

UC SANTA BARBARA

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American Society of Criminology Recognizes UCSB Sociologist for Research on Juvenile Crime, Gangs, and Social Control

Victor Rios, assistant professor of sociology at UC Santa Barbara, has received the New Scholar Award from the American Society of Criminology. The award is presented annually by the society's Division on People of Color, and recognizes scholars who, in the early stages of their careers, have made significant contributions to the literature on people of color and crime.

Rios was recognized for research that appears in six refereed journal articles and his forthcoming book, which explores how juvenile crime policies and criminalization affect the everyday lives of urban youth. To research the book, Rios spent three years shadowing Latino and African American adolescents and young men in Oakland, who law enforcement, school officials, and others had categorized as delinquent.

"I am very honored to receive this award," Rios said. "It will help me inform my colleagues and the public about the crime control paradox that many marginalized young people experience. On the one hand, society attempts to regulate deviance and risk -- such as gangs -- through brute force; on the other hand, it is this brute force that often develops the very crime we seek to prevent. In the process, many

young people's lives are radically altered, leading many through an unforgiving school-to-prison pipeline."

Rios's current research examines gang activity in Santa Barbara, and seeks to distinguish between real and perceived gang violence. "This project is trying to understand when gang crime really is gang crime, and when it is an object of the community's imagination," he said. "If, for example, a group of three Latino boys gets into a fight with another group of Latino boys, it will automatically be considered gang activity. In reality, though, these boys could have no gang affiliation whatsoever. But assumptions are made because of their race, and because of previous acts committed by similar kids."

According to Rios, until the distinction is made between what is real and what is perceived, the gang problem will continue. "In order to find a solution, we have to get at the root cause," he explained. "And in order to do that, we have to understand the kids involved. But if we continue to throw the generic 'gangster' label, we'll never understand them. They get stuck between a rock and a hard place, and begin demonstrating some of the criminal behavior that they might not have if we hadn't labeled them as such."

Rios is also leading a project with Santa Barbara High School that explores the achievement gap between white students and Latino students. He is working in collaboration with the school administrators and teachers to identify the sources of the problem and to propose evidence-based solutions. Rios and his team of five graduate and 20 undergraduate students will examine the factors that contribute to the disparity in academic achievement at Santa Barbara High School, and the factors that contribute to racial separation of students.

"Through my previous research, I'm able to understand the kids on the street," he explained. "Now I'm able to go in reverse and understand the kids who are still in school and on the verge of going in either direction, and study whether and how the school is influencing their choices."

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