

Salvadoran Migrants: Arlington's Greatest Contributors

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It's difficult to imagine the county of Arlington, Virginia without its enormous Central American population. El Salvador's migrants are Arlington's greatest contributors. While possibly overlooked as an impactful historical group because of their semi-recent arrival, Salvadorans have made a significant contribution to the local economy and given the area a cultural uniqueness. Making Arlington their home and staying in the area, the most recent census data from 2010 counted over 7,000 Salvadorans in Arlington¹. They made up nearly 60% of Central American migrants². Their prominence has been recognized in the area in the past. In 2018, D.C. mayor, Muriel Bowser took a trip to San Salvador, El Salvador's capital, in recognition of the Salvadoran population in the metropolitan area³. There, she signed a sister city agreement. ““With thousands upon thousands of Salvadorans living in the DC region who continue to make tremendous contributions not only to our local economy, but to the culture of our city, I am proud that San Salvador will be the first Sister City Agreement I am entering into as Mayor and will work hard to ensure we can build safer, stronger communities together,⁴” she said. Arlington is part of this symbolic sisterhood.

The history of Salvadoran migration to Arlington began with the Salvadoran Civil War. The twelve-year period of violence displaced hundreds of thousands. The civil war began after General Carlos Humberto Romero was deposed of in a 1979 coup. Under his short reign of two

¹ “2010 Census Highlights: Arlington VA.” Arlington Demographics, n.d. Accessed April 28, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Office of the Mayor. “Mayor Bowser Visits San Salvador and Signs Sister City Agreement.” Government of the District of Columbia, August 14, 2018. <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-visits-san-salvador-and-signs-sister-city-agreement>.

⁴ Ibid.

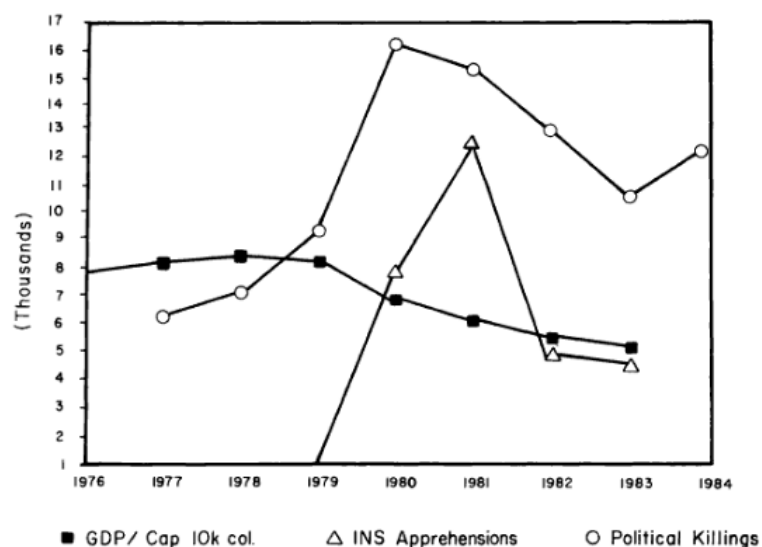


FIG. 1—Relationships among economic condition, migration to the United States, and political violence in El Salvador 1976–1984. Source: Redrawn from Stanley, text footnote 4.

Figure 1- Jones, Richard C., *Causes of Salvadoran Migration to the United States*

over the years. While the United States had previously paid no attention to the country's conflict, the Reagan administration sent \$4 billion in financial aid to the military junta. The money funded the training of death squads that brutalized civilians and the pro-peace clergymen of the Catholic Church⁷. Among the more notable acts of violence was the 1980 assassination of Saint Óscar Romero (no relation to Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero). Romero was a beloved advocate for the rights of El Salvador's poor who he believed were the innocent victims of the civil war⁸.

years, human rights violations rose, and public approval dropped⁵. In the years leading up, several front opposition organizations formed. These were mostly unions meant to represent the poor and working class. Guerilla groups followed shortly⁶. El Salvador fell into the hands of an unstable military junta that would evolve in membership

⁵ Schultze-Kraft, Markus, and René Santamaria Varela. "Civil War." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/El-Salvador/Civil-war>.

⁶ Varela, René Santamaria, and Philip F. Flemion. "Military Dictatorships." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/El-Salvador/Military-dictatorships>.

⁷ Schultze-Kraft, Markus, and René Santamaria Varela, *Civil War*

⁸ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "St. Óscar Romero." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 20, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Oscar-Arnulfo-Romero>.

The war ended in 1992 leaving more than a million displaced, 750,000 dead, countless tortured, and an unknown number missing⁹. The war destabilized the country. Denial of asylum



applicants was high at first, as the US has backed the nation's government. Eventually the states granted 187,000 Salvadorans Temporary Protective Status (TPS) in 1992¹⁰. TPS holders may not apply for citizenship or permanent residence after a certain amount of time, which makes their status different from that of an asylum seeker¹¹. TPS can

also be revoked at any time. Since the influx of migration through the 80s and 90s, Arlington has become a major destination for Salvadoran TPS holders. With many working in construction alongside other Central Americans, they've aided the development of the county.

