religion, and economy of the dominant group provides strong support for the radical exploitive explanation of race relations in Middlewest and Farm County.

Most Mexican Americans in Farm County are second-generation Americans, but they are treated as outsiders. Neighboring Boise has had a greater in-migration in the last five years than has Middlewest, and the Boise Chamber of Commerce welcomes each new resident. Most of these newcomers are Anglo, but I believe the comparison still has merit because it reveals that Middlewest and Farm County, as a consequence of their conservative ideology, create a narrow definition of what makes a person a “real” American. For most Anglos in Middlewest, being Mexican American equates with being a foreigner.

Mexican Americans are disproportionally represented as offenders in the criminal justice system and as recipients of social services. In both cases, Mexican Americans are victimized by the unfair and inadequate treatment of these two institutions. The result is that Mexican Americans fail to receive adequate assistance when the inevitable financial problems arise, while the criminal justice system seems to operate to ensnare, degrade, and construct a criminal image of Mexican Americans whose only crime is living in poverty.

The first step toward solving racial inequality would be to recognize that a problem exists. The second step would be to evaluate the ethical and moral responsibilities of the dominant society toward those less fortunate than themselves. A third step would be to appreciate the humanity of the Mexican American people.