

Immigration: An Escalator to the American Dream
Nicaraguans' Experiences with Immigration to the United States in the
Midst of the War on Terror

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“The world changed after September 11, we all face borderless, stateless threats, and militaries must play an active role in helping governments administer their own territory.”¹

Introduction

The political discourse in Washington has changed since the attacks of September 11th. President George W. Bush has drawn a line and every country and every citizen is “either...with us or against us”.² International relations and foreign affairs are now framed in black and white, and if you’re on the wrong side, you are a target of the United States’ War on Terror. Immigration is an issue that has increasingly been placed in this dualistic framework. The border with Mexico and illegal immigrants are said to be a threat to homeland security. This anti-immigration campaign, combined with economic slowdowns and the general sentiment of fear among the people of the United States, has formed a nationwide anti-immigration movement. I will be analyzing how the process of immigration to the U.S. from Nicaragua has changed since September 11th, and how immigration affects the lives of the Nicaraguan people.

Immigration to the United States from Nicaragua is marked by a long process of bureaucratic red tape and waiting. However, regardless of what laws pass and what obstacles are put in place to hinder those legally trying to obtain visas, each year thousands of Nicaraguans risk their time, money, and futures for a chance to live the “American Dream”. Immigration is an issue that is becoming more central to American foreign and domestic policy, and I have observed firsthand the direct effects of decisions in Washington on Nicaragua. The link between the War on Terror and immigration has affected the lives of many Nicaraguans and I have been investigating the human component of immigration, along with the legal aspects, in an attempt to

¹ Isacson, Adam. “Closing the ‘Seams’: U.S. Security Policy in the Americas.” NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38, No. 6 (May/June 2005): 13-17.

² Bush, President George W. White House speech. <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-4.html>>, November 6, 2001.

make this complex issue clearer. The reality is the U.S. economy, as well as Nicaragua's economy, depend on this exchange of human capital for remittances. The War on Terror has not changed this basic fact, it has only turned immigration into a homeland security issue and further endangered the lives of Nicaraguans.

This project will approach immigration in three ways. I will begin by presenting and analyzing the legal processes and laws involving immigration. This will provide a basic historic understanding of the issue, along with a contemporary understanding of the political discourse surrounding immigration. Following this I will look at immigration from a theoretical perspective. This is where I will delve into the connection between immigration and terrorism, and I will focus on President Bush's manipulation of the public's fear of terrorists to pass further legislative blockades to immigration. I will also critically analyze the U.S. government's prioritization of "safety at the expense of human rights, social development and civil liberties".³ Finally, I will include the personal testimonies I have gathered through interviewing Nicaraguans with immigration experience. The combination of these three methods will form the evidence for my conclusions.

I have chosen to investigate immigration because I have seen both in the U.S. and Nicaragua, its effect on people's lives. It is also critical to recognize that there are many myths surrounding the effects of immigration on the American people, and in Nicaragua there is the false illusion that the United States will provide unlimited opportunities and a higher quality of life. I am interested in confronting these fallacies and trying to sort through the intertwining of truths and lies about immigration. I believe the only way to improve the lives of those involved is to create an increased transnational understanding of the issue.

³ "War on Terror Target: Americas." NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38, No. 6 (May/June 2005): 12.

Methodology

In order to research the topic of immigration in Nicaragua I employed three basic methods. Throughout the Independent Study Project (ISP) period I have researched background information regarding immigration. This research has provided me with a wealth of secondary sources: books, articles, statistics, and internet sites. The largest component of my research came from interviews, both with Nicaraguan citizens and professionals. Finally, I have conducted various observations, both at a legal counseling office for potential immigrants and at the United States embassy in Managua.

The background research I have done has formed a solid theoretical and legal foundation for the rest of my project. In the six years since September 11, 2001 scholars have begun publishing many articles dealing with the War on Terror and the perceived danger to the American “home front”. Immigration is a major focus of this debate. Also, with recent changes to immigration policy and laws, background research is a necessary and relevant aspect of this report. U.S. policies such as the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and the US-VISIT program have been initiated in the wake of September 11th and have changed the immigration experience and process.

The most important part of my research has been my interviews with Nicaraguans. My interviews were all conducted individually, accompanied by a tape recorder when permitted by the interviewee. The interviews can be categorized into four groups by experience, 1) Nicaraguans who have family who immigrated to the U.S., 2) Nicaraguans who tried to immigrate legally, 3) Nicaraguans who have immigrated *mojado* (illegally), and 4) professionals, such as my advisor Dr. Franklin, who is not an immigrant himself, but works in the field. Depending on the category each interviewee identified with, I used a predetermined series of questions. The questions had

overarching themes and were broken into subcategories: basic information, experience, causes and effects, and perception/opinion. All my interviewees were given the option to remain anonymous in my final paper, and were allowed to decline answering any question they were uncomfortable with. These interviews provided the testimonies and experiences I used to draw my final conclusions.

Non-participatory observations also supplied me with evidentiary support for my conclusions. I observed in two locations, Dr. Franklin's office and the United States embassy. Both observations helped me to understand the legal process of immigration and what Nicaraguans confront and experience when they are going through this process.

