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## Breaking the Barrier: Just a Little Spanish Can Help a Lot

by Doug Newcomb,  
CJI Law Enforcement Management Coordinator

**R**esults of the United States census in 2000 revealed that Hispanics are the largest minority population and also the fastest growing group in America.<sup>1</sup> Hispanics are also the fastest growing population group in Arkansas, and their percentage of the population in northwest Arkansas is approaching the national average.<sup>2</sup> Spanish language newspapers and radio stations that were once few and far between can now be found almost everywhere in the State.

So what does this mean for the law enforcement community in the State? As managers, there are a few areas of concern that need to be addressed. How do your officers overcome the language barrier to effectively communicate with Hispanic Americans while also ensuring their own safety and the safety of the civilian? How do cultural differences affect the relationship between Hispanic Americans and law enforcement? (This is especially crucial when the Hispanic frame of reference to law enforcement is not "serve and protect.") The Criminal Justice Institute offers a course, **Officer Safety and Communication Spanish**, that assists law enforcement in addressing some of these critical issues.



### Bridging the Language Barrier

Given the changing demographics of our communities, there is a need to know enough Spanish to recognize a dangerous situation or prevent one from happening. The Criminal Justice Institute's three-day **Officer Safety and Communication Spanish** program was developed by Jose Alentado to help officers with little or no Spanish speaking experience. The course objectives are pronunciation and the Spanish alphabet, arrest commands and control Spanish, interview words and expressions, and noticing and reacting to Latino cultural differences

It's important to remember that the vast majority of Hispanics in our State are not drug cartel employees who are running drugs, money, and guns. Most are U.S. citizens here legally. Their command of the English language will range from excellent to little or none. It is when the little or no English speaker comes in con

tact with the little or no Spanish speaking law enforcement officer that situations can become frustrating for both parties.

One of the most frustrating events for an officer is to be able to ask only a few questions in Spanish and then not be able to understand the answers to the questions asked. Fortunately, there is a way to obtain the basic information you need without having to say "I don't understand a word you're saying" as your eyes glaze over. You learn how to use *Answer in the Question*<sup>TM</sup> to identify suspect information, a technique that allows the officer to obtain accurate information, one word or phrase at a time, instead of asking an open-ended question that generates a misconstrued response.

There is also the opportunity to learn useful and courteous words and expressions to control interviews. Knowing which words to use and being aware of pitfalls are very helpful in obtaining information. You will learn about the structure of family names, including the difference in and importance of a father's and mother's surname. A mistake in the order of submission of these names to dispatch could create serious officer safety issues.

I must admit that when I went to Alentado's Spanish Instructor course, learning the alphabet initially seemed like a waste of time. However, when I saw how mastering the vowels were key to pronunciation, I quickly changed my tune. Some other things you will learn include numbers, days of the week, months, and holidays. This is essential when taking basic reports and filling out traffic warnings or citations. Learning numbers can be tricky, but there is a phrase you learn that allows you to control the rate of information that is obtained.

An essential part of the training is learning street Spanish. Law enforcement will learn to identify danger words, drug slang, weapon terminology, and common gang slang. Additionally, they will be shown differences between Caribbean and Mexican dialects to head off potential problems.

**"How do your officers overcome the language barrier to effectively communicate with Hispanic Americans while also ensuring their own safety and the safety of the civilian? How do cultural differences affect the relationship between Hispanic Americans and law enforcement?"**

There are at least ten hours of training devoted to identifying body parts that are critical to arrest and memorizing the *short and quick*<sup>TM</sup> phrases critical to make standing, kneeling, and prone arrests. Law enforcement will learn how to make routine and high risk traffic stops by using practical exercises.

**Understanding Cultural Differences**

Understanding cultural information and realizing the differences between cultures can be very beneficial to an officer who has contact with Latinos. The more knowledge an officer possesses, the better chance of success whether talking to a suspect, victim, or witness.

For instance, we all need to remember that the law enforcement community in some Latin American or Caribbean countries is looked upon with suspicion and mistrust. Too often, these officers take advantage of their position to enrich themselves and take advantage of others. Given that point of reference and the fact you speak little or none of their language can make for a tense situation. Those who have entered the country illegally and have been here for a short period of time are more likely to be victims of crime and are less likely to contact police for fear of deportation.

In another example, understanding the role of the female in traditional working and peasant class Latino families can help explain the reluctance of female victims to cooperate with police. The daughter is often prepared to be a homemaker. Her primary functions are to take care of her spouse and younger siblings while preparing for her "domestic role."

