I began this study to understand local immigration enforcement in a new immigrant destination. Specifically, I was interested in how law enforcement agencies without a history of dealing with immigrant communities might respond to an influx of Latino immigrant residents. As state and local law enforcement agencies were being pushed to expand immigration enforcement both in their jails and on patrol, I was convinced we were missing part of the story. How and why were Latino immigrants winding up in jail in the first place? I wrote this book to unpack local immigration enforcement as a process that includes agencies and actors who may or may not see themselves as participants in immigration enforcement. Immigration control takes place on our streets and in jails through the implementation of mundane law enforcement practices that many take for granted. In doing this work, I made an intentional choice to focus my gaze on “the state” rather than on those who are targeted by its practices. I would like to use these pages to address questions that I am most frequently asked when I present this work.

Q: How did you get access to law enforcement institutions?

I moved to Nashville, a city where I knew one person, hoping that I would find a way to conduct interviews and observations with officers in the Davidson County Sheriff’s Office (DCSO) and the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department. I figured that if I hung out long enough, eventually someone might take pity on me, a struggling graduate student. Indeed, I framed my requests by emphasizing
my relative lack of power, asking individuals if they might help me on my school project so that someday I might graduate. Ultimately, I believe I got access because I was not threatening and because southern hospitality dictates that one accommodate polite requests.

I started by showing up at events, so that when I later asked for expanded access I would already be a familiar face. For example, I gained access to the sheriff’s office by attending their 287(g) advisory meetings with Katharine Donato, a sociologist who worked at Vanderbilt University. After six months of attending meetings, I approached various members of the sheriff’s office for interviews. During interviews, I worked hard to build rapport, I asked questions nonconfrontationally, and I expressed my deep appreciation to each person I spoke with. When I asked if I might interview every DCSO employee involved in 287(g), a DCSO supervisor helped me set up the interviews and even checked in with me after to make sure I had gotten everything I needed.

I utilized the same approach to gain access to the police department. I started by enrolling in the department’s Citizen’s Police Academy (CPA). The CPA is a public outreach program designed to educate civilians about policing. Its curriculum was twelve weeks long and included lessons from various police officers about property crime, terrorism, drug investigations, and community policing. It was also an opportunity to learn about the police department’s culture and to hear the language that officers use when describing their work. The CPA cohort took field trips, visiting the 911 call center, the police academy, and the shooting range.

I decided that instead of gaining access to the police department from the top (through the chief) I would gain access from the side, through a precinct commander. I knew that I wanted to ride with police in the South Precinct, because this was the area with the largest concentration of Latino immigrant residents. Consequently, I believed that officers in the South Precinct were more likely to come into contact with Latino residents or have opinions about their presence. By this time, my networks in the city were more extensive. I met the precinct commander through a mutual acquaintance, and the commander graciously agreed to let me conduct ride-alongs with patrol officers. Ultimately, I conducted fifteen ride-alongs with officers in the South Precinct and one each in the East, North, and Hermitage Precincts. The data I present come from observations and interviews in the South Precinct.

Q: How did officers respond to your presence?

I assume that this question is fundamentally about race and gender. The patrol officers I rode with were (mostly) white men from the South, and I am a Mexican American woman from California. Unlike some ethnographers who come to embody their subjects, I knew I could never be an insider with Nashville law
enforcement. Rather than consider this an obstacle, I followed the lead of other ethnographers who argue that officers’ responses to fieldworkers should be considered data. Officers’ performances provide insights into how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by others.

Not surprisingly, officers were curious about why I was riding with them. For example, some patrol officers assumed I was studying to work as a dispatcher in the 911 call center. Twice, I was confused for a Latina police department employee who worked at another precinct on domestic violence investigations. Sometimes, officers thought I was married to one of the three Latino officers who worked in the South Precinct. Thus, while officers’ assumptions obviously placed me outside their community of officers, they placed me inside a larger community of people who were on their side: dispatchers, detectives, and partners. Their assumptions suggest they did not see me as a “spy” trying to catch them doing something wrong but as someone positively oriented to the department and sympathetic to their predicaments. I actively cultivated an image of being naive, harmless, and grateful for their assistance.

I explained to officers that I was a student who was writing about policing for a school project and that I was interested in how they did their jobs amid the precinct’s increasing diversity. This seemed to satisfy their curiosity, and officers volunteered to answer my questions or “get into things” so that I would have more to write about. When I kept showing up to ride, I would get nods of recognition and occasional jokes. “You again?” someone might say, as I walked into the roll call room. “Haven't you had enough of us?” “Maybe you should just sign up for academy.”

