

The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida

*A Report of the Colombian Studies Institute's
Colombian Diaspora Project*

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**Prepared for delivery at the 2003 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association,
Dallas, Texas, March 27-29, 2003**

Introduction.¹

Colombia is in crisis.² An ongoing undeclared Civil War, encompassing widespread guerilla and drug-related violence, combined with economic recession during the late-1990s, have brought turmoil to this South American state. Colombia's political and economic instability has resulted in tens of thousands of Colombian citizens being displaced from their home communities. Many Colombian peasants are fleeing rural areas, where fighting between guerillas, paramilitaries, and government forces is the most intense. Many of these rural residents are relocating to internal refugee camps or to the shantytowns surrounding Colombia's largest cities. Other Colombian peasants are escaping the instability by crossing international borders to become refugees in neighboring Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. Additionally, Colombians with financial means are migrating to other states, principally Costa Rica, Spain, and the United States. A significant number of Colombians, estimates ranging as high as 200,000 to 300,000, have migrated to the United States in just the past few years.

Three significant conditions characterize the Colombian migration to the United States in the last few years. First, the migrants include a proportionally larger percentage of persons from the middle and upper-middle classes, including professionals from all sectors of Colombian society. Second, a larger proportion of the Colombian migrants are remaining in South Florida (Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, and Monroe counties). Third, the latest wave of migrants does not intend to return to Colombia until the political and economic instability subsides. The impact of the increasing number of Colombian migrants in South Florida raises significant policy issues that U.S. federal and State of Florida decision-makers cannot long ignore.

South Florida is no stranger to large influxes of political and economic migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. The recent arrival of increasing numbers of Colombians is similar to several influxes of migrants experienced by South Florida over the last 40 years. Cuban migrants began flooding the region after Fidel Castro's 1959 overthrow of Fulgencio Batista. Over 650,000 Cubans now reside in South Florida. The 1980s political unrest in Central America led to tens of thousands of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans migrating to South Florida. The region is also a favorite destination of migrants from Haiti and other Caribbean island states. Significant numbers of Peruvians and other South Americans, including Brazilians, have also chosen South Florida as their final destination. More recently, socio-political unrest in Ecuador and Venezuela has resulted in the flow of their citizens toward South Florida. The "push" of Latin American political and economic instability, combined with the "pull" of South Florida as the "Gateway to the Americas" has changed the region's demographics to one of a vibrant patchwork of ethnically segregated Latin American and Caribbean neighborhoods.³

¹ This study is based on research conducted in 2000-2001.

² See Summit of the Americas Center, *Colombia, Conflicto armado, perspectivas de paz y democracia* (Miami, FL: FIU Latin American and Caribbean Center, 2001) and Independent Task Force, Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Inter-American Dialogue, Bob Graham and Brent Scowcroft, Co-Chairs and Michael Shifter, Project Director, *Toward Greater Peace and Security in Colombia* (Washington DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2000).

³ See Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge, The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

The latest Colombian migrants arriving in South Florida compare their situation to those of other groups escaping political and economic turmoil. Many see the personal threats to Colombians from their home state's guerillas, paramilitaries, common criminals, and government security forces, as more severe than the threats under which other Latin American and Caribbean groups came before them. Others blame the current turmoil in Colombia on failed U.S. counter-drug policies and widespread corruption in the Colombian government. Caught in the bureaucratic debate of whether they are political or economic migrants, the Colombians arriving in South Florida are becoming increasingly frustrated as they attempt to establish their U.S. legal status and rebuild their lives in South Florida.

This paper is a preliminary report on a larger research project on the Colombian Diaspora in South Florida.⁴ It begins with a description of the conditions within the Colombian Diaspora in South Florida. Colombian-American service organizations and members of the latest Colombian migrant wave to reach South Florida provided the majority of this information. The paper then addresses the potential economic, political, and social impacts of the Colombian Diaspora on South Florida. Finally, it assesses whether the Colombian Diaspora in South Florida presents a case of normal "push-pull" immigration, where the migrant group breaks most ties with the home state, or is the Colombian Diaspora a case of transnational migration, where migrants maintain strong economic, political, and social networks in both their home and new host states.⁵

The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida.

Colombian migration to the United States and South Florida can be characterized in three periods or inter-related waves.

The **first wave** of Colombian migration to the United States corresponded with the 1950s' *La Violencia*, the political war between the Colombian Conservative and Liberal political parties that cost over 200,000 lives. This initial wave continued after the end of *La Violencia* in the late-1950s and lasted until the late-1970s. All socio-economic classes were involved in this initial wave; however, the majority was from the lower and lower-middle classes who were looking to escape the political violence and searching for economic opportunities. Migrants in this period were primarily young male adults who were either accompanied by or later joined by their families.

Once *La Violencia* ended in 1958, the migration continued at a slower pace, but was still mainly from the lower and lower-middle classes as they sought economic opportunity in the United States. Those migrating from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes during this period were not only in search of economic opportunity, but were also reportedly risk-takers looking for "adventure" in the United States. Most migrants during this period came from the larger interior

⁴ The majority of the material in this paper was collected from extensive interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted from October to December 2000 by FIU graduate researchers with approximately 40 Colombian community leaders residing in South Florida. These leaders included the Miami Colombian Consul, heads of several Colombian-American service and business organizations, and managers of Colombian media outlets in South Florida. Focus groups were conducted in March 2001 with Colombian migrants arriving in South Florida within the last 3-4 years.

⁵ See Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt, "The study or transnationalism: pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (March 1999), pp. 217-237.

