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Immigrant Workers in the Cleaning Industry

The Experience of Boston's Central Americans

Karen M. Lado

This study has two objectives: to describe Central Americans' employment experience in the Boston area by focusing on cleaning workers and to explore the reasons why Central Americans in particular, and immigrants in general, become concentrated in industries like cleaning. The study highlights a number of characteristics of immigrant workers and of cleaning work that contribute to employment in the industry. Recent immigrants need jobs that do not require English skills or formal training, can be accessed informally, and offer schedules that allow them to take on additional work. Cleaning companies, in turn, need a constant source of reliable workers who are willing to do work that many consider undesirable in return for relatively low wages. The study suggests that the key factor linking Central American workers with cleaning is the formation of social networks in immigrant communities, which aid in transmitting employment information. The results also suggest that although they view cleaning jobs as temporary, many Central Americans remain in the industry for long periods because they lack better employment opportunities.

In the early 1980s, thousands of Central American immigrants began to enter the United States, driven by political conflict and economic collapse in the region. Estimates of the numbers of Salvadorans currently in this country range from a low of 500,000 to one million. The numbers for Guatemalans in the United States are similarly elusive, but estimates range from about 200,000 to 500,000.¹ Although the most visible Central American communities formed in major cities in California, Texas, Florida, and the District of Columbia, Boston also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of Central Americans residents. In 1990, the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that about 19,250 of them were living in the Boston metropolitan area.² The true number is probably substantially higher, owing to the undercount of undocumented residents and the inflow of new immigrants since 1990. Those who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s were Salvadoran, followed a few years later by a growing flow from Guatemala.

As their numbers increased, Central Americans have become an important part of the Boston labor force. These workers appear to have congregated in a small number of sectors, including building cleaning, restaurants, hotels, and assorted manufacturing industries, all of which offer low-skill jobs that do not require substantial training or

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Such networks do not explain, however, why companies appear to prefer immigrants to natives. When asked why their labor force was composed almost exclusively of immigrants, cleaning company officials uniformly said it was because immigrants were the only people willing to accept the jobs.”

— Karen M. Lado

English language skills. Contract building-cleaning companies particularly are major employers of Central American and other Boston area immigrants. These companies, which employ from one or two to several thousand workers, clean most of the downtown Boston office buildings. Their labor force is, and has historically been, almost exclusively composed of immigrants.

The entry of Central Americans into the Boston labor market offers the opportunity to develop a case study of immigrant employment in the building-cleaning industry. This study has two objectives: to describe Central Americans' employment experience in the Boston area by focusing on cleaning workers and to explore the reasons why Central Americans in particular, and immigrants in general, become concentrated in industries like cleaning. The study highlights a number of characteristics of immigrant workers and of cleaning work that contribute to immigrant employment in the industry. New immigrants need jobs that do not require English skills or formal training, can be accessed informally, and offer schedules that permit them to take on additional work. Cleaning companies, in turn, require a constant source of reliable workers willing to do jobs that many consider undesirable in return for relatively low wages. The study suggests that the key factor linking Central American workers to cleaning jobs is the formation of social networks in immigrant communities through which employment information is transmitted.

Because data on Boston's Central American community are scarce, my research is based primarily on interviews, thirty-eight in all, conducted between November 1993 and April 1994, with Central American workers, cleaning company representatives, real estate managers, social service providers, and activists familiar with the subject community. My goal is to paint a broad picture of the Central American experience in cleaning; This article does not in any way represent a comprehensive survey of the cleaning industry or of the Boston Central American community.

The Boston Cleaning Industry

In 1991, more than 600 cleaning companies in the greater Boston area employed approximately 18,000 people (Table 1).³ This represented an almost 100 percent increase in the numbers of companies and employees from fifteen years earlier. Such rapid growth can be attributed to two principal factors: the expansion of the Boston real estate market and a national trend toward contracting out property management and, consequently, cleaning services. The impetus for the latter change was primarily economic; property management companies could provide the same services more cost effectively than in-house managers.

