

Prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD)

The Salvadoran Diaspora in the United States

June 2015 Revised

Summary

Approximately 2.1 million Salvadoran immigrants and their children (the first and second generations) live in the United States. El Salvador is the largest source of immigration to the United States from Central America, and migrants from this country account for 3.1 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population. The size of the El Salvador-born population in the United States has grown substantially in recent decades; in 1980, 95,000 Salvadoran immigrants lived in the United States, compared to 1.17 million today.

Salvadorans make up the second-largest unauthorized immigrant population in the United States; for these immigrants, a direct pathway to legal permanent residence or U.S. citizenship is not available. With so many unauthorized in their ranks, the Salvadoran immigrant population has the second-lowest naturalization rate among the 15 Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD) analysis populations, far below that of the total U.S. foreign-born population. The precarious U.S. residence status of many members of the Salvadoran diaspora poses additional integration challenges, such as legal and financial barriers to advancement in higher education and professional settings, ineligibility for public benefits, difficulty accessing health care, constraints on acquiring significant assets due to low incomes, and limited access to credit.

Unauthorized immigrants in the United States also face the risk of deportation. However, many Salvadorans who lack current visas are not in imminent danger of being deported: approximately 212,000 Salvadoran immigrants who could otherwise be removed from the United States have been granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) through March 9, 2015, and at least another 10,000 El Salvador-born young adults have a temporary reprieve from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Beneficiaries of TPS or DACA also receive U.S. work authorization, but neither of these programs grants permanent immigration status or opens pathways to legal permanent residence or citizenship.

Among the 15 groups in the RAD analysis, Salvadorans have the lowest levels of educational attainment besides Mexicans.¹ Forty-eight percent of the Salvadoran diaspora has less than a high school degree compared to 13 percent of the general U.S. population; and just 8 percent

¹ All Rights Reserved. © 2015 Migration Policy Institute. Information for reproducing excerpts from this report can be found at www.migrationpolicy.org/about/copyright-policy. The RAD Diaspora Profile series covers U.S.-based Bangladeshi, Colombian, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Filipino, Ghanaian, Haitian, Indian, Kenyan, Mexican, Moroccan, Nigerian, Pakistani, Salvadoran, and Vietnamese diaspora populations. This updates the initial July 2014 diaspora profile to correct an error.

of the Salvadoran diaspora holds a bachelor's degree versus 20 percent of the U.S. population. Nevertheless, children of Salvadoran immigrants (the second generation) have made educational gains relative to the first generation. The median annual income of Salvadoran diaspora households is \$41,000—\$9,000 below the median for all U.S. households, and only 14 percent of Salvadoran diaspora households fall into the top 25 percent of the U.S. household income distribution. Although a higher proportion of Salvadoran diaspora members participate in the labor force than the U.S. general population (75 percent versus 64 percent), they are far less likely to be in professional or managerial occupations (10 percent versus 31 percent).

Salvadoran immigrants are broadly dispersed throughout the United States, but they live in greatest numbers in the states of California, Texas, and New York. More El Salvador-born people reside in Los Angeles and its surrounding communities than any other metropolitan area. The Washington, DC; New York; and San Francisco metropolitan areas are also important Salvadoran population centers.

The Salvadoran diaspora in the United States has established a few large and well-funded organizations. The wealthiest among these groups is the Salvadoran American Humanitarian Foundation (SAHF). Despite having one of the highest annual revenues of the roughly 1,000 diaspora groups identified for the 15-group RAD analysis (at \$50 million), SAHF does not seem to have a significant public presence in the United States, making it hard to determine whether it enjoys a broad base of support among the Salvadoran diaspora. One other Salvadoran diaspora group has annual revenues above \$1 million: ENLACE El Salvador, a Christian development organization that helps churches in El Salvador implement development programs in the communities they serve. Five other organizations have revenues above \$200,000: the Salvadoran American Leadership & Educational Fund, El Rescate, Christians for Peace in El Salvador, Building New Hope, and the Association of Salvadorans of Los Angeles. Most of the Salvadoran diaspora organizations examined for this profile are devoted to promoting economic development in El Salvador or advocating for migrants' rights or nonviolent solutions to political conflict in the homeland, and many of these groups are religiously affiliated. However, there are only a small number of formal Salvadoran diaspora organizations in the United States, especially considering the Salvadoran diaspora's size; in fact, fewer than two dozen groups could be identified for this analysis through desk research. Salvadorans in the United States may prefer to engage with El Salvador through channels such as hometown associations (which may not register formally as organizations), familial networks, pan-Latino organizations, or by contributing directly to charities that are based in El Salvador.

