

SALVADORANS, GUATEMALANS,  
HONDURANS, AND COLOMBIANS:  
A SCAN OF NEEDS OF RECENT LATIN  
AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS TO THE  
BOSTON AREA

*Summary of Findings*

---

Full report can be accessed at [www.gaston.umb.edu](http://www.gaston.umb.edu)

*T*his report focuses on four groups of recent Latin American immigrants to the Boston area — Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Colombians — about whom relatively little is known. Although these groups have been represented in the Boston area for several decades, their numbers leaped in the 1990s, contributing notably to the growing diversity both of our region and of the Latino population.

The 2000 U.S. Census<sup>1</sup> reported that there are 49,101 persons from El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, and Honduras in Massachusetts, an increase of 85% since 1990. The largest growth has been among Salvadorans (137%) and Guatemalans (73%). Today these four groups

account for 11% of the Latino population. Their growth has come primarily from immigration: immigrants make up over 75% of these groups, and more than half of these immigrants have arrived in the U.S. within the last 10 years. Although Census figures almost certainly represent undercounts, they show that these four national groups are taking their place as important components of the state's Latino and immigrant populations.

Research on Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Colombians residing in other areas of the country has underscored the violence and trauma particular to their process of migration, the over-representation of undocumented immigrants in all the groups, the strong labor market attachment of these groups, and their strong organizational capacity. The research embodied in this report bolsters most of these findings and adds new information about the characteristics of these groups in Massachusetts. These immigrants are young; they are recent arrivals; they have a strong attachment to work despite barriers that

1 Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians:  
A Scan of Needs of Recent Latin American Immigrants to the Boston Area

may be posed by language difficulties, limited education, and immigration status; they face difficulty in gaining access to education, housing, and social services; and they work hard to develop resources in their communities.

When compared to the aggregate of the Latino population, the new immigrants face a number of hurdles that make their lives in the U.S. extremely stressful and difficult, including:

1. **Immigration Status.** Many immigrants from these groups arrive in the Boston area without documentation or have only temporary legal status. The large representation of undocumented persons in these groups sets their experience apart from the bulk of the state's Latino population. The primary issue is one of legal documentation that allows these people to participate fully in the economy as well as to obtain needed services.
2. **Education.** These immigrant groups show a great need for improved educational services. Among Salvadoran adults, 45 percent have less than a 9th grade education. Their needs range from K-12 education to adult literacy training.
3. **Labor.** These groups have a high rate of participation in the labor force, higher than that of the overall population of the state. But because of the barriers of language, education, and immigration status they are consigned to low-paying jobs and often are underemployed in relation to their skills. Poverty among these groups is high, though not as high as in the overall Latino population.
4. **Families.** These immigrant groups often come from traumatic situations in their countries of origin, and members often undergo long separations. They live in larger families with more adults, but with adults who work many hours. There is a great need for family support and after-school services for children.
5. **Access to Services.** Policy restrictions, language barriers, and fear of discovery are strong barriers to services for these families.
  - a. Linguistic barriers to services affect all new immigrants since few services are available in Spanish.
  - b. Policies restricting access to services affect all immigrants but particularly those who are undocumented. Undocumented children are unable to access programs like Head Start, after-school programs, and summer camps because either the parent or the child must prove residency.
  - c. Fear of discovery often prevents undocumented parents from accessing services to which their U.S.-born children may be eligible.
6. **Transportation.** Unable to obtain drivers' licenses, these immigrants are tied to the T. It is a factor that limits their choices in housing and employment.
7. **Exploitation at Work and in Housing.** Some immigrants from these groups may be undocumented. Our research shows that undocumented immigrants often work under exploitative conditions, where workers are not paid for work performed, are denied vacations, must tolerate sexual harassment or risk being turned into authorities, and are being exposed to hazardous working conditions. Housing is another area where the undocumented are often exploited. Landlords, aware of the vulnerability of the undocumented, offer housing conditions that are very substandard — with broken windows, without heat, with pests — knowing that renters are afraid to complain.

The study was undertaken as part of a Practicum in Applied Research by students and faculty in UMass Boston's PhD Program in Public Policy in collaboration with Centro Presente, a service and advocacy organization serving new Latino immigrants in the Boston area. The project sought to (1) identify the characteristics of these populations and (2) conduct of scan of their

needs, specifically in the areas of immigration, employment, education, social support, and housing. It relied on several sources of data: (1) the 2000 U.S. Census; (2) interviews with Salvadoran, Honduran, Guatemalan, and Colombian community leaders and professionals providing services to these groups in Chelsea, Cambridge, Boston, and Somerville; (3) group interviews with constituents of Centro Presente, including persons from each of the national groups as well as persons with a variety of immigration statuses.

## IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

1. The initial migration of Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Guatemalans responds to situations of war and natural disasters in their countries of origin. In the 1990's, the economic conditions in their countries of origin and the need for family reunification expanded and sustained the flow.
2. Although there have been groups of Colombians living in Boston for decades, the increase in the migration of Colombians in the last 10 years responds to the rise of violence in their country of origin.
3. These groups represent the most rapidly growing Central and South American groups in the Massachusetts. This growth is overwhelmingly due to immigration. Between 70% and 80% of the Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Colombians living in Massachusetts are immigrants<sup>2</sup>. More than half of the persons from these groups have come to the U.S. since 1990.
4. Salvadoran, Honduran, Guatemalan, and Colombian immigrants enter the U.S. with a variety of immigration statuses. Within these groups co-exist immigrants who are in the U.S. as permanent residents, those who are undocumented, and those who are protected by country-specific programs such as Temporary Protection Status. There are also many others who are naturalized U.S. citizens or who are U.S.-born.
5. Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Colombians have settled primarily in the Boston area — Boston, Cambridge, Chelsea, and Somerville — but in the last 10 years they have tended to settle beyond areas contiguous to Boston, for example, in Lynn and Lowell<sup>3</sup>.