It has been important through the investigation process to recognize my own personal history, and identify the components that have both shaped my perceptions and limited my research. I believe there are five factors that greatly affected my project. The most basic is my Spanish speaking ability. All of my interviews and a large part of my research were conducted in Spanish, my second language. Although I did not have extreme difficulties, this may have affected my interpretations of words used by my interviewees, or while reading articles. I also believe the location of my upbringing, Southern California, has shaped my perception of and interest in the immigrant experience. Growing up in a community where a dependency on immigrant (mostly illegal) labor is undeniable has always made me question what motivates these workers who put up with working in poor conditions in the presence of harsh discrimination. I did not start this project bias-free and I must take that into account when considering my conclusions and theories.

Beyond these two primary factors, I believe my position as a middle-class, undergraduate, American citizen, also has affected my work. Immigration, especially

illegal, can be a very sensitive topic. In certain cases there may have been information my interviewees were not comfortable sharing, or they may have altered the truth because of one or more of my personal traits.

General limitations, such as time and accessibility, combined with my personal history have affected this research without a doubt. In no way should these things undermine the validity of my project, but they must be recognized. I also believe that these limitations can be of vital importance in forming conclusions. For example, the amount a family member knows about their relative's experiences abroad may be a limitation; however, this has led me to make conclusions about the discrepancy between the reality of an immigrant's experience and what they chose to share with their family in Nicaragua. I found in multiple cases family members were guarded from the whole truth for a variety of reasons: to avoid disappointment, to provide reassurance, or to ensure protection in cases of illegal immigration.

The position of the researcher and the methodology used during investigation must be considered when reading about or studying any topic. These two factors add passion to research and make every project unique. In this case, by taking into account my research recipe, my analysis of immigration will be better understood.

A General Understanding of Immigration

The United States and Nicaragua have a long history together that has been characterized by division: political, economic, and social. These two countries have clashed repeatedly over the past century, and, unfortunately, the Nicaraguan people have been disproportionately affected by this immense divide. Nicaragua's recent history can be traced from one uncontrollable catastrophe to the next. Starting in 1972 with the earthquake that devastated Managua, followed by the Nicaraguan Revolution and the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional's* rise to power in 1979, and then hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Nicaragua's land and people have faced trial after trial. Unfortunately, a power relationship that already favored the U.S. has only been strengthened by each of these upheavals. The economy of Nicaragua suffers as money and resources flow out of the country, and President Daniel Ortega now faces a divided civil society that barely has the means to survive.

In Nicaragua 48% of the population is living in poverty, surviving on less than US\$2/day.⁴ With underemployment rates reaching 46.5%⁵, conditions have only pushed more and more Nicaraguans to look elsewhere for the means to survive. Immigration to the United States has become the only solution for many families. A relationship has formed involving the exchange of human capital, or *mano de obra*, for remittances. Nicaragua's economy is dependent on this inflow of remittances.⁶

Causes

It is important to look at Nicaragua's recent history in order to understand the primary causes for immigration to the U.S. During my research I found the three most common causes for leaving Nicaragua to be the political turmoil during the Revolution

⁴ "Nicaragua." CIA-The World Factbook. 15 November 2007. 4 December 2007.
<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nu.html#Econ>>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Suenz, Enrique. "Economía de Nicaragua." Revolution, Transformation, and Civil Society Seminar. Managua, Nicaragua. 28 September 2007.

(or the political situation after), the economic situation which is connected to high levels of unemployment, and family instability, which is usually characterized by separations combined with financial difficulties. In all three of these causes it is clear they are augmented by historical events such as Hurricane Mitch and the *Frente Sandinista's* popular revolution. Examples of these causes will be given in the testimonial section of my paper.

Effects and Consequences

When analyzing the causes of immigration, it is equally important to analyze the effects. Remittances are the most visible effect of immigration in Nicaragua. In 2006, US\$30 million dollars came from the seven traditional immigration states of California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey alone.⁷ They are a tangible expression of transnationalism between Nicaragua, a country of origin, and the U.S., a destination country.⁸ In most cases, remittances are the result of a compromise between family members⁹, although initially many new immigrants can not afford to send money¹⁰. Immigrants send money principally to aid their family, but as they become more stable in the U.S. they often begin to invest in Nicaragua, with the prospect and hope of returning for retirement. Investment may be considered a luxury, a step beyond survival, but remittances often are used to buy property or to start businesses.¹¹ In the case of my interviewee Aura, her parents in Texas see her design company as a worthy investment and have begun to send money she can use to build up her business.¹²

⁷ Acevedo, Ivonne. "Las Remesas ¿Instrumento de desarrollo al fin?" El Observador Económico. Edición No. 172 (2006): 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Morales, Araceli, Managua resident, Interview re: immigration. November 14, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

¹¹ Acevedo, Ivonne. "Las Remesas ¿Instrumento de desarrollo al fin?" El Observador Económico. Edición No. 172 (2006): 31.

¹² Ramirez, Aura Yeritza, Nicaraguan daughter of immigrants, Interview re: her parents in the United States. November 26, 2007, Barrio Maximo Jerez, Managua.

