Latin American Immigrants in the Washington, DC Metropolitan area: History and Demography

Audrey Singer
The Brookings Institution

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In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the Washington region grew, in large part due to the economic stability offered by the expansion of the federal government, international organizations and embassies, and universities, all of which attracted both native and foreign-born population. In addition, since the late 1970s, the U.S. government has resettled thousands of refugees in the region. Washington's increasing internationalization that began largely with professionals and students has continued with both high- and low-skilled immigrants arriving through networks that join them to family members and friends already living in the region. Washington maintains a growing economy and a growing population.

Latin Americans in the Washington region have a unique history which has resulted in a national origin composition that is considerably different from other metropolitan areas. Washington's Latin American and Caribbean immigrants make up 40 percent of all immigrants in the region. Washington's largest immigrant group is from El Salvador, currently the second largest Salvadoran population among U.S. metropolitan areas, after Los Angeles. However, the earliest waves of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants arrived from Cuba and the Dominican Republic beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, joining Puerto Ricans and South Americans from a handful of countries including Bolivia and Peru. This early wave of immigrants included professionals and students seeking higher education (Cadaval, 1989). In the 1980s, migrants began to flee from Central America, as civil wars intensified in several countries and as natural disasters further devastated living conditions and local economies.

The seeds of Central American migration began in the 1960s and 1970s with the recruitment of domestic workers, mostly women, by Central American diplomatic and international staff (Repak, 1995). As family members and friends escaped the turmoil in El Salvador, Guatemala, and other Central American countries, they joined these earlier migrants, and the immigrant population became more gender-balanced. Today the population has slightly more men than women. In the 1980s, many of the migrants settled in neighborhoods in the District of Columbia, such as Mount Pleasant and Adams Morgan, where Latin Americans working in

American countries are among the top ten: El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala, and Bolivia. El Salvador is the largest source country in the metropolitan area, with 133,000 estimated in 2006, more than twice the size of the next largest country of origin, India.[2] Also among the top ten origin countries are five Asian countries–India, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and China–and Ethiopia.

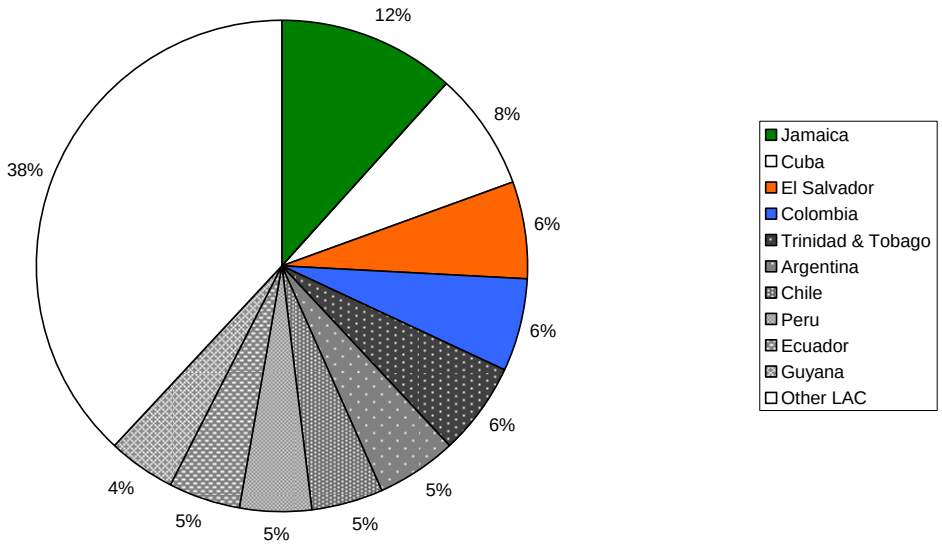
Table 1. Top Countries of Birth for the Foreign-born Population in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2006

		2006	
		Estimate	Percent
	Total Foreign Born	1,063,033	100.0
1	El Salvador	133,191	12.5
2	India	62,311	5.9
3	Korea	58,934	5.5
4	Mexico	43,633	4.1
5	Vietnam	43,215	4.1
6	Philippines	40,517	3.8
7	China*	40,422	3.8
8	Guatemala	33,843	3.2
9	Bolivia	32,344	3.0
10	Ethiopia	27,703	2.6
11	Peru	27,676	2.6
12	Other Western Africa**	25,270	2.4
13	Honduras	22,763	2.1
14	Iran	20,443	1.9
15	Nigeria	20,277	1.9
16	United Kingdom	19,143	1.8
17	Pakistan	18,558	1.7
18	Ghana	16,969	1.6
19	Germany	16,240	1.5
20	Jamaica	15,254	1.4
21	Africa, n.e.c.***	14,185	1.3
22	Taiwan	12,845	1.2
23	Trinidad and Tobago	12,639	1.2
24	Middle Africa	12,316	1.2
25	Canada	12,016	1.1
26	Colombia	11,925	1.1
27	Brazil	10,399	1.0
28	Russia	9,137	0.9
29	Afghanistan	9,014	0.8
30	Dominican Republic	8,662	0.8

