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Latinos in Massachusetts: Colombians

By Phillip Granberry, PH.D., and Krizia Valentino

September 2020
Foreword

Today it is possible to experience the vivid culture of Colombia within the borders of the United States. This would be impossible without the migration of many Colombians starting as early as the 1930s.\(^1\) Many states, specially Florida, New York, Texas, New Jersey, California, and Massachusetts, are now home to Colombian immigrants.\(^2\) While choosing to leave one’s home country and begin a new life is a daunting task, many Colombian immigrants chose this path to ensure safety for their families. At the time, Colombia was in the midst of a 52-year armed conflict involving multiple guerilla groups like Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) as well as right-wing paramilitary groups and the government’s security forces. As the conflict came to its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the first large wave of Colombian immigrants arrived in the U.S.

Throughout the following years, multiple efforts were made to create peace among the combatants. This time of uncertainty led to more Colombians to make the difficult decision to emigrate to the United States. From 2008 to 2016, a second wave of Colombian immigrants arrived in the U.S., as Colombian leaders met with FARC leaders to negotiate a peace treaty.

Although the Colombian president at the time, Juan Manuel Santos, began negotiations with FARC leaders in 2012, debates on a final peace treaty went on for more than four years and multiple violations of a cease-fire took place. This situation created more frustration and uncertainty for Colombians living in Colombia at the time. The fear resulting from the uncertainty of successfully negotiating for peace led to a third large wave of migration of Colombians to the U.S.\(^3\)

On November 24, 2016, a final peace treaty between la FARC and the Colombian government was signed. Even though this was a victory for Colombians, fear and general distrust of the ability to maintain peace led to a continuation of emigration to the U.S. The Gastón Institute “Latinos in Massachusetts” series shows a new wave of Colombian migration in 2017. The large difference between this third wave and original migrants is

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\(^2\) Uriarte, Miren; Granberry, Phillip; Halloran, Megan; Kelly, Susan; Kramer, Rob; Winkler, Sandra; Murillo, Jennifer; Wagle, Udaya; and Wilson, Randall, "Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Colombians: A Scan of Needs of Recent Latin American Immigrants to the Boston Area" (2003). [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/gaston_pubs/134](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/gaston_pubs/134)

that Colombians already living in Massachusetts had established communities and paved the way for the success of the new arrivals. 4

Colombians who had already settled in Massachusetts made it easier for other Colombians, including their relatives or friends, to succeed as they emigrated to the state. Settled in Massachusetts since the 1980s, Colombians had learned how to negotiate the streets of Boston, (especially East Boston) and surrounding communities, revitalizing their neighborhoods and helping to make them into the vital Latino communities that they are today. This can be said also for Colombians present in larger numbers in New York and Florida.

Colombians as resilient individuals keep demonstrating the ability to adjust to change. To understand better how Latino populations, living under the oppression of armed conflicts for so many years can move to a different country and have the ability to adjust and change, we have to look at the definition of “Resilient”. Being resilient means: “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Colombians routinely lived under difficult circumstances before settling in the US. And yet, it was those very experiences that fostered the resilience and strength to recover and become successful, educated citizens of a new country, seeking a better and peaceful life for themselves and their families and willing to accept new challenges and opportunities. According to the Gastón Institute analysis, Colombians who settled in Massachusetts are living above the poverty level, contribute greatly to the labor force, and are more likely than other Latinos to hold at least a bachelor’s degree.

Today, East Boston and its surrounding communities are home to many Colombians. It is there where you will find Colombian-owned restaurants and businesses, and where you will experience the authentic Colombian hospitality.

Colombians who emigrated to the U.S.—having endured the extraordinary social and psychological conditions arising from 52 years of conflict—were empowered people who understood that challenges and obstacles, no matter how difficult, could be overcome with the same resilience and hard work that had guided them through even the most difficult of times.

Proudly, today, many Colombian immigrants are joining together to give back to Colombian communities that are still in need. One example of an organization is the New England Association for Colombian Children (NEACOL). In 2013 this organization was founded by a network of professional Colombian immigrants living in Massachusetts under the recognition of the Colombian Consul at the time, Monica

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4 Rivera, Lorna, op. cit.
Pizon. Since then NEACOL has awarded more than $200,000 in grants and has benefited around 12,000 children in the areas of Health, Nutrition, and Education.

This year, responding to the needs of the community living during the COVID-19 pandemic, NEACOL opened an emergency COVID-19 fund to respond to the needs of the Latino and Colombian community in New England. NEACOL selected two organizations in Massachusetts: the East Boston Branch of YMCA Greater Boston and Emmaus Inc., in Haverhill. Funds for these organizations, as well as others in Colombia, will bring food relief to children and their families in need during this crisis.

