

Testimony of

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Joint Hearing on the  
Public Safety and Civil Rights Implications of State and Local Enforcement of Federal  
Immigration Laws

Before the  
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law

and the  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties

of the  
Committee on the Judiciary  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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Thank you Chairwoman Lofgren, Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member King and Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and Members of the Subcommittees for holding this hearing and for giving me the opportunity to testify.

My name is Antonio Ramirez, and I am here today representing Latinos and immigrants in Frederick County, Maryland. When I told my friends that I had the honor of speaking to you today, many of them told me that it was not a good idea because they fear retaliation against me. Although this is a possibility, the reason I became a naturalized citizen was so that I could stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, and it is important that I communicate the experiences of the Latino and immigrant communities in Frederick.

I am a proud citizen of the United States. I have lived, worked, and volunteered in and around Frederick since I came to this country more than twenty years ago. Back then, I started working as a dishwasher in a Frederick restaurant. Now I am the chief safety officer for a construction company in Frederick. In between, I worked as everything from a handyman to a substitute teacher in Frederick County public schools. I have volunteered in Frederick hospitals, nursing homes and hospices, taught basic English and led bible studies in local jails. I have also helped start two non-profit organizations dedicated to helping immigrants in Frederick integrate into American society. I have also tried to help the people of Frederick get to know their immigrant neighbors a little better. For example, a few years ago, I organized an eight-week cultural sensitivity training for Frederick police officers, where they learned about Latino culture and some Spanish.

I have always shared with others my belief that this is the greatest country in the world, where everyone's rights are respected, and where no one is judged because of what they look like. And so it is with great sadness that I report to you that this is no longer true in Frederick County, Maryland. In Frederick, Latinos are not seen as people anymore; instead, we are just "illegals" – including many, like me, who are proud citizens of this great country.

Latino citizens and immigrants in Frederick feel like we are walking around with huge targets on our backs. We get stopped by the police in Frederick County for all kinds of reasons – or no reason at all – and then asked for "papers."

One Saturday about a month ago, a Latino man I know was pulled over at about 7:30 in the morning. He was told by the police officer that it was because the little tree air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror was illegally blocking his view of the road. I have heard that this has happened to several other Latino drivers in Frederick, but I have never heard of it happening to non-Latinos.

I know two Latino men who were pulled over in separate incidents – one in October, and one in November – both because the police officers told them they were driving too slowly. I have heard of at least two other people – both Latino – who have been pulled over for the same thing. Only one of the four was given a ticket for driving too slowly.

I have also heard of Latino citizens getting pulled over for things that they swear that they did not do, like not coming to a complete stop or not staying in one lane. They are convinced that the only reason that they were stopped was because the officer saw a brown face behind the wheel and assumed it was an “illegal” driving. Latinos have also told me that when the police do stop them, they ask everyone in the car for passports or other identification cards, no matter the reason why the car was stopped.

Other Latinos – both immigrants and citizens – have said that they have been stopped by police and asked for identification while they were just walking on the sidewalk or sitting on a bench. Most of them are also asked if they have drugs on them, and the police usually pat them down. This especially happens in Hillcrest, a mostly Latino neighborhood of Frederick. However, last Saturday a Latino man I know was stopped by police in downtown Frederick, who asked him if he was selling drugs. They only let him go after they searched him and he showed them his driver’s license.

Last summer, just a few months after the 287(g) program started, I was pulled over by the police in the Hillcrest neighborhood. I had no idea why I was pulled over. I asked the officer as he walked up to my window if there was a problem. He seemed surprised to hear me speak in English. He said that he had pulled me over because he thought I was not wearing my seatbelt, even though I had it on the entire time. After checking my license, he let me go. I think it was the color of my skin that made the officer “mistakenly” think that I was not wearing a seatbelt.

These actions by the police in Frederick have made even Latino *citizens* change the way we live our lives to avoid being harassed. We avoid driving on certain roads that we know the police stake out. We avoid driving at all late at night, when it is too easy for police to pick out the Latino drivers and make up a reason to pull us over. For over 20 years, I had a rosary hanging from my rearview mirror as a reminder of my faith. After my friend was pulled over for having the air freshener on his mirror last month, I took it off. I didn’t want the police to have it as an excuse to pull me over and harass me.

The Frederick County Sheriff’s Office has claimed that this program is about catching violent criminals.<sup>1</sup> Last summer I met with him and one of his officers in his office. I offered to work with him to improve relations between his office and Frederick’s Latino community and to help him catch criminals. After listening for a few minutes, he asked me why the Latinos don’t understand that “we don’t want them here.” He explained that he “want[s] Frederick County to look the way it did fifteen years ago,” and that that was a reason why he joined the 287(g) program.

Sheriff Jenkins did not take me up on my offer to work with him to catch criminals, either at this meeting or when I made the same offer in October. He has also refused to meet with other Latino citizens who are very concerned about the discrimination in Frederick. However, he has been working with a group called “Help Save Maryland,” which the Southern Poverty Law

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<sup>1</sup> *Examining 287(g): The Role of State and Local Law Enforcement in Immigration Law, Before the H. Comm. on Homeland Security, 111th Cong. 1 (March 4, 2009)* (written statement of Charles A. Jenkins, Sheriff of Frederick County).

Center says is a “Nativist Extremist” group.<sup>2</sup> He has been the guest speaker at Help Save Maryland events in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties, Maryland, where he advocated pressuring local officials in those counties to join the 287(g) program.

Sheriff Jenkins has also boasted about how the program has helped him bring money to the County because the federal government pays him \$83 a day to detain immigrants, but it only costs him \$7 a day to hold them.<sup>3</sup>

Another problem with the program is that even though the police of the City of Frederick is not in the 287(g) program, there is only one jail in the County. So when anyone is arrested in the County by any police agency, they go to the Sheriff’s jail. That means that Latinos and immigrants are now afraid of not just the Sheriff, but all police.

As a result, Latinos and immigrants do not report crimes anymore. I know one woman who is the victim of domestic violence who will not report it because her husband has said that if she does, he will call immigration, have her deported, and keep their child. And therefore she just tolerates being beaten.

I know a mother who is too afraid to call the police about the drug dealer who lives in her neighborhood, even though he has tried to give drugs to her children. She confronted the drug dealer, and demanded that he stop, but he just laughed at her, both because she is a little woman and he is a large man, but mainly because he knows that she will not call the police.

I also know a Latino man who was robbed last summer on Patrick Street in downtown Frederick. He was approached by a man who demanded that he give him all his money or else the thief would call the police and tell them that the Latino man was selling drugs. Instead of risking problems with immigration, he gave up his money. I have heard of several other Latinos being threatened like this, but none of them have reported it to police.

The Sheriff testified to Congress last month that immigrants don’t trust his officers because of our “cultural problems,” because we come from countries where the police are corrupt. It is true that many of us come from countries where you cannot trust the police. But he is wrong that this is a reason why we do not trust him or his officers; to the contrary, we come expecting much better from this country. We expect to be able to trust the government and law enforcement. But we have been disappointed by Frederick, where the problem of culture is not ours – it is the culture of fear that has been spread with the 287(g) program.

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<sup>2</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, ‘*Nativist Extremist’ Group List* (2009), <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=443>.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Stern, *Sheriff Updates County on ICE Action*, Frederick News-Post, Oct. 17, 2008, available at [http://www.fredericknewspost.com/sections/storyTools/print\\_story.htm?storyID=81545&cameFromSection=news](http://www.fredericknewspost.com/sections/storyTools/print_story.htm?storyID=81545&cameFromSection=news).