

Causes and Effects of Guatemalan Immigration to the United States

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ABSTRACT

Immigration has been a hot topic lately, especially immigration from Latin America. But why are millions of people leaving their countries and families to move to the United States? Through extensive interviews with Guatemalan immigrants as well as first hand observation of living conditions in Guatemala, this project takes a closer look at why there has been an increase in immigration from Latin American countries to the United States. This project will show the social, political, and economic reasons why Guatemalan immigrate to the United States, and the effects that this migration has on both Guatemala and the United States. This project will also showcase the myths and realities of immigration as well as provide information on possible immigration reform plans given by the current administration.

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF GUATEMALAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Recently one of the most talked about topics in our country has been immigration; more specifically, illegal immigration. The United States Census Bureau estimates that about 11.5 million undocumented immigrants are living in our country; about 75 percent of them are from somewhere in Latin America (bbcnews.com, 2006). Ryan Resch and I took a closer look at one of these Latin American countries, Guatemala. We went to Guatemala from late December of 2006 through January 2007 to ask why so many Guatemalans were emigrating to the United States, and the effects this migration has had on both of these countries. It is estimated that 1.3 million Guatemalans are living in the United States right now (Prensa Libre, 2007), that's over 10 percent of the population of the entire country of Guatemala, and about 480,000 of them are here as undocumented workers (census.gov, 2004).

Guatemala itself has both a complicated and painful history. About one thousand years ago, the great Maya Empire spread across most of what is now known as Guatemala. As that empire declined, in the 16th century, Guatemala was suddenly "discovered" by Spanish conquerors. As Spain conquered Guatemala, it primarily divided up the land into 22 large portions that were given to 22 families. To this day these 22 extended families own the majority of the wealth in Guatemala. In fact, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population lives on 50 percent of the total income (wiredtapmag.org).

Since the arrival of the Spanish, the indigenous population has been the more sub-servant class. They rarely owned land and were often forced to work on plantations as virtual slaves. It was not until 1944 that the Guatemalan people had their first opportunity for equality. At that time Guatemala entered "The Ten Years of Spring," a period of free speech and political activity, proposed land reform, and a perception that great progress could be made. Civilian president Juan Arévalo was democratically elected in 1945, followed by the election of another socialist democratic reformer, Jacobo Arbenz, in 1951. At that time, one of the largest landowners in Guatemala was the United Fruit Company. At that time the UFC owned over 550,000 acres of land, but was only using about 15 percent of it (Jonas, 1991). Arbenz told the UFC that the Guatemalan government would expropriate the land that had not been in use in the last 10 years, and would in turn compensate them with the amount they had previously written on their own tax valuations.

However, the UFC didn't like this idea and believed that they should be paid more for the land. Also, the UFC owned large amounts of land in other parts of Central America and worried that if they allowed negotiations to take place in Guatemala then what would stop the other countries from implementing the same types of reforms. Because of this, the UFC turned to its friends in high places, in the U.S. government. The directors of UFC began to lobby to convince the Truman and Eisenhower administrations that Colonel Arbenz intended to align Guatemala with the Soviet bloc. Besides the disputed issue of Arbenz's allegiance to Communism, the directors true fear was the impending land reform. The American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was an avowed opponent of Communism whose law firm had represented United Fruit. Also, his brother Allen Dulles was the director of the CIA (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 1999). Together the Dulles brothers doctored up a military sponsored coup that threw Arbenz out of power in 1954. After this Guatemala was run by a string of dictatorships through the 1990's. It is

also important to note that all of these dictatorships were supported by every U.S. administration from Eisenhower to Reagan, with the exception of the Carter administration.

By 1960 resistance mounted in Guatemala and guerilla groups formed; this began the 36 year-long civil war. These guerilla groups and the Guatemalan military often engaged in fierce battles. However, by the early 1980's these battles began to involve innocent citizens. The dictatorships of Romeo Lucas García from 1980 to 1982 and Efraín Ríos Montt from 1982 to 1983 caused the most destructive and horrific period of the entire Guatemalan civil war. Well over half of the documented massacres occurred during the dictatorships of these two men. Also, the escalation of military-sponsored kidnappings and assassinations escalated rapidly (Manz, 2004). At this time, the military was still fighting the guerrilla insurgency movement. They decided on a new approach to fighting the guerrilla by attacking peasants that were supposedly helping them. The military came up with the metaphor that the guerrillas were like fish and the peasants, most of them poor indigenous farmers, were like water: in order to kill the fish one must cut off the water supply. Thus, massacres began to occur in the Guatemalan countryside in order to wipe out the peasant population. It should also be mentioned that Ríos Montt and many of his commanding officers were trained at the U.S. School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. The Reagan administration gave military equipment and supplies to Ríos Montt despite receiving numerous reports from international human rights organizations about the crimes Montt's regime was committing (Manz, 2004).

