

# Why Ohio is “Ground Zero” for the Immigration Debate

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Whether it’s in the courts or in the political arena, immigration continues to be a major issue on the national stage. For years, places like California, Arizona, and Texas—with their comparatively large immigrant populations and proximity to Mexico, have dominated the conversation.

The reality is, the problems with our failed immigration system are not limited to the southern border and in fact, the effects of stagnant immigration laws; stalled executive actions; and a do-nothing Congress are being acutely felt all over the United States.

We would like to make the case that Ohio is actually Ground Zero for today’s immigration debate. Read on to learn why.

Along the northern Ohio and western Pennsylvania border with Lake Erie, an infusion of federal tax dollars has resulted in two shiny new border patrol stations and a massive expansion of border agents patrolling in local towns and communities. Immigrants from across the state—many of whom are settled, long-term residents with homes, businesses, children, and spouses who were born here—have faced relentless scrutiny for appearing to be “foreign,” forced to live in the shadows and in constant fear of being separated from their loved ones.

As if life weren’t hard enough for Ohio’s immigrant population and their families, Gov. John Kasich and Attorney General Mike DeWine, both Republicans, made it harder. Late last year, DeWine and Kasich—who just announced his campaign for the 2016 presidency—signed Ohio on to the misguided lawsuit filed by 26 Republican-led states to block a new Deferred Action for Parents of American and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) plan and the expansion of the President’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The initiatives, currently on hold due to a court injunction, would have enabled thousands of Ohio residents—and millions across the country—to obtain temporary immigration documents and work permits until Congress finally follows through on immigration reform.

In the following pages, we lay out key statistics about Ohio’s immigrant population; paint a picture of what immigration enforcement looks like on the ground; and highlight what’s at stake for Ohio and the nation as the immigration debate moves forward. Finally, we introduce you to some of the key advocacy groups on the ground and explain what they’re doing to shed light on this family, human rights, and workers’ rights issue.

### **Ohio’s Latino and Immigrant Population is Driving State Population and Economic Growth**

While Latinos only comprise 3% of Ohio’s overall population (and 2% of its electorate), the

latest Census Bureau statistics show that they are driving population growth across the state. Per Jennifer Smith Richards of *The Columbus Dispatch*, “The new estimates that break down population changes by race and Hispanic origin show that Ohio gained an estimated 32,263 Hispanic residents between 2010 and last year. That’s an increase of about 9 percent. Meanwhile, there are about 7,000 fewer residents who say they’re not Hispanic in origin.”

Ohio is also home to 477,337 immigrants, 82,000 of whom are undocumented and 25,000 of whom are eligible for the President’s DAPA and expanded DACA programs. Out of those 25,000 Ohioans eligible for the President’s latest programs, over 10,000 are farmworkers.

The undocumented community makes a significant contribution to the state economy as well—paying \$72.8 million in state and local taxes in 2010. That number could be even greater should DAPA and the expansion of DACA move forward—the Center for American Progress (CAP) estimates that the programs could add up to \$41 million in additional tax revenue over a five year period.

Paying taxes is not the only economic contribution that immigrants are making in the state. They’re driving innovation too. In 2010, 6.7% of all Ohio business owners were foreign-born, and between 2006 and 2010, new immigrant business owners contributed 5.7% of all net business income in state.

## **Ohio is a Microcosm of the National Immigration Debate**

Ohio’s immigrants have a strong economic foothold in the state, and implementing DAPA and DACA fully—as well as passing federal immigration reform—would allow them to make even more of a contribution. Current policies and practices at the Federal, state, and local level have tended more toward restricting immigrants, rather than embracing them.

An influx in federal funding over the years has paid for new border patrol stations with jurisdiction over Ohio, and an explosion of new border patrol agents who have begun operating in the interior. There aren’t a lot of unauthorized immigrants crossing from Canada into northern Ohio by way of Lake Erie. So, border agents are increasingly coming into local towns and communities to arrest immigrants—many of whom are settled and long-term residents with homes, businesses, children, and spouses that were born here. Border patrol agents have been working hand in glove with the Ohio Highway Patrol and local police, seeking out immigrants well beyond the physical border.