Table 1

Status	To which group does this apply?
<b>Permanent legal residency</b> Permission to permanently live and work in the United States.	ALL
<b>Undocumented immigrant</b> In the U.S. without the permission or authorization of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.	ALL
<b>Temporary Protected Status (TPS)</b> Temporary immigration status granted to eligible nationals of designated countries.	Salvadorans and Hondurans
<b>Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA)</b> Persons benefited by the NACARA law and waiting determination of asylum application.	Salvadorans and Guatemalans

3 Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians:  
A Scan of Needs of Recent Latin American Immigrants to the Boston Area

### *In their own words....*

*When I think of the Salvadorans who came during the war, many ... were coming from rural areas that had gone through very significant problems. I can think of specific places where people witnessed mass killings. I can think of people who were threatened by both sides. (Salvadoran activist)*

*Unemployment was one of the biggest problems [in El Salvador]. People were displaced and needed to find a place to live, a job, ways to have a decent living. (Salvadoran activist)*

*When the violence began to spread to urban areas, to reach people's doors, there were new reasons to migrate such as, security, socio-economic, kidnapping. Now everyone migrates — from professionals to uneducated people. Young people when they realize that they have no future in Colombia, that they can lose their lives, they leave the country no matter their age or social status.... Now even those people with resources, no longer have access to U.S. visas beyond a tourist visa, which means that many migrate without visas.*

*(Colombian leader living in Boston)*

### BEYOND THE “LATINO” LABEL:

#### A LOOK AT THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF GUATEMALAN, HONDURAN, SALVADORAN, AND COLOMBIAN POPULATIONS

There is often the tendency to group Latinos or Hispanics as if they were one homogeneous population. But the growing national diversity — and with it differences in the migration streams, immigration statuses, modes of incorporation, and economic and social outcomes — belies such an aggregation. Our analysis of socio-demographic characteristics of the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Colombian populations of Massachusetts in comparison to those of the overall Latino population reveals that there are important differences among the Latino groups in the state. These differences need to be considered in policy development and service delivery to these populations.

#### *1. Share of Immigrants*

These four groups, for example, exhibit a much higher prevalence of immigrants compared to the overall Latino population. Among Massachusetts Latinos as a whole, native-born (including those born in Puerto Rico) predominate while among Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians almost three out of four persons are immigrants.

**Table 2**

	<b>% Foreign-Born</b>
Total Population	12.17
Hispanic or Latino population	31.16
Guatemalan	75.66
Honduran	72.81
Salvadoran	78.88
Colombian	78.12

Foreign-Born as Share of Population.  
Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000.  
U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

Immigrants from these four groups are mostly recent immigrants. Among all Latino immigrants, 50% have been in the U.S. only since 1990; among Colombians and Salvadorans, for example, 57% are of recent arrival. Among most groups, there is a core of “experienced immigrants” who have been in the U.S. for more than 20 years. The percentage of experienced immigrants is highest among Colombians and Hondurans and lowest among Salvadorans, who started migrating to the U.S. only after the 1970’s.

The larger share of immigrants and their relative recency denote groups that are deeply involved in the contradictions of immigrant status, the process of language acquisition, and social and economic incorporation. For them, initiatives directed to the problems of immigration status and immigrant adaptation are a high priority, where these may not be priorities for other groups.

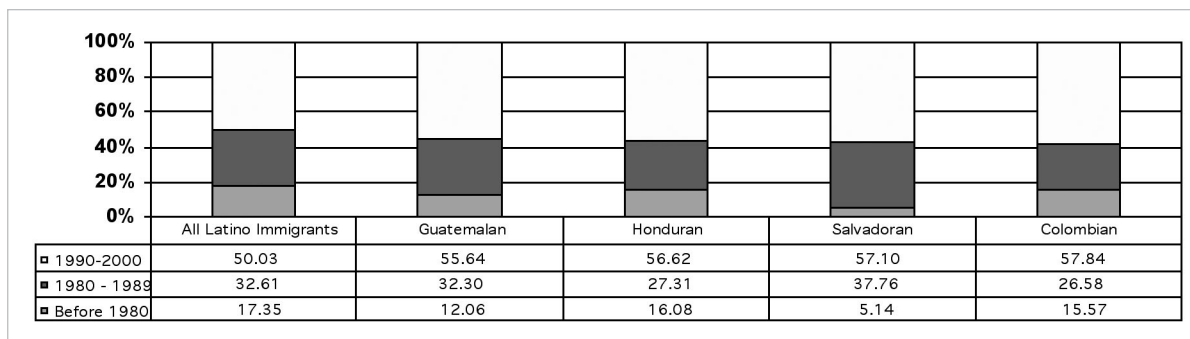
**Table 3**

	Yrs
Total Population	36.60
All Hispanic or Latino	24.70
Guatemalan	26.30
Honduran	27.30
Salvadoran	27.10
Colombian	29.60

Median Age, Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

The relative youth of the population of these groups appears to be related to the age at which immigrants arrive, rather than the overwhelming presence of children as is the case among the overall Latino population. A comparison of the age structures of the overall Latino population and the Central American groups, for example, shows that 30% of Central Americans are children under 19 while among the overall Latino population that age cohort amounts to 40% of the population.

**Figure 1**



Year of Entry in the U.S. Foreign-Born Population from Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

## 2. Youth of the Population

With median ages of between 26 and 29 years, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Colombians are a young population relative to the total population of Massachusetts, but a slightly older one than the overall Latino population of the state.

Supports for children and young families are common priorities. In the case of Colombians and Central Americans support for the entry of young adults into the labor market is a critical need.

## 3. Families

Families among the Central Americans groups tend to be larger than those of the overall Latino population and of the total population of the state. The majority of the families in all four groups are married-couple families, a slightly

higher representation than is found among the aggregate Latino population. The presence of families with children headed by women among Colombians, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans is closer to the patterns found in the general population than to those found among Latinos.

#### 5. *Economic Insertion and Poverty*

The pattern observed of the economic insertion of these groups in comparison to that of Latinos in general deserves attention. For example, the attachment to the labor force among persons over 16 years of age from these groups appears

to be stronger than that of the overall Latino population. Central Americans have a higher rate of participation in the

labor force than both the overall Latino population and the general population of the state. The higher attachment to the labor force is reflected in the number of members of the family that work. Among Central Americans, more persons within a family work than is the case among the total population and among Latinos as a whole. Among Guatemalans and Salvadorans, for example, about 30% of the families have three or more workers, compared to about 13% among the total population and among Latinos as a group.

