



LAW ENFORCEMENT

‘Incredibly dystopian’: ICE enforcement upends lives for rural Delaware communities

by José Ignacio Castañeda Perez August 7, 2025

The lives of immigrants living in towns like Dagsboro along the Delaware-Maryland border have been upended by recent immigration enforcement crackdowns. | SPOTLIGHT DELAWARE PHOTO BY JOSE IGNACIO CASTANEDA PEREZ

Why Should Delaware Care?

The Trump administration's immigration crackdown has completely transformed the everyday reality for immigrants in Southern Delaware, imbuing the lives of hundreds of people with fear and uncertainty.

Gina remembers the abandoned cars appearing on the road.

It was a week in March, and they emerged without explanation.

Derelict lines of vehicles littered the shoulders of U.S. Route 113 leading into her hometown of Frankford — a rural town of less than 900 residents near the Delaware-Maryland border.

Some cars still blinked their hazards amid the absence of their owners. Others would remain deserted on the side of the highway for days or weeks.

All of them are remnants of the Trump administration's crackdown on undocumented immigrants living in southern Delaware.

Agents sweep through the roads in the early morning, arresting suspected undocumented drivers and leaving cars behind in their wake, according to resident accounts and social media posts. The drivers' family or friends are often notified of the abandoned cars through Facebook posts or pictures in private WhatsApp group chats.



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"After a while, you realize why those cars are there and why they've been sitting there for more than a week," Gina said.

The first thought for many immigrants at the sight of an abandoned car, residents say, is now that ICE took the passengers. Not car trouble or a busted tire, but federal agents.

In March, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents escalated their enforcement in a cluster of rural Sussex County towns that are home to scores of immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala.

The crackdown imbued deep-seated fear into immigrant communities along the state border — including Dagsboro, Seaford, Frankford and Millsboro — leading to a complete upheaval of residents' lives.

Immigrants who have lived in Delaware for decades — raising children, paying taxes and opening businesses — are now retreating back into the shadows. The fearful conditions, some residents say, are the worst they've been in more than 20 years.



Gina, a 19-year-old resident of Frankford, is pictured in Dagsboro, Delaware, on July 31, 2025. | SPOTLIGHT DELAWARE PHOTO BY JOSE IGNACIO CASTANEDA PEREZ

Gina, alongside two other women interviewed for this story, asked to only use their first names out of fear of retribution.

Gina left for college last fall and returned to Frankford for the summer, eager to see her family, reconnect with friends and pick up a part-time job.

But the new reality greeted her instead.

She fears the next time she comes home, things might never be the same.

“The worst scenario would be that everything I left behind is now gone,” Gina said. “I’m going to come back to an empty house.”

'Incredibly dystopian'

In Delaware, administrative ICE arrests of undocumented immigrants have increased by nearly 115% since President Donald Trump took office in January compared to this time last year, according to the [Deportation Data Project](#), a group that collects immigration enforcement numbers.

There's been an average of 1.6 arrests daily in the state since Trump took office, according to the data.

Many immigrants no longer leave their homes, except for work. Some completely forgo driving anywhere until the afternoon to avoid the morning traffic stops. Some trade workers have outright refused to drive work vans to job sites — a reaction to ICE agents seemingly targeting commercial vehicles.

Some Latinos have even begun tinting their windows to avoid being profiled by ICE, police or other drivers on the road.

Residents have formed clandestine group chats on Signal and WhatsApp to share information about ICE sightings and photos of abandoned vehicles. Every morning, dozens of participants check in from their corners of Delaware, usually writing, "all clean," if their morning route is clear of law enforcement.

"This feels [...] incredibly dystopian to be almost hiding this way," said Katy, a 23-year-old Frankford resident.

The first thing Katy's parents say when they pass a car on the side of the road is, "poor thing, they took another one."

The recent crackdown has completely transformed the family dynamics between Katy and her parents, who have different immigration statuses, as they try to limit their interactions with ICE.

"Don't go there," Katy recalled saying to her parents. "Don't go to Salisbury [Maryland]. For anything, tell me and I'll go."

Katy has been forced to initiate uncomfortable dinnertime conversations with her parents about what would happen if they were to be taken. She keeps copies of her parents' work permits, has their lawyer's phone number, and knows how to open their safe.

Recently, Katy's aunt and uncle, who have lived in Delaware for decades, received a letter telling them to report to Immigration Court. The pair abruptly packed up their lives and left for North Carolina.

Katy has become hyperaware of her surroundings. Unusual cars or license plates raise flags in her mind.

"Where the hell are we?" Katy said. "What the hell have I done to be having to remember cars and plate numbers?"

For Carmen, a 23-year-old Millsboro native, the increased ICE enforcement has turned routine happenings into anxiety-inducing scenarios.



Carmen, a 23-year-old Millsboro native, is pictured in Millsboro, Delaware, on July 31, 2025. | SPOTLIGHT DELAWARE PHOTO BY JOSE IGNACIO CASTANEDA PEREZ

One afternoon, her dad was taking longer than usual to return home from a job. While a commonplace occurrence, the tardiness now took on a different tone.

“It’s 6, almost 7 o’clock, and he’s not home, and I’m over here scared,” she said. “It is scary living moments like this because we’ve never seen it.”

‘That’s the fear’

Reyna Gilventura’s father lived his life in Southern Delaware within a 5-mile radius. Fears of immigration authorities from his time as an agricultural worker in California lingered.

He might travel to Selbyville once a month for groceries and the laundromat, but that was it. No further. He never crossed that imaginary threshold.

“That was the trauma he carried,” Gilventura said.

Gilventura spent her childhood within that same threshold, amid the fearful haze of immigration crackdowns. But the conditions were still never as bad as they are now, she said.

The consequences of living without authorization in the U.S. have evolved, and a new dimension of fear has emerged for Delaware immigrants.

The Trump administration has deported people to countries from which they did not come, arrested those who are U.S. citizens and now threatens to detain immigrants in “Alligator Alcatraz,” a detention center in the Florida Everglades.

“It’s OK if you get deported, it’s fine,” Gilventura said. “How about if you end up dead or somewhere else? That’s the fear.”



Reyna Gilventura lived most of her life in southern Delaware, including in Frankford and Millsboro. She's never seen fearful conditions in the immigrant community as bad as they are now. | SPOTLIGHT DELAWARE PHOTO BY JOSE IGNACIO CASTANEDA PEREZ

There was heavy immigration enforcement on the weekend of Gilventura’s daughter’s quinceañera in Seaford. What she expected to be an overflowing and jubilant coming-of-age celebration became a quieter affair.

Gilventura even considered canceling the party. She didn’t want to be the reason why someone got in trouble.

During the event, many guests who had agreed to attend did not show. Gilventura did not ask questions.

“I knew why,” she said.

For decades, immigrants said, Delaware was seen as immune to the effects of immigration enforcement and deportation seen across the country.

The First State — touting just less than 1 million residents — wasn’t California, Texas or Arizona.

But for many Delaware immigrants, that reality is changing.

