

**AMBIGUOUS IDENTITIES:  
CENTRAL AMERICANS IN SOUTHERN  
CALIFORNIA**

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## **Introduction**

Central Americans in the United States today find themselves in a highly ambivalent situation. Many initially came as result of war, persecution, and/or deteriorating economic circumstances resulting from political instability in their home countries with the idea of returning when conditions returned to normal. Others came with the idea of earning money in the United States and returning after a few years to their countries of origin. The duration of political unrest and economic instability, as well as personal factors, led many to stay long beyond expectations, and many have settled in this country.

However, with the end of the war in El Salvador, the temporary status of Salvadorans is ending (although some are eligible for asylum). Increased political hostility toward immigrants, especially in California, makes it difficult for many to remain and complicates settlement and economic incorporation. Recession in California, cutoff of college educational opportunities, and threatened cutoff of education and health care with Proposition 187, have also made it difficult for undocumented immigrants, especially recent arrivals, to find stable work or secure living conditions.

At the same time, continued economic differences in the home countries (and in some cases lack of security) means that immigrants have little to return to. In addition, many have families at home dependent on remittances they can send from better paying jobs in the United States.

This paper is based partly on preliminary results from a larger study of Salvadorans and Guatemalans in California, which is being conducted in both the San Francisco area, by

Carlos Cordova and Susanne Jonas, and in the Los Angeles area, by Norma Chinchilla and Nora Hamilton. It involves a survey of approximately 600 persons, 300 in each area, using a questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions. The purpose of the study is 1) to ascertain factors in decisions of Central Americans to remain in the United States or return to Central America, 2) to analyze the impact of these decisions on immigrant families in terms of economic and political behavior, identity and social patterns, and 3) to examine the extent and nature of contacts and links between Central Americans in the United States and their communities and families in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The focus of this paper is an examination of the quantitative data from the interviews in Southern California, and of qualitative data from a smaller subset (41) of these interviews.

## **II. Decisions to Remain or Return**

Respondents were given several different options in response to the question: Do you believe that you will return to live in El Salvador/Guatemala? Of the sample of 300 persons, exactly half (151, or 50 percent) plan to remain in the United States (Table I). This represents a striking change from plans at time of arrival, when only 12 percent planned to remain, 50 percent planned to come for a temporary period, and the rest were uncertain. Nearly 40 percent of those who initially came for a temporary period now plan to remain. Only three persons now plan to return immediately, another 25 plan to return within a definite and specified period of time, a total of 28 or 9% with definite plans to return. The rest include 72 who are thinking of returning at some unspecified date in the future (24%), 23 who might return depending on circumstances (8%), 19 characterized as "don't know" or "no response," and 7 "other." If we collapse these four categories, there are 121 (40.3%) in the "indefinite" category, many of whom plan to remain for the present but may return in the future.

The study examines several factors believed to be important in influencing decisions to remain or return: legal status, length of stay in the United States, gender, initial reasons for

migration, family presence in the United States, and influence of the peace accords or negotiations in the respective countries of origin.

With respect to legal status, over half of the respondents (159, or 53 percent are, or claim to be, citizens (19) or permanent residents (140) (Table II). Only 12 percent state that they are undocumented. In contrast, the vast majority (82 percent) were undocumented at the time of their arrival. Status does have an effect on plans to remain; 54.7 percent of citizens/permanent residents plan to remain, compared to only 40.5 percent of the undocumented, but this relationship is not as strong as one might expect. In contrast, 73.3 percent of those who received amnesty have definite plans to remain. Only 30 percent of those with TPS/DED had definite plans to remain, undoubtedly due to the indefinite status of this group; this status expired in January 1996; 60 percent of this group are indefinite about their return plans. Proportionately more Guatemalans (56.6 percent) than Salvadorans (47.7 percent) plan to remain; this may be due to the number of Salvadorans confronting an end to their temporary status and the fact that the peace process is less advanced in Guatemala than in El Salvador (Table VI).<sup>1</sup>

Of 293 respondents who provided information on their date of arrival, 249, or 84 percent, arrived in 1980 or afterward. Within this group there is a striking difference between those who arrived between 1980 and 1986 and those who came later; 53.9 percent of this earlier cohort have definite plans to remain, while only 45.5 percent of the 1987-94 cohort plan to remain (Table III). The earlier group that came during a period of considerable turmoil in their countries of origin and, even if they may have planned to remain temporarily, their plans were frustrated by the duration of these conditions. They also came during a period of increasing concern in the United States regarding immigration, indicated in the debates surrounding the passage of IRCA, the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which might have prompted them to legalize their status as soon as it was feasible to do so. In contrast to the post-1986 arrivals

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<sup>1</sup>The end of temporary status has prompted some Salvadorans to seek asylum through on the basis of the ABC (American Baptist Church) decision to the effect that immigrants had been unjustly denied asylum during the 1980s.

they have had greater opportunity to do this and also more time to become settled.