**Table 4**

	Average family size	% married couple families	% families with children < 18 headed by a woman
Total Population	3.11	76.92	10.05
All Hispanic or Latino	3.56	48.77	32.75
Guatemalan	4.02	62.57	13.53
Honduran	3.91	51.00	25.80
Salvadoran	4.01	63.40	12.72
Colombian	3.52	67.52	13.56

Selected Characteristics of Families. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

#### 4. *Educational Attainment*

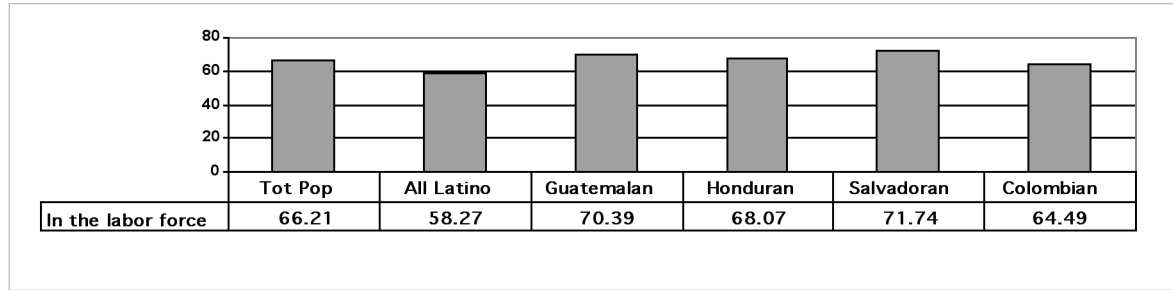
Educational barriers, a serious hurdle for Latinos in general, are a particularly salient problem among Central Americans. Among Salvadorans over 25, for example, 45% had less than a 9th-grade education; the percentages of Hondurans and Guatemalans with this level of education were also high. The percentage of persons with this level of education among Latinos overall was 20%.

**Table 5**

	% Total Population	% All Latino	% Guatemalan	% Honduran	% Salvadoran	% Colombian
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>4,853,130</b>	<b>272,359</b>	<b>8,857</b>	<b>4,161</b>	<b>12,962</b>	<b>10,691</b>
Less than 9th grade	5.36	19.73	35.61	28.96	45.14	16.08
9-12th grade, no diploma	10.18	21.99	17.99	17.81	21.32	14.52
High school grad, inc equivalency	27.18	25.84	24.33	23.84	20.15	25.53
Some college	19.48	16.35	11.31	15.24	8.05	19.22
Associate Degree	6.79	3.97	3.86	4.18	1.81	4.57
Bachelor's degree	18.86	7.26	4.27	7.52	2.86	12.49
Graduate or professional degree	12.15	4.87	2.63	2.45	0.68	7.60

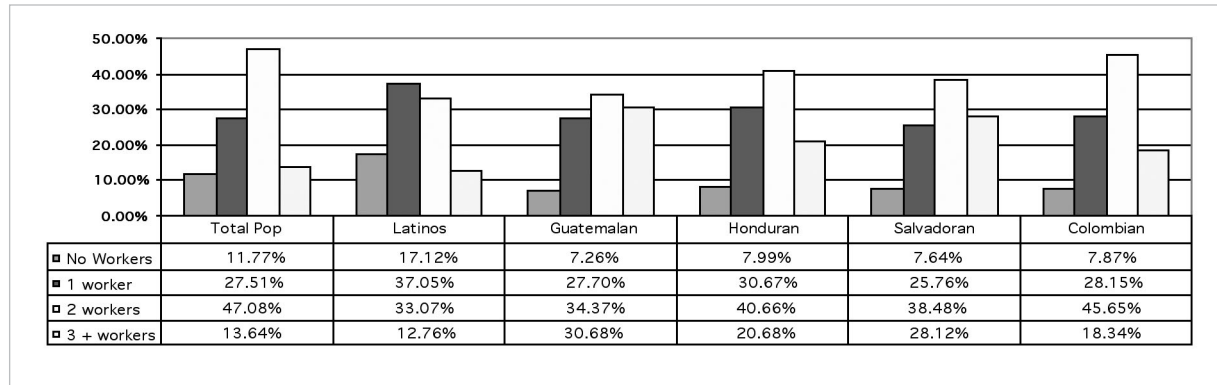
Educational Attainment of Persons 25 and Over. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

Figure 2



Labor Force Participation of Persons over 16 Years. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

Figure 3



Number of Workers in the Family. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

There are some similarities in the occupational and industrial distribution of Latinos in general and members of these four groups but also some important differences. Most Latinos work in service-related occupations, regardless of where they come from. But among persons from the four groups under study here, the percentage of persons in these occupations is much higher in comparison to the aggregate of Latinos. Among Guatemalans and Salvadorans, this placement is

followed by a strong representation in production (largely in the manufacturing sector), while among Colombians and Hondurans the second slot belongs to those working as managers. The latter is also the case for the overall Latino population. The presence in management and professional occupations, a growing reality among Latinos in general, is less strong among Guatemalans and Salvadorans.

Table 6

	% Tot Pop	% Hispanic	% Guatemalan	% Honduran	% Salvadoran	% Colombian
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,161,087</b>	<b>150,303</b>	<b>6,039</b>	<b>2,732</b>	<b>9,038</b>	<b>6,561</b>
Professionals and Managers	41.08	23.27	11.53	19.84	6.95	24.16
Service	14.06	24.61	32.39	31.66	40.54	31.37
Sales and Office	25.90	22.19	14.72	15.89	14.59	17.41
Construction /Extraction	7.46	6.11	8.68	6.08	5.73	5.09
Production and Transportation	11.28	23.24	31.33	24.23	31.19	21.52

Occupational Distribution of persons 16 and over. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

The higher number of workers in families has led to higher household and family incomes among Colombians, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans when compared to other Latinos. Nevertheless, whether one considers earnings or individual and family income, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Colombians gain much less from their work than the general population. Therefore the percentage of poor families with at least one full-time worker is much higher in these groups.

enough consistency to add up to a considerable amount for persons at this level of income. Because of the weight that remittances represent for these groups, the reported levels of poverty, which are based on incomes before remittances, may greatly underestimate the rate of poverty in these groups.

The rate of individual, family, and child poverty among these groups is significant, but it is lower than that found among the overall Latino population. The higher incidences of

**Table 7**

	Median Earnings (all workers)	Median Family Income	Median Household Income	% poor families w/ 1 or more FT workers
Total Population	28,420	61,664	50,502	10.48
All Hispanic or Latino	18,125	27,885	27,300	8.80
Guatemalan	19,258	38,901	42,674	14.96
Honduran	18,115	37,549	38,180	18.24
Salvadoran	17,734	36,927	40,493	19.58
Colombian	17,839	37,290	35,372	13.21

Earnings, Family and Household Income and Poor Families with One or More Full Time Workers. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

The intense participation in the labor force is necessitated, in part, by the urgency of support for families left behind. Individual remittances from Latin American immigrants from these groups living in the U.S. usually amount to about \$200 to \$500 per month, according to a 2001 report of the Pew Hispanic Center and the Multilateral Investment Fund<sup>4</sup>, and are sent with

poverty are found among Hondurans and Colombians, but neither reaches the high Latino rates. The highest rates of poverty across all groups are found among children under 18.