Though remittances are an example of the dependency Nicaragua has on the United States; the U.S. also is dependent on Nicaragua, as well as other Latin American countries, to provide the U.S. economy with cheap (mostly illegal) labor. The illegal immigrants provide services that most U.S. citizens have no interest in performing.¹³ Unfortunately, illegal immigrants are left vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation. By working without documents they are perceived as dispensable by American employers and are often the target of human rights violations.

Discrimination and other human rights violations such as racial profiling at ports of entry, and mistreatment (sometimes murder) at the U.S.-Mexico border, are direct negative effects of immigration. These consequences form a general disillusionment that characterizes many immigrant experiences. Blinded by the “American Dream”, immigrants arrive in the United States expecting to make millions and live a much easier life.¹⁴ However, reality for new immigrants many times consists of unemployment, hunger, and mistreatment.

Along with the aforementioned negative effects of immigration, the separation of families also has consequences. Emotional and psychological damage are unavoidable in these cases, and delinquency and street gangs can result from the generational gap and absence of parental authority in immigration-torn families. This is ironic since many parents leave due to a desire to better their family’s standard of living, but this can compromise their children’s social and mental well-being in exchange for financial stability.

Immigration serves as an indicator of the absence of peace in a country. Central American countries are losing massive numbers of their people in this outward flow of

¹³Winship, Courtney. “NACARA: An Exploration of Immigration Law.” SIT Nicaragua ISP Project. Managua: 12 May 2000.

¹⁴Toledo, Maria-Teresa, Managua resident, Interview re: immigration. November 23, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

citizens due to the inadequate and unstable conditions in these countries. Both countries of origin and destination countries are affected. Governments cannot ignore this issue, especially in recent years. Immigration has become the focus of heightened political debate in the United States, and in Nicaragua the government lacks an active role in confronting and solving this issue. Although these two governments' positions differ, both equally affect immigration, either by their aggression or by their passivity.

Legal Process, Laws, and Political Discourse

September 11th and the War on Terror

September 11, 2001 single-handedly has changed the American people, American politics, and international relations. When the two Boeing 767-200s collided with the World Trade Center towers, all the world could do was watch. No one knew what to think or do; a country that spent over US\$28 billion in 2006¹⁵ on its military was caught utterly defenseless. The attackers could not be named nor placed; the only way to describe this threat was terrorism. Terrorists are people who attack for ideological reasons in a way that is meant to instill fear into their victims, and on September 11th millions of Americans were terrified.

In moments such as these there is no prepared plan of action. The United States was faced with countless options. The question was, who do we blame? Who do we attack? Who should be held accountable for the 2,974 lives lost? President Bush announced shortly after the attacks, "The new war on terror is going to be a different war".¹⁶ Now, six years later the world is still trying to define what the War on Terror means. Terrorists are a "...shadowy, faceless enemy ready to strike at any moment, an

¹⁵ "The Fifteen Major Spender Countries in 2006." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2007. 4 December 2007.

<http://www.sipri.org/contents/milap/milex/mex_major_spenders.pdf/download>.

¹⁶ "War on Terror Target: Americas." NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38, No. 6 (May/June 2005): 12.

enemy that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time”.¹⁷ The Bush Administration has used the sentiment of fear embedded in the American psyche after September 11th to justify labeling undeserving victims as terrorists. In the case of Latin America, undocumented immigrants have become a new face of terrorism.

The defense of national security and the “home front” are terms that have peppered political dialogue and debate ever since the start of the War on Terror. Just as President Bush has chosen to divide the world into two halves- those who are with us and those who are against us- the immigration debate has been framed in the same dualistic terms. In order to forward his own political agenda the Bush Administration has manipulated a deepening sense of vulnerability that is found in the American people due to downsizing, outsourcing, stagnant wages, the decline of labor unions, and the steady loss of medical and retirement benefits.¹⁸ Immigrants have been blamed for these economic slowdowns and the Administration has implemented the War on Terror discourse to label the U.S.-Mexico border a terrorist port of entry and immigrants as a threat to national security.

Immigration restrictionism is now framed as key for homeland and cultural protection. Those who are against immigration argue the War on Terror’s success depends on gaining total control of U.S. borders and by downsizing the immigrant population. Former Colorado governor Richard Lamm articulated this new political position, “America is now the battlefield and every American is a potential target...if we wish to respond to this new type of warfare, we must confront the relationship between immigration and terrorism”.¹⁹ Equating immigration with terrorism has had dire consequences for the immigrant population in the United States; human rights and

¹⁷ “War on Terror Target: Americas.” NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38, No. 6 (May/June 2005): 12.

¹⁸ Barry, Tom. “Anti-Immigrant Backlash on the ‘Home Front’.” NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 38, No. 6 (May/June 2005): 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

civil liberties have been compromised in order to confront this perceived threat at our borders.

Immigration is now not only viewed as dangerous to American national security, but also culturally damaging. “In this new era, the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America’s traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico”.²⁰ However, the reality is that by using immigrants as scapegoats for all the nation’s problems, divisions in American society only have become more extreme. Consequently, the true causes of U.S. social, economic, and political problems are not being addressed.

