

# Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Immigration

## Manipulation and Harmful Narratives About Migrants in Ohio

### Crisis Background

Around August 2024, the city of Springfield, Ohio, became the focus of a racist and baseless conspiracy after social media posts alleging that Haitian immigrants were stealing and eating residents' pets spread online. The following month, targeting intensified after then-Senator JD Vance (R-OH) and President Donald Trump each repeated the conspiracy, amplifying its reach during their presidential campaign. The narratives became a national flashpoint despite Springfield police and city officials repeatedly refuting these conspiracies. As our sample from 2026 represents, these narratives have persisted.

Following the conspiracy's mainstream spread, the city of Springfield and its Haitian immigrant community – estimated at 12,000 to 15,000 people, many of whom settled in the city between 2020 and 2024 – were subjected to sustained harassment and extremist activity, including coordinated propaganda campaigns, demonstrations from white supremacists, and multiple bomb threats. Some mainstream discourse has been “subtler”—relying on “invasion” and “flood” rhetoric that portrays immigration as an existential threat. This rhetoric has been documented as a key vector for Great Replacement-style conspiracy theories targeting Haitian immigrants.

### Themes: Harmful Narratives

Users combined racist and xenophobic tropes, slurs, and dog whistles with discussion of U.S. immigration policies, resulting in manipulative **us vs. them** framings targeting Haitian immigrants. Posts also incorporated unfounded claims to strengthen **us vs. them** narratives, including one suggesting that Ohio Governor Mark DeWine (R) was following the “democrats agenda of replacing american workers [sic]” with Haitians, emphasizing perceived cultural differences to drive division.

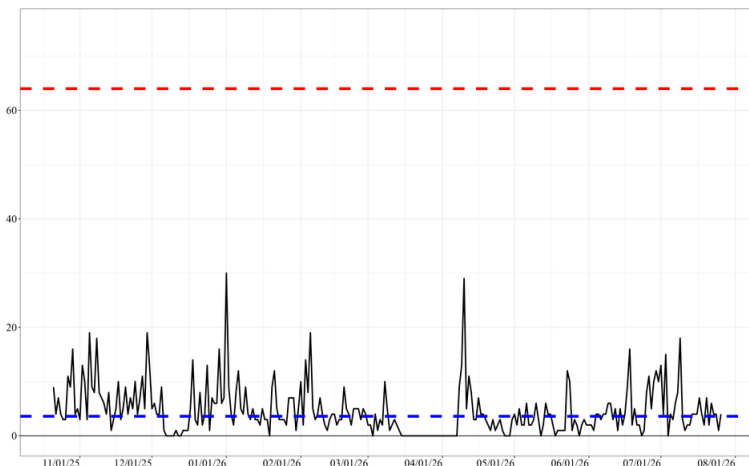
Fearmongering posts using **emotional manipulation** were another common tactic. By referring to Haitian immigrants as “flooding” or “invading” communities, alongside baseless allegations of violence or dehumanizing behaviors, users sought to exploit demographic and cultural shift anxieties to manufacture fear and panic, portraying Haitian immigrants as existential threats.

Posts **scapegoating** Haitian immigrants, or unfairly blaming them for complex societal challenges like high taxes, job scarcity, and wage stagnation, were also common themes. Users sought to redirect public frustration from systemic economic factors onto a vulnerable population to deflect accountability or maintain control. This occurred despite immigrants in Ohio paying \$7 billion annually in taxes, and wages in Springfield rising more than 6% annually—twice the national average—during Haitian immigration to the city.

### Ongoing presence of racist and xenophobic language related to Haiti and Ohio on Gab

On Gab, posts using anti-migrant or anti-Black terms in the context of Ohio and/or Haiti remained prevalent nearly two years after the September 2024 peak during the 2024 General Election (red line). Throughout the period from November 2025 – July 2026, this intersection of subject and rhetoric was up to half as frequent as when it had become a widely circulated topic in the national media, and regularly above the average from October 2024 – January 2025 when it was a salient politicized narrative in the election (blue line).

- = Maximum 2024 Campaign Intersection in Sept 2024
- = Average Intersection for Oct 2024 – Jan 2025



### Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A starting point is always to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

**Emotional manipulation** can be mitigated by calling out tactics like moral outrage, scapegoating, or false dichotomies, checking reliable sources and evidence, and prioritizing critical thinking.

**Scapegoating** can be addressed by speaking out against the unjust targeting of groups, building alliances with other communities to enhance solidarity, and calling out discriminatory attitudes.

**Us vs. them narratives** can be mitigated by shifting focus from divisive labels to common goals while promoting empathy and shared interests.