The United States is the top destination for Salvadoran emigrants, and the U.S.-based Salvadoran diaspora is El Salvador's primary source of remittances. The Salvadoran diaspora in the United States sent \$3.6 billion to the homeland in 2012, and altogether, the country's remittances totaled \$3.9 billion that year. With a total gross domestic product estimated at \$23.8 billion, remittances comprised 16.5 percent of the country's GDP in 2012. After Haiti, El Salvador is the most remittance-dependent country in the RAD analysis (by share of GDP).

Detailed Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics²

Analysis of data from 2009-13 reveals a Salvadoran diaspora in the United States of about 2.1 million individuals, counting immigrants born in El Salvador and U.S.-born individuals with at least one parent who was born in El Salvador.

First Generation (Salvadoran immigrants in the United States)

- An estimated 1.17 million immigrants from El Salvador resided in the United States.
- The El Salvador-born population in the United States has grown rapidly since 1980, when approximately 95,000 Salvadoran immigrants lived in the United States and made up only 0.7 percent of the foreign-born population.³ In 2012, 3.1 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population was Salvadoran.
- Sixty-four percent of immigrants from El Salvador came to the United States before 2000, the same rate for the U.S. foreign-born population overall.
- Unauthorized El Salvador-born immigrants made up approximately 6 percent of the U.S. unauthorized population in 2011. After Mexico, unauthorized immigrants from El Salvador were the largest national-origin group within the total unauthorized population in the United States.⁴
- Following a series of earthquakes that struck El Salvador in 2001, the U.S. government extended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to approximately 217,000 qualifying Salvadoran immigrants residing in the United States at the time of the disasters; about 212,000 Salvadorans currently hold that status,⁵ which can be extended as long as conditions in the origin country prevent its nationals from returning safely. Immigrants who qualify for TPS are granted work authorization and cannot be detained or deported on the basis of their immigration status alone.
- About 10,000 unauthorized El Salvador-born young adult immigrants who came to the United States as children were granted work authorization and a temporary reprieve from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. From mid-August 2012 to mid-March 2013—the program’s first seven months—about 19,000 immigrants from El Salvador applied for the benefit. Four percent of all DACA applicants during that time period were of Salvadoran birth, the largest national-origin group after Mexicans.⁶

2 Unless otherwise noted, estimates for the diaspora population and its characteristics are based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Surveys (CPS), using five years of pooled data (2009 through 2013) collected in March of each year. All Census Bureau data were accessed from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

3 These estimates are based on MPI analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2012 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 1980 Census.

4 Michael Hofer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan Baker, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012), www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf. In January 2011, an estimated 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants resided in the United States.

5 “Extension of the Designation of El Salvador for Temporary Protected Status,” 78 *Federal Register* 104 (May 30, 2013), 32418-424, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-05-30/html/2013-12793.htm.

6 Audrey Singer and Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, *Immigration Facts: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2013), www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2013/08/14_daca/daca_singer_svajlenka_final.pdf.

- Twenty-nine percent of Salvadoran immigrants in the United States were U.S. citizens. Salvadoran immigrants had the second-lowest citizenship rate among the 15 populations in the RAD analysis (after Mexico), well below the U.S. foreign-born population overall (44 percent).
- Ninety percent of first-generation Salvadoran immigrants were working age (18 to 64), while only a small share was age 65 and older (5 percent). The median age of Salvadoran immigrants was 39.

Second Generation (U.S.-born with at least one El Salvador-born parent)⁷

- The second-generation Salvadoran population consisted of approximately 935,000 U.S.-born individuals with at least one El Salvador-born parent.
- Fifty-one percent of the Salvadoran second-generation population reported that both parents were born in El Salvador; and 49 percent reported one El Salvador-born parent.
- The Salvadoran second-generation population in the United States was young, with a median age of 11. Seventy percent of the second generation was below age 18, and 30 percent was working age (18 to 64).