Among Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans, rates of poverty are higher for native-born than for immigrants. This is also the case among the overall Latino population in Massachusetts and responds to high rates of poverty among children, who are the most likely persons in these groups to be born in the U.S.

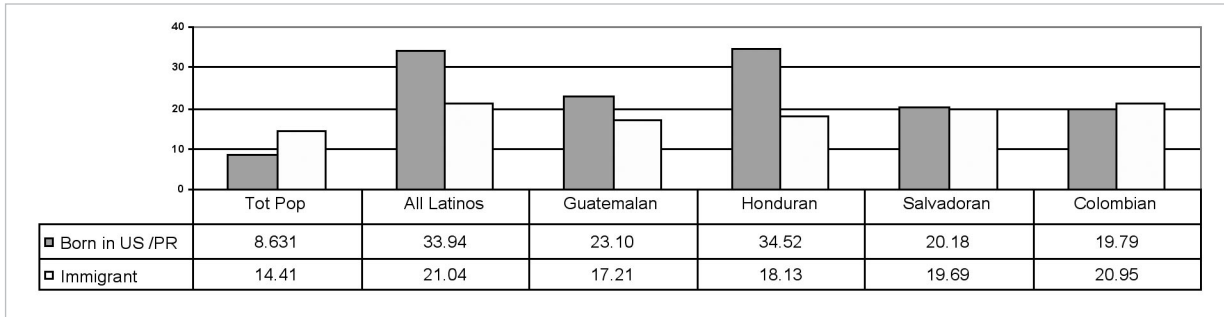
**Table 8**

	% Total Population	% All Latino	% Guatemalan	% Honduran	% Salvadoran	% Colombian
Individuals below 100% poverty level	9.34	29.83	18.62	22.50	18.99	20.70
Families with income below 100% poverty level	6.50	28.49	16.52	25.72	15.81	17.57
Families w/ children under 18 below 100% poverty level	10.13	33.09	17.88	31.17	18.41	23.71
Children under 18 below the 100% poverty level	12.03	37.19	19.28	35.63	23.85	23.26

Poverty among Individuals, Families and Children. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4



Figure 4



Poverty among Immigrants and Native-Born. Total Population and Selected Latino Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

## SCAN OF ISSUES AFFECTING

### NEW GUATEMALAN, HONDURAN, SALVADORAN, AND COLOMBIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE AREAS OF IMMIGRATION, EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND HOUSING

Each Latino group has an experience — a process of migration, a combination of immigration statuses, human capital assets, and niche in the labor force — that frames their integration to the local economy and the specifics of their social adaptation. The following sections expand our understanding of particular issues affecting new immigrants from Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras now living in the Boston area by focusing on the barriers they encounter and the assets they wield in addressing issues of immigration, employment, education, social support, and housing.

#### *1. In the Area of Immigration*

Immigration status and its consequences are everyday realities to be managed by members of these four groups. The situation of persons who are not U.S. residents and citizens was the center of the discussion of the most pressing issues in

immigration. Two main concerns dominated the discussions: (1) the large presence of undocumented immigrants among the populations of the four groups and the few avenues available for legalization and (2) the difficulties and the lengthy process faced by those eligible for programs leading to legalization.

In each of the four groups that are the focus of this study, there are large contingents of persons who are in the United States undocumented, that is, without legal authorization from American immigration authorities. However there are some immigration programs that have provided some protection to a group of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans who qualify. The first is Temporary Protection Status (TPS), which protects from deportation Hondurans who arrived in the U.S. before Dec 20, 1998 and Salvadorans who arrived before February 13, 2001<sup>5</sup>. TPS only grants protection from deportation and authorization to work for as long as the program exists. This permit is renewed periodically and depends on agreements between the U.S. and the immigrants' country of origin. The second is the opportunity to adjust their status to legal permanent residency offered by the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) of 1997 to Salvadoran and Guatemalan undocumented immigrants residing in the U.S. since before the end of 1990<sup>6</sup>. Of the four groups addressed in this report, only

Colombians do not have some avenue towards legalization at this time.

Immigrants applying or on TPS are required to keep themselves informed about changes in the dates of renewal; they often require support in the application and in the renewals. Similar requirements are the case when applying for NACARA, a process that often takes many years. Throughout that time, applicants often require support to move from one step to the next in the process, since the bureaucratic process is complex and burdensome. The process is also fraught with anxiety since wrong steps, missed deadlines, or lack of information may result in denial and deportation. Providers and community leaders focused on the potential for exploitation that the length and complexity of the process entails.

In summary, the following were identified as salient:

- The presence of many persons with undocumented status or with temporary legal status
- Long waits for results of NACARA applications keep asylum applicants with uncertain status.
- The need for persons with TPS to renew their work permit periodically and to wait for many years for the resolution of their immigration status
- The lack of accurate information about immigration laws
- Abuse in the hands of unscrupulous immigration lawyers and service

### Recommendations from Leaders and Providers

- Improve the information available to immigrants regarding immigration laws, the process to legalization and their rights in the process.
- Advocate for a speedier processing all types of immigration requests, including legalizations, by increasing resources dedicated for this purpose.
- Work towards legalization of undocumented immigrants currently in the U.S. by (1) educating the American public about the causes of immigration from Latin America to the U.S and about the contributions of all immigrants, including the undocumented and (2) by organizing and registering to vote those immigrants who are citizens for the benefit of the entire Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Colombian communities

### Assets and Resources

- The leadership of persons and organizations in the Central American community working to obtain and maintain immigration relief measures such as TPS and NACARA. There is also incipient organization in this regard within the Colombian community.
- Organizations in the Boston area providing information and legal support to immigrants in the process of legalization.
- The leadership of local persons and organizations in building coalitions with other immigrant groups in the Boston area.

## *In their own words...*

*The issue of immigration is the root of every problem. (Colombian activist working on immigration and labor issues in Boston)*

*How does TPS affect someone's everyday life? The fact that they actually have a job and that they are legally here is a huge relief for them. I think it affects them more during the period when they are trying to decide whether or not it should be renewed, and it creates a lot of stress. (Social service provider in East Boston)*

*Not having papers or having an expired TPS limits them in their everyday life activities. Like for example if you lose your drivers' license and you cannot get to work. I know a man whose permit expired and he could not renew his license. It took him two hours to get to work and it was very expensive. (Honduran activist working on immigration issues)*

*One of the barriers that immigrants face with TPS is with the lack of organization in the immigration service. (Honduran activist working on immigration issues)*

*At this time the [backlog] is huge because the amount of applications is huge and the time to process is long so there is not opportunity for [immigrants] to complete the legalizations. (Salvadoran activist)*

## *2. In the Area of Employment*

---

Central Americans and Colombians in the Boston area face many difficulties related to employment as a result of their status as immigrant newcomers to the labor market. But some members of these groups find their opportunities even more limited due to their immigration status, their low levels of education and work skills, and barriers due to the inability to speak English. This is the case among new immigrants from these four groups.