The world finally took notice to what was happening in Guatemala when the 1992 Noble Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú, was able to draw attention to the extreme human rights abuses. Finally, on December 29, 1996, an official peace accord was signed and a constitution was formed.

Even though these peace accords were signed over ten years ago, numerous problems continue to plague this small Central American country. First of all, there is a huge disparity of wealth. The poorest 20 percent of the population receive only 1.9 percent of the total disposable income (educategirl.com 2007). Furthermore, there is an increasing unemployment rate of 10 percent (worldpress.org, 2006) in both rural and urban regions. Guatemala also lacks sufficient education programs. In 2000 the female illiteracy rate was 38.4 percent and the male illiteracy rate was 23.9 percent (educategirls.com), these rates are even worse in indigenous communities. The lack of education for children occurs for many reasons: enrollment costs, school locations, and a lack of teachers. Often public schools are too expensive for poor farming families to afford, not to mention the cost of the materials. Also, there are very few schools in rural communities; many children need to travel over an hour to reach a school.

In these same rural communities there is also a problem with access to health care. Guatemala is among the worst performers in terms of health outcomes in Latin America, with one of the highest infant mortality rates and one of the lowest life expectancies at birth. Major causes of death in Guatemala still include treatable and communicable diseases, such as diarrhea, pneumonia, cholera, malnutrition, and tuberculosis. (Gragnolati, 2003). There is also a significant problem with malnutrition; one of every two children are malnourished (Mendoza, 2006). The United Nations children's fund, UNICEF, reports that Guatemala has the worst malnutrition problem in Latin America, even higher than the 35.2 percent average in Africa.

One might take a look at all these problems and ask, what is the Guatemalan government doing to help? Although there have been initiatives taken by the Guatemalan government to reform some of these problems, there is a bigger problem that plagues the government itself—corruption. According to the USAID, Corruption is an endemic problem in Guatemala that has profoundly negative impacts on investment, governance and the legitimacy of democratic government. In addition to the direct losses caused by diversion of funds, corruption is used as an argument against paying taxes, impeding the generation of additional revenues. Newspapers, television, and radio in Guatemala report weekly news that uncovers an infinite list of bribes that amount each year to hundreds of thousands of dollars that disappear in hypothetical programs usually referred as “phantom projects” (Homomominilupus.com, 2007). People have completely lost faith in their government. They have endured a 36 year long civil war in which the government deliberately killed hundreds of thousands of its citizens, and now they still see how government officials are pocketing tax money instead of putting it into social programs. In fact, in January of 2007 Guatemala actually went bankrupt. There was no paper money to fill ATM machines or to fill bank safes. The government claimed that they had made a calculation error and simply did not print enough paper money. Many Guatemala citizens believe differently—that certain officials took the printed paper money for themselves. It is unlikely that the truth of what happened will ever be revealed.

Another problem that continues to overwhelm Guatemala is drug trafficking. The signs are visible everywhere in Guatemala. Newspapers carry frequent accounts of grisly execution-style murders. Immigration authorities report a surge in the entry of Colombian nationals. A newly chartered bank in Coban, 70 miles north of the capital, is doing a brisk business despite not having formally opened its doors to the public (aliciapatterson.org). Also, airstrips can be found in very remote regions of the northern jungle Petén area. Furthermore, U.S. officials now believe that 75 percent of the cocaine that arrives in the U.S. travels through Guatemala. (bbcnews.com, 2005). In the mountainous

region bordering Mexico, hundreds of Guatemalan peasants are cultivating opium poppies. Converted into paste, the crop is then sold to Mexican traffickers for processing into heroin (aliciapatterson.org).

Drug trafficking is just one of the many crime issues that can be found in Guatemala. There has also been an increase in organized crime, gang violence, and prostitution. This has all made Guatemala a much more insecure and dangerous place to live. Furthermore, UNICEF reports that approximately 60 percent of the homicides of women are the result of domestic violence, and that sexual abuse and incest affect 30 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys.

After taking a look at the numerous problems in Guatemala: crime, lack of health care, lack of education, and unemployment, it's not a surprise to see very high numbers of people emigrating from Guatemala. Many Guatemalans are desperate; they can't find a job, so they become poor, then they cannot afford to take care of their families. It is difficult to imagine not being able to afford a medical procedure or even simple medications to take care of your loved ones, or not being able to afford to send your children to school. This desperation is the biggest reason that people are emigrating from Guatemala. Often times they feel as if they have no other choice and cannot find another way to make money besides leaving to find work. One of the most popular places to find work is the United States.