Typically, property management firms and increasingly corporations and educational institutions hire contract cleaning companies for fixed hours. The Boston market for these services is segmented by size of building and to a lesser degree by a union/ non-union company split. Large buildings, particularly downtown, employ one of the major and better-known cleaning agencies, while individual offices and smaller buildings tend to engage one of the myriad mom-and-pop services. Companies must be unionized to work in large downtown buildings, but companies that service small buildings or suburban properties are usually nonunion.

The Boston cleaning market is fiercely competitive. The demand for cleaning services is closely tied to growth in the real estate market and, more generally, to the state

Table 1

Boston Area Cleaning Companies and Employees, 1967–1991

Year	Employee Total	Percentage Change	Cleaning Companies by Number of Employees					
			Total	0–19	20–99	100–249	250–499	>500
1967	6,757	NA	218	165	39	07	06	1
1972	8,061	19%	286	225	40	12	08	1
1977	9,034	12%	316	245	53	10	05	3
1982	2,304	36%	377	282	68	15	09	3
1987	18,764	53%	635	521	74	21	10	9
1991	17,925	–4%	615	506	72	25	08	4

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, County Business Patterns 1967, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, and 1991.

of the local economy. The early 1980s, when Central Americans began to enter the labor market in large numbers, represented the golden age of the Boston cleaning industry. Companies struggled to find enough workers to meet the demand created by the real estate boom. In the wake of the economic downturn of the late 1980s, which brought the real estate market to a standstill, the urgent need for cleaning services has diminished. In response, companies have tried to lower costs and expand services in order to retain contracts and win new business. Because labor represents the companies' single largest expense, controlling cost has been key to enhancing competitiveness.

A principal means to that goal is offering part-time work. The vast majority of cleaning jobs — between 65 and 95 percent, depending on the company — must be completed during evening hours, after daytime staffs have departed. Part-time work has a number of advantages for companies. The workers earn less money and receive fewer benefits; their union rate is \$7.75 per hour versus a minimum of \$8.00 per hour for full-time workers. Part-time employees are entitled to paid holidays and vacation time; full-time employees receive, in addition, pensions and health care, both managed by the union. The wages and benefits are set out in a contract negotiated by the companies and the union every three years. Wages in small, nonunionized organizations can be substantially lower — between \$4.25 and \$6.00 an hour — with no benefits.

In addition to receiving lower wages, part-time workers are expected to work faster than full-timers because their shifts are shorter. Moreover, part-time evening work, usually between 6:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., fits into office schedules well, allowing cleaners to work quickly when the premises are empty. The timing also implies that companies employ workers who generally have daytime jobs. This may decrease pressure to increase wages and benefits, because the workers are not solely dependent on cleaning for their income.

However, one potentially negative consequence of part-time cleaning work is the high turnover rate of workers, who leave when they find more desirable full-time employment. Turnover rates can be as high as 100 percent a year, depending on the state of the local economy. Consequently, companies are always seeking new hands. This constant demand for labor is one of the keys to understanding immigrant employment in the industry.

Immigrant Workers, Social Networks, and Employment

Almost all Boston contract cleaning workers are immigrants, although the ethnic composition has changed over the years. Twenty-five years ago, many were Portuguese, with fewer arriving from Poland and other Eastern European countries. Today, cleaning workers are primarily from Central and South America — especially El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and Colombia — the Caribbean — Haiti and the Dominican Republic — and Cape Verde. Supervisors also tend to be immigrants, in contrast to managers and central office personnel, who are almost always native Americans.