Colombian cities of Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín. A negligible number of migrants remained in South Florida as most Colombians traveled to New York and other cities where jobs were more plentiful and where other Spanish-speaking migrant groups had concentrated.

The **second wave** of Colombian migration to the United States began in the late-1970s and continued until the mid-1990s. All socio-economic classes were still involved in this second wave; however, there was an increase in the number of middle, upper-middle, and upper class migrants. Most migrants during this period were still primarily young male adults and their families. One of the more curious dimensions of this wave is that migrants left Colombia despite the uniquely favorable economic climate in the country during the 1980s and early-1990s. In contrast to nearly every other state in Latin America, Colombia did not experience an economic crisis during this period; instead the country grew at a respectable rate. This period was also characterized by the explosion of drug-related violence in Colombia occurring within the context of an escalating U.S.-led War on Drugs. Thus, Colombians often left their home state during this period to escape drug-related violence and security threats. Many Colombians were also pulled to the United States by the promise of jobs, peace, and stability—similar to the experiences of first wave migrants.

Unique to the second wave was the presence of migrants associated with the growing international drug trade who came to establish transportation hubs and distribution networks for the illegal drug trade throughout the United States.⁶ Those who migrated during this second wave (and first wave migrants who did not become U.S. citizens) were adversely affected by the negative stereotyping of all Colombians being considered drug-traffickers. This negative stereotyping reduced the trust within the Colombian migrant community and kept Colombians from associating with other Colombians in the United States who were not part of their own family or well-known friends or associates.

The second wave migrants still came mainly from the larger Colombian interior cities, the Colombian coffee region in the west-central section of the state, and the north coast city of Barranquilla. The percentage of Colombian migrants remaining in South Florida in this period increased as Miami became a large Hispanic-dominated city and an important hub for the international drug trade.

An important dimension of this second wave of Colombian migrants was the proliferation of a significant number of legal small businesses; including restaurants, import-export firms, and other enterprises. During this period, legitimate international trade between Florida and Colombia experienced a significant increase, resulting by the mid-1990s in Colombia becoming one of Florida's most significant trading partners. The second wave of Colombian migrants to South Florida contributed to a rapidly expanding Hispanic middle class in the region, which became an important support network for later arrivals.

⁶ These points are made in Francisco Thoumi, *The Political Economy and Illegal Drugs in Colombia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 1995). See also Guy Gugliotta and Jeff Leen, *Kings of Cocaine, Inside the Medellin Cartel—An Astonishing True Story of Murder, Money, and International Corruption* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

By 1990, near the end of the second wave of Colombian migrants, the U.S. Census registered 83,634 Colombians residing in all of Florida. Eighty-three percent of this number resided in South Florida, including: Miami-Dade (53,582), Broward (12,341), Palm Beach (3,352), and Monroe (111). There is no way of determining how many undocumented Colombians lived in South Florida in 1990 and were not counted in the U.S. Census.

The **third wave** of Colombian migration to the United States began in the mid-1990s and continues to the present. While all socio-economic classes are still involved, this latest wave presents a drastic increase in the number of middle, upper-middle, and upper class professionals who are migrating primarily to escape the increasing violence and personal security threats (extortion, kidnapping, murder, etc.) to their families from the Colombian guerillas, paramilitaries, common criminals, and government security forces. Combined with the “push” from Colombia’s political and criminal violence problems, a majority of the third wave migrants are also looking for improved economic opportunities as Colombia’s economy fell into a deep late-1990s recession. The third wave has seen a shift of migrants from primarily young adults to a combination of both the young and old. Third wave migrants are coming from throughout Colombia, with an increasing number from the smaller cities in predominantly rural areas. A large percentage of third wave Colombian migrants remain in South Florida. Specific conditions found within this third wave of Colombian migrants are addressed in the following sections of this paper.

The “Push” of the Third Wave Out of Colombia.

In rough priority order, third wave Colombian migrants report the following reasons for leaving Colombia. The reasons encompass a complex mix of political and economic factors, with the political factors taking a dominant role in the third wave.

1. Fear of the general violence situation in Colombia.
2. Feeling that they could live more secure in the United States.
3. Sense that there are no solutions for the Colombian political and economic problems.
4. Discontent with elected Colombian officials (government).
5. Fear as the Colombian violence touched them in some manner (personal threats, family or friend’s kidnappings, family or friend’s murders, etc.).
6. Expectations of economic (job) opportunities in the United States.
7. Discontent with the Colombian political system (state institutions).

The Colombian political and economic elite have recognized the recent migration “brain drain” problems as so serious that the Colombian media have run special reports explaining why Colombians should remain at home.⁷

The “Pull” of Third Wave Colombians to South Florida.

A number of factors are influencing an increasing percentage of third wave Colombian middle, upper-middle, and upper class migrants to remain in South Florida rather than continue to other

⁷ See “Exodo” *Semana* (Bogota, Colombia) June 28, 1999; and “Por que Quedarse en Colombia?” *El Tiempo* (Bogota, Colombia) Special Supplement, November 8, 2000.

U.S. cities with large Colombian populations (New York, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, Chicago, etc.). These “pull” factors include (in a rough priority order):

Spanish Language. A person can function in South Florida very well speaking only Spanish, as it is the primary language of local business and social interaction in the region’s large Hispanic community. This is a particularly attractive aspect as even a move a few hours north into Central Florida means that migrants must quickly learn English to simply get by.

