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# The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida (Working Paper No. 1)

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WORKING PAPER SERIES

# The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida

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

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## **Introduction.**

Colombia is in crisis.[1] An undeclared civil war, encompassing widespread guerrilla and drug-related violence, combined with economic recession during the late 1990s, has brought turmoil to this South American state. Colombia's political and economic instability has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Colombian citizens from their home communities. Large numbers of Colombian peasants are fleeing rural areas, where fighting between guerrillas, 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. Others are escaping the instability by crossing international borders to become refugees in neighboring Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama. At the same time, Colombians with financial means are migrating to other states, principally Costa Rica, Spain, and the United States. A significant number of Colombians, estimated at as many as 200,000 to 300,000, have migrated to the United States in the past three years alone.

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 (Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, 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 federal and state decision makers cannot afford to ignore.

South Florida is no stranger to large influxes of political and economic migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. The recent wave of Colombian migration is similar to several influxes of migrants the region has experienced over the last 40 years. Cuban migrants began flooding in after Fidel Castro took power in 1959, and more than 650,000 now reside in South Florida. Political unrest in Central America in the 1980s led tens of thousands of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans to migrate to South Florida. The region is a favorite destination for migrants from Haiti and other Caribbean island states, and significant numbers of Peruvians and other South Americans, including Brazilians, have also chosen to move to the area. More recently, sociopolitical 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 into a vibrant mosaic of ethnically segregated Latin American and Caribbean neighborhoods.[2]

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 guerrillas, paramilitaries, common criminals, and government security forces as more severe

than the threats that drove other Latin American and Caribbean groups to come to the US before them. Others blame the current turmoil in Colombia on failed US counterdrug policies and widespread corruption in the Colombian government. Caught in a bureaucratic debate over their status as political or economic migrants, the Colombians arriving in South Florida are becoming increasingly frustrated as they attempt to establish their legal status in the US 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.[3] It begins with a description of conditions within the diaspora, based largely on information provided by Colombian-American service organizations and members of the latest Colombian migrant wave to reach South Florida. The paper then addresses the potential economic, political, and social impacts of the Colombian diaspora on South Florida itself. Finally, it assesses whether the Colombian diaspora in South Florida presents a case of normal "push-pull" immigration, in which the migrant group breaks most ties with the home state, or is instead a case of transnational migration, in which migrants maintain strong economic, political, and social networks in both their home and new host states.[4]

## **The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida.**

Colombian migration to the United States and South Florida can be categorized into three periods or interrelated waves.

The **first wave** of Colombian migration to the United States corresponded with the period known as *La Violencia*, the political war between the Colombian Conservative and Liberal parties that cost more than 200,000 lives in the 1950s. This initial wave continued after the end of *La Violencia* in the late 1950s and lasted until the late 1970s. All socioeconomic classes were involved in this initial wave; however, the majority of migrants were people from the lower and lower-middle classes seeking to escape the political violence and searching for economic opportunities. Migrants in this period were primarily young adult males who were accompanied or later joined by their families.

After *La Violencia* ended, the migration continued at a slower pace but was still mainly comprised of lower- and lower-middle-class individuals searching for economic opportunity in the United States. Those migrating from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes during this period not only came 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 Colombian cities of Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín. A negligible number of migrants remained in South Florida, but most traveled to New York and other cities where jobs were more plentiful and 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 socioeconomic classes were involved in this second wave, although the number of middle, upper-middle, and upper-class migrants increased. 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 economy grew at a respectable rate. But this period was also characterized by the explosion of drug-related violence in Colombia occurring within the context of an escalating US-led war on drugs. Many of the Colombians who left their home state during this period were escaping drug-related violence and security threats. Others were 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 established transportation hubs and distribution networks for the illegal drug trade throughout the United States.[5] Those who migrated during this second wave (and first-wave migrants who did not become US citizens) were adversely affected by the negative stereotyping of all Colombians as drug traffickers. This negative stereotyping reduced levels of trust within the Colombian migrant community and kept Colombians from associating with fellow countrymen in the United States who were not part of their own network of family, friends, and associates.