To understand how immigrants have become concentrated in cleaning, it is necessary to consider the importance of social networks. Past studies of immigration have stressed the role of such networks in propagating migration between countries. Once immigrants arrive in their new country, they send information about conditions and opportunities to friends and relatives at home. The existence of a community of immigrants reduces the cost of immigration for subsequent individuals, who can rely on the “pioneers” for information about how to enter the country and assistance in finding housing and jobs once they arrive. Over time, the process of immigration creates social and economic linkages between sending and receiving countries. Industries in the receiving country, for example, may come to rely on immigrant labor. Immigrants send money to their families back home and assist family members who immigrate to the new community. Some subsequently return home — permanently or temporarily — where they communicate their experiences to potential immigrants directly.

The experiences of Boston’s Central Americans exemplify the role of social networks in migration. When asked why they had to come to Boston, the immigrants I interviewed inevitably said that they had come because a sibling or cousin or other relative was already living here. Although it appears that, as in many immigrant communities, more men than women make the move, there are still a substantial number of families represented. In many cases, husbands arrive first, followed by their wives a year or two later. Children may accompany their mothers or remain with relatives in the home country.

Just as social contacts influence migration, they also influence the types of employment people find on arrival. All but one person I interviewed had either heard about cleaning work from friends or accompanied friends or relatives to their workplaces to apply for jobs. The cleaning companies’ recruitment system takes advantage of these social networks. Generally, new recruits can apply for work either at a company headquarters or at a particular building where they want to work. During the mid-1980s, when companies were desperate for workers, hiring took place at both the headquarters and the building level. Currently, however, it is almost always necessary for the applicant to have a personal contact in a building in order to be hired because large numbers of people are looking for work.

As a result of such building-specific hiring, it is common to find relatives working in the same building. Word-of-mouth hiring also leads to variations in ethnic groups across work sites. Some buildings may have a large number of Haitian workers, others a majority of Latinos or Brazilians. The ethnicity of supervisors who favor one group over another can also influence ethnic composition.

Social contacts appear to be particularly important for undocumented workers.

For example, an undocumented worker armed with false papers who applies for a job at the main office of a cleaning company runs the risk of having the social security number

checked and being discovered immediately. However, when the same person applies at a particular building, the paperwork is sent to the main office and may pass muster without question. Even if company officials are aware that individuals are undocumented — as many appear to be — this strategy allows companies to claim ignorance of workers' undocumented status and lay the blame for hiring them on a manager.

The Experience of Cleaning Work

Once on the job, people experience differences in cleaning from company to company and, within a company, from building to building. The broad parameters of cleaning work are determined by company policies. Management decisions about the number of worker-hours to allot to each building influence the length of shifts and the pace of the work. Some companies, for example, have a reputation for pressuring their workers to work very quickly, especially following the cost-cutting measures of recent years. Most companies appear to have cut hours, reduced the number of workers assigned to buildings, and increased workloads in recent years to control costs. These changes have had a significant impact on the work environment and on workers' incomes.

Despite the existence of a union contract, company policy also influences working conditions and the nature of benefits. Central American workers in unionized companies did not generally complain about problems in collecting their wages, but they did highlight numerous instances of companies trying to restrict their access to benefits to which they were legally entitled. For instance, workers noted that they did not always receive paid holidays or sick days as required by the contract or that the company tried to limit their use of sick days by requiring them to present medical excuses for any days missed. Companies can also arbitrarily reassign workers to different buildings, a strategy used to control perceived troublemakers.

Nonunion workers are more vulnerable to blatant exploitation. They may work extra hours for which they are never paid or be fired at the end of a month without ever collecting a paycheck. According to immigrants and others familiar with the cleaning industry, nonunion companies, particularly those with the most abusive labor practices, are more likely to employ undocumented, uneducated workers who are sorely in need of work. In fact, one Boston company achieved local notoriety for the way it treated its workers. It transported workers — crammed fourteen or more into a van designed to hold eight or nine — from East Boston to clean supermarkets in a number of suburban towns. The workers, most of whom were undocumented, were paid only for the time they spent cleaning, not for the hours spent traveling from site to site. Consequently, a worker might be paid for only eight hours of a twelve- or fourteen-hour day.