In fact, since the creation of the Border Patrol station in Sandusky, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), AFL-CIO, Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE), and others have filed numerous successful lawsuits regarding racial profiling by U.S. Border Patrol agents.

In a case that recently made national headlines, plaintiffs obtained an apprehension log from the Sandusky station that contained a smoking gun. Despite the fact that Ohio does not share a border with Mexico or any other Latin American country, the log showed that nearly 88% of all people apprehended here were of Hispanic. Only 10% of those apprehensions occurred near the border, and none involved people attempting to enter without inspection.

Three local law enforcement agencies accused of profiling Hispanics settled lawsuits by adopting non-discriminatory policing policies. In one case, the individuals profiled received substantial money damages. After a seven day trial, briefing is now being done in *Muniz vs. Gallegos*, a case alleging the Border Patrol profiled Hispanics for seizures and arrests based on ethnicity or race. A decision will likely come this fall.

In addition to this Border Patrol activity, the Detroit Field Office of ICE—which has jurisdiction over deportation decisions in Ohio—is widely recognized as one of the most aggressive in the nation. In 2011, countless reports of civil rights abuses prompted an outcry from local and national leaders, after ICE agents were found stalking immigrant families dropping their children off at school. The national headquarters of ICE launched an internal investigation but, predictably, held no one to account.

These incidents are not uncommon, and are indicative of a law enforcement culture aimed at targeting and intimidating the immigrant community. The Detroit Field Office also has a history of resisting and ignoring the deportation priorities determined by Headquarters.

It seems that the national media recognizes that Ohio is a microcosm of the U.S. immigration debate, and they have covered stories about immigrants in Ohio extensively.

For example, Ginger Thompson and Sarah Cohen of the *New York Times* wrote in a 2014 expose, “More Deportations Follow Minor Crimes, Records Show”:

“Painesville, Ohio, 30 miles east of Cleveland, offers a snapshot of some people caught up in the system. Every Tuesday night at a nondenominational church downtown, several dozen immigrant families cram together to talk about ways they can help loved ones who are either facing deportation or who have already been removed. The stories spill out so fast, and they all seem to share the same general narrative arc — immigrant drives through red or yellow light, police officer asks for driver’s license, immigrant lands in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody, children reel from uncertainty.”

Various individual deportation cases have also garnered local, state, and national media attention because the Detroit Field Office made incomprehensible decisions that were only reversed after public outcry.

Consider the examples of Manny Bartsch, one of the first DREAMers to make national headlines for attempting to fight his deportation. In 2005 and 2006 when Manny was fighting this case, then-Senator Dewine actually helped him, and introduced a private bill on his behalf. Bartsch now holds papers under Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA)—and he wants to know why DeWine has changed his mind on immigration.

Then take the case of Saida Umanzor, the breast-feeding mother who was callously separated from her child despite posing not threat to the public. Her case was profiled in 2007 in the *New York Times*, and lead to a change in policy at ICE although Umanzor was still deported.

After over two decades in the U.S., a routine traffic stop, in which Alfredo Ramos was not the driver, turned into a deportation nightmare ending in a federal felony charge. After a [hard fought public campaign](#) by local Ohio advocates and community members, U.S Attorney David Hickton dropped the re-entry charge, ICE finally granted Alfredo's stay, and he was [released](#). But it took a miracle to get that result; and many others before him were charged, convicted, and deported.

Take also the case of [Ricardo Ramos](#) of Lake County; [Pedro Hernandez Ramirez](#) of Elyria; Luis Nicasio Padilla of Painesville; Marinela Martinez-Magana of Central Ohio, [Esmeralda Cornejo of Columbus](#), Guadalupe Mata of Columbus and many other Ohioans who have had to wage public battles against deportation because the Detroit Field Office refused to use common sense discretion.

Many of these cases involve members of HOLA, a grassroots Latino advocacy group that has turned into a deportation defense organization since the dramatic uptick in enforcement began in the state. Executive Director Veronica Dahlberg has been fearless in organizing to prevent the separation of families and the deportation of beloved community members. Her strategy has also helped turn grassroots team members into leaders of the various chapters she's established around the state. Dahlberg was recently profiled as one the Cleveland Plain Dealer's "2015 People to Watch."

