

SPANISH IN OHIO

Terrell A. Morgan
The Ohio State University

In the year 2000 around 200,000 people in Ohio spoke Spanish at home (U.S. Bureau of the Census). This is under 2% of the state's population, but it represents a 35% increase in the number of Spanish speakers reported just ten years earlier in a state where the total population increased at a rate of less than 5%. Who are these Spanish speakers of turn-of-the-century Ohio, and how might we characterize the Spanish spoken in the state within the larger pan-Hispanic dialectological picture? How is linguistic behavior changing in the face of dramatic demographic shift?

This field report addresses such questions by looking first at the two large, well-established Spanish-speaking communities of the state: the Mexican(-American) population(s) of Toledo and the rural northwest, and the Puerto Rican communities of Lorain and other parts of the industrial northeast. A formal description of these native Ohio Spanishes is based on digital video recordings of free conversation by adults from communities where Spanish has been spoken for over half a century, and parallels are drawn to other such communities in the Midwest and beyond. Attention then turns to the "other Hispanics" in metropolitan areas such as Columbus and Dayton, where an amorphous mix of Spanish dialects has given way, in less than a decade, to an immigrant overlay with a decidedly Mexican flavor. Indeed, media outlets such as the state's half dozen Latino newspapers, the proliferation of small businesses catering to a Hispanic clientele, and the changing demands on social service providers all attest to the increased currency of Mexican cultural and linguistic expression throughout the state, especially among non-English speakers.

The paper concludes with a look at educational, political, cultural, and commercial initiatives that have impacted Spanish language use in the Buckeye State. The report provides a list of resources available to those interested in academic study of Ohio Spanish, and suggests topics for further research.