

From Disney to Chavez: Venezuelan Migrants in the U.S.

Proposal

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Background

Much like the rest of Latin America, Venezuela succumbed to the combined and devastating impacts of the debt crisis of the 1980s and the free-market policies purportedly aimed at overcome it. The collapse of national industries, rising unemployment, currency devaluations and the erosion of safety nets inaugurated an era of unprecedented poverty (nearly 80% by the early 1990s), political unrest, increasing crime rates and widespread corruption (particularly in the financial and governmental sectors). These events, combined with heightened class and ideological polarization under the controversial administration of President Hugo Chavez, have helped transformed Venezuela from an immigrant to an emigrant country.¹ The majority of these migrants hail from the largest cities and from the higher socio-economic ranks. Many were trained in United States universities as engineers, scientists and telecommunication specialists during the 1970s. Oil not only financed an ambitious, state-led, industrialization program, but one of the largest national scholarship programs for study abroad (Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho scholarship program) and expanding middle class. The collapse of that industrialization model dampened many of these U.S.-trained professionals, and would-be migrants,' expectations for uninterrupted social mobility or a middle-class lifestyle somewhat unrealistically set to U.S. standards. Under President Chavez' administration, the reversal of neoliberal policies of privatization and state de-regulation, has led to an even deeper restructuring of the domestic economy. The collapse of direct foreign investment and the rechanneling of resources away from the professional middle class and toward the 'social budget,' have further diminished the hopes of formally-educated Venezuelans to realize their home-spun version of the "American dream" at home. Moreover, the mass consumerism that had provided a social glue and kept the poorest strata content or at a distance, began to collapse in the 1980s. Under the Chavez administration, social divisions have been exacerbated. This fact, combined with a whole host festering social problems and the collapse of societal institutions, has engendered a climate of generalized insecurity and increasing levels of crime and violence. This has caused many Venezuelan middle class professionals to view migration as, not simply a means toward upward mobility, but a necessary step to protect their families from inevitable harm.

Deteriorating political-economic conditions at home are woefully insufficient for explaining the roots of migration from particular countries of origin to particular destinations at any given time, and Venezuela is no exception. Historical linkages between sending and receiving regions have served as better predictors of who leaves for where and even how well they will likely do in their country of settlement (Portes and Rumbaut 2000, Rumbaut and Portes 2001, Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Portes 2007). As Saskia Sassen (1992, 1995) has shown, the U.S' long history of direct investment in the region, demand for certain types of labor, active geopolitical agendas and its central role in the expansion of a global economy go a long way in explaining the migration trajectories of Latin Americans. Cubans, Mexicans, Colombians and Venezuelans have been extended different "bridges" that have shaped their dominant type of migration (as laborers, professionals or entrepreneurs). In the case of Venezuela, U.S. oil companies' direct investment at the start of the twentieth century became the initial foundations of these 'migration bridges' deployed, much later, at the collapse of Venezuela's economy in the 1980s. Oil camp acquaintances and co-workers, on this side of the border became the initial anchor for the first Venezuelan 'pioneers' (Tinker-Salas 2003). Some of these early migrants also accessed the social and institutional ties established during their study abroad and frequent travel to the U.S. The ideological and cultural flows increased with globalization. By the 1970s, visiting Miami's shopping malls and annual pilgrimages to Orlando's Disney World became required rites and markers of membership into the prosperous class.

There's always been a parallel life with the U.S. Venezuelans have been coming to the U.S. for years, have owned second homes here, have come here to study, to shop, to buy merchandise for their businesses back home. We feel comfortable here. For us, the U.S. is nothing new (Abbady, 2002).

Today, there are signs that the Venezuelan migration process is acquiring the same self-sustaining and geographic dispersion features found among other migrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2000, Rumbaut and Portes 2001). According to the 2009 American Community Survey, there are 196,327 Venezuelans in the United States. The overwhelming majority (80.3%) are foreign born. Florida has been the preferred destination for most Venezuelans and 46% of all Venezuelans reside in that state. The largest concentrations are found in Miami and Orlando. New York harbors the second largest concentration of Venezuelans in the U.S. However, an oil-lubricated network formed not only by oil camps, but by the more recent privatization strategies, is increasingly evident in Texas' metropolitan areas (primarily Houston and Dallas) and even Omaha where Northern gas has hired the occasional Venezuelan. Incipient streams of Venezuelan migrants are also making their way to other 'new destination' states such as North Carolina.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we will examine the key historical periods within which multiple, but highly compacted Venezuelan migration waves to the United States have developed since the 1980s. Secondly, we will examine the relative success of Venezuelan migrants in their quest for social mobility and the strategies that they appear to be utilizing to do

so. Our data comes primarily from the U.S Census and the American Community Survey as well as dozens of interviews with Venezuelan migrants in Florida and Omaha, Nebraska.