Immigration Law

A complete analysis of immigration must include the legal aspect. In order to understand the complexity of the issue, I will focus on the laws and policies that have affected Nicaraguans in relation to immigration. I will also look at how immigration law has changed since September 11th.

Since the beginning of the Sandinista Revolution began in 1979, immigration policy has undergone a series of changes. Beginning in 1984, the United States granted 25% of 48,000 asylum applicants from Nicaragua legal status, as a way to demonstrate the Administration’s stance against communism.²¹ These numbers are significant considering only 2.6% of Salvadoran claims and 1.7% of Guatemalan claims were granted.²² This difference can be attributed to President Reagan’s aggressive anti-communist stance. However, as was the case for one of my interviewees, the process of

²⁰ Huntington, Samuel P. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of Civil Order. New York, Simon & Schuster: 1996.

²¹ Davy, Megan. “The Central American Foreign Born in the United States.” Migration Policy Institute, April 2006. 30 November 2007.

<<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=385#2>>.

²² Ibid.

receiving asylum could take many years. Rosa's family applied for asylum in 1986, but did not receive residency until 1996.²³

1997 marked the next monument in U.S.-Nicaragua immigration policy. President Clinton signed the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), which included various immigrant benefits, including provisions that allowed anyone who could prove they had been living continuously in the U.S. since 1995 to obtain legal permanent residency (LPR).²⁴ It allowed undocumented aliens of Nicaragua to adjust their status to legal resident without applying for an immigrant visa in their home country.²⁵ NACARA also aided many families by reuniting Nicaraguan parents in the U.S. with their children still in Nicaragua. Inez Perez's parents immigrated to Miami when Violeta Chamorro was elected to the presidency in 1990, leaving six children behind in Nicaragua. Then, with the implementation of NACARA all but two of the children were able to move to the U.S. Inez legally could not immigrate because she was no longer a minor and one brother had already immigrated *mojado*.²⁶

The biggest problem with NACARA was the lack of utilization. Unfortunately, one hundred fifty thousand Nicaraguans had the opportunity to benefit from NACARA, but only seventy thousand took advantage of it before the April 1, 2000 deadline.²⁷ This may have been due to a lack in communication within the Nicaraguan government, but most likely the problem was within the United States, where Nicaraguans were not informed of their eligibility. Undocumented immigrants in the U.S. live in fear of the

²³ Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

²⁴ Davy, Megan. "The Central American Foreign Born in the United States." Migration Policy Institute, April 2006. 30 November 2007.
<<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=385#2>>.

²⁵ Winship, Courtney. "NACARA: An Exploration of Immigration Law." SIT Nicaragua ISP Project. Managua: 12 May 2000.

²⁶ Perez, Inez, Managua resident, Interview re: NACARA and immigration. November 22, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

²⁷ Winship, Courtney.

government, and most try to retain a low profile, therefore getting the information about NACARA to this group of people was nearly impossible.

Still in effect today, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is another program that targets Central American countries including Nicaragua. Part of the Immigration Act of 1990 (IMMACT), TPS was created by Congress as a protection the Attorney General may extend to aliens in the U.S. who are temporarily unable to safely return to their home country due to ongoing armed conflict, an environmental disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions.²⁸ In 1998, after Hurricane Mitch decimated Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the U.S. government extended TPS to citizens from these countries already living in the U.S. TPS for Guatemalans and Salvadorans ended in March 1999 (El Salvador was granted TPS again after earthquakes they suffered in 2001), while TPS for Hondurans and Nicaraguans was extended until July 2007.²⁹ Recently TPS was further extended for Nicaraguans through January 5, 2009.

TPS's connection to the War on Terror is apparent in its administration. On March 1, 2003, in compliance with the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the power to grant TPS to a country, and to extend and terminate TPS designations, was transferred from the Attorney General to the Secretary of Homeland Security.³⁰ Simultaneously, administrative power was changed from the former Immigration and Naturalization Service to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a branch of the Department of

²⁸ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Webpage. "Temporary Protected Status." 1 December 2007. <<http://www.uscis.gov/>>. Path: Home; Services & Benefits; Humanitarian Benefits; Temporary Protected Status.

²⁹ Davy, Megan. "The Central American Foreign Born in the United States." Migration Policy Institute, April 2006. 30 November 2007. <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=385#2>>.

³⁰ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Webpage. "Temporary Protected Status."

Homeland Security (DHS).³¹ Symbolically this exemplifies immigration's new framing as a national security issue.

The last recent change to immigration policy that I would like to analyze in this section is the new system for registration of visiting foreigners, US-VISIT. As Dr. Franklin Franklin Chavez states, "...Before the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon...the federal immigration authorities had very little control over foreigners exiting national territory."³² Now, in order to secure control over the national ports of entry and exit, primarily airports, and to increase internal and international security, the U.S. is implementing US-VISIT. This new system will electronically register foreigners who are entering or exiting the U.S. The process begins overseas at foreign U.S. consulates, where electronic fingerprints and digital photos are taken of immigrants and visiting foreigners. These prints are first used to check for criminal records to ensure the foreign visitors do not pose a threat to national security. The process then continues when the foreigner arrives at a U.S. port of entry where their prints are taken again and compared with those previously taken by the visa recipient.³³

In the section that explains the new US-VISIT program on the Department of Homeland Security website, the connection between immigration and terrorism is insinuated. One of the four priorities listed for the program is to "ensure the integrity of our immigration system".³⁴ This is followed by a section headed, "Why do we collect this information?", where the DHS responds, "These procedures reduce fraud, identity theft, and the risk that terrorists and criminals will enter the U.S. undetected or by using

³¹ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Webpage. "Temporary Protected Status."