Educational Attainment

- The Salvadoran diaspora had relatively little formal education, although schooling levels were higher in the second generation than the first. The Salvadoran and Mexican diaspora populations were the least educated of the 15 groups in the RAD analysis.
- Forty-eight percent of the Salvadoran diaspora age 25 and older had not completed high school, compared to 13 percent of the general U.S. population. The U.S.-born children (second generation) of Salvadoran immigrants were more than five times as likely to have completed high school as their parents (52 percent versus 10 percent of those age 25 and older).
- Eight percent of Salvadoran diaspora members age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree as their highest credential, far lower than the U.S. population overall (20 percent). Only 6 percent of Salvadoran immigrants age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree, versus 19 percent of the second-generation population age 25 and older.
- Two percent of the Salvadoran diaspora age 25 and older had an advanced degree (master's, advanced professional, or PhD), compared to 11 percent of the general U.S. population. Only 2 percent of Salvadoran immigrants held an advanced degree, as did 7 percent of the second generation age 25 and older.

Household Income

- Households headed by a member of the Salvadoran diaspora had a lower median annual income than U.S. households overall: \$41,000 versus \$50,000. Among the 15 groups studied in the RAD analysis, only Mexican, Haitian, and Ethiopian households

⁷ U.S. born is defined as born in the United States or born abroad to a U.S.-citizen parent.

had a lower median annual income than Salvadoran households.

- Fourteen percent of Salvadoran diaspora households reported annual incomes above \$90,000, the threshold for the top 25 percent of U.S. households.
- Four percent of Salvadoran diaspora households had annual incomes exceeding \$140,000, the threshold for the top 10 percent of U.S. households.

Employment

- Salvadoran diaspora members age 16 and over were more likely than the general U.S. population to be in the labor force: 75 percent versus 64 percent.
- Within the labor force, members of the Salvadoran diaspora were less likely than the overall U.S. population to be employed: 89 percent versus 91 percent.
- Members of the Salvadoran diaspora were in professional or managerial occupations at a rate well below the general U.S. labor force: 10 percent versus 31 percent.⁸ Salvadoran and Mexican diaspora populations worked in professional or managerial occupations at the lowest proportions of the 15 groups in the RAD analysis. These occupations include specialized fields (e.g. engineering, science, law, or education) as well as administrative and managerial jobs (e.g. finance or human resources).

Geographic Distribution⁹

- Salvadoran immigrants were dispersed throughout the United States, but the largest numbers were in the states of California (415,000), Texas (170,000), and New York (105,000).
- The Los Angeles metropolitan area was home to the largest number of Salvadoran immigrants (275,000). The Salvadoran immigrant population was most concentrated in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, where 165,000 El Salvador-born residents made up 2.9 percent of the population. In the New York City area, this immigrant group numbered 140,000, and about 105,000 Salvadoran immigrants lived in the San Francisco metropolitan area.

Remittance Volume¹⁰

- El Salvador's remittances totaled \$3.9 billion in 2012. With a total gross domestic product estimated at \$23.8 billion, remittances comprised 16.5 percent of the country's GDP. El Salvador was the second most remittance-dependent country in the RAD analysis (after Haiti), by share of GDP.
- The Salvadoran diaspora in the United States transferred about \$3.6 billion in remittances to El Salvador in 2012. By a wide margin, the United States was the top destination country for Salvadoran emigrants and the top source of remittances.

8 This rate is calculated based on the share of all individuals reporting an occupation for their primary job at the time the CPS was administered, or their most recent primary job.

9 Analysis based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008-12 ACS. Note that geographic distribution is only analyzed for the immigrant population. Second-generation Salvadoran diaspora members are not included in this section due to data limitations.

10 Remittance data are taken from World Bank Prospects Group tables for annual remittance inflows and outflows (October 2013 update) and the 2012 Bilateral Remittance Matrix (both available here: <http://go.worldbank.org/092X1CHHD0>). GDP estimates are from World Bank World Development Indicators data. Population estimates are from the United Nations Population Division mid-2013 matrix of total migrant stock by origin and destination.