The second-wave migrants also came mainly from the larger Colombian interior cities, as well as the coffee-growing region in the west-central part of the country and the northern coastal 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 the second wave of Colombian migrants was the proliferation 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, making Colombia one of Florida's largest trading partners by the mid 1990s. The second wave of Colombian migrants to South Florida contributed to the region's rapidly expanding Hispanic middle class, which became an important support network for later arrivals.

In 1990, near the end of the second wave of Colombian migrants, the US Census registered 83,634 Colombians residing in the state of Florida. Eighty-three percent were concentrated in South Florida counties, 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 US Census.

The **third wave** of Colombian migration to the United States began in the mid 1990s and continues to the present. Although all socioeconomic classes are still involved, this latest wave presents a dramatic 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 themselves and their families from the Colombian guerrillas, paramilitaries, common criminals, and government security forces. In addition to these “push” factors from Colombia, the lure of improved economic opportunities abroad was an important “pull” for third-wave migrants 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 the old. Third-wave migrants come from throughout Colombia, with an increasing number from smaller cities in predominantly rural areas. A large percentage of third-wave Colombian migrants remain in South Florida. Specific conditions found within this community are addressed in the following sections of this paper.

### **The “Push” Out of Colombia.**

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

1. Fear of the general violence in Colombia.
2. Feeling that they could live more securely in the United States.
3. Sense that there are no solutions to Colombia’s political and economic problems.
4. Discontent with elected Colombian officials (government).
5. Fear after being touched by the violence in some manner (personal threats, the kidnapping or murder of family or friends, etc.).
6. Expectations of economic (job) opportunities in the United States.
7. Discontent with the Colombian political system (state institutions).

Colombia’s political and economic elites have recognized the recent migration as a “brain drain” that poses a serious problem for the country’s future, to the extent that the Colombian media have run special reports explaining why Colombians should remain at home.[6]

### **The “Pull” 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 on to other US cities with large Colombian populations (New York, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans,

Chicago, etc.). These "pull" factors include (in rough priority order):

1. *Spanish language.* A person can function well in South Florida speaking only Spanish, the primary language of local business and social interaction in the region's large Hispanic community. This is a particularly attractive aspect; even a few hours north, in Central Florida, migrants find that they must speak English to get by.

2. *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, while lower- and lower-middle-class Colombians arriving in South Florida in the third wave tend to move on to New York or Chicago. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many affluent Colombians 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. Increasingly, institutions have been established to support recent arrivals and to politically mobilize the Colombian community behind the cause of obtaining temporary protection from deportation. Our interviewees report that Miami has become a favorite destination precisely because of the presence of friends and relatives who have homes in the area and who possess important contacts. Too much should not be made of this role, however, as our interviewees report finding little organized support. Moreover, interviewees also note a contradictory response. On the one hand, they stress the importance of the networks established by earlier migrants. On the other hand, they are quick to apply negative stereotypes to second-wave migrants.

3. *Lifestyle.* Colombians can move to South Florida and feel safe without substantially changing their lifestyles. Colombian products are readily available in South Florida supermarkets and the number of Colombian restaurants is increasing. South Florida cultural activities (music, dance, arts, etc.) are similar to those in Colombia. South Florida Spanish-language stations feature Colombian radio and television programs, and Colombian newspapers and magazines are available at newsstands 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 ones they led in their home state, minus the security threats.

4. *Proximity to Colombia.* South Florida is just over two hours by air from north coast Colombian cities and just over three hours from the larger cities of Bogotá and Cali. It is almost as easy for Colombians to travel to South Florida as it is for them to travel between the larger cities in Colombia. This consideration is especially important for persons who have brought their families to South Florida for security reasons but must travel frequently to Colombia to run their businesses.

5. *Other factors.* Good weather, available employment, investment opportunities, and unfamiliarity with other parts of the United States are some of the other factors cited to explain why a large

percentage of third-wave Colombian migrants are drawn to South Florida. However, those who come to the area because of perceived available employment often face the sad reality that they must accept jobs that they would never have performed back home. Given the shortage of professional employment possibilities in the region, many in the recent diaspora report staying in South Florida only long enough to identify employment in cities such as Atlanta and New York.