It is critical we understand more deeply the many social-cultural differences among Colombians and other Latinos so we can more effectively address their specific community needs. One issue that is common to all the Latino communities, however, is a clear need for greater representation, leadership, voice, and power in the political, corporate, and nonprofit spheres.

Margarita Duque-Escallon
President, NEACOL - New England Association for Colombian Children
Intro

The Gastón Institute’s 2020 Latinos in Massachusetts series focuses on the ten largest Latino populations located throughout the state. In order of size, these Latino populations are Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Brazilians, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Colombians, Cubans, Hondurans, and Ecuadorians. This report analyzes Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data from the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Our descriptive analysis uses both household- and individual-level data to estimate population size and percentages and to compare Colombians to Other Latinos and Non-Latinos in the state.

Latinos in Massachusetts: Colombians

Massachusetts was home in 2017 to 918,565 Latinos, of whom 42,488, or approximately 5%, were Colombian. Massachusetts has the sixth largest Colombian population in the United States (after Florida, New York, New Jersey, California, and Texas). Appendix A maps the Colombians in the United States, while Appendix B maps the Colombians by cities and towns in Massachusetts. Boston had the largest Colombian population in 2017 followed by Revere, Lowell, Worchester, and Chelsea. (These five cities between them had 50% of the Colombian population in the state.) Figure 1 shows that the population grew by 77% from 2008 to 2017, while the state’s overall Latino population grew by 44% during this period. By comparison, the state’s total population grew by 5.6% from in this same period.

Figure 1: Colombian Population from 2008 to 2017

Source: 2008-2017 American Community Survey

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5 These reports will not identify Latinos in specific cities and towns, as previous years’ reports have done. Instead, the focus is on the most prevalent Latino ethnic groups statewide.
6 We use Latino origin and ancestry, based on migration from Latin America, to identify these populations. Thus, Brazilians are included in the category “Latino” although most Brazilians self-report using a racial category – white or black – rather than identifying with the term “Latino.”
Nativity

Foreign-born Colombians in Massachusetts, who on average arrived in the United States in 2001, composed 61% of Colombians in the state as of 2017. With few mechanisms to obtain citizenship, only 63% of Colombians in that year were U.S. citizens. By comparison, 34% of Other Latinos were foreign born, and 79% of their population were citizens. The Non-Latino population was 14% foreign born, and 94% of their population were citizens.

Even though 39% of the Colombians were native born, 76% of Colombian children had at least one foreign-born parent compared to 46% for Other Latinos and 24% for Non-Latinos.

Age Distribution and Marital Status

The Colombian population in Massachusetts in 2017 had a median age of 32 years, older than Other Latinos (29 years) and younger than Non-Latinos (41 years). Figure 2 shows that 37% of Colombians were age 24 or younger compared to only 43% of Other Latinos and 28% of Non-Latinos.

At the same time, the prime working-age years of 25-44 and 45-64 together accounted for a large proportion (59%) of Colombians, greater than for Other Latinos (52%) and Non-Latinos (54%). Non-Latinos had the largest share of the population 65 and older while Colombians had the smallest share.

Figure 2: Age Categories

Source: 2017 American Community Survey
**Marital Status**

Figure 3, covering all ages 15 and older, shows the relative marriage rates. The Colombian population had a higher marriage rate (39%) than Other Latinos (35%), though less than for Non-Latinos (48%).

![Figure 3: Marriage Rates of the Population 15 Years and Older](image)

Source: 2017 American Community Survey

**Education**

Latinos in Massachusetts overall have relatively low levels of educational attainment, but this is less true of Colombians than of other groups. Figure 4 shows that Colombians had a lower share of their population without a high school diploma (18%) than Other Latinos (27%). (The figure for Non-Latinos was 7%.) Correspondingly, Colombians had a larger share of their population with at least a Bachelor’s degree than Other Latinos (27% compared to 18%), though lower than for Non-Latinos (47%).

The ages from 18 through 24 are important for obtaining higher education, and 60% of Colombians in this age group who had not already earned a Bachelor's degree were enrolled in college, compared to 38% of Other Latinos and 61% of Non-Latinos.

English language difficulty can influence educational attainment. Of the population age 5 and older, 62% of Colombians in 2017 either spoke only English or spoke it very well. This put Colombians slightly lower than Other Latinos (65%) and much lower than Non-Latinos (94%).
Labor Force Participation

Colombians had a much higher labor force participation rate (81%) than did Other Latinos (69%) and Non-Latinos (66%). Among Colombians, men had higher labor force participation (87%) than women (74%). Younger Colombians had higher labor force participation, which was 87% for those 25-44. This was higher than for Other Latinos (80%) and Non-Latinos (86%) in this age group.