³² Chavez, Dr. Franklin Franklin. "Errores fatales dejan pocas posibilidades de visa." *El Nuevo Diario*. 23 Nov. 2007.

³³ Department of Homeland Security Webpage. "US-VISIT: How it Works." 13 November 2007. 24 November 2007. <http://www.dhs.gov/xtrvlsec/programs/editorial_0525.shtm>.

³⁴ Department of Homeland Security Webpage. "US-VISIT Program." 13 November 2007. 24 November 2007. <http://www.dhs.gov/xtrvlsec/programs/content_multi_image_0006.shtm>.

stolen or fraudulent documents.”³⁵ US-VISIT may be a necessary security measure; however, it is further evidence of the obstacles now in place for immigrants as a result of September 11th.

This section should provide a solid base for understanding contemporary immigration policy and law. The legal aspect of immigration affects both the theoretical and personal aspects, making it critical to understand how laws have changed in accordance with current events and political agendas. The next section will provide an explanation of the immigration process by looking at the types of immigration, visas, the process, and costs. Immigration can be broken down by multiple factors, the first being whether an immigrant goes legally or illegally. I will begin by explaining the process of legal immigration.

Immigration Process-Legal Immigration

In order to legally travel to the United States from Nicaragua a visa is required. There are two types of visas, immigrant and non-immigrant. Non-immigrant visas are for those who wish to visit the U.S. for a short period of time; tourism, studies, business, exchange programs, etc. are viable claims for a non-immigrant visa.

The non-immigrant visa process begins online, where applicants must fill out a DS-156 form in English. This immediately presents two obstacles to the average Nicaraguan, access to the internet and the ability to read English. Next, applicants must print out their forms on a high-quality printer (men must fill out the supplemental DS-157 form) and attach a 2”x2” photo. Applicants then are required to pay a \$100 visa processing fee at their local *Bancentro* (a Nicaraguan bank), schedule an interview, and turn in their paperwork. If the consulate approves the request the applicant will be notified within 2-5 days. According to the U.S. Embassy-Nicaragua website, applicants

³⁵ Department of Homeland Security Webpage. “US-VISIT: How it Works.” 13 November 2007. 24 November 2007. <http://www.dhs.gov/xtrvlsec/programs/editorial_0525.shtm>.

must prove to the consulate they will return to Nicaragua (this can be demonstrated through proof of “strong economic, professional, or personal ties”³⁶), and they will engage in activities in the U.S. appropriate to their status as a visitor.³⁷

This process is only for those applicants who wish to temporarily visit the United States. The majority of my interviewees had tried one or more times to obtain non-immigrant visas in order to visit their family abroad, however many were unsuccessful. The U.S. consulate will refuse anyone a visa who they suspect has motivation to stay in the U.S.

The other type of visa, an immigrant-visa, is much more difficult to obtain and the process is much more complex. The U.S. immigrant visa program favors family-based immigration as opposed to work-based immigration. Applicants must be somehow related to either U.S. citizens or U.S. Legal Permanent Residents (LPR). Applications are divided into two types: unlimited and limited family-based. Unlimited family-based immigration is broken into two subcategories: Immediate Relatives (IR) of U.S. citizens, which may include spouses, widows, or unmarried children under the age of 21, and Returning Residents (SB), which involves LPRs who have spent more than a year abroad. Applicants who fall under the limited family-based category are subdivided into four categories: Family First Preference (F1), unmarried sons or daughters of U.S. citizens; Family Second Preference (F2), spouses, minor children, or unmarried sons and daughters over the age of 21 of LPRs; Family Third Preference (F3), married sons and daughters along with their children, of U.S. citizens; and Family Fourth Preference (F4), brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens along with their children and spouses.

Once it is decided what category an applicant falls under, the process begins with the petitioner (a relative or employer) filing an I-130 form with the DHS. If this

³⁶ U.S. Embassy Managua Homepage. “Non-Immigrant Visas.” 23 October 2007. 30 November 2007. <http://nicaragua.usembassy.gov/how_to_apply2.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

form is approved the petition is then sent to the National Visa Center (NVC). After an unpredictable period of time, the NVC will send the petitioner a bill for U\$65 in order to process Form I-864, and will send the beneficiary Form DS-3032. When NVC receives the completed Form DS-3032 from the applicant, the Center mails them a bill for the immigrant visa fee (currently U\$380.00). Further instructions are sent to the applicant once the U\$380 fee is paid, including the steps required for making one's interview appointment. Interviews are always required, and, unfortunately, even at this point in the process, many applicants are denied.

Both the processes for immigrant and non-immigrant visas require the investment of time, money, and the applicant's future. The fees required are non-refundable, and for many immigrants they require huge sacrifices. Immigrants often must sell their property in order to afford the high costs involved in this gamble. Sadly, many applicants are denied the chance to immigrate legally for arbitrary reasons, and in these cases there are few alternatives. The most employed alternative is illegal immigration, the only other option outside of legal immigration Nicaraguans have for making it to the United States.

