

# **The Central American Foreign Born In The United States**

*by Megan Davy*

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In the United States, more attention is paid to migration from Mexico than from the Central American countries south of Mexico.

Although Mexico is often considered part of Central America in data collection (the US Census Bureau and the United Nations Population Division consider Mexico part of Central America while the US Office of Immigration Statistics does not), this Spotlight treats Central America as separate for two reasons. First, immigration patterns are markedly different from those of the Mexican foreign-born population, and second, US foreign policy response in the region requires consideration.

This Spotlight looks at both the political developments shaping the immigration of Central Americans to the United States as well as statistics representing their impact.

With the exception of estimates of Central Americans residing in the United States under the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program, all numbers come from the 2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics and the 2000 census; all years are government fiscal years (October 1 to September 30).

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

## **Developments Shaping Immigration from Central America and Policies Toward the Region**

- Political events and natural disasters have shaped immigration from Central America.
- In the 1980s, decisions on asylum applications from Nicaragua and El Salvador were influenced by US foreign policy toward the home country.
- The United States drafted specific immigration policies for Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans in the 1990s.
- An estimated 374,000 Central Americans are living in the United States under Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which the attorney general granted in 1998 and 2001 after natural disasters in the region.

## **A Statistical Overview of Central American Foreign Born in the United States**

- There are over two million Central American foreign born in the United States.
- Over half of all foreign born from Central America are from El Salvador and Guatemala.
- California, Florida, New York, Texas, and New Jersey are the top five states in which the Central American foreign born reside.
- The Central American foreign born compose at least 10 percent of the foreign-born populations of the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland.

- A discretionary immigration provision accounted for almost half of all new legal permanent residents from Central America in 2004.
- Of the Central American born age 25 and older, less than half have a high school diploma.
- The Central American born from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have the lowest high school graduation rates while Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have the highest.

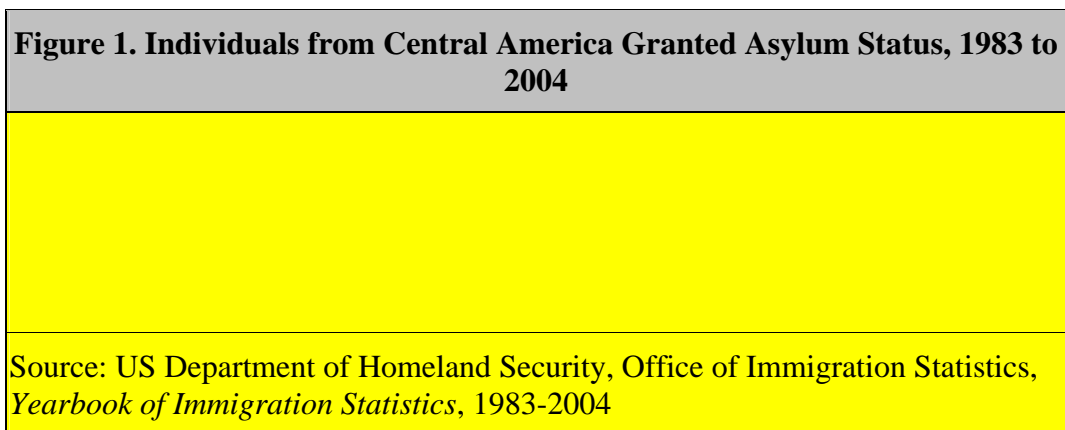
Countries Included in Central America
Belize
Costa Rica
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Nicaragua
Panama

**Political events and natural disasters have shaped immigration from Central America.**

Significant legal and illegal immigration to the United States began in the 1980s when civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, combined with already weak economies, created an exodus to the United States. Other periods of increased immigration have followed natural disasters, such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998, two earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001, and Hurricane Stan in 2005.

**In the 1980s, decisions on asylum applications from Nicaragua and El Salvador were influenced by US foreign policy toward the home country.**

From 1984 to 1990, the United States granted asylum to 25 percent of the 48,000 asylum applicants from Nicaragua, compared with only 2.6 percent of the 45,000 claims from Salvadorand and 1.8 percent of the 9,500 claims from Guatemalans. Most observers attribute this discrepancy to the US policy of supporting anti-communist activity. In the late 1980s, Nicaraguans were fleeing communist oppression, while the United States was supporting the Salvadoran government against a Marxist insurgency (See Figure 1).



**The United States drafted specific immigration policies for Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans in the 1990s.**

In 1991, the US government and attorneys settled the *American Baptist Churches (ABC) v. Thornburgh* class-action suit, which alleged that the government engaged in discriminatory treatment of asylum claims made by Guatemalans and Salvadorans. As a result, Guatemalans and Salvadorans physically present in the United States before October 1, 1990 and September 19, 1990, respectively, were granted a new interview and asylum decision, irrespective of any prior decisions on the asylum claim.