Also at the helm in numerous high-profile cases over the years is David Leopold, a noted immigration lawyer from Cleveland who is a past-president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and a nationally-respected commentator on the issue.

In their work, Dahlberg and Leopold have consistently pointed out the financial and emotional hardships brought on families after a loved one's deportation. Take the example of an 11 year-old from northeast Ohio who committed suicide after her father's deportation; the tragedy was eloquently put into context by Connie Schultz in a moving column entitled "Crushing children's dreams does not honor the spirit of Christmas."

Social science research shows that the trauma of a parent's deportation has a several negative effect on young children. According to a [2012 CAP report by Joanna Dreby](#), an estimated 5,100 children are forced to live in foster care as a direct result of a parent's deportation, costing state and federal governments around \$26,000 per year for each child. But it's the emotional pain of deportation that causes the greatest damage. Dreby [writes](#):

"The emotional stress for children, who are often less verbal, is especially disturbing. A report by the Urban Institute found numerous changes in behavior among children whose parents were detained or deported, as reported by their families, including increased frequency of crying, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, clingy behavior, and an increase in fear and anxiety."

Numerous children in Ohio—including many who are U.S. citizens—are going through this trauma today. Numerous men and women in Ohio—many of whom are also citizens—have also been turned into single parents by the government's deportation machine.

Cleveland Heights resident [Elizabeth Perez](#), a former Marine who was honorably discharged in

2009, has been fighting for five long years to reunite her family since her husband Marcos was deported to Mexico in 2010. Perez is an honorably discharged US Marine Corps veteran with service-connected disabilities, who is struggling alone to raise two boys without her husband by her side. [As she said in a new video](#) profiling her story: “All I want in my life is for Marcos to be here and we have the option of what we want to do... My home is what we had before he was deported. And I’m not going to live in a home again until he’s back. It’s just going to be living in houses and waiting.”

And then there’s the case of Javier Flores from Akron. Flores, who would’ve qualified for the President’s DAPA program, was a long-time resident of Ohio and the father of four U.S. citizen children—all age 10 or younger. Despite his clean criminal record, deep familial ties, and long history of making economic contributions to the state, local officials determined that an expired license plate was reason enough to pull him over and Flores was coerced into signing his own deportation order.

Eli Saslow of the *Washington Post* visited Flores after his deportation to Oaxaca, Mexico. [In a piece entitled](#), “An American Dream Deferred,” Saslow captured the after effects of deportation on Flores’s family:

“Every member of his family had suffered in their own ways since his deportation. His wife was sleeping two hours each night, since she was taking care of the children during the day and still working her regular shift at the window factory. She was too exhausted to breastfeed, so the baby was having stomach pains from cheap formula. The pain caused the baby to fuss all night, which kept everyone awake since they were all sleeping in the same room.

Heidi [Flores’s four year old daughter] didn’t understand what it meant to be deported, no matter how many times Javier tried to explain. ‘They forced me to leave,’ he had told her, again and again, but still Marilu [Flores’s wife] had detailed the meltdowns that followed each call. Heidi screamed for him. She demanded. She cried until her body shook. As a last resort, Marilu sometimes calmed her by saying that Javier was at work and would be home in a few days. But the days continued to pass and the lie grew bigger...

...Two hours of sleep. A call from a teacher about Edwin. Another paperwork problem at the food stamp office. A crying baby. A sore throat. This was what their nighttime calls had become since Javier’s deportation. Marilu’s frustrations accumulated over the course of a day, until talking to her at night felt to Javier like trying to defuse a bomb.”

Jeffrey Toobin of *The New Yorker* also delved into the destabilizing effect the threat of deportation has on Ohio families in his recent profile of Olga Flores. Olga is an Ohio mother who fears driving her cancer-stricken child to the hospital because of her immigration status. Olga, who has lived in the U.S. for 17 years and has three U.S. citizen children, is eligible for the President’s DAPA program, but is fated to remain in limbo until these programs clear the courts or meaningful immigration reform is passed. In his piece Toobin perfectly captures the desperate situation the Flores family is in. In Olgas’ words:

“Before I had children, I thought about what if the police would pick me up—I would just leave, go back to Mexico, even though I haven’t been there in a long time,” Flores told me. “Now that my child is sick, I really do worry. Medicine back home is very different. When you go to the doctor, you have to take money before things happen. He has a higher probability of surviving in the United States. Now we *have* to stay.”