### **IMMIGRATION STATUS.**

Immigrants encounter the fewest employment barriers if they have been granted citizenship or permanent residency but, even then, respondents reported they were at times exposed to negative attitudes. These situations, difficult as they are, pale in comparison to the situation faced by undocumented immigrants and those in Temporary Protection, according to those interviewed for this study. For these, exploitation rather than discrimination is more common.

Fear of discovery and the advantage it provides for employers is at the center of a relationship that can often become exploitative. Employers often hire illegal immigrants “under-the-table” with questionable documentation or no documentation at all knowing that they will be able to pay low wages and provide poor working conditions. Interviewees related instances of workers not being paid for work performed, of being denied vacations, of having to tolerate sexual harassment or risk being turned in to authorities, and of being exposed to hazardous working conditions.

For new Colombian immigrants the most salient barrier is the immigration status of large numbers of recent immigrants. Many work in very low paying jobs, primarily because those are the only jobs they can obtain without work permits. For Central Americans, TPS and NACARA

have blunted somewhat the impact of undocumented entry for some Central Americans without legal permanent residence. Although the protection does not cover everyone, is precarious, and has to be constantly attended to, TPS and, especially, NACARA make obtaining a legal work permit possible. They provide some relief from the fundamental barrier that undocumented status represents in relationship to employment. This does not mean that immigration status is no longer a major concern in terms of employment for these groups. Not only are many persons still ineligible for these programs, but any mistake in making renewals makes an immigrant on TPS deportable.

#### **LANGUAGE BARRIERS.**

The inability to speak English well or at all was the second most frequently mentioned barrier to employment. And this is a correct perception of the situation confronting Central Americans and Colombians in Massachusetts, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. When persons 18-64 were asked their level of English fluency, 46% of Salvadorans and 39% of Guatemalans said that they did not speak English well or not at all. Figures for Colombians and Hondurans were slightly lower, but still well above the overall percentage of Latinos (23%) who reported that they had acquired this level of English fluency. For immigrants, with or without documents, lack of English proficiency is a tremendous barrier to employment. The inability to speak English leaves many immigrants in the position where the only employment opportunities available to them are in menial jobs and other work that does not require English ability. Many expressed that this barrier also works to employers' advantage, since employers are aware of the fact that the options for non-speakers of English are limited.

#### **LOW EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT SKILLS.**

Many immigrants find it difficult to find employment in anything but the lowest skilled jobs because of their low levels of education. Low level of educational attainment is particularly salient among Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans. This means that some persons, regardless of their immigrant status, only qualify for low-level service occupations such as housekeeping or restaurant work. Advancement within the service sector or in manufacturing usually requires more education.

#### **UNDEREMPLOYMENT.**

Downward occupational mobility is a common phenomenon among professionals and others who arrive in the U.S. with a high level of education but without a specific job. Legal status and language barriers contribute to underemployment, but so do institutional barriers such as professional credentialing and licensing. Among the four groups in this study, underemployment is most common among Colombians.

In spite of the barriers that status, language, and education represent, the willingness and ability to work hard works in favor of all these groups. According to providers and community leaders, Central American and Colombian immigrants take on any job they can, often several. Many of these jobs are society's least attractive and lowest paying jobs, but they take them so that they can survive here with lower levels of poverty and support their families, who are often back in their home countries.

### Recommendations from Leaders and Providers

- Improve the information available to all immigrants regarding workers' rights. Information and education about workers' rights is particularly critical among undocumented workers.
- Improve access to Adult Basic Education and ESL programs for adult workers;
- Increase the number of available Adult Basic Education and ESL programs for adult workers.
- Improve access to workforce development programs
- Work to provide avenues for legalization for all groups. This is especially critical at this point for Colombian workers.

### Assets and Resources

- Strong attachment to work on the part of these immigrant groups
- Organizations that offer adult basic education and workforce development programs
- Organizations that advocate for immigrant rights in the workplace and work with immigrants to address these problems

### *In their own words...*

*There are two barriers for Central Americans and Colombians: the documents and the language.*

*(#2.6) [Group member 2 in Focus group 6]*

*I have had temporary jobs that didn't require having papers; basically cleaning jobs, work in restaurants. (#2.3)*

*It helped to talk to other people, in the streets, in the restaurants, in the library. This is how I met a person who helped me to find the job I have now. I began working with a family that wanted their children to learn Spanish, because the mother is Latino and doesn't want the children to forget the language. When I go to the park with them I meet other people who invite me to teach other children... (#2.1)*

*If I am looking for a job, they say "Okay you don't have papers. All right, I can get you a job here, but the first month is mine." And sometimes they work a month for this guy just to get the right to work for him. (Guatemalan leader from Boston)*

*....the temporary employment agencies that pick them up in a corner and bring them to a different place every day to work, pay them minimum wage and then take out a fee for shoes, food, etc. So the person ends up with almost nothing in their pay checks. These agencies are created in a way that companies can call and say "I need so many people for this date."*

*(Colombian activist working on labor and immigration issues in Boston)*

### *In their own words...*

*People are fired on the spot without a reason, and they know because they don't have good papers there's not much they can do. (Social service provider in East Boston)*

*... As we spoke I noticed that he was missing a finger.... He was working at a meat slicing machine and was injured. I asked if the company had paid for the hospital. He responded that they did not pay for anything.... Then he lost his job ... because he could no longer work because he was missing a finger.*

*(Colombian activist)*

*Sometimes they do not have the education required to qualify for courses, for example for a carpentry course, in which you have to read diagrams. Training to either be a carpenter or a painter is designed for people with at least a high school diploma.*

*(Honduran activist working on immigration issues)*

*We represent people that in their own countries could be doctors, accountants, mathematicians, lawyers, whatever ...but there's a language barrier when they come to this country and they [are forced to] take the [low-paying] jobs that new immigrants often do. (Labor organizer)*

### *3. In the Area of Education*

#### *(K-12 and Higher Education)*

---

Children under 18 make up about one fourth of the populations of Colombians, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans. Honduran and Guatemalans have the largest share of children, at about 26%, while the percentage of children was lowest among Colombians, at 24%. These values are well below the percentage of children in the overall Latino population, where 36% are children. Nevertheless, children from these groups represent sizeable percentages of the children of Somerville and Chelsea, although the largest number of children from these groups live in Boston.