Within the general parameters set by a company, conditions vary substantially from building to building. Because of the decentralized structure of cleaning work, on-site supervisors and managers wield a great deal of power. A worker's future with a company can sometimes be contingent on his or her relationship with the supervisor. For example, supervisors recommend individuals to be hired, assign tasks, discipline workers, and recommend that they be fired. In addition, supervisors, who are usually drawn from the pool of cleaning workers, are often the only people who speak the workers' native language. They are the workers' link with the company, through whom information about company policies is relayed. Workers usually have no contact with a daytime building manager or with personnel in the company's central office.

As a result, the quality of the work experience depends partly on the quality of the supervision. If a supervisor assigns tasks evenhandedly and imposes penalties fairly and consistently, workers may have generally positive attitudes toward the work. Their feelings about the work may be quite different from their attitudes toward the companies that employ them. Individuals who find the physical work satisfactory may feel frustrated or antagonized by their company's treatment of its workers.

Problems arise, however, when supervisors and managers abuse their authority. The two most common types of problems cited by workers are favoritism along ethnic lines and sexual harassment. In some cases, workers said that supervisors favored members of their own ethnic groups at the expense of others. Given the composition of the labor force, friction most commonly occurs among Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking workers and supervisors and among Haitian and non-Haitian workers and supervisors. According to Central American workers, some supervisors try to hire members of their own ethnic/national group, sometimes by forcing out workers of other groups. They may also assign easier tasks to their compeers, leaving the more undesirable work to others. As a result, the workers become polarized along ethnic lines. Some felt that companies deliberately treated ethnic groups differently in order to split the labor force. Nevertheless, regardless of whether these ethnic divisions are intentional, companies benefit in the end by making it harder for workers to organize.

Sexual harassment is also a serious problem for female workers. Supervisors may pressure women to have sex with them in exchange for more desirable assignments or for such perks as receiving permission to leave early. If a woman refuses, the supervisor may threaten to have her fired. Under these circumstances, immigrant women who do not speak English and are unfamiliar with American laws may find it hard to protect themselves. Working conditions, moreover, make women vulnerable to harassment and actual assaults, as cleaners often work alone at night on empty floors. If other workers speak different languages, a woman may be unable to communicate to her coworkers that she is being harassed and to complain to higher-level management. Companies appear to be unresponsive to the problem of sexual harassment, making few efforts to investigate complaints or to discipline employees accused of such actions.

Immigrant workers' vulnerability is exacerbated by the inefficacy of their Boston union. The cleaning workers are represented by a local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In contrast to other cities, where the union's presence in the cleaning industry has waned in recent years, the Boston local retains a virtual lock on the downtown cleaning market. Cleaning companies must be unionized to be able to work in the large downtown properties. However, the local appears to have maintained this control by minimizing the demands it places on companies. It has a reputation among workers, labor activists, real estate managers, and others familiar with the Boston cleaning industry for failing to protect its members, particularly the immigrants.

Although workers automatically become union members after thirty days on the job, a number of Central Americans noted that they and their coworkers had no idea they belonged to a union or that they were protected by a union contract. Because they do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the U.S. system, workers may not realize that union dues are automatically deducted from their paychecks. Many never come into contact with the union or participate in a union election. Shop stewards in a building are usually appointed by the union or the company rather than being elected by the workers. According to Central American workers and labor activists, workers who pursue a griev-

ance find that the union sides with the company rather than the workers. The union's ineffectiveness appears to stem from a number of causes. The Boston local is relatively large, representing workers in several sectors across a large number of work sites. Of 17,000 workers it claims, some 8,000 are in the building services industry; the remainder include college maintenance workers, clerical staff, and public employees. Under these circumstances, it would be difficult for any union to reach out to all its members. At the same time, it is clear that the union has not made a significant effort to reach out to its immigrant employees despite the fact that the immigrants represent the majority of cleaning workers. The local, with only a handful of Spanish- and Portugues-speaking employees, does not have a systematic outreach program among immigrant workers. Critics of the local argue that the union deliberately exploits its immigrant members, benefiting from their dues but offering them few services in return.