In 1997, President Clinton signed the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which provides various forms of immigration benefits and relief from deportation to certain Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans, as well as certain Cubans and nationals of former Soviet bloc countries and their dependents. Instead of having to prove 10-year residency and hardship to US citizen or legal permanent resident family members as a result of their deportation, as was stipulated under new legislation in 1996 (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act or IIRAIRA), citizens of these countries only have to have seven years of residency and prove hardship to themselves.

NACARA also grants legal permanent resident (LPR) status to Nicaraguans continually present in the United States since 1995 who applied before March 31, 2000. Salvadorans and Guatemalans who applied for benefits under the ABC case (prior to October 31, 1991 and October 1, 1991, respectively) are eligible for LPR status adjustment under the more lenient qualifications.

**An estimated 374,000 Central Americans are living in the United States under Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which the attorney general granted in 1998 and 2001 after natural disasters in the region.**

According to a Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress, it is estimated that, as of November 2004, over 290,000 Salvadorans, 80,000 Hondurans, and 4,000 Nicaraguans were benefiting from TPS.

TPS grants beneficiaries from a given country work authorization and protection from deportation for a time period designated by the attorney general. TPS does not include a path to permanent residency.

After Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador in 1998, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) announced TPS for citizens from these countries already living in the United States. TPS for Guatemalans and Salvadorans ended in March 1999 while TPS for Hondurans and Nicaraguans is currently extended until July 2007.

The attorney general announced TPS for El Salvador following two earthquakes in 2001; the status, recently extended, is valid until September 2007.

**There are over two million Central American foreign born in the United States.**

According to the 2000 census, there were 2,026,150 Central American foreign born in the United States.

**Over half of all foreign born from Central America are from El Salvador and Guatemala.**

Of the two million foreign born from Central America, 817,336 were from El Salvador and 480,665 were from Guatemala, according to Census 2000 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Foreign Born from Central America by Country, 2000**

Country	Number	Percent
Central America	2,026,150	100.0
El Salvador	817,336	40.3
Guatemala	480,665	23.7
Honduras	282,852	14.0
Nicaragua	220,335	10.9
Panama	105,177	5.2
Costa Rica	71,870	3.5
Other Central America	47,915	2.4

**California, Florida, New York, Texas, and New Jersey are the top five states in which the Central American foreign born reside.**

Over 70 percent of the Central American foreign born lived in five states according to Census 2000. California was home to 725,339 (36 percent), Florida to 241,703 (12 percent), New York to 207,828 (10 percent), Texas to 184,707 (nine percent), and New Jersey to 89,722 (or four percent).

**The Central American foreign born compose at least 10 percent of the foreign-born populations of the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland.**

While the Central American foreign born compose 6.1 percent of the total foreign-born population, according to Census 2000 they represent 28.1 percent of the 73,561 foreign born in the District of Columbia, 15.0 percent of the 570,279 foreign born in Virginia, and 12.8 percent of the 518,315 foreign born in Maryland.

**A discretionary immigration provision accounted for almost half of all new legal permanent residents from Central America in 2004.**

Of the 61,333 Central American foreign born who received legal permanent resident status in 2004, 28,456 (46 percent) were classed as "cancellation of removal" admittances, more than any other entrance category (see Figure 2).

According to US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), cancellation of removal is "a discretionary benefit adjusting an alien's status from that of deportable alien to one lawfully admitted for permanent residence. Application for cancellation of removal is made during the course of a hearing before an immigration judge."

**Figure 2. Immigrants from Central America by Class of Admittance, 2004**

Source: Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *2004 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*

**Of the Central American born age 25 and older, less than half have a high school diploma.**

According to Census 2000 data, 44.3 percent (or 838,835) of Central American born age 25 and older have at least a high school diploma. Only 8.3 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Educational Attainment of the Central American Foreign Born Population Age 25 and Older**

Source: US Census Bureau, Census 2000

**The Central American born from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have the lowest high school and college graduation rates while Costa Rica and Panama have the highest.**

The foreign born from El Salvador have the lowest high school graduation rate (34.8 percent) and the lowest percentage of those age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree (4.9 percent). For Guatemalan foreign born, high school and college graduation rates are 37.3 percent and 3.0 percent, respectively; for Honduran foreign born, the rates are 44.4 percent and 8.1 percent.

Of those born in Panama, 82.7 percent have a high school diploma or higher and 22.9 percent a bachelor's degree. Among the Costa Rican foreign born, 68.9 percent have a high school diploma and 18.1 percent a bachelor's degree.

**Sources**

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**Megan Davy** is a political analyst in the Migration Policy Institute. The Migration Information Source is a one-stop, web-based migration resource for journalists, policymakers, opinion shapers and researchers.