U.S. census data are used to obtain an estimate of the number of Venezuelans in the United States in 1990, 2000, and 2006-2008. This analysis shows that the Venezuelan population has grown significantly since 1990. The Venezuelan population has increased from 48,513 in 1990, to 93,007 in 2008, and to 187,155 in 2006-2008. Between 1990 and 2006-2008 the Venezuelan population in the United States nearly quadrupled; and it doubled from 2000 to 2006-2008.

Examination of the 2006-2008 American Community Survey (ACS) confirms that Venezuelans have only recently immigrated to the United States. For example, nearly half (47%) of foreign-born Venezuelans have immigrated to the United States between 2000 and 2008. Furthermore, four-fifths have immigrated from 1990 to 2008. Only 8 percent immigrated to the United States before 1980 and 12% immigrated between 1980 and 1989.

In the 2006-2008 period, Venezuelans were concentrated in a handful of states. The five states with the largest Venezuelan populations include Florida (92,156), Texas (16,793), New York (11,894), California (9,074), and Georgia (6,371). Nearly three-fourths (73%) Venezuelans made their home in these five states, with half of all Venezuelans living in Florida. The concentration of Venezuelans in Florida increased from 43% in 2000 to 49% in 2006-2008. Note that the Venezuelan population grew significantly in two states—Texas and Georgia—between 2000 and 2006-2008. For example, the number of Venezuelans in Texas and Georgia nearly tripled during this period.

We obtain a demographic and socioeconomic profile of the Venezuelan population in the United States based on the 2006-2008 ACS data. The Venezuelan population is relatively young with a median age of 32. Females outnumber males among Venezuelans in the United States with 91 males per 100 females. Nearly three-fourths (74%) of Venezuelans were born outside of the United States. The vast majority of foreign-born Venezuelans (74%) are not naturalized U.S. citizens. Furthermore, close to three-fourths (74%) of Venezuelans identify themselves racially as white. Finally, more than three-fourths (77%) of foreign-born Venezuelans are bilingual, i.e., they speak Spanish at home and speak English well or very well.

Venezuelans are characterized by high levels of socioeconomic status. In 2006-2008, 93% of Venezuelans 25 and older were high school graduates, with half being college graduates. Venezuelans had relatively low unemployment rates with close to 6% of Venezuelans being jobless in 2006-2008. A relatively high percentage (14%) of Venezuelan workers are self-employed. Venezuelan workers tend to be employed in occupations associated with high levels of socioeconomic standing (average of 48.6 on the occupational socioeconomic index).

Venezuelan households also have relatively high incomes with a median household income of \$52,000. Finally, Venezuelans have a relatively low level of poverty (11.5%). Compared to selected other Latino groups (Colombians, Cubans, and Mexicans), Venezuelans fare more favorably than these comparison groups across all the socioeconomic indicators examined here.

This brief population profile is but the starting point of a more in-depth analysis of who is leaving Venezuela and what are the likely impact their exodus will have on that country's societal project, as well as on the overall political, economic and social landscape in their destination communities. Venezuelan migration has occurred between two serious world recessions and is maturing in the midst of an increasingly hostile climate for new immigrants to the United States. Their incorporation into U.S. labor markets may or may continue to be as favorable as it looks, and their resources and capacity to navigate legal statuses may or may not continue to be as abundant as the context of exit, the U.S economic crisis and opportunities for permanent stay deteriorate. Recent interviews with medical doctors and information technology professionals will serve as the first bellwether signs of what's to come.

ⁱ Without question, the deterioration of economic conditions in Venezuela has been a major factor behind the increase in Venezuelan migration since the 1990s. The sudden imposition of a neoliberal package of structural adjustment measures caused major disruptions in employment and led to 1989 social explosion dubbed "El Caracazo." The informal sector employs more than 50 percent of Venezuelans today and the country's GDP has declined about one percent a year since the early 1980s (Romero,2002) More recently, the political climate fueled by the collapse of traditional political parties brought the controversial figure of Hugo Chavez to power. The dismissal of some 20,000 from the Venezuelan workers from the state oil company, PDVSA, the core of the formal economy, has triggered its own migration wave, the dimensions and multiplier effects of which cannot be adequately measured at this early point in time (See, for example, the collection of works in *Venezuelan Politics in the Chavez Era. Class, Polarization & Conflict*, edited by Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers). This migration is extremely volatile. Numbers have increased since 2000, yet U.S. barriers to migration since 9-11 have also sent larger numbers of these qualified migrants to Australia, Canada, and the Middle East. Omaha has experienced similar volatility. It is important to get the methodology right to capture these movements and their impact.

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