Existing Social Networks. Many of the middle, upper-middle, and upper class Colombians migrating to South Florida already have family and friends in the region. Lower and lower-middle class Colombians arriving in South Florida in the third wave tend to move on to New York or Chicago where their families and friends live. Also, over the 1980s and early-1990s, many in the more affluent Colombian classes established social contacts in South Florida and bought vacation condominiums or homes in the region. These existing social networks in South Florida work in two ways. First, they provide recent arrivals with key support such as temporary housing. Second, they provide the necessary contacts to find employment.

Lifestyle. Colombians can move to South Florida and feel safe while not substantially changing their lifestyles. A plethora of Colombian products are available in South Florida supermarkets. The number of Colombian restaurants in the region is increasing. South Florida cultural activities (music, dance, arts, etc.) are similar to those in Colombia. Colombian radio networks and TV programs are readily available on South Florida Spanish-language stations. Colombian newspapers and magazines are also available in South Florida or can be read easily on the Internet. These factors, combined with the dominant Spanish language and existing social networks of family and friends, allow Colombians to live almost identical lives to the way they did in their home state (minus the security threats).

Proximity to Colombia. Just over 2 hours by air from Colombian North Coast cities, and just over 3 hours to the larger cities of Bogotá and Cali, it is almost as easy for Colombians to travel to South Florida, as it is to travel between the larger cities in Colombia. This is especially important for persons who have brought their families to South Florida for security reasons, but must still travel frequently to Colombia to run their businesses.

Other Factors. Tropical weather, employment availability, investment opportunities, and unfamiliarity with other parts of the United States, are other factors found to explain why a large percentage of the third wave of Colombian migrants are drawn to South Florida.

The Size of the Colombian Diaspora in South Florida.

No one knows accurately how many Colombians there are in South Florida. The Colombian Consul in Miami estimates that there are approximately 458,000 Colombians permanently residing in all of Florida. The Colombian American Service Association (CASA) estimates that 240,000 Colombians live legally in Florida.⁸ Some claim that as many as 40% to 50% of all Colombians in Florida may be undocumented. Other estimates on the number of Colombians in

⁸ We are indebted to Juan Carlos Zapata, president of the Colombian American Service Association (CASA) for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

South Florida range from 250,000 to 350,000 (also assuming 40%-50% are undocumented). Due to the large number of undocumented migrants in the South Florida Colombian Diaspora, the 2000 U.S. Census does not provide a valid count of the total number of Colombians in the region. Figures from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were not available at this writing; however, INS officials interviewed for this project claim that it is difficult to determine an exact count on how many Colombians legally enter and leave South Florida. INS sources report that asylum claims made by Colombian nationals have increased by a factor of six in just the last two years alone (from 427 in 1999, to 2747 in 2000).⁹

The Colombian government's Department of Administrative Security records reveal that over the 5-year period 1996-2000, 1,015,205 more Colombians departed and remained abroad (to all destinations) than returned to Colombia.¹⁰ It can be assumed, that since 25 percent of all Colombian departures leave for the United States, at least 25 percent of those not returning to Colombia (approximately 250,000) remained in the United States, with a large proportion remaining in South Florida. According to CASA, 75 percent of all Colombians traveling to the United States enter the country through Miami.

Where Colombians Live in South Florida.

Unlike other South Florida migrant groups, Colombians do not live in large concentrations or ethnic enclaves, as is the custom of many South Florida migrant groups.¹¹ Several factors help explain this dispersion of Colombian migrants across South Florida communities. First, Colombians live and establish social networks based on strict socio-economic class and Colombian regional loyalties, just as they did in Colombia. Second, the negative stereotyping of all Colombians as drug-traffickers in the 1980s and early-1990s made Colombians further distrustful of other Colombians they did not know, leading to a fragmenting of the community. Therefore, Colombians are dispersed across the entire South Florida community. Areas favored by Colombians in South Florida, especially by newer third wave migrants, include:

Lower and Lower-Middle Classes. These classes live mainly in the west-central Miami-Dade County communities of Hialeah and Fontainebleau, and the southern Miami-Dade County city of Homestead. These areas provide the region's most inexpensive housing and the most job opportunities in the manufacturing, service, or agricultural industries.

Middle and Some Upper-Middle Classes. These classes live in several South Florida communities. In the 1980s and early-1990s, these classes concentrated in the southwestern Miami-Dade County Kendall region. While many Colombians still live in this area, and many of the third wave migrants are living with relatives or friends in Kendall, the area's reputation as the center for Colombian drug-traffickers has reduced the number of third wave Colombian migrants moving into these neighborhoods. Today, the middle and some upper-middle class migrants are moving instead into areas with large tracts of new housing construction, including, Miami-Dade County's west-central Doral community; Broward County's western Miramar, Plantation,

⁹ See Alfonso Chardy, "Colombian travelers asking to stay in U.S." *The Miami Herald*, March 30, 2001, pp. 1a, 2a.

¹⁰ Jose Olinto Rueda Plata, "La Demographia Nacional en el Contexto de la Crisis," paper presented at Seminario Internacional Sobre Politicas Migratorias, Bogota, Colombia, November 7, 2000.

¹¹ See Portes and Stepick.

Pembroke Pines, and Sunrise communities, and Palm Beach County's southeastern Boca, Boca Raton, and West Palm Beach communities.

Upper-Middle and Upper Classes. These classes live in Miami-Dade County's eastern Key Biscayne, Miami Beach, Brickell and Bayshore (City of Miami), and Coral Gables communities; and Broward County's west-central Weston area (where some Colombians are reportedly buying two and three homes for their families). Jewish Colombians are also concentrating in Miami-Dade's northwestern Aventura area, which hosts a large concentration of upper-middle and upper class Jewish persons.