Immigrant Labor's Role in Cleaning

The existence of social networks helps explain why Central Americans congregate in an industry like cleaning. Such networks do not explain, however, why companies appear to prefer immigrants to natives. When asked why their labor force was composed almost exclusively of immigrants, cleaning company officials uniformly said it was because immigrants were the only people willing to accept the jobs. They stated that the companies would be inclined to hire natives, but few apply because they tend to perceive cleaning as dirty, demeaning work. Consequently they prefer to seek alternative employment or remain unemployed rather than work as cleaners. The Central American cleaners echoed those sentiments.

The Central Americans' experience, however, suggests that from the perspective of Boston area cleaning companies, not all low-skill workers are alike. The immigrant labor force, particularly low-skill, non-English-speaking members, represents a uniquely tractable and self-generating labor pool. Companies that can tap into this pool, either deliberately or accidentally, have no reason to encourage native employment.

Immigrants as a Tractable Labor Force

Building service companies require a large pool of docile workers who are willing to accept the instability that characterizes the cleaning market. Companies want workers whom they can hire and lay off easily, who are willing to accept part-time work at odd hours, and who do a job that natives scorn. In addition, companies need reliable workers who can be trusted to work alone in expensive offices but do not demand higher wages or improved working conditions.

Immigrants in general represent a more tractable labor force than natives, partly because the labor-market position of immigrants is much weaker than that of natives. Immigrants, who are usually desperately in need of work, are unfamiliar with labor-market opportunities and laws and constrained by their lack of permanent legal status.⁴ For example, U.S. Central American workers are in an uncertain legal position. Some are undocumented; others, as a result of provisions in the Immigration Act of 1990, became eligible for special temporary protected status (TPS), a temporary stay of deportation that entitled Salvadorans to work permits and made them eligible for most government benefits if they arrived in this country before September 1990.⁵ Although TPS expired in 1992, holders of the status continued to be legally entitled to live and work

here under the deferred enforced departure (DED) program. In addition, some Salvadorans and Guatemalans became eligible to apply or reapply for political asylum in the United States; they receive work permits while their applications are being considered.⁶ The Clinton administration has announced that it will not extend the DED program, which expired at the end of 1994, which means that some 180,000 Salvadorans nationwide could lose their legal standing during 1995 unless they are successful in applying for permanent residency or political asylum.

Once employed, immigrants are more easily manipulated through fear and misinformation than natives. Immigrants realize that they have few employment options, and those who are undocumented are afraid of being deported. In the cleaning industry in particular, the disciplinary system, which allows supervisors and other managers to make arbitrary decisions, contributes to immigrant workers' powerlessness. Supervisors issue warnings for any infraction of the rules, such as tardiness, absenteeism, or failure to complete work to the required standard. Three warnings constitute grounds for dismissal. Unless a worker can consult a higher-level manager, who ordinarily does not speak the worker's native language, the only route to appeal is through the union, which is notorious for its poor defense of the cleaners' rights.

Moreover, many Central Americans may not be interested in improving workplace conditions. Their goal is to earn as much money as possible to support relatives at home, to bring additional family members to the United States, to improve their quality of life here, or eventually to return home. Because they believe that their work is transitional, they have less of a stake in changing the system. In addition, many people are too preoccupied simply with trying to survive in a new country to become involved in any kind of labor struggle. From this perspective, it is not surprising that most workers do not organize; on the contrary, it is remarkable that any do.