## **Despite Recent Policy Wins, State Leaders are Holding Ohio Families Back**

Years of publicity around heart-breaking cases like these have finally lead to policy change at the Federal level, at least in the form of executive actions. But often when you take two steps forward, you take one back.

In late 2014 President Barack Obama announced a new slate of policies to reform the system under existing law. Along with the creation of the Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA) program and the expansion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson issued [an updated memorandum about the prosecutorial discretion](#) that immigration officials have when dealing with the undocumented community. The goal of this memorandum was to finally prioritize detention and deportations of those who pose a true threat to national security and our communities, after paying lip service to this goal in the earlier “Morton memo.”

Still, the Detroit Field Office continues to make questionable policy decisions regarding certain immigration cases. Enter [Guadalupe Mata](#), a DAPA eligible father of four, who was nearly deported in May 2015. In addition to having no serious criminal record, Guadalupe was also the victim of a violent crime which occurred at store where he worked in the Columbus, Ohio area. This alone should have made him eligible for a U visa, yet he was targeted for deportation and detained in front of his son on his way to work. After pressure from local advocates, Mata was released on an order of supervision. His family was lucky enough to find a good lawyer, David Leopold, and advocates; we don’t know how many people like him have fallen through the cracks

To make matters worse, Ohio’s own political leaders have undercut the important policy gains the President is trying to initiate. Governor Kasich and Attorney General DeWine’s decided to sign Ohio on to a politically-motivated immigration lawsuit that is effectively suing the thousands of Ohio families with immigrant parents who are desperate for immigration relief.

After being an advocate for immigrants while in the U.S. Senate and his first years as Ohio Attorney General, Mike DeWine’s about-face on immigration was so surprising that even Former Governor Ted Strickland [weighed in](#):

“I see a major contradiction in Mike DeWine’s behavior here, because this immigration executive order at its heart is a family values issue – keeping parents and children together and allowing them to come out of the shadows in which they are forced to live in this country. I do not know why this man has chosen to use Ohio resources and Ohio’s prestige in this way. I find it really troubling. I’d like to talk to Mike DeWine about that, because it is such a contradiction to so much of what he does in his personal

life.”

For a Governor who fancies himself a moderate and an Attorney General with a relatively pro-immigrant past, Governor Kasich and Attorney General DeWine’s decision to join a lawsuit that attacks Ohioan families doesn’t make any sense. Not only do tens of thousands of Ohioans stand to benefit from DAPA and the expansion of DACA, but the implementation of these plans would greatly benefit the economy of the state.

This issue is especially salient for Governor Kasich, who just announced his 2016 presidential bid. Kasich has yet to go on the record on the lawsuit, preferring instead to point the finger at his lawyer, Attorney General DeWine. Like it or not, immigration is a litmus test for Latino voters in the upcoming election, and an issue Governor Kasich can no longer avoid if he hopes to remain competitive on the national stage.

According to Latino Decisions, Republicans who want to become president of the United States will need to win at least 47% of the Latino vote nationwide—and 43% in Ohio. But the issue of immigration reform—and the anti-immigrant lawsuit—are crucial issues for these voters. In fact, according to 2014 Latino Decisions polling, two thirds of Latino voters have a close friend, co-worker or family member who’s undocumented, and 32% know someone who has faced detention or deportation. This isn’t just politics; this is personal. With Kasich supporting a lawsuit that is widely seen as an attack on Latino families, he’s facing an uphill battle.

## **Why Immigration Stories Cannot Go Uncovered in Ohio**

Every day, Ohio children are being torn from their parents because of an immigration system that has failed us all, and their stories deserve to be heard in both the national media and state and local press.

Despite billing themselves as moderates, some of Ohio’s leaders have also avoided scrutiny for taking extreme, anti-immigrant positions. The state and local media have a role to play in probing these decisions and reporting on the impacts on real people and communities in Ohio.

**To set up a time to discuss immigration reform with families, immigration leaders, and experts in Ohio, please email [press@americasvoiceonline.org](mailto:press@americasvoiceonline.org)**

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