Colombian Diaspora Employment Patterns.

The ways Colombians make a living in South Florida are as varied as where they live. The following generally characterizes the economic activities of Colombians in South Florida.

Lower and Lower-Middle Classes (from all three waves). These persons work in a variety of manufacturing, service, and agricultural industries. Many of those working in these industries are undocumented and are thus vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous bosses. When Colombians work in one of these industries, it is reported that they prefer to work only with other Colombians. Many Colombians have also started their own small businesses, including restaurants and other personal service-related businesses. There are no discernable patterns as to Colombians in these classes concentrating in one particular industry in South Florida—instead the workers are distributed throughout the entire regional economy.

Middle, Upper-Middle, and Upper Classes (from the first and second waves). These persons work in a variety of professional, business, and educational entities, much the same as other South Florida residents.

Middle, Upper-Middle, and Upper Classes (from the third wave). The employment of third wave migrants from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes differ from the first two waves in several respects. It is also interesting to note that third wave migrants from these classes feel that they have dropped one or more social classes since their arrival in the United States.

Investors. In the third wave, many Colombians who were members of the middle and upper-middle classes in Colombia sold their businesses and properties and moved their entire families to South Florida. They are looking for investment opportunities, while maintaining their middle and upper-middle class lifestyles in South Florida. Many of these do not have the required \$250,000 to qualify for an investor visa—as many lost large amounts of equity in the sale of their assets in Colombia's depressed economy in the late-1990s. Many of the Colombians in this category have only enough resources to continue their middle and upper-middle class lifestyles for two to three years in South Florida. If unable to reestablish new sources of income in South Florida, these persons will have to either migrate to other locations or look for jobs possibly in the South Florida manufacturing, service, or agricultural industries.

Professionals. Most third wave professional Colombians are surprised with the difficulties they face in obtaining licenses and work visas to continue their professional careers in South Florida. Many also do not speak English, which complicates their finding professional employment in South Florida. For the many Colombian academics moving to South Florida, there simply are not enough college or university jobs. Without proper licenses, work visas, or job opportunities, many migrant Colombian professionals have reverted to working low-paying jobs (similar to the lower and lower-middle classes). Some professionals are reported working two to three low-paying jobs at once to support their families—a situation experienced by many migrant groups on initially arriving in the United States.

Transnational Businesspersons. For many Colombian migrants who were not willing to lose large amounts of equity in selling their capital-intensive businesses (farms, large factories, etc.) in Colombia, their main option is to manage their businesses using transnational methods. In these cases, the person normally moves their family to South Florida for personal security reasons, and then continues to run their business in Colombia through a combination of intermediaries, frequent trips to Colombia, and/or by telecommuting through the Internet. Exactly how many Colombians in South Florida are involved in transnational business is unknown.

Upper Classes. Colombian upper class migrants in South Florida do not face the same problems as other classes due to their greater resources. They usually have the \$250,000 required for investor visas or have the financial means to pursue other legal immigration status through expensive immigration lawyers. Some do experience problems similar to the above third wave middle and upper-middle class professionals and transnational businesspersons; however, since they are not necessarily dependent on their profession or business for the income to maintain their lifestyles, their problems are not as serious.

One problem that third wave Colombian migrants report in finding employment is that they are not familiar with U.S. employment practices. Most have little or no experience in developing resumes and undergoing job interviews. They are not used to situations where they must compete for jobs based upon their qualifications. Instead, they are used to the Colombian system where employment is usually gained through close networks among families and friends. Additionally, third wave Colombian migrants find it frustrating that U.S. employment practices require that their paperwork be in order, including having valid work visas and social security numbers.

Obtaining Legal Status for Colombian Migrants.

The primary concern of third wave Colombian migrants is obtaining a legal status in the United States. Most third wave Colombian migrants report they had insufficient information about the U.S. immigration process before leaving Colombia. Through a combination of the media, including popular movies, and reports from relatives and friends that had previously migrated to the United States, most third wave Colombian migrants were given the impression that it would be easy to obtain a legal U.S. immigration status and continue their professional careers in the United States. This has not been their experience after arriving in the United States.

Colombian migrants are experiencing a deep frustration with the U.S. government over their legal status. They resent that they have not been able to obtain a legal status and easily continue their professional careers. They resent that Colombians are unable to participate in the U.S. immigration programs for critical professionals, as do citizens of many other states. Third wave Colombian migrants have a general belief that they are more educated, talented, and creative than previous waves of Colombian migrants, not to mention other Latin American and Caribbean migrant groups, and therefore do not understand the difficulties they experience in turning their tourist visas into a more permanent legal immigration status. Colombians are most frustrated by what they perceive as a U.S. anti-immigration prejudice in their case. Many believe that the Colombian internal violence and security situation is similar to, if not worse than, that of the Cubans under Fidel Castro, or to the 1980s war-ravaged Central Americans, and thus feel they are entitled to immediate legal status (given to Cubans) or at least to a Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted to Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans during the 1980s and early-1990s.¹² The result is that many third wave Colombian migrants are becoming undocumented as they overstay tourist visas after having entered the United States legally.