Tables, Maps, and Graphs

Characteristics of the Salvadoran Diaspora in the United States, 2009-13

	Salvadoran Diaspora in the United States*	Total U.S. Population
Household Income		
Median household income	\$41,000	\$50,000
Average household size	3.5	2.5
Share of households with high incomes (\$90,000+)	14%	25%
Share of households with very high incomes (\$140,000+)	4%	10%
Employment		
Total population age 16 and older	1,474,000	239,386,000
Share in the labor force	75%	64%
... that was employed	89%	91%
... that was in a professional occupation ⁺	10%	31%
Educational Attainment **		
Total population age 25 and older	1,154,000	201,925,000
... with less than high school education	48%	13%
... with high school or some college education	42%	57%
... with a bachelor's degree	8%	20%
... with an advanced degree	2%	11%
Population Characteristics by Generation		
First- and Second-Generation Immigrant Population	2,109,000	73,140,000
First-generation immigrant population***	1,174,000	38,468,000
... that was working age (18-64)	90%	81%
... that entered the United States before 2000	64%	64%
... naturalized as U.S. citizens	29%	44%
Second-generation population****	935,000	34,672,000
... that was under age 18	70%	46%
... that was working age (18-64)	30%	43%
... with only one parent from El Salvador	49%	

* defined as all first and second generation

** highest level reported

*** all individuals who report El Salvador as their place of birth, excluding U.S. births abroad

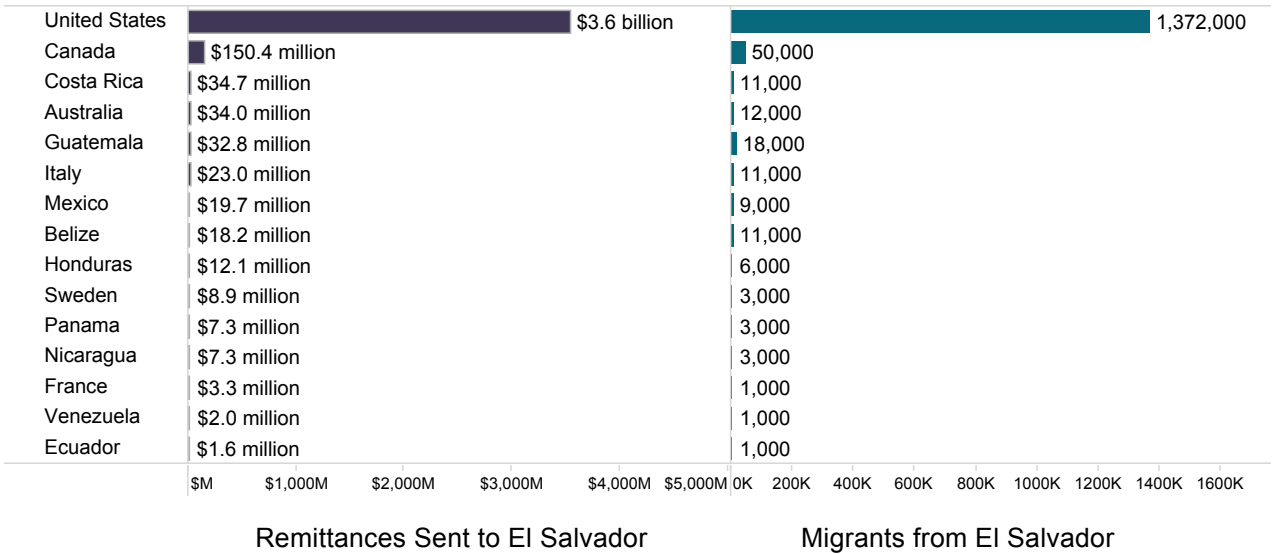
**** all individuals who report having at least one parent born in El Salvador

⁺calculated based on the share of all individuals reporting an occupation for their primary job at the time the Current Population Survey (CPS) was administered, or for their most recent primary job.

Note: Estimates are based on Migration Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Census Bureau CPS pooled 2009-13 data.