A high percentage of children from these groups are immigrants. Among these groups, about one third of the children are foreign-born. Among Colombians 48% of the children are immigrants themselves. As one would expect, the share of children who are not fluent in English is higher among these groups: about 8% of children of school age in the overall Latino population spoke English “not well or not at all,” compared to 20% of Salvadoran, 13% of Guatemalan, and 12% of Colombian school-age children. Only Hondurans, at 8%, mirrored the overall Latino population.

#### **CHILDREN, PARENTS & SCHOOLS**

Public schools in Massachusetts accept children with all types of immigration statuses, and this was underscored by the overwhelming majority of respondents. “The immigration status does not matter for primary education,” explained a Salvadoran educator, “because every one can go to public school. We do not ask for social security numbers.” Although there were some reports of overzealousness school officials after September 11 pressuring immigrants for some type of documentation, it does not seem to be a common practice. Far more common — and

**Table 9**

	% of population that is <18	% of immigrants among children <18	% speak English not well or not at all (5-17 yrs)
All Hispanic / Latino	36.27	10.35	7.97
Guatemalan	26.31	33.29	13.05
Honduran	26.86	30.82	8.32
Salvadoran	24.79	29.72	19.71
Colombian	24.48	48.47	12.10

Selected Characteristics of Children. Selected Latino National Groups, 2000. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census SF4

causing significant concern — are the problems facing children in the schools as well as the barriers to the participation of parents in the schooling of their children.

In regard to **children and schools** the following were of concern:

- Problems in the adaptation of new immigrant children to schools, including cultural barriers faced by the children and the lack of preparation of teachers and school staff to deal with needs of immigrant children
- Practices and behaviors that are demeaning to students
- The ending of bilingual education programs and its effect particularly on new immigrants and on older immigrant students
- High stakes testing (MCAS) required for graduation and its impact on students who arrive to MA schools in high school
- Declining investment in education in general and its impact on the number of teachers and staff in schools

Focusing on the relationship between parents and schools, respondents highlighted:

- Lack of information available to parents about programs of all types
- Absence of a process of orientation for immigrant parents to the expectations of U.S. schools regarding their participation in school activities and the educational support for their children as well as the importance of dialoguing with teachers about the progress of their children’s education
- Barriers to the participation of parents

in schools included

- language and the lack of translators,
- immigration status and fear of discovery
- the perspective that school administrators and teachers are authority figures who should not be challenged

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

Although immigration status does not present a barrier to access to K-12 education, it does represent a fundamental barrier to access to higher education. All immigrants, regardless of status, are allowed to attend colleges and universities, both public and private. But undocumented immigrants and immigrants with temporary statuses (such as TPS) must pay out-of-state tuition (as if they were international students) in public institutions of higher education in Massachusetts. Undocumented immigrants are also not eligible for federal financial aid grants, which are the basis of most need-based financial aid decisions in both public and private college and universities. Since parents must fill out financial aid applications, U.S.-born children of undocumented parents are affected by the financial aid limitations that the status of their parents imposes, although once independent from their parents, they may attend the public system as in-state students.

In regard to higher education, then, the following issues were identified:

- The cost of higher education
- Legal barriers to financial aid for undocumented immigrants and/or their U.S.-born children
- Effect on access and retention of current guarded environment towards immigrants in institutions of higher education

### Recommendations from Leaders and Providers (K-12)

- Develop more knowledge about the experience of immigrants in the area to inform the practice of school personnel
- Advocate for the improvement of conditions for Latino children in the public schools, focusing specially on the effects of the end of the bilingual education programs on new immigrant and older children and the MCAS
- Advocate for increased investment of the state in public education
- Develop ways to link parents to the schooling of their children by:
  - Providing appropriate and accurate information about programs
  - Orienting them to the expectation and demands of U.S. schools
  - Addressing barriers of language and culture

### Recommendations from Leaders and Providers (Higher Education)

- Support the MA Senate No 237 which provides eligibility for in-state tuition to students who graduated from a Massachusetts high school after attending for three or more years
- Support the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act (Senate 1291), which provides an opportunity for young undocumented immigrants to legalize if they grew up in the U.S., have graduated from a U.S. high school and have no criminal record.

### Assets and Resources

- Community-based programs and non-profits working with children in after-school and educational support programs.
- Public libraries with after-school programs
- Programs in non-profits and in universities that recruit and support immigrant students in higher education

### *In their own words...*

*For the older children, it's more difficult [to learn English quickly]. I have seen high school students who have a real difficult time even after several years in the bilingual department.*

*(ESL and adult education teacher)*

*We have a population who didn't go to school in their own country ... so we have ... 14-year olds who are at third grade level. If you are 14, you cannot go to third grade, so they place them in the lowest level in middle school. Now it becomes a problem: they are in sixth grade, and they don't know how to read or write in their own language. They don't speak English, but also, they don't know how to read or write in their own language. (Educator in a Boston middle school)*

*The teacher will teach but the student will not understand. The teacher will not speak the second language. The child will not participate in the classes and the child will be separated academically and will not do well. They will not do well academically because of their capacity for the language not because of their intelligence.*

*(Salvadoran educator)*

*We have children [at the school] that come from Colombia, from the war, very smart children but they will not make it, and they will succumb due to the language. (#3.2)*



### *In their own words...*

*We view the schools as organizations with authority and respect. Immigrant parents think that schools here are offering their children the best education. They believe that teachers know more than they do or have a better perspective and understanding about their children's learning. They also believe that due to their own lack of education and their social-economic and legal status, their input is not valuable. The parents say "How can I question the teacher when he knows more than me?" "How can I go and tell teachers to do something differently?" (Colombian parent organizer in a local school)*

*The undocumented immigrant's child graduates from high school and is not able to apply for financial aid or college because of his parents' status and because you need the income of your parents or financial information to apply for aid. So his or her option of advancing is over... (Honduran leader)*

*When you have an older brother or sister who is the brightest in the class ...the valedictorian but that because of the papers is do not allowed to go on to college, the younger kids see that and say "Why should I start?" (Salvadoran activist)*

### *4. Social Support*

---

Most of the literature on the social consequences of immigration focuses on the harshness of the process of immigration and of the adaptation of immigrants to their new surroundings. The context of how an immigrant leaves and makes his or her way to the United States is significant in the early adaptation of the newcomer. How immigrants are received and take their places in the new society influence their subsequent experience and psychosocial adjustment. Interviews and focus groups conducted for this study make clear that within Colombian, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran communities there are persons at every stage of the process of adjustment: new arrivals, persons settling, some with already established routines that incorporate them at different levels into U.S. society. Some who immigrated long ago may have stable situations while others who have also been in the U.S. for many years still struggle to attain a certain level of stability.