Many Colombian migrants blame failed U.S. counter-drug policies for the violence and economic problems in their home state. TPS has not been granted to Colombians for two primary reasons. First, Colombian President Pastrana initially declared that the current large Colombian migration is due to economic and not political reasons. Although President Pastrana subsequently reversed his position in characterizing Colombians as economic migrants, their case for TPS was weakened.¹³ Second, despite some efforts in the U.S. Congress and by several pro-immigration non-governmental organizations, there is only weak lobbying of the U.S. government to approve Colombian TPS. With the exception of support from a few Cuban-American legislators, the Colombian TPS request has not been able to muster a significant amount of political support either in Washington or even in Florida. Unless a broader political coalition can be forged to support the Colombian demand, it is unlikely to advance in the near future. Moreover, the new Bush administration has not made any overtures that might lead us to believe that TPS will be forthcoming.

In the meantime, without TPS, and like other large migrant groups before them, Colombian migrants try every measure at their disposal to work the U.S. immigration system to establish legal status and obtain work permits. Student visas, investment visas, work visas, family reunification measures, and marriage to U.S. citizens, are all options being pursued by Colombians to obtain and maintain their legal status. For example, many Colombians were debarking international flights connecting through Miami International Airport and requesting political asylum. As a result of this tactic, Colombians connecting through the United States to other international locations must now have valid U.S. visas.¹⁴ Like for other migrant groups, unscrupulous lawyers are charging high prices to Colombians in the United States to work the immigration system for them. These lawyers usually promise migrants that they can quickly

¹² See U.S. Committee For Refugees, "World Refugee Information, Country Report: Colombia" at http://www.refugees.org.world.countryrpt/amer_carib/colombia.htm (January 2001).

¹³ It is probably correct to assume that the granting of TPS to Colombians would significantly weakened the support for the U.S. component of Plan Colombia. (Why?)

¹⁴ See Chardy.

obtain their legal status, when in fact all the law offices do is submit completed immigration paperwork. In short, unscrupulous immigration lawyers are a major source of creating unrealistic expectations among Colombian migrants who have few, if any, chances of convincing INS to grant them temporary protection.

In lieu of TPS and other options, one of the routes taken by many Colombian migrants recently is to legally enter the United States on a tourist visa and then apply for asylum claiming some sort of persecution at home. According to INS sources, initially these requests were denied as applicants failed to demonstrate that they were the victims of government-led political persecution at home. Most asylum seekers have attempted to demonstrate that they are the victims of persecution by drug-traffickers, paramilitary squads, and/or guerrillas. As the Colombian internal conflict received greater international attention and as INS became flooded with requests, the number of asylum seekers who received favorable action increased. It is now estimated that roughly 65 percent of all Colombian asylum requests are approved.

The Impact of Colombian Migration on South Florida.

It is too early to accurately assess the overall impact of third wave Colombian migration on South Florida. Initial evidence reveals that the economic impact is potentially strong. The political impact is weak as Colombians in the United States are not politically active. Socially, the impact of the Colombian migration is also weak as the Colombians assimilate quickly into a South Florida population characterized by social and ethnic divisions and lacking social trust—conditions very similar to those the Colombians left behind in their home state.

The Economic Impact. This is the area where Colombians potentially have the most impact on South Florida. On the one hand, certain economic conditions associated with Colombia's instability could strengthen the South Florida economy.¹⁵ On the other hand, other Colombian economic conditions could also weaken economic ties between Florida and Colombia. To understand these conditions requires a review of Colombia's current economic situation. The Colombian economy suffered its worst recession in 70 years in 1999 and early-2000. The state's gross domestic product fell 4.5% in 1999, unemployment reached 19.5% in early-2000, and the fiscal deficit grew to about 5.5% of GDP. The level of extreme poverty grew from about 18% of the population to 20%, with much higher figures in rural areas. The causes of the recession were many: internal strife, rampant violence and disorder, and external shocks from low oil and coffee prices. Colombia's credit rating was lowered from investment grade and interest rates increased to 20%. Finally, foreign direct investment in 2000 reached only \$700 million, the lowest figure in nearly a decade.

This downturn in the Colombian economy has a perverse positive impact on Florida. For South Florida, the downturn in the Colombian economy resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in potential investment capital fleeing Colombia and being deposited into South Florida's banking community. Additionally, the increasing Colombian migrants are opening numerous new businesses in South Florida. Many of these new businesses are involved in international trade—an area where Colombians have always prospered. These new international businesses have the

¹⁵ See Jose De Cordoba, "Latin American Refugees Create new Economic Center in Miami," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2000, p. 1.

potential to increase the level of Florida's overall external trade. Currently, there are significant trade ties between Colombia and South Florida (approximately 5% of all Florida's external trade is with Colombia and the majority of it passes through South Florida). The Colombia-South Florida international trade is likely to grow as many of the international businesses that Colombian migrants are opening in South Florida are focused on trade with their home state. Thus, the increased investment resources and international businesses that the Colombian migrants offer are a potential boon to the South Florida economy. However, recent economic figures reveal there are other forces that may be degrading Colombian-South Florida economic ties.

Using 1999-2000 trade data as an indicator, the actual trend is towards decreasing levels of trade between Florida and Colombia.¹⁶ Florida exported \$1.87 billion to Colombia in 1999. The top 20 exports represented only 46% of total Florida exports, a low proportion in comparison with other countries, suggesting great diversity in the Florida export trade to Colombia. In first semester 2000, Florida exported \$823.7 million to Colombia, indicating that the decline in Colombian-South Florida trade continued into 2000. The situation with imports to Florida from Colombia is similar. Florida imports from Colombia in 1999 totaled \$1.49 billion. The top 20 imports accounted for \$1.21 billion of the total, or 81.1%. Compared to exports, Florida imports from Colombia are much less diversified, reflecting a more typical relationship between the state and its Latin American trading partners. In first semester 2000, Florida imported \$774.7 million from Colombia, indicating a potential increase in trade in 2000 compared to 1999.