Among the different age groups, 56 percent among the younger cohorts (ages 20-29) plan to remain, compared to 48 percent of those 30-39, 49 percent of those between 40 and 49; 40 percent of those between 50 and 59, and 42.9 percent of the small number of those 60 and above (Table IV). It is probable that a substantial proportion of the youngest group came as teenagers and were socialized in U.S. schools; in any event their major perceptions or recollections of their country of origin would presumably be of a country at war and experiencing severe economic difficulties. In contrast, older cohorts may remember periods of relative peace and prosperity in their home countries and (depending of course on age at time of arrival) may have found it more difficult to adjust to life in the United States.

Studies of immigrant adaptation and return according to gender have indicated that women are more likely to want to remain in the United States than men even though their economic opportunities may be more limited than those of men. This is because many experience greater personal freedom and independence than they would have in their countries of origin (see Chavez et al, 1990; Kibria, 1994; Repak, 1994). Our data does not substantiate this finding; 51.5 percent of the men and 49.4 percent of the women plan to remain in the United States; although this difference is small it is not in the expected direction (Table V). However, in the open ended responses several women indicated that they experienced greater freedom, more options to do what they want, and greater independence here. One woman stated that she would remain though her husband would like to return; he was better off economically in El Salvador. (In most cases, both either planned to remain, or to return at least eventually.) When asked about the preferences of their children, most of those who responded indicated that their children had grown up here, were used to being here, and would probably remain. This again corresponds to expectations in the literature and previous studies (Goldring, 1992; Guarnizo, 1993).

In response to the question why they came to the United States, 142, or nearly half, gave political conditions in their country of origin; 55 or 19 percent mentioned economic conditions in

their country of origin, 23 percent came for family reunification or other personal reasons, and only 8 percent came due to economic opportunity in the United States. (Table VII). As would be expected, most of those who came in the 1980s gave political reasons, while most of those who came in the 1970s came for economic reasons.

Of those who migrated to the United States because of political conditions in their country of origin 51 percent plan to remain; of those who came because of economic conditions, 47.3 percent plan to remain, and among those who came to take advantage of economic opportunities in the United States 45.5 percent plan to stay. This could help to explain the large number of the youngest cohort who are planning to remain; over 62 percent gave political conditions as their reasons for migration, compared to 45 percent or less among the other groups. Nearly 59 percent of those who came for reasons of family reunion plan to remain, in contrast to 46.4 percent of those who came for other personal reasons. (The last category, those who came "for adventure," or "to get to know the United States" is too small to be significant.)

Finally, we attempted to ascertain the relationship between plans to remain or return and family in the United States, based on whether respondents had children and the location of their children. In the early to mid 1980s, there seemed to be relatively high levels of family separation, although evidence for this is partly anecdotal, based on conversations with counselors, priests, and teachers; and intake interviews at an immigration counseling center. In the current study we found that 58.9 percent of the respondents with no children (73 total) planned to remain. Again, the youngest cohort had the largest proportion (52 percent, compared to 14 percent or less among the other groups) of those without children.

Among those with children (226), in by far the largest number of cases (157) all of the children were in the United States (Table VIII). Of those with all their children in the United States, 53.5 percent planned to remain, compared to 35 percent of those with some children in the United States and 31 percent of those with all of their children abroad. This causal relationship could of course go either way: having the family here is a motivation for staying (or having children at home is a motivation for returning), or the respondents came with their

families or sent for the children because they planned to settle in the United States.

Questions to ascertain the perceptions of Central Americans of conditions in their home countries and in the United States revealed an awareness of the difficult decision that confronts the would-be immigrant or returnee. Opinions were mixed as to whether the peace accords/negotiations in El Salvador and Guatemala had resulted in an improvement in the political or economic situation in their home country. Of those who responded yes or no to the question: will the peace accords/negotiation lead to a more stable political situation in El Salvador/Guatemala, a slight majority (54.7 percent) believe that the peace accords **would not** lead to a more stable political condition. A similar percentage (54.9 percent) believed that they would not lead to economic improvement. Only 17 percent indicated that the accords had affected their decision to return.