### **The Size of the Colombian Diaspora in South Florida.**

No one has an accurate count of the numbers of Colombians in South Florida. The Colombian Consulate in Miami estimates the number of Colombians residing permanently in all of Florida at 458,000. According to some estimates, as many as 40% to 50% of all Colombians in Florida may be undocumented. The Colombian American Service Association (CASA) calculates that 240,000 Colombians live legally in the state.[7] Other estimates of the number of Colombians in South Florida range from 250,000 to 350,000 (also assuming 40%-50% are undocumented). Due to the large number of undocumented migrants, the 2000 US Census does not provide a valid count of the total number of Colombians in the region. Figures from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were not available at this writing, and INS officials interviewed for this project claimed that it is difficult to determine exactly how many Colombians legally enter and leave South Florida. However, the INS was able to report that asylum claims made by Colombian nationals have increased by a factor of six in the last two years alone (from 427 in 1999 to 2747 in 2000).[8]

Records kept by the Colombian government's Department of Administrative Security reveal that between 1996 and 2000, 1,015,205 more Colombians departed the country and remained abroad (in all destinations) than returned to Colombia.[9] Since 25% of all Colombian departures head for the United States, we can assume that at least 25% of those not returning to Colombia (approximately 250,000) remained in this country, with a large proportion choosing to stay in South Florida. According to CASA, 75% 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.[10] Several factors help explain the dispersion of Colombian migrants across South Florida communities. First, Colombians live and establish social networks based on strict class and 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. Consequently, the Colombian community is dispersed throughout South Florida, although the different



socioeconomic groups tend to favor certain areas.

*The 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 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, they concentrated in Kendall, in southwestern Miami-Dade. While many Colombians still live in this area, and many third-wave migrants move in with relatives or friends in Kendall, the area's unsubstantiated reputation as the center for Colombian drug traffickers has reduced the number of third-wave Colombian migrants moving into these neighborhoods.<sup>[11]</sup> Today, middle-class and some upper-middle-class migrants are heading instead to areas with large tracts of new housing construction, including Doral in west-central Miami-Dade; Miramar, Plantation, Pembroke Pines, and Sunrise in western Broward County; and Boca Raton and West Palm Beach in southeastern Palm Beach County.

*Upper-middle and upper classes.* These classes live in Key Biscayne, Miami Beach, Brickell and Bayshore (City of Miami), and Coral Gables in eastern Miami-Dade, as well as Broward'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, home to a large upper-middle and upper-class Jewish community.

### **Colombian Diaspora Employment Patterns.**

The ways Colombians make a living in South Florida are as varied as the areas where they live. The following are some general characteristics of their economic activities.

*Lower and lower-middle classes* (from all three waves of migrants). These persons work in a variety of manufacturing, service, and agricultural industries. Many of those working in these industries are undocumented and 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 enterprises, including restaurants and other personal service-related businesses. No discernable patterns emerge by industry; instead the workers are distributed throughout the entire regional economy.

*Middle, upper-middle, and upper classes* (first and second waves). These persons work in a variety of professions, businesses, and educational institutions, much the same as other South Florida residents.

*Middle, upper-middle, and upper classes* (third wave). The employment patterns of third-wave migrants from the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes differ from the first two waves in several respects. Third-wave migrants from these classes tend to feel that they have dropped one or more social classes since their arrival in the United States.

Investors. Many third-wave 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. A good number lost large amounts of equity in the sale of their assets in Colombia's depressed economy in the late 1990s and do not have the required \$250,000 to qualify for an investor visa. 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 re-establish new sources of income in South Florida, these persons will have to migrate to other locations or look for jobs, possibly in the region's manufacturing, service, or agricultural industries.

Professionals. Most third-wave professional Colombians are surprised at the difficulties they face in obtaining licenses and work permits to continue their professional careers in South Florida. Many also do not speak English, which complicates their ability to find professional employment. In particular, the region does not have enough college or university jobs to absorb the many Colombian academics moving to South Florida. 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 report working two or three low-paying jobs at once to support their families—a situation experienced by many migrant groups upon arrival in the United States.