Immigration Process-Illegal Immigration

Illegal immigration to the United States involves its own strict process that requires specific steps that transcend factors such as time, gender, and economic status. The majority of my interviewees' family members in the U.S. had immigrated illegally (*mojado*) by way of Mexico. Central America forms a bridge to the U.S.; once an immigrant has left Nicaragua they must find the means to either travel by land up through Honduras and Guatemala to Mexico, or they must fly to Mexico, where they will meet with a smuggler or "coyote".

“The smugglers who bring immigrants into the USA illegally are reviled by officials as unscrupulous and unsavory, but tens of thousands of [immigrants] view them as heroes”.³⁸ *Coyotes* are paid on average U\$3,000 for each undocumented immigrant they take across the borders. They are part of an intricate underground network that is comprised of both U.S. citizens and other immigrants, on both sides of the border, that traffic the immigrants past the brutal border patrol and to their final destination. Rosa, an American citizen who emigrated illegally from Nicaragua in 1986, explained that there were days she was not given any food and the group of 20 illegal immigrants that were crossing with her same *coyote* would share a single can of Coke-a-Cola. However, the immigrants put up with the *coyote*'s drunkenness and harsh treatment, because only he knew where the hideouts in the ground were dug and who would pick them up in San Diego to take them to Los Angeles.³⁹ *Coyotes* are responsible for the immigrant's arrival across the border, but once they reach their destination city they are left to fend for themselves.

Many illegal immigrants never even reach the point of arrival; the U.S. Border Patrol and new official and unofficial additions to border security present challenges that previously did not exist. The MinuteMan Corps provides an example of the implications of the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. This civil defense corps has been formed by residents of border states who believe there is a lack of action on the part of the government in confronting the perceived invasion of illegal aliens from Mexico. Their mission statement, “To see the borders and coastal boundaries of the United States secured against the unlawful and unauthorized entry of all individuals, contraband, and foreign military. We will employ all means of civil protest,

³⁸ Gonzalez, Daniel. “‘Coyotes’: Criminals to the U.S. but heroes to many immigrants.” USA Today. 30 November 2003. 1 December 2007. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2003-11-30-coyotes_x.htm>.

³⁹ Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

demonstration, and political lobbying to accomplish this goal”⁴⁰, articulates their anti-immigrant position. On the homepage of their website they keep a running tally of how many illegal alien sightings the MinuteMen have made and their current project is to build a “demonstration fence” which will pressure Congress to act. They are collecting donations from the public to fund their own construction of this wall on the border. Although this organization claims only to report sightings, they were formed in the aftermath of September 11th and contribute to a rising national anti-immigration movement. Claims of violence have also been made by immigrants against the MinuteMen.

The recent additions of physical border barriers also have changed the experience of immigration. Presently there are several walls placed in the more urban areas of the southwestern United States. Consequently, this has increased the number of illegal immigrants who try to avoid the walls by crossing the border through the Sonoran Desert, a 50 mile stretch of land that provides little refuge from boiling temperatures. The U.S. Border Patrol has seen a rapid increase in the number of immigrant deaths since the installation of these barriers, and immigration activists argue that barriers do little to stop the numbers of people trying to immigrate, and unnecessarily increase the danger involved in crossing.⁴¹ Currently in Congress H.R. 6061, “The Secure Fence Act of 2006”, has been voted on and approved and is undergoing revision. This bill would require hundreds of miles of wall to be built along the border. On August 18, 2007 Americans were polled by Rasmussen Reports for their

⁴⁰ [MinuteManHQ.com](http://www.minutemanhq.com/). 3 December 2007 <<http://www.minutemanhq.com/>>.

⁴¹ “United States-Mexico Barrier.” [Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States-Mexico_barrier). 17 November 2007. 2 December 2007. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States-Mexico_barrier>.

opinion on the border fence construction; 56% were found to be in favor of the construction, and 31% against.⁴²

Whether a Nicaraguan immigrates to the United States legally or illegally, there are major risks and dangers involved, and success can never be counted on. One option Nicaraguans have is to seek legal counsel before they attempt to traverse the complex immigration process. My ISP advisor, Dr. Franklin, offers these services to Nicaraguans, both at cost and free of charge for those who can not afford to pay.

Legal Counseling, Dr. Franklin's Story, and the Role of the Government

Dr. Franklin Franklin Chavez works for an organization called AyudaUSA. The objective of AyudaUSA is to help immigrants qualify for legal immigration to the United States through legal guidance. AyudaUSA was founded with one main message, "Please don't go illegally"⁴³. In 1987, after almost becoming a victim of the notary because of his perceived illegal status in the U.S., Dr. Franklin became aware of his grandfather's U.S. citizenship, and for the first time became conscious of his rights as an American citizen. At this point he was inspired to help other immigrants who he realized were an "easy target due to their ignorance and the lack of communication".⁴⁴ Through AyudaUSA Dr. Franklin works with Nicaraguans to navigate the visa process, by giving them the advice they need and helping them to understand the forms and instructions that are further complicated by the English/Spanish language barrier.