Respondents were also asked whether they thought they would be able to find employment, or would have sufficient economic resources, if they returned. Forty-four percent believed they would be able to find employment or economic resources on their return, as opposed to 42 percent who did not. Exactly half of those who responded to a question regarding political and security problems anticipated problems on their return, while half did not. These expectations did seem to influence their expectations regarding return. As would be expected, a larger proportion of those concerned about finding employment on their return planned to remain (60.3 percent), whereas only 40 percent of those who felt they could find employment had definite plans to stay. Similarly, 59 percent of those who believe they would experience security problems plan to remain vs. only 43.9 percent of those who do not anticipate such problems.

Among those who explained their responses in the questionnaires we examined, reasons given for political and economic improvement were an end to the war, less danger, and an increase in investment, trade and jobs. Those anticipating that conditions would **not** improve pointed to failure to comply with accords, crime and delinquency, continued or increased poverty, and high levels of unemployment. As stated by one respondent, a Salvadoran: "Now

everything is worse; everyone is armed; they kill you for a watch. There are 40,000 unemployed soldiers and 30,000 unemployed guerrillas...For a small country with this amount of unemployment, the situation is very serious." He thinks that many will come to the United States despite the difficult economic conditions here because "at home they fear for their life."

A few respondents knew of others who had returned - relatives, friends or acquaintances - and in most cases indicated that they had readjusted well in their country of origin. One mentioned uncles and friends who had started their own business; another mentioned a nurse who had lived here for thirty years and had done well. Several mentioned that if they themselves returned they would bring money to start their own business, or that they (or in some cases their children) would have certain advantages in finding work due to English language ability, university education, and/or professional training. In short, both the experience of those who have returned and the expectations of those here indicate that economic success on return to El Salvador or Guatemala would probably depend on bringing resources from the United States, whether economic resources which could be invested in a business or skills and professional training. There is no guarantee of success, however; one respondent mentioned several acquaintances who had come back to the United States after trying to start businesses in El Salvador.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents (86 percent) believe that conditions for immigrants in the United States have grown worse. Of those who elaborated on this response, the majority pointed to anti-immigrant laws and increased discrimination, and/or high unemployment, cost of living and limited work opportunities. Most would advise others from their country not to come: "Life here is very difficult"; "Better to save the money they would spend coming here"; "They will be disillusioned. They believe everything is easy - that the money is going to fall into their hands. In reality it is hard `cuesta ganar el dinero."

However, there were a few who believed that others should come **in spite of** the worsening conditions, and the reasons given are interesting. "They have the right to improve their lives, as long as they come to improve themselves and get ahead and not cause problems.

Another indicated that although conditions have worsened, he believes in a better future for his family here and would still advise others to come. According to another, "Conditions for immigrants have worsened due to the change in policy [but he] "would advise people to come because there are opportunities to develop here." In short, for these respondents, traditional immigrant expectations of a better life in the United States seem to hold: although conditions for immigrants are worsening economically and politically, there are still opportunities for individual or family mobility that don't exist in their countries of origin.

### **III. Perceptions of the United States and Country of Origin**

Several closed and open-ended questions elicited information having to do with immigrant perceptions regarding the United States and their country of origin (El Salvador or Guatemala) and their relationship with each. These included questions regarding self-identity, likes and dislikes about the United States and home country, and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

To the question: "How do you see yourself?" the majority (62 percent of the total) see themselves as Guatemalan or Salvadoran. Another 32 percent see themselves as both U.S. and Salvadoran/Guatemalan; only 4 percent identified as U.S. In short, self-identity as Salvadoran or Guatemalan includes many who plan to remain in the United States as well as many who are planning to return or are indefinite about their future.

Asked about dislikes, the responses tended to cluster around certain issues. With respect to what they liked most about the United States, a substantial number gave responses about economic stability and opportunity, technological advances, and material conveniences. A second, somewhat smaller set of responses focused on political liberties, democracy, freedom of expression. Perhaps the largest group had to do with advantages for children, especially educational advantages. "Children can prepare themselves to get ahead" or "serve society." They could become bilingual.