However, getting to the United States isn't so easy for these poor, desperate immigrants. Immigrants who manage to find work and achieve moderate success symbolize hope for the thousands of native Central and South Americans who live in impoverished conditions. These vulnerable populations are easily exploited by human smugglers, commonly referred to as "Coyotes" (cjd.org). These coyotes often exaggerate the plethora of wealth and opportunities to poor Guatemalans. Guatemalan immigrants usually pay coyotes between \$2000-6000 for voyage to the U.S. border (personal interview, 2007). This is much more than most of these immigrants can afford. Thus many immigrants or the families of these immigrants become deeply in debt to the coyotes. Even after paying these high "travel costs," a safe voyage to the U.S. is not guaranteed. There is always a possibility of being stopped by the authorities, or even being deported back to Guatemala. Also, the coyotes often mistreat their passengers. Immigrants frequently go long periods of time without food or water, and are stuffed into cramped quarters throughout the journey. Furthermore, there have been many cases of coyotes sexually abusing their female passengers. When the immigrants finally reach the U.S. border, they are dropped off by the coyotes and forced to fend for themselves. They often must walk across the Arizona or New Mexico desert for days without food or water. According to the U.S. border patrol, in 2005, more than 500 migrants died while crossing the border.

These atrocious immigration stories were confirmed during various personal interviews taken in Guatemala with citizens who had crossed the border and returned. All of these interviewees stated that their main reasons for traveling to the United States was to work to either to pay for their children's education, or to simply pay for their food. Each one spoke of the dangerous passage he or she took crossing the border, jumping from vehicle to vehicle, walking miles at night, and spending days crossing the desert. Most of the interviews were taken in the small highland village of Chaculá in northwestern Guatemala. In this village, approximately 300 of its 1,000 citizens are currently in the United States working without documents. Most of them are young men between 15-35. These missing husbands, brothers, and fathers have had a significant impact on this small community. Spending years without seeing a loved one is very difficult, it has also been difficult for the numerous mothers left to be single parents while their husbands are away working in the States.

Many of the people interviewed also opened up about negative experiences that they had while working in the United States. Many were taken advantage of by employers or landlords. Others experienced harsh racism and discrimination. Each story was quite heartbreaking, but perhaps the most painful story was that of Jorge. Jorge paid a coyote about \$3,000 and was through Mexico to Phoenix, Arizona. Later, he was held in a van and traveled up through California and the Canadian Border States all the way through Pennsylvania. There, in Philadelphia, the van he was in got into a car accident. After the accident, Jorge woke up in a prison hospital where he remained until his deportation nine months later.

There are many anti-immigration groups in the United States that would argue that Jorge got what he deserved and shouldn't be here without documentation. Many of these groups see immigrants as enemies, terrorists, criminals, or economic threats. They use the immigrants as the scapegoat, and blame them for all of our nation's problems. One of these organizations, American Immigration Control, advertises on its web page things such as, "diversity weakens communities" and desires to "repeal federal bilingual education programs and bilingual balloting" (americanimmigrationcontrol.com). Another one of these organizations, Illegal Immigrant Protest, accuses immigrants of having access to free health care, free education, and of the "outright displacement of the American worker." They also accuse immigrant children of dragging down standardized test scores, as if they are the only problem with the American public educational system. They claim "hospitals across the country are closing at an alarming rate due to the cost of providing "free" care. Some of these groups even go as far as saying

that there is a secret plot by the Mexican government and American Hispanics to wrest the Southwest away from the United States in order to create "Aztlan," a Hispanic nation (splcenter.org).

The reality is that immigrants do not commit more crimes than native-born citizens do. Using data from the 2000 Census, an Immigration Policy Center report shows that immigrants are less likely than native-born citizens to be behind bars. Among men age 18 to 39 (who comprise the vast majority of inmates in federal and state prisons and local jails), immigrants were five times less likely to be incarcerated than the native-born (immigrantsolidarity.org). Also, the concept that undocumented immigrants drain the welfare system is a myth. Undocumented immigrants are completely ineligible for the vast majority of state and federal benefits. As a result, health care spending for immigrants is approximately half that of citizens (Mohanty, 2005). Finally, the idea that undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes is ridiculous. All immigrants pay sales taxes and most pay income taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) or false social security numbers. The Social Security system reaps the biggest windfall from taxes paid by immigrants. The Social Security Administration reports that it holds approximately \$420 billion from the earnings of immigrants who are not in a position to claim benefits (testimony, 2004).

Still many of these anti-immigration groups insist that we solve the "immigration crisis" by building a 700-mile fence along the southern border, charging undocumented immigrants with a felony, or even deporting all of the millions of undocumented immigrants who are living in the U.S. regardless of how long they have been living here.

