Chilean Americans

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Between 1971 and 2001, the INS admitted 59,500 documented Chilean immigrants into the United States. In addition, the U.S. census counted 38,640 Chilean immigrants in 1980, 62,036 in 1990, and 84,242 in 2000 (117,698 by adjusted 2000 Hispanic/Latino figures). In 2000, Chilean immigrants resided primarily in Florida (19.7%), California (17.9%), New York (16.1%), New Jersey (7.5%), and Texas (5.2%).

There are four broad phases of U.S.-bound Chilean migration. In the first phase (late-nineteenth century), Chilean and other South American laborers migrated to California during the Gold Rush. In the second phase (post-World War II to the 1960s), further Chilean migration was spurred by economic deterioration in Chile and economic expansion in the U.S. Due to these earlier migrations, there is now a sizable number of second- and third-generation Chileans living in the United States.

In the third phase (1973-1989), almost one million Chileans are estimated to have left or been exiled under the military dictatorship of General August Pinochet, who led a U.S.-backed military coup against leftist President Salvador Allende Gossens in 1973 and ruled until 1989. About ten percent of these refugees migrated to the United States, where many of them remained politically active and so had a substantial impact on American policy and cultural thought toward Chile, especially in the form of publicizing the abuses ordinary Chileans suffered under Pinochet's reign and attempting to garner international support against him. Of particular prominence is journalist and author Isabel Allende, niece of ex-President Salvador, who has explored such themes as freedom, exile, and gender in her renowned novels, one of which (*The Infinite Plan*) is set in Northern California where she has resided.

Migration during this third phase overlapped slightly with migration during the fourth phase (mid- to late-1980s), when economic deterioration in Chile provided greater incentive for Chileans to migrate abroad. Under Pinochet's dictatorship, emigration had slowed in the early-1980s due to good overall economic conditions in Chile, but it began to rise again in the mid-1980s due to new economic difficulties. The contours of these two migration phases are illustrated by U.S. immigration figures. Table 1 shows that Chilean immigration increased steadily after 1973 (the year Pinochet took power) until 1981. It stabilized between 1981 and 1986, but then rose again, peaking in 1990. Since 1990, Chilean immigration has remained stable at around 1,500 per year. This reflects Chile's good economic conditions compared with the rest of South America during the 1990s, as well as the fact that many Chileans returned home after the end of the Pinochet dictatorship – eager to reunite with friends and family and excited to build a new political

future in Chile, but also, as Jamie Llambias-Wolff explores in his research on return Chilean exiles, unprepared to deal with many of the harsh social and psychological pressures that reintegration would demand of them.

Therefore, U.S.-bound Chilean migration was most important during the mid- to late-1970s and mid- to late-1980s, but it has declined in relative salience since – especially compared to other South American migration figures, many of which grew substantially larger over the 1990s. For example, INS data show that among South American countries, only Argentina sent a higher percentage of its 1971-2001 migrants during the 1970s than Chile; only Guyana sent a higher percentage of its 1971-2001 migrants during the 1980s than Chile; and in the 1990s, Chile sent the lowest proportion of its 1971-2001 migrants of all South American countries. Chilean emigration may grow again in the future, but for now other South American groups, such as Colombians and Ecuadorians, are dominating the flows.

Historically, Chilean immigrants have resembled other well-off South American groups such as Argentines, Brazilians, and Venezuelans, all known for their high educational levels, geographical dispersion, and positive integration in the U.S. labor market. Recent INS data show fewer Chileans migrating under official employment preferences (14.7% in 2000 and 18.4% in 2001) and more migrating under family-sponsored and immediate-relative preferences instead. However, 2000 U.S. census data show that a high proportion of Chilean immigrants ages 25-64 continues to hold a bachelor's degree or higher (31.8%) and to work in managerial/professional occupations (30.8%), and that a relatively low proportion of Chilean immigrants are employed in lower-level blue-collar work (22.1%). Thus, like other South American immigrants, Chileans are educationally and occupationally as well as socially and politically diverse. And finally, the *Chilean Cultural Organization* of Palm Beach County, Florida, is just one example of the kinds of immigrant organizations that Chileans have founded to "promote and preserve Chilean culture" and history in the United States.

Suggested Readings

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to Immigration Since 1965. Ed. by Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, forthcoming).

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Table 1:
Chilean Immigrants Admitted to the United States, 1971-2001, By Decade
Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)

1970s		**1980s**		**1990s**	
1971	956	1981	2,048	1991	2,842
1972	857	1982	1,911	1992	1,937
1973	1,139	1983	1,970	1993	1,778
1974	1,285	1984	1,912	1994	1,640
1975	1,111	1985	1,992	1995	1,534
1976	1,266	1986	2,243	1996	1,706
1977	2,596	1987	2,140	1997	1,443
1978	3,122	1988	2,137	1998	1,240
1979	2,289	1989	3,037	1999	1,092
1980	2,569	1990	4,049	2000	1,712
				2001	1,947
Total 1970s	**17,190 (28.9%)**	**Total 1980s**	**23,439 (39.4%)**	**Total 1990s**	**16,924 (31.7%)**
				Total 1971-2001	**59,500**

Sources: INS Statistical Yearbooks, years 2001 (Table 3), 1997 (Table 3), 1987 (Table 3), 1985 (IMM 1.3), and 1980 (Table 13).