

Colombian Americans
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Some three million Colombians currently reside abroad, mostly in the United States, Costa Rica, and Spain. Between 1971 and 2001, the INS admitted 348,246 documented Colombian immigrants, and the U.S. census counted 151,100 Colombian immigrants in 1980, 303,093 in 1990, and 525,881 in 2000 (742,406 by adjusted 2000 Hispanic/Latino figures). In 2000, Colombians are the largest South American immigrant group in the United States: only Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, El Salvador, and Haiti have sent more immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America since 1970. Colombian immigration has been rising steadily from its pre-1970 levels, and migrant remittances sent back to Colombia have mushroomed accordingly. In 1999, Colombia received \$600 million from migrants abroad.

Colombia was primarily an immigrant-receiving country until the 1950s, when emigration picked up with the start of industrialization, rural depopulation, and progressive urbanization. Colombian emigrants headed primarily to Venezuela and Ecuador – Colombia’s neighbors – but also to the United States. Early research on Colombian emigrants divided them into three groups: traditional migrants (1918-1948), political migrants (1948-1962), and post-1962 economic migrants. *Los tradicionales* were a small number of migrants who came to the U.S. early on. They were usually highly-educated professionals like doctors, engineers, professors, and students looking for upward mobility as it was becoming harder to obtain in Colombia. Next, during *La Violencia*, extensive armed insurrection and guerrilla activity in rural areas of Colombia uprooted more people. Finally, economic emigrants began moving with the onset of rising rural economic depression and population growth in Colombia after 1962. While these emigrants came from all social classes and backgrounds, during the 1960s and 1970s U.S.-bound Colombian migration became less skilled as changes in the U.S. economy generated greater demand for unskilled labor, and blue-collar and service workers gradually began to replace their professional predecessors.

Recent migration streams have been strongly affected by Colombia’s drug war and escalating violence and economic instability since the 1980s. During this period, more Colombians of all backgrounds have been emigrating abroad to escape political persecution and economic losses. In fact, sociologist Luis Guarnizo (2001) estimates that as many as 200,000 to 300,000 Colombians migrated to the U.S. between 1998 and 2001 alone (these figures are *not* equal to INS admissions, which only count “legal” immigrants admitted by INS offices). Among them are larger numbers of well-educated Colombian professionals and Colombians travelling without legal documents. In 2000, the INS ranked Colombians among the top estimated undocumented immigrant populations in the U.S. (at 141,000).

Unlike the “de-skilling” of U.S.-bound Colombian migration through the 1970s, the new streams have been “professionalizing”. We see this in Collier and Gamarra’s comparison of the late-1970s to mid-1990s migrant stream and the mid-1990s to present-day migrant stream. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the number of middle- to upper-class migrants increased despite an overall favorable economic climate in Colombia, due to increasing political violence associated with the drug war. And in the mid-1990s, a deep economic recession worsened Colombia’s political crisis. As a result, even more middle to upper-class Colombians began emigrating in order to escape drastically deteriorating economic conditions as well as increasing violence and personal security threats. Compared to their predecessors, these new migrants are more likely to be younger and older rather than just working-age adults, more likely to come from smaller cities in rural areas rather than just central cities like Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín, and more likely to settle in Florida than to keep going to other traditional Colombian destinations like New York or Chicago. Indeed, in 2000, 30.6 percent of Colombian immigrants settled in Florida (primarily in Miami-Dade and Broward counties), 21.4 percent in New York (primarily in Queens, where Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights is considered the unofficial center of “Little Colombia”), 13.3 percent in New Jersey, 7.2 percent in California, and 4.3 percent in Texas.

In all of their destinations, Colombians exhibit great diversity. Guarnizo (2001) states that “today New York houses a representative cross section of Colombian society, including expatriated world-class artists and billionaire industrialists, international drug traffickers and petty drug dealers, underemployed professionals and tenured academics, blue-collar workers and emergent entrepreneurs.” Some Colombians are highly educated, well integrated into the formal U.S. labor market, and fluent in English. Others are semi-skilled, work in less prestigious occupations, and speak English less fluently, while still others are involved in illegal activities like drug trafficking and speak very little English. Overall, Colombian immigrants fall in the middle stratum of Latin American immigrant groups. For example, they are not as well represented among managerial and professional occupations as some other South American groups (like Venezuelans, Argentines, and Chileans), but neither are they as concentrated in low-status blue-collar occupations as Mexicans and many Central American and Caribbean groups. Even still, while lower-class Colombians encounter obvious difficulties getting by in the U.S. – especially if they are undocumented – many newer middle and upper-class Colombians have also encountered major difficulties securing a visa and legal status, transferring a professional degree from Colombia to the United States, or gaining a foothold in the U.S. labor market. Many of them have had to endure substantial downward mobility. There are also other divisions internal to Colombian immigrants. Many Colombian settlements are racially diverse and consist of persons of European, Afro-Caribbean, and indigenous heritage. But Colombians continue to differentiate themselves by race and regional origin, just like they did in Colombia. For example, many Colombian American associations – and not necessarily those listed below – continue to exclude Colombians of lower class or racial status from membership.

Among the many Colombian American institutions and associations in the United States are larger Colombian-American chambers of commerce as well as smaller Colombian businesses (especially in the restaurant and tourism industries), Colombian professional and networking organizations (such as the *Federation of Colombian Professionals* in New York), immigrant advocacy groups (such as the *Colombian American Service Organization* in Miami and the *Community Center of Legal Council* and the *TPS Committee for Colombia* in New York), and U.S.-based organizations promoting peace, justice, and welfare in Colombia (such as the *Colombia Support Network* in Madison, Wisconsin, and the *Movement for Peace* in New York). In addition, there is an even larger variety of Colombian music, dance, cultural, and political groups (such as the *American Colombian Democratic Organization* in Hollywood, Florida, *Colombianos Unidos* and the *Colombian Liberal and Conservative Parties* in New York, and the *Club Social Deportivo Colombia* in Fort Lauderdale, Florida). All of these institutions help Colombians maintain valuable cultural values, manage adaptation pressures, organize politically, and promote greater knowledge of Colombian history and culture in the United States. Today, Carlos Manzano is the lone elected Colombian official in New York, serving in the 65th Assembly District of Manhattan, although the proliferation of Colombian associations and institutions suggests that Colombian Americans' clout may increase in the future.

Unique to Colombians' situation in the United States is a stigma deriving from international drug trafficking (*narcotráfico*), the U.S.-sponsored war on drugs in Colombia, and generally tense political relations between Washington, D.C. and Bogotá. Drug trafficking and Colombian national identity have become inextricably intertwined in recent years, so much so that the resulting social stigma has increased levels of social fragmentation and general mistrust among Colombian immigrants. It has also hampered many of their efforts to improve their social standing in the United States, or to lobby successfully for political and legal benefits – such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) – while paradoxically strengthening their ties to Colombia. In the future, overcoming this collective stigma as well as their own internal ethnic, racial, regional, and class divisions will be an important part of Colombians' struggle to achieve upward mobility, avoid discrimination, and define their identity in the United States.

Suggested Readings

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