Last year, May of 2006, President Bush proposed his own immigration reforms. First, he wants to secure U.S. borders by adding 6,000-18,000 more border guards and installing more hi-tech detection measures such as hi-tech fences, new border patrol roads, and motions sensors along the southern border. He also wants to implement a temporary worker program that would match "honest immigrants" with jobs that employers could not find Americans to do. The worker would have to return to his or her country of origin after a specified time. He also wants to create new identification cards for legal foreign workers that would allow employers to verify they were hiring a legal worker. Bush also wants to provide illegal immigrants with a chance for citizenship. He said applicants would have to pay a penalty for breaking the law, pay back taxes, learn English, and would have to "wait in line" behind legal migrants. In total this proposed plan would cost about \$1.9 billion.

Many immigrant advocacy groups do not believe that the plans of the radical anti-immigrant groups or those of President Bush will "solve" anything. Many of these advocacy groups believe that the creation of these identity cards will only ostracize the immigrant community more. They also believe that building fences and criminalizing undocumented workers will only attack the effects of the actual problem and not the cause itself. The cause of course being that poverty in Latin American countries causes people from these countries to move to the United States. So instead of putting billions of dollars into militarizing borders and imprisoning immigrants, the U.S. should spend the money on helping out these impoverished countries.

Many of these advocacy groups would also argue that the U.S. is not helping out these Latin American countries at all, but that their policies are only impoverishing them more. The most obvious example of these is through the so call "free" trade agreements. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed in 1994 was designed to increase the scope for the flow of free trade and investment among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. It includes measures for the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade, as well as many other specific provisions concerning the conduct of trade and investment that reduce the scope for government intervention in managing trade (populareconomics.org). However, many argue that NAFTA has not helped Mexico whatsoever. According to a 2006 article in the Minnesota Star Tribune, NAFTA's agricultural provisions resulted in a flood of subsidized corn being imported into Mexico from the U.S. which drove about 1.5 million rural families out of business. Also, NAFTA's labor rules did not provide Mexican workers with gains in workplace rights. Thus, their inability to unionize has made the wage of Mexican factory workers fall by more than 20 percent over NAFTA's first five years. Many argue that NAFTA's detrimental effects on Mexico has directly related to the increase in Mexican emigration. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of immigrants to the U.S. from Mexico actually decreased by 18 percent in the three years before NAFTA's implementation. But, in the first eight years of NAFTA, the annual number of immigrants from Mexico increased by more than 61 percent. Consequently, many immigrant advocacy groups encourage the elimination, or at least modification of NAFTA.

The majority of U.S. lawmakers do not seem to agree with the need for the modification of NAFTA and have in fact passed the newest free trade agreement, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which extends the same trade policies through the countries of: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. It was signed May 28, 2004, and suspiciously passed through the U.S. House of Representatives by one vote in the middle of the night decision by the U.S. Congress on July 27, 2005. Many organizations, including the U.S. International Trade Commission and the Catholic Bishops of Central American, believe that CAFTA's effects on these already impoverished countries will be horrendous and will displace millions of rural people. Critics of CAFTA also believe that its actual implementation was only made possible due to

numerous threats and bribes in the U.S. Congress as well as in the lawmaking houses of the other six participating nations. Bishop Álvaro Ramazzini of San Marcos, Guatemala wrote this about CAFTA on November 11, 2005.

The recent passage of the Central America Free Trade Agreement by the U.S. Congress is a source of grave concern to my diocese and to citizens of my country, Guatemala. A good agreement might have been a tool to ease the grinding poverty that plagues the daily lives of too many Guatemalans. Instead, this agreement not only fails to address the needs of Central America's poor, sick and vulnerable but may well make conditions here worse. CAFTA's U.S. passage, made possible by political threats, payoff promises and procedural manipulations, resembled the tactics employed in March to pass CAFTA in Guatemala's Congress. The juxtaposition of certain politicians' claims that CAFTA would promote democracy with the process that was required to pass it is one of CAFTA's cruel ironies. In my country, when thousands of protesters raised their voices against CAFTA, President Oscar Berger responded by calling on the Guatemalan military to suppress them, thereby violating the fragile Peace Accords that ended decades of bloody civil war. The military used water cannons, rubber bullets and armored vehicles in the capital. In the countryside, military police attacked a march of Mayan peasant farmers, murdering two civilians.

CAFTA opponents believe that it too will increase the emigration flow from these poor Central American countries just as NAFTA increased Mexican emigration.

Guatemalans, along with many other Latin American citizens, are immigrating to the United States to escape poverty and to provide their families and themselves with better lives. However, large influxes of undocumented workers can cause problems in society. How should these influxes be controlled and monitored? Is the answer building a fence? From my experience in Guatemala, I believe the answer is to stop looking at the immigrants as a problem and start looking at them as immigrants who are human beings. After we humanize these people we can begin to understand one another and hopefully come together to alleviate problems that arise when different cultures and languages live together.