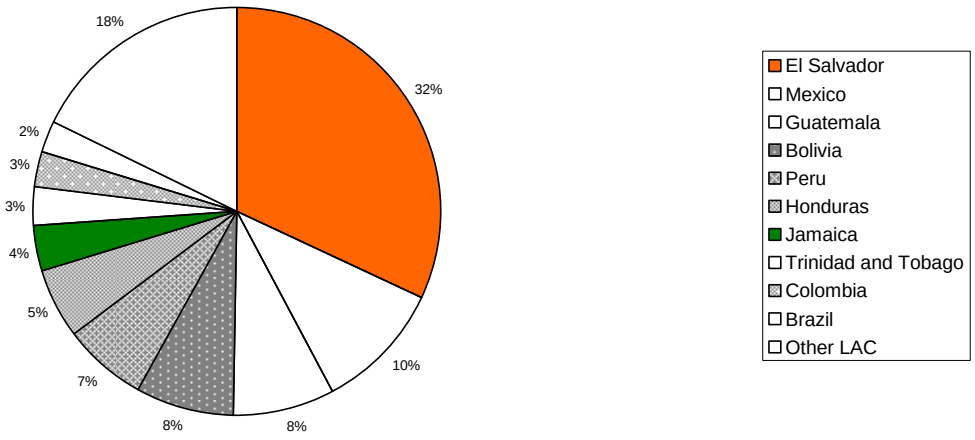
*excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan

**"Other Western Africa" does not

National Origins of Latin American Immigrants in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 1980



National Origins of Latin American Immigrants in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2006



B. Washington’s Latin American and Caribbean

surprising finding is that Arlington County has a very high share of Latin American newcomers (those who entered the United States since 2000) despite decline in their absolute numbers in the past six years.

Total Washington Metropolitan Area	56.1	18.6	20.0	36.1

Among the jurisdictions, it is interesting to note where the highest rates of naturalization are and among whom: among Mexicans in Montgomery County, South Americans in Prince George's county, and nearly across the board for Caribbeans. Central Americans have consistently low rates of naturalization across all places in the region. The Mexicans and Central Americans have been in the United States for less time than the other groups, and this is reflected in their propensity to become U.S. citizens. An obstacle for Central Americans is that a large number have Temporary Protected Status, a legal status that allows them to live and work temporarily but does not put them on a pathway to citizenship.[4]

D. Washington's Latin American immigrant population is comprised largely of working-age adults with high rates of employment but skills that limit their labor market performance. More than one-third are lacking a high school diploma, two-thirds are not proficient in English, and more than one-third of those employed work in blue-collar service occupations.

With regard to basic demographic features, the Latin American immigrant population looks quite different than the total population of the Washington region. The comparisons in this section are for the metropolitan area as a whole for 2006 only. (See Table 6.)

Table 6. Demographic, Social, and Economic Characteristics for Latin American Immigrants and Total Population in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2006

	Latin American Immigrants		Total Population	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
TOTAL	421,587	100.0	5,220,055	100.0
Race and Ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latino	361,464	85.7	612,929	11.7
NH-White	12,829	3.0	2,684,441	51.4
NH-Black	41,962	10.0	1,363,698	26.1
NH-Asian & Pacific Islander	1,718	0.4	446,347	8.6
NH-Other^	3,614	0.9	102,201	2.0
NH-American Indian or Alaskan native	0	0.0	10,439	0.2
Age and Sex				

Linguistically Isolated	50,549	34.6	104,114	5.4
Poverty Status				
Living below poverty line	37,049	9.0	301,483	5.9
Living at or above povertly ine	372,751	91.0	4,770,459	94.1
Living below 200% of poverty line	115,795	28.3	802,237	15.8
Living at or above 200% of poverty line	294,005	71.7	4,269,705	84.2
Employment Status				
Total, in the labor force	309,742	100.0	2,955,397	100.0
Employed	295,456	95.4	2,819,468	95.4
Unemployed	14,286	4.6	135,929	4.6
Not in the labor force	85,059	20.2	1,122,976	21.5
Occupation				
Total workers age 16+	343,390	100.0	3,386,407	100.0
Service	**113,079**	**32.9**	**523,841**	**15.5**
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	54,297	15.8	125,728	3.7
Food Prep and Serving Related	38,028	11.1	152,336	4.5
Personal Care and Services	14,287	4.2	110,335	3.3

of Latin American immigrants into the Washington region is vital for its viability to grow in the globalized economy to which the region is attached. It is in the interest of local institutions, leaders, and the public – as well as immigrants and their children – for incorporation on a grand

Table 4. Period of Entry for Latin American & Caribbean Immigrants in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2006

	Number	Percent

References

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