It is also evident that, in the case of recent immigrants, the stresses due to the process of immigration segue into problems related to the immigrants' status and the difficulties they encounter in the process of adaptation and incorporation to the U.S. due to language and cultural differences. The increased vulnerability of these individuals and families is seldom addressed, due not only to the problems of language but also to the almost complete absence of supports for these groups. Both policy restrictions and language and cultural barriers affect access to services to immigrants at a crucial time in their adjustment to life in the U.S.

#### **INCREASED VULNERABILITY.**

Providers, community leaders, and focus group members indicated that there was an increased psychosocial vulnerability on the part of immigrants who required social support. Social

support for families was necessary due to:

- Trauma, faced both in countries of origin and in the process of migration
- Separation and reunification of families
- Changes in roles within the families: of men and women and of parents and children
- Individual and family stresses due to immigration status and economic hardships
- Perceived high incidence of family violence

Providers and leaders indicated that there was an urgent need to pay attention to the **problems of youth**. Some children, they point out, are growing up alone, be it because their family was deported or because the tension between parents and children has become unbearable. Others are growing up without hope because of the limits imposed by immigration status. In the eyes of many providers and community leaders, the emerging gang behavior among young people from these groups is a result of the stresses faced by these young immigrants.

Concern focused on adolescents. Often these are children who have undergone separation from and later reunification with their families, who have had to adjust to changing roles and the uneven process of acculturation between parents and children. These situations, providers point out, tend to undermine the authority of parents and create great tensions within families.

### *In their own words...*

*... the sadness, leaving their families, or their families not being all together. That's very difficult emotionally. living in the shadows.... Not being seen, not being acknowledged, not being respected, not being there..."*

*(East Boston social service provider)*

*Children may have been cared for in their home country by other relatives. They have to adjust to their parents now being their caretakers and the authority in the home.... There is a lot of stress in just trying to figure out how this family takes form again. (Social service provider working with Colombians and Salvadorans in East Boston)*

Another important concern is the situation of children who are undocumented themselves and the U.S.-born children of undocumented parents. Although the first are not U.S. citizens and the second are, both live the lives of marginality and fear of the undocumented. For both, immigration status becomes relevant at the community level when programs require their or their parents' social security number for enrollment in after-school programs, summer jobs programs, and summer camps. In the case of the U.S.-born children of the undocumented, this situation changes when they become independent of their parents and can, on their own, claim the benefits of citizenship and, with that, support for post-high school education and better jobs. But this comes after a childhood of economic and social disadvantage. For undocumented children, the marginality continues: they will not be able to continue their education, regardless of their academic achievement. These appear like insurmountable odds against their aspirations for gaining better jobs than those their parents now have.

## BARRIERS TO SERVICES.

Respondents indicated that immigrants faced institutional, cultural, and financial barriers to access to services. Barriers included policy restrictions on the use of services by both authorized and undocumented immigrants, barriers to services due to fear of discovery of the undocumented, barriers of language and culture, and financial barriers, including lack of health insurance.

- **Policy restrictions** on the access of immigrant to social and public services arose out of the intertwining of social and immigration policy with the stated goal of curtailing undocumented immigration. This took place at the federal level in 1996 with the passage of both the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), better known as Welfare Reform, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. With this act, legal immigrants arriving after August 1996 lost eligibility for safety-net programs for the first five years they were in the U.S.: SSI, Food Stamps, TANF, housing benefits, and Medicaid. Later, some benefits were restored for immigrants under 18, over 65, and the disabled. But, at this time, no federal benefits are available for the undocumented, including Head Start, school nutrition programs, WIC, grants, and loans for higher education and job training among others.

Massachusetts reacted to the federal restrictions by maintaining state eligibility for state-funded Medicaid (MassHealth) and food stamp programs for legal immigrants. But these have been greatly curtailed in the 2004 Massachusetts state budget, which cut all state-funded MassHealth coverage for roughly 10,000 legal immigrant adults. In Massachusetts, undocumented immigrants can send their children to public school and will

receive emergency health care from hospitals with free care pools, but that is all.

- **Fear of discovery** affects the use of all types of services, even when eligible. For example, although the American-born children of the undocumented are eligible for all benefits, including food stamps and TANF, participation in these services on the part of the undocumented is very low because parents fear that demanding these services for their children will expose their undocumented status. A provider in East Boston explained that *“the most common scenario is that the children are citizens and the parents either have TPS or they are undocumented. The children can apply for different public benefits, but parents are still very fearful of going into public agencies, like the welfare office.”*

For these reasons many agencies are unable to reach eligible immigrants or serve mixed-status families. National estimates are that three out of every four children in immigrant families are U.S. citizens. Yet, because of the insecure circumstances facing members of their families, many of these children go without needed services and supports. Children in **“mixed-status”** families, regardless of their citizenship, run the same fate as their undocumented siblings and parents.

- **Being perceived as a public charge** causes even those immigrants that are here legally to harbor some of resistance to use services. Since 1996, in order to obtain legal residency permits, immigrants’ sponsors have to commit to pay for all medical and service needs for at least 5 years. So it is common for immigrants to abstain from using public services for that period of time. Immigrants with other statuses such as TPS and NACARA are also reluctant to use services to which they and/or their

children are entitled for fear that they will be perceived as “in danger of becoming a public charge,” something that would prevent them from obtaining permanent residency in the U.S. Cutbacks and policies heap hardship on recent immigrants, even if they are here legally, since they are denied assistance at a crucial time in their adjustment to living the U.S.

- **Language differences** also constitute strong barriers to access and use of services by immigrants. Recent federal guidance by the Department of Health and Human Services (August 2000) and the Massachusetts’ Emergency Room Interpreter Bill, signed by Governor Paul Celluci in 2000, guarantee linguistic access to hospital services and services in institutions funded by the federal government. Community-based programs geared to the Latino community also offer services that are linguistically accessible, but these do not cover all areas of need. Mental health and family support services in Spanish, for example, are in short supply. The fact is that in many cases — in day care, after-school programs, and other services for children, when they encounter the Department of Social Services, the legal system, and/or other human services — immigrant families often face services that are not linguistically accessible to them.
- **Financial barriers to services** affect most immigrants. Even authorized immigrants who are working are often not provided insurance by their jobs, making immigrants pay “out of pocket” for most of their “help seeking” — in health care, in mental health, in dental services. Focus groups members and interviewees expressed that given the low salaries of workers, this was a major barrier, making immigrants wait until the last minute to seek these services, usually in an emergency situation.