When officers admonished me about my safety, I knew it was because officers were socialized to be concerned about their own safety. Indeed, some officers took my safety a little too seriously. For example, one officer made me ride with a bulletproof vest on, which was hot, heavy, and uncomfortable. For the rest of the shift, officers who saw me with the vest on seemed highly amused. One officer showed me how to use the patrol car radio in an emergency, showing me where to push the button and where to speak into the mic. Much to my horror, one officer even pointed out an extra rifle in the patrol car, which he affectionately referred to as Big Bertha, and indicated that I should use it if I needed to protect myself. I assured him that I had already signed a release form, so he should not concern himself with my safety. He laughed.

Ride-alongs provided numerous opportunities to conduct field interviews with officers in a place where officers felt comfortable. An officer’s patrol car is his office, or his domain. While a few officers were initially guarded in my presence, many felt comfortable enough to voice their political beliefs, insult their superiors, use derogatory and scatological humor, and complain about civilians who called them for help. I laughed at jokes and nodded sympathetically at complaints. However,
since this project is ultimately about the role of police in immigration control, rather than police occupational culture more generally, many of these details have fallen out of the text.

Officers reacted favorably when they learned that I was bilingual. For example, one afternoon when we were getting ready to leave the police station parking lot in a patrol car, the officer I was with drove up to another patrol car with the window rolled down and told his coworker, “She speaks Spanish!” His tone of voice suggested that this was something the other officer should be jealous of. Indeed, the fact that I speak Spanish made me a commodity, because I could help officers communicate with the Spanish speakers they would inevitably encounter: officers used me as a translator, rather than fumbling through interactions by themselves. As a result, my presence likely shaped officers’ interactions with Spanish-speaking Latino residents. By translating, I facilitated the flow of information between officers and residents. With me by their side, officers were never frustrated by an inability to communicate with Spanish-speaking residents. Instead, officers told me what to say and what to ask, and I relayed the information that officers requested. This made all their interactions with Spanish-speaking residents smoother than they might have been in my absence. Given that I spoke Spanish and am obviously of Latino descent, I believe officers responded to Latino residents more politely and less punitively than they might have in my absence. Similarly, I suspect that officers were particularly well behaved because I am a woman. Male ethnographers, for example, describe a cop “canteen culture” where police officers use masculine and sexual humor. While officers made fun of one another and occasionally said things that were offensive about others, they did not, for example, make overtly sexual remarks about women in my presence. Concerned that officers might mistake my curiosity about their profession and opinions as romantic interest, I wore a fake engagement ring during my fieldwork. I am not certain it was necessary, but it made me feel better.

Ultimately, since my argument is that police behavior is driven by institutional practices, rather than individual biases, I am confident that my analysis holds up, even though officers may have been on their best behavior when I was with them. I drew my conclusions about the importance of investigative stops in the police department from observations in the roll call room, interviews with police officials, conversations with and between patrol officers, local news reports documenting the police department’s shift in priorities, and a broader police literature that documents the rise of investigative police stops across the country.

Q: Are the police racist?

Because police have a duty to protect and serve diverse populations, it is not surprising that many people want to know whether police are prejudiced, are racist,
or have negative racial attitudes. Indeed, some who read this book may believe it argues that the police are racist, and others may believe the book shows that police are well-meaning and demonstrably not racist. Indeed, although police tend to be socially conservative and although some have racial prejudices, researchers are often unsuccessful at linking officers’ individual-level biases to their aggregate policing practices. Moreover, because of the way that courts have defined racial discrimination, for policing to “count” as racially biased, the officer must intend to discriminate.

My work points out that all officers face pressure to make investigative traffic stops and that during stops officers feel compelled to cite or arrest Latino immigrant motorists who are legally ineligible for identification. Officers do not do this because of racial animosity (although some officers may be prejudiced); they do this because investigative traffic stops are institutionalized practices and because state laws make unauthorized immigrants arrestable (and therefore deportable). Stated differently, an entire police force of antiracist cops would produce similar outcomes because police practices are driven by structural factors.

Race is undeniably a part of this story. Indeed, institutionalized police practices and state and federal laws produce racial disparities in who is stopped, cited, and arrested. Moreover, even though federal law makes unauthorized immigrants deportable, Davidson County’s deportation program ensured that deportable immigrants would be identified for removal. This book argues that the convergence of law, institutional policies, and police practices sends a powerful message to Latino residents about their place in American society.