Figure 5: Labor Force Participation of the Population 16 and Older

Source: 2017 American Community Survey
**Unemployment**

In 2017, the ACS estimated Massachusetts unemployment at 4.5% overall, but 3.0% for Colombians. This unemployment rate was lower than for Other Latinos (6.6%) and even Non-Latinos (4.2%).

![Unemployment Chart](chart.png)

*Figure 6: Unemployment*

Source: 2017 American Community Survey

**Occupations**

Over 58% of employed Colombians worked in service and blue-collar occupations, almost exactly the same as for Other Latinos and much lower than for Non-Latinos (30%). In contrast, the share in managerial and professional occupations was 18% for both Colombians and Other Latinos and 37% for Non-Latinos. Even with their higher educational attainment, Colombians fill segments of the labor market that are somewhat similar to Other Latinos, but much different than Non-Latinos.
Wages

Given the occupational information in Figure 7, it is not surprising that Colombians earned relatively low wages in 2017. Full-time Colombian workers had a median wage income of $36,099. Their median wage income was approximately $2,000 less than for Other Latinos and over $24,000 less than for Non-Latinos. The overall wage income disparity between Latinos and Non-Latinos persisted when analyzed by nativity, age, and educational attainment.

Poverty

With their lower wage income, it is somewhat surprising that only 14% of Colombians were below the poverty threshold. This is more similar to Non-Latinos (8%) than to Other Latinos (23%). Slightly over 20% of Colombian children lived below the poverty threshold compared to 31% for Other Latinos and 9% for Non-Latinos.
Standard of Living

The final measures of Colombians’ participation in Massachusetts are projected to identify how they are rewarded for their economic, social, and political participation. We look at homeownership, household income, housing costs, and medical insurance.

Homeownership

Colombians in 2017 had nearly the same homeownership rate as Other Latinos (25% and 26% respectively). In contrast, the rate for Non-Latinos was 67%. The Colombians’ rate of 25% means that three quarters of Colombians were renters.
**Household Income**

Household income is another aid in assessing a population’s standard of living. It accounts for the incomes of all people ages 15 years or older occupying the same housing unit, regardless of relation. Colombian’s median household income was $62,289. This was much higher than for Other Latinos’ households ($43,683) though lower than for Non-Latino households ($82,513).

**Figure 10: Median Household Income**

![Median Household Income graph](image)

Source: 2017 American Community Survey

**Housing Cost Burden**

A housing cost burdened household spends more than 30% of its monthly income on either a rent or mortgage payment. In Massachusetts, noted for its high housing costs, 47% of all renting households in 2017 were housing cost burdened. This figure was 50% for Colombian households, 52% for Other Latino households, and 46% for Non-Latino households. Among homeowners, only 26% of Colombian household were housing cost burdened. This was lower than for Other Latinos (39%) and similar to the figure for Non-Latinos (25%).
Medical Insurance

Colombians had similar shares of their population without medical insurance as Other Latinos (7%). However, this share was much higher than for Non-Latinos (2.2%).

Figure 12: Medical Uninsurance

Source: 2017 American Community Survey
Appendix A: Colombians in the United States

Appendix B: Colombians in the Massachusetts
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Established in 1989, the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy was created by the Massachusetts Legislature in response to a need for improved understanding about the Latino experience in the commonwealth. Now in its 30th year, the Gastón Institute continues its mission of informing the public and policymakers about issues vital to the state’s growing Latino community and providing information and analysis necessary for effective Latino participation in public policy development. To learn more about the Gastón Institute, visit www.umb.edu/gastoninstitute.

About the Authors

Phillip Granberry is a social demographer. He worked with various community-based organizations assisting recently arrived U.S. immigrants before earning a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Massachusetts Boston. He has published several articles on the accumulation and use of social capital among Latinos and the sexual health communication of Puerto Rican mothers with their children. In addition to his research and teaching in the Gastón Institute and Economics Department at UMass Boston, he is Senior Researcher in demography for the Boston Planning and Development Agency.

Krizia Valentino is a graduate student in the Applied Economics program at UMass Boston, expected to graduate May 2020. She has supported data collection and analysis for a wide range of projects at the Gaston Institute, including a Survey Report for English for New Bostonians and the Latino Non-Profit Mapping Project with Amplify Latinx. In addition to her time at Gaston Institute, she is also a teaching assistant in the UMass Boston Economics department.