The number one import from Colombia in 1999 was cut flowers, at \$338.1 million. This single item represents 22.7% of total imports. In second place was pigments dispersed in nonaqueous media, at \$160.9 million, followed by men's or boys' suits, jackets, trousers, etc., at \$129.3 million, and unwrought gold, at \$68.3 million (colloidal precious metals accounted for \$56.7 million). Colombia's dominance in the cut flower market is reflected in the fact that Florida imports from Colombia represent 73.4% of total Florida imports of that item and 57.2% of total U.S. cut flower imports.

A number of other potentially negative economic factors resulting from the Colombian migration could also affect South Florida. First, the "brain drain" of Colombian professionals in the third migration wave appears to be adversely affecting Colombia's overall economy and could adversely affect the level of trade with South Florida. It is still too early to determine how this brain drain will actually affect Colombian trade with South Florida. Second, the Colombian migrant population could become a burden on already overstressed public school system budgets in South Florida.¹⁷ Hundreds of Colombian students are entering the system while their parents and guardians, often here on tourist visas or are undocumented, pay little in the way of public taxes to support them. The situation has become so problematic that the Florida governor has put forth a plan requiring migrants with financial means to pay a fee for their children's

¹⁶ Summit of the Americas Center, 2001, "Florida-Colombia Trade Shows Signs of Recovery" available at http://www.americasnet.net/Commentators/John_Curry/curryreport_05.html (March 16, 2001).

¹⁷ According to officials in the Miami-Dade County Public School system, 8,120 Colombia-born students were enrolled in 2000-2001. This figure represents an increase of over 2,000 from the previous year. These officials estimate that in the 2001-2002 school year over 10,000 Colombia born students will enroll in the Miami-Dade County Public School system.

education in Florida's public schools. A similar concern is being felt at the university level.¹⁸ Third, fears are that just as the Colombian migrants have become a burden on the public school systems, they may also eventually stress public health and other social service programs in South Florida.

One area of economic impact that cannot be overlooked from Colombian migration to South Florida is the sending of remittances from Colombians in South Florida to their families remaining in Colombia. An unknown amount, probably in excess of \$400,000,000, is sent annually from Colombians living in South Florida to their families in Colombia. This economic link is almost as significant as the international trade between Florida and Colombia. The sending of remittances to family members remaining in Colombia is characteristic of all Colombian social classes residing in South Florida.

The Political Impact. While the growing number of Colombians in South Florida might assume a growing political impact—this is not the case. Colombians are not particularly politically active, either while living in Colombia or after arriving in the United States. Those residing permanently in the United States have not widely sought to become U.S. citizens in order to exercise U.S. political rights. This is indicated by the fact there are only 70,000 former Colombians, out of an estimated 458,000, who became U.S. citizens in Florida, and only 23,000 of those are registered to vote in the United States. Prior to 1991, most did not want to abandon their Colombian citizenship and made only limited efforts to assimilate into U.S. culture. Even with the new Colombian Constitution's 1991 establishment of the legal status of dual citizenship (which the United States does not recognize), few Colombians have rushed to become naturalized U.S. citizens and their assimilation efforts into U.S. society remain weak. Many Colombians claim they became U.S. citizens only because of the stigma of the negative stereotyping of all Colombians as drug-traffickers. These persons became tired and frustrated at the increased harassment and delays they experienced in international airports for carrying a Colombian passport.

In South Florida, despite their large numbers, only three Colombians have run for public office (all in 2000, one for Miami-Dade County mayor and two for a Miami-Dade County Commission seat). Two of the Colombian candidates opposed each other in the same race for a seat on the Miami-Dade County Commission and split the Colombian vote in the Kendall area, both losing to a Cuban-American candidate. Little effort was made by leaders in the Colombian-American community to get the two Colombian candidates to cooperate and not split the non-Cuban vote. It is important to note that the Colombian vote in this Kendall precinct with one of the largest concentration of Colombians in South Florida was insignificant in the sea of Cuban-American and other voters. Of 23,000 votes cast for the Miami-Dade County Commission seat, only 1,500 were Colombian.¹⁹

¹⁸ According to the International Student Services office at Florida International University, 321 international students from Colombia were enrolled during the 2000-2001 academic year up from 194 during 1999-2000 and 94 in 1996-1997.

¹⁹ Since the original research for this project, a Colombian-American has been elected as a Florida State Senator from the Kendall area.

Even though the 1991 Colombian Constitution legitimized dual-citizenship and the Colombian government encourages political participation in Colombia by their Diaspora, the vast majority of Colombians residing in South Florida do not take advantage of their Colombian citizenship rights. Only 10,000 Colombians in South Florida are registered to vote in Colombian elections (out of an estimated 250,000-350,000 Colombians living in the region), and only 7,000 participated in the 1998 election won by President Pastrana. The lack of political participation by Colombians, in exercising both their U.S. and Colombian political rights, can partly be explained by the overall lack of confidence that Colombians have in the Colombian government and the lack of participation Colombian citizens have traditionally been allowed in the Colombian political process.

The Social Impact. Colombians, who normally experience weak social capital in their home state, find societal conditions similar in South Florida with its ethnically segregated communities and low levels of social trust.²⁰ Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Outside of their small networks of family and friends, social ties among Colombians and with non-Colombians are extremely weak. This is largely due to the extreme low levels of social capital and social trust that Colombian migrants bring to South Florida from their home state. Colombians are reportedly self-centered and self-involved—behaving extremely individualistic outside their immediate family and friendship networks. Norms of cooperation and compromise (among or between Colombians and other ethnic groups) are weak. This lack of social capital also keeps Colombians from becoming more politically or socially involved in the South Florida community.