Transnational businesspersons. A main option for Colombian migrants who were not willing to lose large amounts of equity by selling their capital-intensive businesses (farms, large factories, etc.) in Colombia is to manage their businesses transnationally. These individuals normally move their families to South Florida for personal security reasons while continuing to run their businesses in Colombia through a combination of intermediaries, frequent travel, and/or telecommuting through the Internet. Exactly how many Colombians in South Florida are involved in transnational business is not known.

Upper classes. Upper-class Colombian migrants in South Florida generally do not face the same problems as other classes, thanks 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 those of third-wave middle- and upper-middle-class professionals and transnational businesspersons, but since they are not necessarily dependent on their

profession or business for the income to maintain their lifestyles, their difficulties are not as serious.

A general complaint of third-wave Colombian migrants is that they are not familiar with US employment practices. Most have little or no experience in developing resumes and undergoing job interviews. Many are not accustomed to competing for jobs based upon their qualifications; instead, they are used to gaining employment through close networks of family and friends. Third-wave Colombian migrants also become frustrated by US employment practices which require that their paperwork be in order, including valid work visas and social security numbers.

### **Obtaining Legal Status for Colombian Migrants.**

The primary concern of third-wave Colombian migrants is obtaining legal status in the United States. Most report having had insufficient information about the US immigration process before leaving Colombia. Through a combination of media sources, including popular movies, and reports from relatives and friends who previously migrated to the United States, most third-wave Colombian migrants were left with the impression that it would be easy to obtain legal immigration status and continue their professional careers in the United States. In practice, this has not been their experience.

Colombian migrants are experiencing deep frustration with the US government over their legal status and many believe that, in some measure, their current plight is the fault of failed US counterdrug policies. In their view, US policies have caused the violence and economic problems that plague their country. They resent that they have not been able to legalize their situation and continue their professional careers, and are especially bitter that Colombians are not eligible to participate in the US immigration programs for critical professionals that apply to citizens of many other states. Third-wave Colombian migrants tend to believe 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. Many believe that the internal violence and security situation in Colombia is similar to, if not worse than, that of Cuba under Fidel Castro, or 1980s war-ravaged Central America, and thus feel they are entitled to similar treatment: the immediate legal status given to Cubans or, at least, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) granted to Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans during the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>[12]</sup> The result is that many third-wave Colombian migrants enter the United States legally but remain here with undocumented status after their visas expire.

TPS has not been granted to Colombians for two primary reasons. First, Colombian President Andrés Pastrana initially declared that renewed Colombian migration was due to economic and not

political reasons. Although he subsequently reversed his position, his words weakened the Colombian case for TPS. Second, despite some efforts in the US Congress and by several non-governmental organizations, lobbying of the US government to approve Colombian TPS has been weak. With the exception of a few Cuban-American legislators, the Colombian TPS request has been unable to muster significant political support in Washington, or even in Florida. Unless a broader political coalition can be forged to support Colombian demands, this effort is unlikely to succeed in the near future. The Bush administration has not made any overtures to indicate that TPS will be forthcoming.

Without TPS, and like other large migrant groups before them, Colombian migrants try every measure at their disposal to establish legal status and obtain work permits. Student visas, investment visas, work visas, family reunification measures, and marriage to US citizens are all options that Colombians pursue to obtain and maintain legal status. For a time, a common tactic was to debark international flights connecting through Miami International Airport and request political asylum. As a result, Colombians connecting through the United States to other international locations must now have valid US visas.<sup>[13]</sup> Like other migrant groups, Colombians have found that unscrupulous lawyers will charge them high prices to work the immigration system for them. These lawyers promise to help migrants obtain legal status quickly, when in fact all they do is submit completed immigration paperwork. Unscrupulous immigration lawyers carry a share of the blame for creating unrealistic expectations among Colombian migrants who have few, if any, chances of convincing the INS to grant them temporary protection.