Dr. Franklin aided me throughout my ISP process by openly discussing the topic of immigration. When I interviewed him, a major point we focused on was the role of both the United States and the Nicaraguan governments. He believes the Nicaraguan government administrations of Enrique Bolanos and Arnolando Aleman both "promoted

⁴² Joe Murray, "Poll: Americans Frustrated With Immigration Crisis," [Philadelphia] "Evening Bulletin", 21 August 2007.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Chavez, Dr. Franklin Franklin, Immigration Lawyer and Director of AyudaUSA, Interview re: immigration process and personal involvement. November 7, 2007, AyudaUSA Office, Managua.

underground remittances”⁴⁵, and today the Ortega Administration doesn’t pay any attention to the issue of immigration. The government has been unable to promote new jobs and inversion into the economy, and combined with Nicaraguan economic policy, immigration is indirectly supported. In order to confront and slow down the massive outflow of immigrants from Nicaragua the government must create new jobs, foster investment, and develop opportunities for the working class. The cost of basic needs in Nicaragua also must be lowered. The current economic and social conditions in Nicaragua are worsened by the government and continue to give people reason to leave.⁴⁶

The U.S. government also plays an active role in immigration according to Dr. Franklin. He has seen the effects of September 11th and the War on Terror, both positive and negative. A positive result of the War on Terror is the heightened security at ports of entry. National security was weak before September 11th, but now the country is safer due to changes in security.⁴⁷ However, these positive changes have been accompanied by human rights violations. Dr. Franklin is critical of the tactics security forces employ at airports in order to scare suspected illegal immigrants, and he believes authority is being abused by the Border Patrol.⁴⁸ He believes the American way is centered on a belief in human rights and civil liberties, and these are being compromised in the name of national security.

The next section of my ISP will contain the personal testimonies of Nicaraguans I interviewed that have had experience with immigration to the United States. The testimonies will combine all the aspects of this project, the legal process and immigration law, legal and illegal immigration, the War on Terror, and human rights.

⁴⁵ Chavez, Dr. Franklin Franklin, Immigration Lawyer and Director of AyudaUSA, Interview re: immigration process and personal involvement. November 7, 2007, AyudaUSA Office, Managua.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Each testimony will tell the story of a family's sacrifices, and will confront the reality of achieving the American Dream.

Personal Testimonies

Luis's Story, Legal Immigration

July 2, 2004 is a day that changed the life of Luis Carlos Cruz. On this day he married Sarah, a beautiful woman from North Carolina. Weddings are always momentous occasions, but in the case of a transnational marriage, the implications and challenges for the new couple are very different.

Following the wedding, Luis began the process of receiving legal means to go to the United States. With legal documents in hand, such as his birth certificate and proof of his university course of study, he went to the U.S. embassy. When applying for immigration to the U.S. a sponsor is needed, in this case that person was Luis's wife Sarah. Previously, Luis had attempted to apply for a tourism visa and was denied, but this time would be different. Accompanied by a marriage certificate, pictures of the couple, and love letters, Luis's chances of being granted a visa were much higher.

During the interview stage of his application he was asked about his intentions in the U.S., why he would like to go, how long he would stay, and what he does here in Nicaragua.⁴⁹ The U.S. embassy was unable to find a reason to deny Luis a visa, and he was granted a non-immigrant visa. When he arrived at the airport in Miami he had his unopened immigration package in hand, filled with medical test results and paperwork that he was unable to open prior to his arrival. In Miami he was interviewed again to determine how long his visa would be good for. After finding out that Luis was studying in Nicaragua, they decided to give him a 2 year visa, which would force him to

⁴⁹ Cruz, Luis Carlos, Nicaraguan and spouse of U.S. Citizen, Interview re: experience in the U.S. and marriage to an American. November 22, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

return to Nicaragua to complete his studies. The U.S. considers educational level when granting visa and wanted to motivate Luis to further his education.

Luis went to the U.S. intending to familiarize himself with the country his wife called home. Now, when he reflects on his time abroad, he relates an experience of personal enlightenment. In the U.S., he is quick to point out, he went through an abrupt change; for the first time in his life, Luis had to depend solely on himself. “Things pass much more quickly there [than in Nicaragua], you have to be organized and make the most of your time. Here [in Nicaragua] people only know how to sustain”.⁵⁰ Luis admitted that the treatment immigrants receive in some places can be very cruel, but he felt very comfortable in North Carolina and found the people to be generally friendly. Overall, he describes his experience as “incredible and full of independence”,⁵¹ but there are factors that make Luis’s case unique, and I believe his experience was characteristic of a very select group of Nicaraguan immigrants.

The most influential factor in Luis’s testimony was his marriage to a U.S. citizen. Although for many newly married couples obtaining visas can be very difficult, to obtain solely a non-immigrant visa Luis experienced few problems. However, now he is beginning the process of applying for residency and discovering a completely different process. The second factor that alters his experience from the norm would be his above average educational level. His educational background aided him in the visa process. Lastly, Luis had a support network in place when he arrived to the U.S. Sarah’s family helped him to find a job quickly and enroll in English courses. This is a luxury that is not available to many Nicaraguans upon arrival to the U.S. The following testimony will highlight some of the more common difficulties.