Immigrants as a Self-generating Labor Force

The second benefit to employers is the self-generating nature of the immigrant labor force. As the Central Americans' experience illustrates, once new workers move into a company, their social networks link them to the broader community of their compatriots. Because hiring usually occurs at the building level, where supervisors and managers can hire friends and relatives of current workers, companies pare their recruiting costs. In light of the worker high turnover rate, this can represent a significant saving and ensure that the experienced workers have a stake in training and monitoring the behavior of new employees.

Social networks are not unique to the Central American community or to the building-cleaning industry. In his study of immigrant workers in New York City restaurants, for example, Thomas Bailey described similar network hiring with immigrant employees informing their friends of openings in their place of employment.⁷ He found examples of similar networks in garment factories, retail outlets, and other establishments with small workforces that rely on nonbureaucratized, informal procedures for recruitment, training, and promotion.⁸ Although large cleaning companies may employ immense workforces, such decentralized hiring makes the individual buildings comparable to the smaller firms Bailey described.

Bailey also notes that network hiring can promote solidaristic behavior among workers in a business.⁹ Such behavior does indeed occur among cleaners, but is commonly of greater benefit to the employer than to the workers. Because supervisors prefer to hire members of their own ethnic groups, workers from various backgrounds, particularly

those who speak different languages, may find it trying to work together. The overall effect is to split the labor force, pitting immigrant against immigrant and making organizing much more difficult.

The Immigrant Perspective on Cleaning

Previous studies of immigration have argued that the transitional nature — or perceived transitional nature — of immigrants' work in the United States explains why immigrants are willing to take low-wage, undesirable jobs. According to Michael Piore, for example, jobs in general are not simply strategies by which workers gain a desired economic outcome; rather, they are embedded in a larger system of social relationships.¹⁰

Employment in this context serves two purposes: the economic function of earning money and the social function of establishing prestige and status in the community. Jobs in the secondary labor market, which encompasses a range of low-skill, low-paying jobs that offer little security and few opportunities for advancement, are of low status, so many natives refuse them.

Some immigrants, however, have a different attitude toward work, partly because they do not intend, at least initially, to stay in the United States permanently. Their goal is to earn as much money as possible as quickly as possible before returning home. These are target earners for whom the function of a job is strictly economic; their social standing is defined by ties to the home country. Their willingness to take low-status jobs is reinforced by the fact that many new immigrants come from rural, underdeveloped economies. Job hierarchies in these countries overlap the hierarchies in this country so that jobs that are classified as low status here are classified as low-medium status in the countries of origin.¹¹

As this theory suggests, the immigrants I interviewed for this study indicated that they worked in cleaning strictly for economic reasons. When Central Americans arrive in Boston, they must find work as quickly as possible not only to support themselves and send money to relatives back home but to pay off the thousands of dollars that traveling to this country can cost. Many Central American immigrants come from rural, agricultural areas and have limited educational backgrounds. For them, cleaning provides an entrée to the American labor force. They can access the work through the informal channels preferred by recent and undocumented immigrants; they require no previous training, education, or familiarity with English, and they need not be able to read in any language; training is by example and the work is strictly repetitive. Moreover, because they work at night, they are unlikely to come into contact with officials who might question their legal status.

Nevertheless, it is not strictly the transitional nature of employment that makes cleaning acceptable to Central American workers. They cannot find employment alternatives in the Boston market, which may reflect both the characteristics of immigrant workers themselves and the existence of discrimination and other structural barriers to mobility. Therefore, cleaning jobs, particularly with unionized companies, are attractive because they pay better than other low-skill jobs available to newcomers. The work is not as physically demanding or as dirty as many factory and restaurant jobs, and the evening schedule permits them to hold down full-time jobs. Full-time cleaning also makes it possible to earn benefits.