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

### **The Impact of Colombian Migration on South Florida.**

It is too early for accurate assessments of the overall impact of third-wave Colombian migration on South Florida. Initial evidence suggests potential for a strong economic impact. The political impact is likely to be weaker, as Colombians in the United States are not particularly active politically. Socially, the impact of the Colombian migration is also weak, for Colombians assimilate quickly into a South Florida population characterized by social and ethnic divisions and lacking social trust—conditions similar to those that Colombians left behind in their home state.

*The economic impact.* This is the area in which Colombians will 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.[14] On the other hand, other aspects of this situation could 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. GDP fell by 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.

Ironically, the downturn in the Colombian economy had a positive impact on Florida. Colombians withdrew hundreds of millions of dollars in potential investment capital and deposited it into South Florida banks. In addition, Colombian migrants have opened numerous new businesses in South Florida, many of which are involved in international trade—an area in which Colombians have traditionally prospered. These new international businesses have the potential to increase the level of Florida's overall external trade. Currently, approximately 5% of all Florida's external trade is with Colombia, and the majority passes through South Florida. Many of the international businesses that Colombian migrants are opening in South Florida focus on trade with their home state, providing further growth potential for Colombia-South Florida international trade.

But despite the potential boon to the South Florida economy from the increased investment resources and international businesses of Colombian migrants, recent economic figures reveal the presence of other forces that may be degrading Colombia-South Florida economic ties.

Using 1999-2000 trade data as an indicator, the trend reveals that Florida exports to Colombia are declining while Colombian exports to Florida are increasing.[15]

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 reduce the level of trade with South Florida. Second, the Colombian migrant population could become a burden on already overstressed public school budgets in South Florida.[16] Hundreds of Colombian students are entering the public school system while their parents and guardians, often here on tourist visas or as undocumented aliens, pay little in the way of taxes to support them. The situation has become so problematic that Florida's governor has put forth a plan requiring migrants with financial means to pay a fee for their children's education in Florida's public schools.

A similar concern is being felt at the university level.[17] Third, some fear that just as Colombian migrants have become a burden on the public school systems, they may also eventually stress public health programs and other social services in South Florida.

Another area of economic impact that cannot be overlooked is the remittances that Colombians in South Florida send to their families back home. The exact total of such remittances is not known, but it probably exceeds \$400,000,000 annually. 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.* The growing number of Colombians in South Florida may eventually assume a greater political impact, but to date this has not been the case. Colombians are not particularly active politically, either in Colombia or after arriving in the United States. Colombians residing permanently in the United States have not widely sought citizenship status to exercise US political rights. Only 70,000 Colombians in Florida, out of an estimated statewide population of 458,000, have become US citizens, and only 23,000 are registered to vote in the United States. Prior to 1991, most Colombians did not want to abandon their Colombian citizenship and made only limited efforts to assimilate into US culture. Even after the 1991 Colombian Constitution legalized dual citizenship (which the United States does not recognize), few Colombians rushed to become naturalized US citizens, and their efforts to assimilate into US society remain weak. Many Colombians claim that they became US citizens only because of the stigma of the negative stereotyping of all Colombians as drug traffickers. These persons were tired of the constant harassment and delays they experienced in international airports for carrying a Colombian passport.

Despite their growing presence in South Florida, only three Colombians have run for public office. All campaigned in 2000, one for the post of 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; they split the Colombian vote in the Kendall area and lost to a Cuban-American candidate. Leaders of the Colombian-American community made little effort to get the two Colombian candidates to cooperate. Admittedly, the Colombian vote in this Kendall precinct, which has one of the largest concentrations 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.

Even though the 1991 Colombian Constitution legitimized dual citizenship and the Colombian government encourages political participation by its citizens abroad, 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 US and Colombian political rights can be partly explained by the lack of confidence of Colombians in their government and the low levels of participation traditionally allowed under the Colombian political process.

