

Venezuelan Americans
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In *The Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, Society* (2005)
Edited by Ilan Stavans
New York: Grolier

Before the 1980s, Venezuela was a stable country with a center-left democratic system, a functioning upper-middle class economy, and a petroleum industry that successfully linked it to first-world development plans. It was also primarily an immigrant receiving, not sending, country. Historically the study of Venezuelan migration has been focused on immigrants *entering* Venezuela – from neighboring Colombia, Europe (primarily Spain, Italy, and Portugal), the Caribbean, other South American countries (such as Argentina and Uruguay), and Asia and the Middle East. Only recently have Venezuelan *emigrants* received much attention.

This shift occurred because various debt, banking, and currency crises and rising inflation and unemployment plagued Venezuela during the 1980s and 1990s, increasing incentives for emigration. During the 1980s, Venezuela witnessed economic stagnation and political discontent as its petroleum industry began going into long-term decline. In 1983, “Black Tuesday” marked the beginning of a long line of currency devaluations that would incite riots in February 1989. Then, during the 1990s, Venezuela witnessed two coups (1992), a presidential impeachment (1993), another major financial crisis (1994), and finally, the gradual collapse of its traditional party system and subsequent election of populist Hugo Chávez Frías as president (1998), much to the chagrin of to Venezuelan elites and business leaders. As Javier Corrales poignantly documents, real wages in Venezuela decreased almost seventy percent over two decades, the probability of being poor increased from 2.4 to 18.5 percent over one decade, and over two-thirds of the population now lives below the poverty line. Politico-economic unrest in Venezuela has worsened in recent years, especially following an attempted coup against Chávez on April 11, 2002, continued declines in petroleum values, and labor strikes and protests.

Like elsewhere in South America, these crises have made a middle-class lifestyle much harder to attain and protect. As Venezuela painfully worked its way through not one but two “lost decades,” increased emigration to the U.S. and elsewhere took on a powerful shape. A photo caption in a January 2003 *New York Times* article on conflict in Venezuela read, “Hundreds of people stood in line to apply for visas to go to Spain. Efforts by diplomats to resolve the stalemate between the president and his foes have been unavailing so far.”

As with Argentine emigration, U.S. figures are not recent enough to document the new movement. However, between 1971 and 2001, the INS admitted 59,953 documented Venezuelan immigrants, and the U.S. census counted 38,120 Venezuelan immigrants in 1980, 50,823 in 1990, and 114,677 in 2000 (149,309 by adjusted 2000 Hispanic/Latino figures). Specific to post-1989 Venezuelan emigration are rising

incentives for Venezuelan elites, entrepreneurs, and upper-level bureaucrats – as well as professionals and manual laborers – to migrate abroad in order to protect their personal property and capital investments, especially as Chávez and his populist policies have begun challenging them more seriously since 1998. In this respect, early analyses have likened Venezuelan emigration under Chávez’ presidency to Cuban emigration under Fidel Castro. Indeed, according to Venezuelan immigrant and sociologist Miguel Salazar, key elements of many Venezuelan Americans’ experience today are political as well as practical: settling in the United States, becoming politically active to oppose Chávez, and becoming more active in American politics.

The Venezuelan American community is based primarily in South Florida, and Venezuelans are more residentially concentrated than other South American immigrant groups, with the exception of the Guyanese and Ecuadorians. In 2000, Venezuelan immigrants settled primarily in Florida (44.2%), New York (9.6%), Texas (7.3%), New Jersey (6.5%), and California (5.3%). Also, Venezuelans in the United States have long been younger and more educated than most other Latin Americans immigrant groups – in 2000, 42.8 percent of Venezuelan immigrants boasted a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 35.2 percent worked in professional/managerial occupations. However, like many other South Americans, recent Venezuelan immigrants are increasingly battling the pressures of undocumented status, ethnic concentration, and uncertainty about politico-economic stability in Venezuela and the possibility of return home.

Because the Venezuelan community in the United States is so new and young, there have been few famous Venezuelan American icons and few large-scale Venezuelan American institutions, at least until recently. Florida-based *El Venezolano Newspaper* (which communicates news about Venezuela to residents in the U.S.) and the *Venezuelan American Brotherhood Foundation* (which strives to “assist Venezuelan and other Latin communities in South Florida and in their countries”) are just two examples of emerging Venezuelan American institutions and associations at present. As the Venezuelan community in the United States grows and matures into the future, more associations are sure to arise in order to assist new immigrants in maintaining valuable cultural values, managing adaptation pressures, organizing themselves politically, and promoting greater knowledge of Venezuelan history and culture in the United States.

Suggested Readings

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- Salazar, Miguel. "The Formation of a Transnational Community: The Highly-Skilled Venezuelan Diaspora in the U.S.A. and Canada." (Cambridge, MA: Qualifying Paper in Sociology, Harvard Univ., 2002).