Several felt that they themselves had changed as a result of living here, generally in the direction of increased awareness or openness, or greater effort toward self-improvement. "Me da cuenta de como es la vida" (I'm recognizing what life is all about); "Me he vuelto mas metodica" (I've become more methodical); "Hay que ser mas listo, no tan ingenio" (One has to be more "on your toes", not so naive." "It has forced me to be more responsible." "I am more liberal than before in making my decisions." "I have improved myself, I am less passive than before. "More materialistic, more liberal, more independent. In some cases, these changes may be due to the fact that some respondents came when they were quite young and have matured since coming to the United States, but the perception of change as a result of living here is important.

Dislikes focused particularly on discrimination (racial discrimination, laws unfavorable to minorities, and violations of immigrant rights) and the problem of gangs, drugs and violence. Others mentioned the frenetic pace of life, high rents and costs of living, and the fact that children don't learn the culture of their country of origin. Some noted the individualistic and isolated life style.

Responses to the questions of what they most liked in their country of origin were overwhelmingly concentrated in three areas: 1) the relative tranquility and lack of stress; 2) the greater warmth of the people, the sense of community and solidarity; and 3) the landscape, nature, and rural life. Other responses were related: being with the family and family unity; culture and customs, stronger moral values. In contrast, dislikes about their country of origin centered on the economic and political situation: 1) poverty, unemployment, economic insecurity, low wages, the high cost of living; and 2) political instability, injustice, corruption, guerrillas, politicians, laws that function only for the rich.

To the extent that these responses can be generalized, they seem to combine a strong emotional attachment to the country of origin with a belief that more general political and economic conditions are better in the United States. There is also a belief that there are more opportunities in the United States for the advancement of themselves and their children, although the effort required is far greater, and the personal cost much higher, than they had

previously envisioned. This may be particularly true for older immigrants who made considerable sacrifices for their children and look back with nostalgia on a relatively tranquil life in El Salvador or Guatemala. One example is a 52-year old Salvadoran woman who came in 1969 to get ahead economically, initially with the idea of staying for five years. Subsequently she helped other members of her family to come here. She believes that immigrants have achieved something, sending money back to their families and in many cases building houses there. "Without this help the country would suffer a lot. Every Salvadoran family has one member here.<sup>2</sup> They do not come for their own advantage but to help their children."

However, she believes that most Salvadoran immigrants would prefer to retire in their own country. While she likes the independence she has in the United States and owns here own business, she dislikes the stress and does not feel that she has integrated into the country. Her own return depends of having her house there: "I am working for that." In contrast, her children have grown up here and have professional jobs or are attending the university; they see this as their country and have no desire to return.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Our findings suggest certain patterns that can be examined further. First, the age cohort with the greatest likelihood of remaining in the United States consists of the 20-29 year-old group. In examining this relationship further, we found that this cohort incorporates more people who came because of the political situation in their home countries, and a disproportionate number who have no children, both factors in a stronger tendency to remain in the United States. Beginning with the 20-29 year old cohort, there is also a striking correlation between age and level of education, with those who have completed secondary education decreasing with age. Thus sixty percent of the 20-29 year-old group have completed high school

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<sup>2</sup>The proportion of Salvadoran families with members in the United States is indeed high: a recent study suggested that for 14-22 percent of Salvadoran households remittances are an important source of income (Funkhouser, 1995). With respect to the importance of remittances as a proportion of the Salvadoran GDP and trade balance, see Lozano Ascencio, 1993.

compared with 50 percent of those in their 30s, 41 percent in their 40s, and 25 percent in their 50s. To the extent that the cohort in their 20s attended at least high school in the United States, they were exposed to a relatively powerful agent for socialization into U.S. culture. A systematic examination of the qualitative data on perceptions of the United States and country of origin could also verify differences in perceptions of the political and economic instability in the home country, based on the hypothesis that for the younger group these perceptions are less likely to be modified by memories of an earlier more tranquil or stable period.

Second, although the preference of women respondents to remain in the United States is not as strong as for men, responses to open-ended questions indicate an awareness of greater freedom and opportunity for women in this country. At the same time this may be offset by the presence of at least some children in the country of origin, age, and date of arrival, among other factors. To the extent that women are disproportionately represented or underrepresented in certain cohorts, this could help to explain the absence of a strong correlation between gender and plans to remain or return.

Finally, an examination of both quantitative and qualitative data might provide more insight into the large "indefinite" group - those who might return at some undefined time in the future, or whose return depends on changes in circumstances.