*The social impact.* Colombians normally experience weak social capital in their home state, and they find similar societal conditions in South Florida with its ethnically segregated communities and low levels of social trust.[18] 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, Colombians' social ties among themselves and with non-Colombians are extremely weak. Norms of cooperation and compromise (among or between Colombians and other ethnic groups) are weak. This lack of social capital 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 politically and economically 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 respect Cubans' achievements in South Florida in terms of economic and political power. Most also feel that Colombians' political situation is similar to, if not worse than, that of Cubans (their main TPS argument). Some third-wave Colombian migrants look down on Cubans, similar to the way Colombians from the interior look down on their countrymen from the coast (whom they claim speak inferior Spanish and have 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 explain the negative attitudes displayed toward Cuban-Americans by more recent Colombian arrivals.

To understand the weakness of social capital among Colombians, it helps to know the sources of Colombian identity. While Colombians individually profess a strong sense of national identity, this concept does not extend much further than cultural and social considerations. Colombians do not possess a common national conscience, a strong sense of community, or a willingness to place the national interest above self-interest—factors required to consolidate a true nationalism.[19] Individual Colombians identify strongly with national symbols and culture, such as the Colombian flag, sports teams, national beauty pageants, foods, drinks, music, dance, art, literature, etc.; however, they do not identify with, and have little or 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 aspect of Colombia makes them most proud, they consistently answer the "people" and the "territory." These same persons have nothing positive to say about Colombian political institutions or the idea of a Colombian state—key aspects of conceptualizing a strong

state.[20] 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. Colombian identity, instead of being national, is tied to the following social institutions (in order of priority):

**Strongest identity factors:**

1. Extended family.
2. Close friends and associates.
3. Socioeconomic class.
4. Region of Colombia (*paisas, costeños, caleños, etc.*).

**Weakest identity factors:**

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

The weakness of Colombian social capital does not mean that Colombians are completely anti-social. They come together for events involving Colombian national sports teams (soccer, etc.) in South Florida, as well as in response to national disasters (earthquake relief, etc.) and at the annual July 20 Colombian Independence Day celebrations. They also join selected religious and business groups (mainly with other Colombians). Perversely, 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 the difficulty of building stronger Colombian social capital involves the several Colombian-American service organizations that have emerged in South Florida (see Appendix A). Although these organizations have a strong altruistic focus on helping newly arrived Colombian migrants and existing members of the South Florida Colombian diaspora, most are perceived as suffering from key problems. First, they have limited resources. Second, members of these organizations are drawn from the upper and upper-middle classes and restrict their memberships to people from certain socioeconomic classes or social networks.[21] Third, members tend to belong to several of the same Colombian-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 coordinate the programs of the other service organizations. In fact, the coalition is a paper tiger that has not been effective at breaking down parochial barriers among the service organizations and bringing them together in any sort of coordinated effort. Some charge the coalition with having close ties to the Colombian government and therefore consider it unworthy of support. Thus, while the intent of Colombian service organizations to help other



Colombians is laudable, the overall results of such programs are limited.

Finally, this paper refers throughout to the negative stereotyping of Colombians as international drug traffickers. Such stereotypes were a major identity factor affecting the second wave of Colombian migration, from the late 1970s to mid 1990s. Today, this negative stereotyping, while not completely gone, seems to carry less weight for Colombians from all migration waves in South Florida.

### **Evaluating the Colombian Diaspora Migration Type.**

One purpose of this paper is to determine the nature of the current third wave of Colombian migration to South Florida. Is it a case of "push-pull" migration, whereby migrants sever all contact with their home state, or rather a case of transnational migration, in which migrants maintain strong economic, political, and social networks in both their home and new host states?[22] The evidence supports the push-pull model. The scholarly immigration literature offers the proposition that the level of transnational migration activities is associated with the social capital the migrant experiences in both the sending and receiving states. The greater the social capital, the more likely it is that conditions of transnational migration will occur. The data presented in this paper indicate a lack of transnational economic, political, or social linkages between Colombia and South Florida due to the weakness of social capital in both regions.

Several academic and World Bank studies have documented the low levels of social capital in Colombia. Evidence reveals that Colombians 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 low levels of social capital on both ends of the Colombian migration stream, strong transnational linkages cannot be expected to occur. Politically, the linkages between Colombian migrants in South Florida and their home state are almost nonexistent, despite Colombian government actions to encourage political participation by the diaspora community. Social linkages are also weak. With the exception of contacts with family and close friends, both in Colombia and in South Florida, Colombians have established few permanent social linkages with other groups. Economically, some transnational linkages do exist, but mainly out of necessity (e.g., 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.