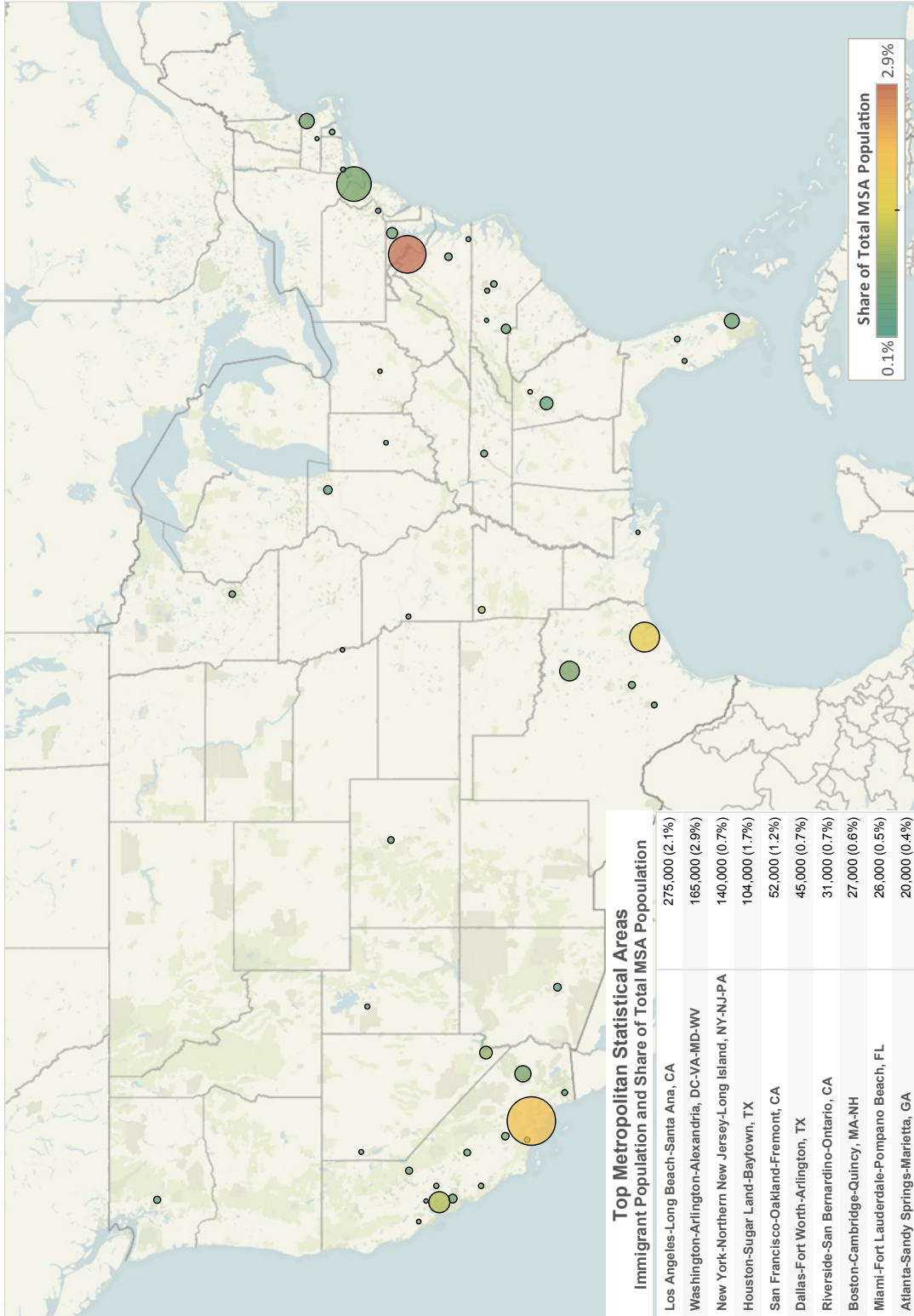
Source: All Census Bureau data were accessed from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0 [Machine-readable database], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

Remittance Inflows to El Salvador by Sending Country and the Salvadoran Emigrant Population, 2012



Source: Migration Policy Institute analysis of World Bank Prospects Group tables for annual remittance inflows and outflows (October 2013 update) and the 2012 Bilateral Remittance Matrix, the World Bank's World Development Indicators, and the United Nations Population Division's Matrix of Total Migrant Stock by Origin and Destination (mid-2013).

**Immigrant Population from El Salvador
Displayed by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)**



Map based on Migration Policy Institute tabulations of U.S. Census Bureau 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Table B05006.

Source: MPI analysis of 2010-12 ACS, pooled.