While those roles are changing for females in more affluent families, it is not the case for the majority. Some Latin American countries do not have domestic violence laws. Domestic violence is considered a family issue of no concern to the police. Sexual assault victims can also be reluctant to contact police and, if contacted, may not be cooperative with police because of fear of the authorities, the suspect, and/or deportation.

# Visit the CJI Library for the Latest Spanish Resources for Law Enforcement

## Spanish for Law Enforcement: Essential Words & Phrases to Communicate with Spanish-Speakers (Two 1-hour audio cds)

Learn essential short and simple phrases to communicate with Spanish-speakers in situations commonly encountered by law enforcement personnel. Learning Spanish will empower you to be more effective at work, improve officer safety and provide opportunities for career advancement. Learn words and phrases that relate to the most commonly encountered situations in Law Enforcement without tedious grammar lessons.

## Quick Spanish for Law Enforcement: Essential Words and Phrases for Police Officers and Law Enforcement Personnel

Quick Spanish for Law Enforcement makes it easier than ever for you to acquire basic Spanish language skills. The book features more than 2,000 key words and phrases in the most easy-to-use format, along with bilingual scenarios based on situations commonly encountered during the course of your duties.

## Webster's New Explorer Spanish – English Dictionary

An up-to-date, easy to use bilingual reference. More than 80,000 words and phrases. Features Latin-American Spanish.

## Tactical Spanish for Law Enforcement

Designed to be used both in the classroom and in the field, Tactical Spanish provides the information officers need most urgently - basic grammar, essential phrases, and commonly-heard slang. This pocket-sized guide is divided into easy-to-find sections that correspond to common law enforcement situations, allowing officers to find the information they need when they need it.

## Essential Spanish for Law Enforcement

Ready to use on the job, Essential Spanish for Law Enforcement is a vital tool for anyone working with the Spanish-speaking community. With the easy pronunciation guide, you'll be able to speak Spanish immediately. Clearly organized by situation, the book covers more than 2500 essential words and phrases. Phrasebook format makes it easy to find the right words and phrases. Includes many common situations, such as basic traffic stops, DUI procedures, gang-related violence, domestic abuse, interviewing witnesses, reading Miranda rights, booking a suspect, and supervising prisoner activities.

## Spanish for Law Enforcement Personnel: ...and for public safety workers, correction officers, parole officers, firefighters/court officers, and welfare and social workers

Here is basic instruction on understanding and making yourself understood when dealing with accident reports, criminal investigations, public gatherings, court and legal proceedings, and other aspects of law enforcement work. All words and expressions are accompanied by their pronunciation and English translation.

## The Complete Spanish Field Reference Manual for Public Safety Professionals

This compact manual is a "easy to learn," practical source for commonly used Spanish words, phrases and slang used in the law enforcement and public safety fields. Includes pictures, illustrations and charts with more than 150 topics targeted specifically for public safety including: Cultural Diversity; Victim Assistance, Domestic Violence; Medical and Firefighting Phrases; Immigration; Parole and Probation; Control and Command Terminology; Dispatch and Telecommunicator Phrases with 911 callback terms; Officer Survival Terms, Hispanic Street and Prison Gangs; and Street/Drug/Jail Slang.



Latin American societies are traditionally male dominated, especially in the areas of family and politics. The concept of "machismo" is not a myth, and it is important to understand this when interacting with Hispanic civilians. A little courtesy and respect can go a long way when trying to obtain information or providing assistance. Family is also very important in Latin culture, and recognizing and respecting the family hierarchy can be very beneficial to law enforcement.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

The course offerings at the Criminal Justice Institute will not turn an officer into a Latin-American expert but

hopefully will give each person some basic information and skills that will allow them to perform their sworn duties in a safe manner.

Like any undertaking, if you don't practice, you won't improve. Law enforcement officers have a very dangerous job. Our training and knowledge must evolve every day to keep pace or preferably stay ahead of changes within our community. Our goal is to provide Arkansas law enforcement officers with as many tools as we can to help them perform their duty safely and go home at the end of their shift.

## References:

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1. U.S. Census Bureau. <[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)>, accessed March 23, 2009.
2. U.S. Census Bureau. <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/05000.html>>
3. Catholic Charities of Arkansas Immigration Services, presentation, February 27, 2009.



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### **CJI Management Quarterly**

Criminal Justice Institute  
University of Arkansas System  
7723 Colonel Glenn Road  
Little Rock, AR 72204