As a result, Central American immigrants consider cleaning jobs to be relatively desirable. Some individuals noted that they would prefer to have a full-time cleaning job

to their employment in a restaurant or factory. Workers seemed to evaluate their cleaning jobs somewhat by the quality of the social environment, particularly their relationship with supervisors, and somewhat by the companies' treatment of employees. Because many friends and relatives are employed in cleaning, the Central American community attaches no social stigma to this type of work. Many workers took pride in doing their job well and were frustrated by the disdain with which they are treated both by their companies and to some extent by the broader American society. When asked to evaluate cleaning, the respondents did not focus on remuneration and benefits. Rather, they were uniformly concerned with the lack of regard shown by their companies. Several noted that the key to improving the workplace is for employers to treat their workers with respect.

Nevertheless, although it meets immigrants' immediate needs, cleaning, evaluated over the longer term, becomes more problematic. Most Central Americans in the industry hold down two or three jobs, typically full-time day work in another cleaning company or a restaurant and one or two part-time cleaning jobs. Like many other immigrant and native workers, they would like to move into better-paying, full-time jobs. Unfortunately, despite high turnover rates and the perceived temporal nature of cleaning, the work is not necessarily transitional for many. Some Central American immigrants appear to do cleaning work, either full or part time, for years at a time to make ends meet.

There are a number of potential reasons for this lack of mobility. Working in cleaning does not naturally lead into better-paying and more stable employment. There are few internal opportunities for promotion in cleaning companies; immigrant workers can become supervisors, but they rarely rise any higher. At the same time, the isolation of their work reinforces their isolation in other spheres. Many Central Americans live with relatives, work multiple jobs in the company of other immigrants, and socialize with people from their own country or region. They find it difficult to attend English classes because of family and work obligations. As a result, they have few opportunities to learn English or become familiar with American laws and customs. The combination of unfamiliarity with English and the separation of immigrant social networks from native networks makes it harder for immigrants to learn about and qualify for better jobs.

In addition, the perceived impermanence of their stay in the United States may limit the extent of their assimilation into the Boston economy. Most of the immigrants I interviewed spoke of returning to their home countries if conditions improved. Legally, many Central American immigrants are in a state of limbo; they are either here without papers, hold temporary work permits that will expire this year, or are awaiting asylum hearings. In a number of cases, close family members, including children, are still living in the home country, either because it is too expensive to bring them here illegally or because the U.S. environment appears to be inhospitable. As a result, workers are ambivalent about maintaining strong ties to their home countries while not planning to return to them in the near future.

Implications of the Study

This study suggests that Central Americans, and indeed all immigrants working in cleaning, are likely to encounter forms of abusive employment practices ranging from infringement of the union contract to serious harassment and dismissal without pay. The union's unresponsiveness to its immigrant membership probably represents the sin-

gle biggest barrier to improving conditions for Boston area cleaning workers. Unlike the situation in many other cities, where the union's base has been eroded by the incursion of nonunion contractors, the Boston union still controls the downtown market. At the very least, an activist union could take advantage of this situation to enforce the provisions of the union contract concerning vacation time, sick leave, and union representation and to defend workers victimized by workplace harassment. The union could also play a critical role in overcoming the information barrier by educating workers about their rights, providing assistance in navigating through the bureaucracy both in the workplace and in everyday life, and increasing access to information about English classes and other area services.

Union activities in other cities demonstrate the potential power of organization in the cleaning industry. In the mid-1980s, SEIU launched Justice for Janitors in a number of cities with large immigrant labor forces, including San Jose, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. The goal of the campaign was to reverse the trend of declining union membership by pressuring property managers to hire union contractors. The Justice for Janitors crusade has become one of the most successful organizing campaigns in labor history. According to union officials, a key element in its success in cities like Los Angeles, where the workforce is almost exclusively Latino — and predominantly Central American — has been the presence of Spanish-speaking union officials whose backgrounds were similar to those of the workers. The campaign's success in Los Angeles, where some 60 percent of cleaning workers are thought to be undocumented, suggests that legal status does not have to be a limiting factor in organizing.