Colombian-American service organizations in South Florida try to help Colombians in the diaspora with medical care, legal advice, immigration information, educational programs, investment and business advice, and other transition problems. Such efforts tend to build social capital in the local community, but the organizations possess few resources and can help only a small percentage of

those who need assistance.

## **Conclusions.**

The observations in this study are preliminary and require 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 both its size and its 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.

South Florida must prepare itself for the arrival of these migrants, who, for the most part, will be a boon to the region's economy. However, the growing Colombian presence could have some potentially negative consequences for South Florida, including pressure on local schools and universities as well as other public services. To prepare for these eventualities, South Florida officials require accurate information about the size of the diaspora community.

In conclusion, 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 they returned would depend on how well established they were in the United States. These responses suggest that, like other migrants to the United States, Colombians are likely to stay in South Florida and contribute in the long run to the ever-changing character of the region.

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[1] 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, D.C.: Inter-American Dialogue, 2000).

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

[3] 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 in South Florida. These leaders included the Colombian Consul in Miami, 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 who had arrived in South Florida within the last 3-4 years.

[4] See Alejandro Portes, Luis E. Guarnizo, and Patricia Landolt, "The Study of Transnationalism: Pitfalls and Promise of an Emergent Research Field," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (March 1999), pp. 217-237.

[5] See 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 Medellín Cartel-An Astonishing True Story of Murder, Money, and International Corruption* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

[6] See "Exodo," *Semana* (Bogotá, Colombia) June 28, 1999; and "¿Por qué quedarse en Colombia?" *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, Colombia), Special Supplement, November 8, 2000.

[7] 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.

[8] See Alfonso Chardy, "Colombian Travelers Asking to Stay in U.S.," *The Miami Herald*, March 30, 2001, pp. 1a, 2a.

[9] José Olinto Rueda Plata, "La demografía nacional en el contexto de la crisis," paper presented at the Seminario Internacional Sobre Políticas Migratorias, Bogotá, Colombia, November 7, 2000.

[10] See Portes and Stepick.

[11] No single neighborhood in Miami possesses the distinction of being the exclusive domain of narcotics traffickers of any national background. Miami's history reveals that traffickers have been arrested in nearly in every single neighborhood in the city, including Coral Gables, Key Biscayne, and Weston.

[12] See US Committee for Refugees, "World Refugee Information, Country Report: Colombia" (January 2001), [http://www.refugees.org/world.countryrpt/amer\\_carib/colombia.htm](http://www.refugees.org/world.countryrpt/amer_carib/colombia.htm).

[13] See Chardy.

[14] See José de Córdoba, "Latin American Refugees Create New Economic Center in Miami," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2000, p. 1.

[15] 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 the first semester of the year 2000, Florida exported only \$823.7 million to Colombia, indicating a slight decline in year-end totals. In 1999, Florida imported \$1.49 billion from Colombia. 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. Florida International University, Summit of the Americas Center, 2001, "Florida-Colombia Trade Shows Signs of Recovery" (March 16, 2001).

[16] According to Miami-Dade County public school officials, 8,120 Colombian-born students were enrolled in the system in 2000-2001. This figure represents an increase of more than 2,000 from the previous year. Officials estimate that in the 2001-2002 school year the number of Colombian-born students in the Miami-Dade County public schools will exceed 10,000.

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

[18] 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," World Bank (March 2001), at [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital) (March 2001).

[19] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

[20] Barry Buzon, *People, State and Fear* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), p. 65.

[21] According to CASA, its board is comprised of 13 Colombian-Americans who are US citizens. All have been educated in the US and are from middle-class backgrounds. None belong to other Colombian service organizations but they are reportedly involved in the activities of other groups. CASA also claims to collaborate extensively with groups that represent other nationalities.

[22] See Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Arturo Ignacio Sánchez 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 Díaz, "Transnational Migration: A View from Colombia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (March 1999), pp. 397-421.