In numbers alone, the Colombian community in South Florida could become a competitor for the more numerous and currently political and economic powerful Cuban-American community. Colombian attitudes about the large (650,000) South Florida Cuban-American community are best characterized as guarded. Most third wave Colombian migrants are respectful of what the Cubans have achieved in South Florida in terms of economic and political power. Most also feel that the Colombian situation is similar, if not worse, than the Cuban situation politically (their main TPS argument). However, many third wave Colombian migrants look down on Cubans, similar to the way those from the interior look down on people from the Colombian coast (whom they see as having inferior Spanish and less refined and proper manners). Most first and second wave Colombian-Americans in contrast demonstrate great respect and admiration for the Cuban-American community. Some might argue that frustration and jealousy explains the negative attitudes about Cuban-Americans by the more recent arrivals.

To understand the weakness of social capital in Colombians, it helps to know the sources of Colombian identity. While Colombians individually profess a strong national identity, this identity does not extend much beyond cultural and social areas. Colombians do not possess a common national conscience, a strong sense of community, or a willingness to place the national

²⁰ See Rubio Maurico, "Perverse Social Capital: Some Evidence From Colombia," *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (September, 1997) pp. 805-816; and John Sudarsky, "Colombia's Social Capital, The National Measurement with the BARCAS, paper available from the World Bank at www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital (March 2001).

interest above self-interest—items required to consolidate a true nationalism.²¹ Individual Colombians identify strongly with national symbols and culture such as the Colombian flag, sports teams, national beauty pageant, foods, drinks, music, dance, art, literature, etc.; however, they do not identify with, and have little to no confidence in, Colombia’s political or economic institutions. It is interesting to note that when third wave Colombian migrants to South Florida are asked what they are most proud of in Colombia, they consistently answer the “people” and the “territory.” These same persons have nothing positive to say about Colombian political institutions and the idea of a Colombian state—key aspects of conceptualizing a strong state.²² As a result, most Colombians of the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes are not ready to sacrifice their own welfare for the good of the Colombian state—as evidenced by the current mass migration of these classes to Costa Rica, Spain, and the United States. A Colombian’s identity, instead of being national, is tied to the following social institutions (in order of priority):

Strongest Identity Factors:

1. Their extended family.
2. Their closest friends and associates.
3. Their socio-economic class.
4. Their region of Colombia (paisas, costeños, caleños, etc.).

Weakest Identity Factors:

5. Their political party affiliation (Conservative or Liberal).
6. The larger Colombian nation.

The weakness in Colombian social capital does not mean Colombians are completely anti-social. They do come together for events with Colombian national sports teams (soccer, etc.) that are often held in South Florida. They also come together in response to national disasters (earthquake relief, etc.) and at the annual July 20 Colombian Independence Day celebrations. They do join selected religious and business groups (mainly with other Colombians). Perversely and paradoxically, for obvious reasons, those Colombians involved in the international drug-trade are reported to have extremely high levels of social trust and cooperation within their individual crime organizations.

One aspect of building stronger Colombian social capital is related to the several Colombian-American service organizations that have emerged in South Florida (see Appendix A). While these organizations do have a strong altruistic focus to help newly arriving Colombian migrants and existing members of the South Florida Colombian Diaspora, most are perceived as suffering from key problems. First, the resources the Colombian-American service organizations have to distribute are limited. Second, members of these organizations are drawn from the upper and upper-middle classes and restrict their memberships to only people from certain socio-economic classes or social networks.²³ Third, members tend to belong to several of the same Colombian-

²¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

²² Barry Buzon, *People, State & Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), p. 65.

²³ According to CASA, its board is comprised of 13 Colombian-Americans who are U.S. citizens. They have all been educated in the U.S. and are all of middle class backgrounds. None belong to other Colombian service organizations but are reportedly involved in the activities of other groups. CASA also notes that it carries out extensive collaboration with groups from different nationalities.

American service organizations, so the overall pool of Colombians with an altruistic streak is actually small. Fourth, these groups do not cooperate particularly well among themselves. For example, in questioning coordination efforts in South Florida, one hears often of the existence and plans of the Colombian Coalition, an umbrella organization intended to better coordinate the programs of the other service organizations. In fact, the Coalition is a paper tiger that has not been able to effectively break down parochial barriers among the service organizations and bring them together in any sort of coordinated effort. Some charge the Coalition with having very close linkages to the Colombian government and therefore unworthy of support. Thus, while one can applaud Colombian service organizations' intent to help other Colombians, their overall results are limited.

Finally, throughout this paper there have been references to the negative stereotyping of Colombians as all being international drug-traffickers. This was a major identity factor affecting the second wave of migration lasting from the late-1970s to mid-1990s. Today, this negative stereotyping, while not completely gone, appears as less of a factor in the eyes of Colombians from all migration waves in South Florida.

Evaluating the Colombian Diaspora Migration Type.

One purpose of this paper is to determine if the current third wave of Colombian migration to South Florida is a case of push-pull" migration, whereby they sever all contact with their home state; or does the migration present a case of transnational migration, where migrants maintain strong economic, political, and social networks in both their home and new host states.²⁴ The evidence supports the push-pull model. The scholarly immigration literature offers the proposition that the level of transnational migration activities are associated with the social capital the migrant experiences in both the sending and receiving states. The greater the social capital, the more likely that a transnational migration condition will occur. In the Colombian Diaspora case in South Florida, it is clear that migrants have not established strong transnational economic, political, and social linkages between Colombia and South Florida due to the weakness of social capital both in Colombia and in the South Florida.