There is a Salvadoran proverb, "En casa de herrero, cuchillo de palo,"¹² or "In the blacksmith's house, [is a] knife of wood." It refers to the concept of great work being done outside of one's home. Arlington county has benefited economically from the arrival of Salvadoran immigrants. Through South Arlington, there are many family-owned Salvadoran restaurants to enjoy. Ten percent of Salvadoran migrants are self-employed¹³. The importance of

⁹ Cecilia Menjivar and Andrea Gómez Cervantes, "El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Drive Migration, Migration Policy Institute," August 29, 2018 <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/el-salvador-civil-war-natural-disasters-and-gang-violence-drive-migration>.

¹⁰ Cecilia Menjivar and Andrea Gómez Cervantes, *El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Drive Migration*, Migration Policy Institute

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Park, Iris. USC Digital Folklore Archives, March 14, 2011. http://folklore.usc.edu/?p=3230#_ftnref1.

¹³ Zafra, Mariano. "Salvadorans with TPS Are a Powerful Economic Engine with Strong Family Ties in the U.S." Univision, September 17, 2018. <https://www.univision.com/univision-news/immigration/salvadorans-with-tps-are-a-powerful-economic-engine-with-strong-family-ties-in-the-us>.

small businesses cannot be overlooked, as they are responsible for 44% of all economic activity in the nation¹⁴. Strong, family businesses like Sofia's Pupuseria, owned by a family bringing 20 years of cooking experience to their restaurant¹⁵, contribute only positively to Arlington. Additionally, 88% of Salvadoran's work in the labor force¹⁶. The importance of TPS holding laborers in the metropolitan area made headlines in 2019 as the program faced possible revocation. General Manager of Independence Excavating Inc. commented in an article for the Washington Times, "'Losing them is going to be devastating to our ability to work,' said Mr. Pecun, adding that a tightening workforce produces a ripple effect. '[If the] labor pool shrinks, cost of labor goes up, and rate of accidents go up. It all starts because of this.'"¹⁷ When the question of what would happen without them was asked, media investigations, like the aforementioned Washington Times article, examined the contributions of TPS holders in the local workforce, especially those of Salvadoran origin. Salvadorans have made themselves a leg which the county relies on to stand.

It's often said that the Washington, DC area has no distinct accent because it's residents have moved in from all over the country. This claim is not the entire story, neglecting entirely the kind of Spanish that has been brought to the area. Migrants from El Salvador have gifted a cultural uniqueness to Arlington. One of the best examples of cultural contribution is the dialect

¹⁴ Office of Advocacy. "Small Businesses Generate 44 Percent of U.S. Economic Activity." SBA's Office of Advocacy. Accessed April 15, 2020. <https://advocacy.sba.gov/2019/01/30/small-businesses-generate-44-percent-of-u-s-economic-activity/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.sofiapupuseria.com/about-us/>

¹⁶ Zafra, Mariano, *Salvadorans with TPS Are a Powerful Economic Engine with Strong Family Ties in the U.S.*

¹⁷ Airey, Julia. "Salvadorans, Construction Companies in a Bind with Trump's End to Temporary Protected Status." The Washington Times. The Washington Times, January 23, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jan/23/tps-end-puts-el-salvador-immigrants-dc-construction/>.

of Spanish, accent, and vernacular brought. El Salvador is somewhat unique among Spanish speaking countries, as it uses the *voseo* second person pronoun. Commonly taught in language textbooks is the *tuteo* pronoun or *tú*. In actuality, another exists: *vos*. Only a handful of countries use *vos*, and when they do it often coexists alongside *tú*. El Salvador uses *vos* exclusively¹⁸. The ubiquity of the Salvadoran dialect in Arlington also means a distinct accent and even local slang. One characteristic of the Salvadoran accent that has made its home in Arlington is the lack of distinction between the “*ll*” sound and the “*y*” sound¹⁹. However, Salvadoran migrants have not just made Arlington culturally unique through language. Some of South Arlington’s top-rated restaurants serve Salvadoran food. There are so many Salvadoran families in South Arlington that the Arlandria neighborhood, named for its Arlington/Alexandria border, is also called *Chirilagua*, a town from which many of the residents migrated.

Arlington County’s *2000 Census Foreign-Born Census Report* counted 26,000 migrant individuals of Latin American nativity. Of those, 40% were from El Salvador²⁰. While their arrival has been fairly recent, Arlington is a younger county itself, making Salvadoran’s time here a robust portion of the county’s history. As an integral part of the labor force, Arlington’s economy leans on them. Having brought along rich and distinct culture, the area’s Latino culture has become idiosyncratic. The over two hundred and thirty-six thousand people that call Arlington home are indebted to the Salvadoran migrants who have helped make such a small county so unique.

¹⁸ Lipski, John M. “El Español Que Se Habla En El Salvador y Su Importancia Para La Dialectología Hispanoamericana.” Accessed April 24, 2020. <http://www.personal.psu.edu/jml34/salvador.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Thomas, William. “2020 Census Foreign Born Population.” ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY PLANNING, HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT, July 2003. <https://projects.arlingtonva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2014/03/2000-Foreign-Born.pdf>.

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