Unfortunately, the Boston local shows no signs of taking up the cause of cleaning workers. Efforts to assist them are limited to the work of legal assistance agencies, social service organizations, and government agencies charged with enforcing labor laws and health and safety regulations, all of which lack the resources or the mandates to launch an effective organizing campaign among the immigrants.¹² Consequently, significant improvements in industry working conditions will depend on either a radical shift in the local's behavior, which is unlikely to come about without substantial external pressure, or the development of an alternative organization to advocate for immigrant workers' rights. Such an organization could also help to coordinate services for immigrant workers, such as language and other educational training, and to increase immigrants' access to job information.

Indeed, the latter strategy was attempted, with some success, in the past. During the late 1980s, an organization was formed to protect the rights of immigrant workers; it was active among cleaning workers for several years, educating them, developing leaders, and pressuring the union to be more proactive. Although its activities have since been substantially curtailed, the organization succeeded in developing a cadre of immigrant leaders in the industry and in bringing about marginal improvements in the union's behavior.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study attempts to address two distinct but overlapping issues: Central American immigration to Boston and the interaction between Central American and other immigrant workers and employers in the Boston labor market. While the results suggest the types of experiences Central American immigrants encounter in cleaning work, they do not in any sense represent a complete picture of the Central American community, much

less of overall immigrant employment in Boston. Rather, the study highlights the need for more focused research in both areas. Current information about the Boston Central American community is anecdotal. There remains a multiplicity of questions to be answered in order to develop a portrait of what could be useful in designing policies to assist these immigrants. This study highlighted some of the key questions, including the magnitude of immigration flows and the importance of cyclical and return migration, the social and educational backgrounds of Central American immigrants, and the processes by which social networks are created and function.

It is equally important to understand the patterns of economic assimilation and the extent of economic mobility within the Central American community. This in turn requires a better understanding of the Boston area overall labor-market structure and the role of immigrant labor in this market. The results of this study suggest a process of deliberate employment of immigrant workers in cleaning that bears much closer scrutiny. It is important to understand the extent to which an "ethnic shift" actually occurred within the industry during the move from in-house cleaning to contract cleaning, the strategies by which companies recruit cleaning workers, both now and formerly, and the nature of the barriers that limit workers' upward mobility. From a broader perspective, there is a need for empirical research on immigrant, particularly Central American, labor in other sectors that would help explain why immigrants congregate in certain industries and the hurdles they encounter in securing better employment. ❁

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Notes

1. William Stanley, "Blessing or Menace? The Security Implications of Central American Migration," in Myron Weiner, ed., *International Migration and Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 236, 239.
2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population*.
3. "Boston area" encompasses Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, and Suffolk counties.
4. See, for example, Manuel Castells, "Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advance Capitalism: The Western European Experience," *Politics and Society* 5 (1975): 33–66, and Edna Bonacich, "Advanced Capitalism and Black/White Relations in the United States: A Split Labor Market Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 41 (1976): 34–51.
5. Peter C. Diamond, "Temporary Protected Status under the Immigration Act of 1990," *Willamette Law Review* 28 (1992): 858–859.
6. A class action suit, *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh*, was filed on behalf of Salvadorans and Guatemalans who had arrived in the United States before certain dates and sued the federal government for violating their Fifth Amendment rights to equal protection by discriminating against them in asylum applications. As a result of the 1991 settlement of this suit, class members were entitled to reapply for asylum under new asylum regulations.
7. Thomas R. Bailey, *Immigrants and Native Workers: Contrasts and Competition* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), 27–28.
8. *Ibid.*, 35.
9. *Ibid.*, 28.

10. Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 52–53.
11. *Ibid.*, 54.
12. From the perspective of immigrant supporters, reliance on government agencies can be a two-edged sword. Although all workers, regardless of their legal status are protected by U.S. labor laws, pursuing a labor violation case on behalf of an undocumented worker can render the worker vulnerable to investigation by immigration officials.