The data presented in this paper supports this finding. There are extremely weak transnational linkages between Colombian migrants in South Florida and their home state. Politically, the linkages are almost non-existent. This is despite Colombian government actions to encourage political participation by the Diaspora. Socially, the linkages are also weak. With the exception of social contacts with family and close friends, both in Colombia and in South Florida, Colombians established few permanent social linkages with other groups. Economically, some transnational linkages do exist, but are mainly out of necessity (businesspersons who did not want to take large equity losses by selling their capitalized assets in Colombia). The remittances sent to family and friends still in Colombia are probably the Diaspora's most significant transnational social and economic linkage. Several academic and World Bank studies have documented the low levels of social capital in Colombia. Evidence reveals that Colombians

²⁴ See Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Arturo Ignacio Sanchez and Elizabeth M. Roach, "Mistrust, fragmented solidarity, and transnational migration: Colombians in New York City and Los Angeles," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (March 1999), pp. 367-396; and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Luz Marina Diaz, "Transnational migration: a view from Colombia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (March 1999), pp. 397-421.

bring this low level of social capital with them to South Florida, a region already fractured along ethnic lines and experiencing its own low levels of social capital. With such low levels of social capital on both ends of the Colombian migration stream, strong transnational linkages cannot be expected to occur.

On the positive side of establishing transnational linkages, the several Colombian-American service organizations in South Florida do try to help Colombians in the Diaspora with medical care, legal advice, immigration information, educational programs, investment and business advice, and other transition problems—which tend to build social capital in the local community. However, these service organizations possess few resources and can help only a small percentage of those who need assistance.

Conclusion.

The observations in this study are preliminary and require a significant amount of additional research and analysis. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Colombian Diaspora has already had an impact on South Florida and all indications suggest that the Diaspora's size and impact will increase in the future. Several reasons account for this conclusion. First, the situation of political and economic instability in Colombia is unlikely to improve in the near future. Even under the most optimistic scenario, conditions in Colombia are likely to get worse before they get better. Second, South Florida will continue to be a magnet for Colombians seeking a temporary way station that possesses many desirable home-like characteristics.

Thus, South Florida must prepare itself to respond to the arrival of these migrants who for the most part will be a boon to the region's economy. At the same, however, South Florida will have to become increasingly concerned with the potentially negative effects of a greater Colombian presence. These would include pressures on local schools and universities, social services, and other public services. Above all, South Florida requires accurate information on the size of the Diaspora.

To conclude, it is important to note the responses of our interviewees and focus group participants to a particular question. When asked if they would return to Colombia in the future, most answered, "Yes, provided security and economic conditions in Colombia improved drastically." However, most also reiterated that whether or not Colombians returned would depend on how well established they were in the United States. These responses suggest that like all other migrants to the United States, the most likely scenario is that Colombians will stay in South Florida and will in the long-run contribute to the ever-changing character of the region.

Synopsis of Follow-On Research.

Since the completion of the original research on this project in 2000-2001, three MA theses have been written by members of the original research team on similar topics. These include:

Researcher: Natalia Franco

Thesis Title: The Colombian Migration to South Florida: Expectations and Experiences

Synopsis: This thesis looked at two important questions. First, how were Colombians preparing for their migration to the United States? Second, why were some Colombians returning to Colombia after an initial attempt at settling in the United States? The researcher found that most Colombians prepared for their migration from unofficial sources, specifically the advice of family and friends already living in the United States. Family and friends painted an idealistic picture of life in the United States that did not turn out to be reality when the Colombian migrants arrived. By not consulting official channels like the US Embassy in Bogotá, the migrants quickly became frustrated after arrival in the United States as the ability to achieve a legal immigration status that would allow them to work and the ability to find employment were not what they had been told before leaving Colombia. The primary reason given by Colombians returning to Colombia after migrating to the United States was their inability to deal with the loss of social status they encountered in the United States.

Researcher: Heather Robertson

Thesis Title: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to the Political Crisis and State Decline in Colombia

Synopsis: Using Hirschman's theory of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, this thesis investigated why Colombians displayed these attributes in relation to their migration to the United States. The researcher found that the main difference between those Colombians who migrated (Exit) and those who remained in Colombia (Voice and Loyalty) was that those who remained in Colombia still retained some hope that the Colombian government could resolve the country's problems. Due to the repressed political system in Colombia, there was very little evidence of Voice (activism to make changes) found in the researcher's fieldwork.

Researcher: Cristyn Casey

Thesis Title: The Colombian Migration to South Florida, The Effect of Social Capital on the Formation of Immigrant Communities

Synopsis: This thesis investigated the social networks of Colombians that migrated to South Florida. It found that for the most part Colombians retained their social contacts within networks of family and friends, based largely on social class and geographic region, as they did in Colombia. As documented by earlier studies, it was found that these Colombian social groups

had very low levels of social capital—or the ability to interact with other groups of Colombians or other nationalities. High levels of fragmentation and distrust were found between Colombians of different social classes, geographic regions, and even social networks. These low levels of social capital thus contributed to the inability of Colombian migrants to obtain immigration status, find employment, organize politically, or have an economic impact on South Florida. The researcher also found a lack of a common project among the Colombian participants in the study (e.g., ending the guerilla war, etc.). Overall the low social cohesion found among Colombian migrants degraded their attempts to transition to a new life in South Florida.