## TABLES

### TABLE I

**Responses to question:**

*Do you believe that you will return to live in El Salvador/Guatemala?*

Plans to return	Number	Percentage
1. Plan to remain in US	151	50
2. Plan to return immediately	3	1
3. Plan to return within a specific period	25	8
4. Plan to return in the future (time unspecified)	72	24
5. My return depends on...	23	8
12. Don't know/no response	19	7
6. Other	7	2
Total	300	100

**Combined Table:**

Plans to return	Number	Percentage
1. Remain in the U.S.	151	50
2. Plan to return (2 & 3)	28	9
3. Indefinite (4, 5, 6, 12)	121	40.3
Total	300	100.0

### TABLE II Plans to Return/Legal Status

	Citizen/ Perm.Res.	Amnesty	Political Asylum	TPS/ DED	Undocu- mented	Other/ NR	Total
Remain	87 (54.7)	11 (73.3)	27 (43.5)	6 (30)	15 (40.5)	5 (71.4)	151 (50.3)
Return	17 (10.7)	0 (0)	3 (4.8)	2 (10)	4 (10.8)	2 (28.6)	28 (9.3)
Indef.	55 (34.6)	4 (26.7)	32 (51.6)	12 (60)	18 (48.6)	0	121 (40.3)
Total	159 (100)	15 (100)	62 (99.9)	20 (100)	37 (99.9)	7 (100)	300 (99.9)

**TABLE III Plans to Return/Date of Arrival**

Plans to Return	Prior to 1980	1980-1986	1987-94	Total
Remain	23 (52.3)	69 (53.9)	55 (45.5)	147 (50.2)
Return	5 (11.4)	12 (9.4)	11 (9.0)	28 (9.5)
Indefinite	16 (36.4)	47 (36.7)	55 (45.5)	118 (40.3)
Totals	44 (100)	128 (100)	121 (100)	293 (100)

**TABLE IV Plans to Return/Age**

Plans to Return	Age 20-29	Age 30-39	Age 40-49	Age 50-59	60 and over	Total
Remain	57 (56.4)	55 ( 47.8)	25 (49.0)	8 ( 40)	3 ( 42.9)	
Return	5 ( 5.5)	13 ( 11.3)	5 ( 9.8)	3 ( 15)	0	
Indefinite	39 (38.6)	47 ( 40.9)	21 (42.3)	9 ( 45)	4 ( 57.1)	
Totals	101 (100)	115 (100)	51 (100)	20 (100)	7 (100)	

**TABLE V Plans to Return/Gender**

Plans/return	Male	Female	Total
Remain	70 (51.5)	81 (49.4)	151 (50.3)
Return	13 ( 9.5)	15 ( 9.1)	28 ( 9.3)
Indefinite	53 (39.0)	68 (41.5)	121 (40.3)
Totals	136 (100)	164 (100)	300 (99.9)

**TABLE VI Plans to Return/Nationality**

Plans to Return	Salvadoran	Guatemalan	Total
Remain	95 (47.7)	56 (56.6)	151 (50.7)
Return	21 (10.5)	7 (7.0)	28 (9.4)
Indefinite	83 (41.7)	36 (36.4)	119 (40.4)
Totals	199 (99.9)	99 (100)	298 (100.1)

**TABLE VII Plans to Return/Reasons for Migration**

Plans/Return	Political Conds.	Economic Conds.	Economic Opts.	Family Reunion	Other Personal	Advent. to know country	Totals
Remain	73 (51.4)	26 (47.3)	10 (45.5)	24 (55.8)	13 (46.4)	4 (50)	150 (50.3)
Return	13 (9.1)	7 (12.7)	1 (4.5)	4 (9.3)	3 (10.7)	0	28 (9.4)
Indef.	56 (39.4)	22 (40.0)	11 (50)	15 (34.9)	12 (42.8)	4 (50)	120 (40.3)
Totals	142 (99.9)	55 (100)	22 (100)	43 (100)	28 (99.9)	8 (100)	298 (100)

**TABLE VIII Plans to Return/Children/Residence**

Plans to Return	All in US	Some in US	None in US	Not Applicable	Totals
Remain	84 (53.5)	14 (35)	9 (31)	43 (58.9)	150 (50.2)
Return	12 (7.6)	6 (15)	5 (17.2)	5 (6.8)	28 (9.4)
Indef./other	61 (38.9)	20 (50)	15 (51.7)	25 (34.2)	121 (40.5)
Totals	157 (100)	40 (100)	29 (99.9)	73 (99.9)	299 (100.1)

**\*Number with children: 226**

**Number with children planning to remain: 107**

**Percentage with children planning to remain: 47.3**

**Percentage without children planning to remain: 58.9**

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