#### Recommendations from Leaders and Providers:

- Work to provide avenues for legalization for all groups, as a way to begin to address the needs of families
- Advocate to expedite the processing all types of immigration requests, including legalizations and family reunifications
- Develop mental health and family support services that take into account the needs of new immigrant families
- Reinstate benefits and social services for authorized immigrants
- Increase access to existing and develop new programs geared to help in the adaptation of new immigrants, including language programs and programs that orient immigrants to American systems and processes, such as immigration, schools, health care, criminal justice, taxes, etc.
- Develop programs that support youth as they become integrated to U.S. society.
- Advocate for the inclusion of all children, regardless of their own or their parents’ status, in services for children at the community level – for example, summer camps, after-school programs, summer jobs, and academic and cultural enrichment programs
- Develop opportunities for immigrant youth to become leaders in the community.

#### Assets and Resources

- Families and the strength of familiar relationships
- Organizations that provide social and mental health services that are linguistically accessible and culturally competent

## 5. *Housing*

---

As is true of Latinos in general, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians are primarily renters. Homeownership rates are low due to low incomes and high cost of housing, lack of information about the process of purchasing real estate, and barriers due to the immigrant status of immigrants. The high cost of rental housing in the region forces families to live together or to move away from the Boston area to find less expensive housing. The inability to get a drivers' license prevents the undocumented who have jobs in Boston from moving out of the city in search of cheaper housing. The fear of discovery felt by the undocumented makes them vulnerable to the practices of unscrupulous landlords, including rent gouging, substandard housing conditions, and arbitrary evictions.

### **Recommendations from Leaders and Providers:**

- Improve availability of information, advocacy and legal support for tenants' rights for immigrants, regardless of status
- Develop advocacy strategies to protect access to housing in the city, particularly for those who cannot commute
- Support the eligibility of undocumented immigrants and immigrants with TPS to obtain drivers' licenses that will permit them to commute to jobs in Boston from cities and towns where housing is less expensive
- Improve access to information about the process of purchasing a home.

### **Assets and Resources**

- Families and friends
- Organizations that work to protect the rights of tenants
- Organizations that advocate for affordable housing

This close look at the experience of four new immigrant groups highlights the complexity that boils right under the surface and that makes so much difference to the lives of people. The story of how Salvadorans, Colombians, Hondurans, and Guatemalans leave their countries of origin, make their way arduously to the U.S., and begin a life in a new place is a story that has a long and rich precedent in Boston. But there are also some clear differences. Most salient among these are those issues related to immigration status and the limitations and opportunities it offers in regards to work, housing, public services, and education as well as the cauldron of stresses it brings in relationship to family stability and psychosocial well being.

The situation of new immigrants in this region requires policy remedies and immediate supports. It requires, first of all, as one Puerto Rican provider put it, that we acknowledge that there are forces beyond those we can control here in Boston that make immigrants from these countries arrive in our city — and that sectors of our city benefit exceptionally from their presence and their work. “We need,” she said, “to be more open about welcoming” these immigrants.” This means respect for their rights as workers and as persons living in the U.S.; opportunities and hope for children and adolescents, regardless of their status; and access to resources by making them culturally competent. Finally it means learning more about them: their background, their culture, and their contribution to our economy and our lives in the Boston area.

Within the Latino community, these too are newcomers. And with them, the Latino community’s diversity takes a long leap forward, never to turn back. This growing diversity requires attention, as Latinos learn of each others’ experiences, the issues they share in common, and those that affect one sector of the population

or another. Most Latinos in Massachusetts are not immigrants; they are born in the U.S. or in Puerto Rico. So, in many ways, Latinos, no matter where they have been born, need to own this immigration too, and with it, the responsibility for making immigrant rights a policy priority and making the situation of recent immigrants a top concern.

Since September 11, 2001, the situation for most immigrants has worsened as national security measures have taken precedence over the individual rights of non-citizens. Respondents often mentioned the backlash from the terrorist attacks, which presents itself both as a more negative environment and attitude towards immigrants and through a more aggressive enforcement of immigration laws, including raids and deportations.

In spite of the hard times, both those related to increased security and those that derive from the situation of being new immigrants, the fact is that, like immigrants before them, Salvadoran, Colombians, Hondurans, and Guatemalans have made Boston their home. They are building organizations, struggling for their rights, doing the hardest jobs, and, at the same time, enriching our lives with experiences and cultures that we would otherwise not have known. Like immigrants from the past, we know that in the end they will contribute more than they will receive.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census Summary File 4 (SF4)  
Sample Data

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Suro, Roberto, Sergio Bendixen, B. Lindsey Lowell and Dulce C. Benavides. Billions in Motion: Latino Immigrants, Remittances and Banking. Pew Hispanic Center and the Multilateral Investment Fund, 2001, p.2

<sup>5</sup> Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2002. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, p. 228

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 224

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of Elena Letona and the staff of Centro Presente in this research. They helped in every way: from taking us through the intricacies of immigration law, to recruiting and managing the focus groups and giving careful feedback to our analysis and writing. We thank them and hope to that our report does justice to the lessons we learned from them. Thanks also to Chen Imm Tan of Boston's Office for New Bostonians, to Holly Lockwood and Edwin Argueta of the East Boston Ecumenical Community Council and to the East Boston Latino Coalition for helping us focus on critical questions in the early stages of this work.

Twenty nine community leaders and service providers and 25 constituents of Centro Presente contributed their time and knowledge to us in interviews and focus groups. We promised all of them confidentiality, but they know who they are and we thank them. Their insights and eloquence are the best of what is contained in this report.

Appreciations go to the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research (MISER) at UMass Amherst for the maps contained in the report, to Jim O'Brien for editing the manuscript and to Ramon Borges, Andres Torres, Elena Letona, Edwin Argueta, Tess Ewing and Mary Jo Marion for their comments in early drafts. The sculptures of the many cultures of Boston by William P. Reinman, which grace the Piers Park Pavillion in East Boston and appear in our cover, were an inspiring find. We thank him for the use of the photographs in our report. Finally, we thank the Public Policy PhD Program and the Gaston Institute, both at UMass Boston, for their material support of this practicum and this report.

*The 2003 Public Policy  
Practicum Research Team*

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Photograph by the artist, William P. Reimann, copyright 2003  
East Boston's Park Pavilion, "Tribute Panels," stone creek granite

Colombia: Tairona rivergod, gold pendant, 11th-16th c.  
Ecuador: Tolita sungod, gold mask, 6th c; praying figure, chest ornament, 6th c.

Permission granted by the artist for this image to be used by the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development & Public Policy at UMass Boston, for use on its 2003 report cover.