⁵⁰ Cruz, Luis Carlos, Nicaraguan and spouse of U.S. Citizen, Interview re: experience in the U.S. and marriage to an American. November 22, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Rosa's Story, The Struggle of the Mojado

Rosa Fuentes is a 32 year old medical assistant living in Brooklyn, New York. Born and raised until the age of eleven in Managua, Nicaragua, she offered me the chance to hear an unguarded testimony of her illegal immigration to the United States in 1986. The testimony begins with Rosa's father who worked for *La Prensa* prior to leaving Nicaragua. When the government changed and the FSLN came into power, her father no longer wanted to work for the newspaper. Multiple times her father and family were threatened, until the point came when they felt it was no longer safe to stay in Nicaragua and chose to leave for a new life in the U.S. Her father had a non-immigrant visa he had used for business reasons, so it was relatively easy for him to get to the U.S.; the rest of the family presented a problem. The decision was made that Rosa and her 15 year old sister would cross the Mexico-U.S. border with the help of a *coyote*. They flew to Mexico with their father, who then paid a *coyote* U\$500 for each of his daughters' passage across the border.

Their journey began in Tijuana where they waited for night to fall before starting to walk and run through the desert to San Diego. The first night they slept in a cemetery, not because they shouldn't have been using the valuable darkness to travel, but because their *coyote* was too drunk to lead them. It took them days of walking and running, using holes dug in the ground to hide from the Border Patrol, with little food, to finally reach American soil. Once they arrived in San Diego they waited for a truck that carried them in the bed, covered with a board, to the house of an American who hosted them for the night. Trucks and houses such as these make up the secret "underground railroad" that begins with the *coyotes* and transports immigrants to their final destination. The next day they were taken in another truck to Los Angeles where they were dropped off at a house with a telephone they used to call their father.

One year later Rosa's mother and two other sisters arrived in the United States by way of fake visas. Her father with his reunited family applied for political asylum, which was eventually granted in 1996, ten years after his arrival. Rosa's family experienced difficult times at first. Rosa recalls how difficult the language barrier was, and how she had to stay with her aunt all day, caring for her cousin, and sneaking food because her aunt refused to feed her. Her parents spent long days working, her father in construction and her mother in a fish factory. They all expected to find safety and a better life in the U.S. but instead were faced with hard work and discrimination from other Americans. "No one sees the reality of how hard [immigrants] work for the money [they] have. Everyone works so hard, in reality sometimes [they're] worse off, but everyone wants the American Dream".⁵² In 1996 when her family was granted residency life became easier and opportunities to which she previously was denied access opened to Rosa.

Rosa eventually moved to New York, where she has gone back to school, married a Dominican immigrant, had two daughters, and works in a medical clinic. Looking back on her experience, she has noticed obvious changes in immigration, mostly in regards to national security. "Since 9/11 there is more security, but they're protecting the wrong borders, raiding the wrong people. Terrorists had access to planes, schools, and information. The government only sees the immigrants at the border; they aren't paying attention to where the problem really comes from".⁵³ Rosa explained that immigrants are set up to fail in the U.S., "If one Mexican kills someone, all Mexicans are singled-out, discriminated against".⁵⁴ However, this discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment is challenged by the strong immigrant community.

⁵² Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The majority of my interviewees believed the immigrant community and retention of Latino or Nicaraguan culture helped them through the hard times they faced in the U.S. For example, Rosa told me that the immigrant community "...has always been united, together, neighbors, and help each other".⁵⁵ Cultural values have also remained important to Rosa and her family. She recognizes that American and Nicaraguan cultures clash, but her family has attempted to bridge that. "We've always lived the same. We talk everyday, everyone's close knit and flies to each other if anything's needed".⁵⁶

Rosa concluded our interview by telling me she isn't sure she could go through the experience of illegal immigration again. Her father left Nicaragua to protect his family, but for Rosa, with "the risk of being raped and killed..." she points out "it's not the same when you experience it, risking your life".⁵⁷ Rosa's experience exemplifies the challenges illegal immigration presents, and she spoke about many of the effects of this experience, such as discrimination, loss of her childhood, and extreme risk. The next testimony also deals with the consequences of illegal immigration, but from a different perspective.

Aura's Story, Left Behind

Aura Ramirez is a beautiful, 26 year old Managuan, working to start up her own personal clothing shopper business. Aura's family is spread across North and Central America, with aunts, uncles, and cousins in the U.S., Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Everyone in her family has had their own experience with immigration, but Aura's is unique. Her parents were faced with economic instability under the Aleman Administration in 1999; they faced two choices, immigrate to the U.S. or sell their

⁵⁵ Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

house and live on the streets of Managua. Aura's mother and father made the difficult choice to illegally immigrate to the U.S., leaving behind their two children, Aura and her 15 year old brother. They moved to Houston, Texas and found jobs in construction and floristry. "Thank God they had family in the U.S., because many people live in the streets and suffer so much".⁵⁸

The main focus of my interview with Aura was the negative consequences of immigration. She recognizes that the government in Nicaragua has "robbed the people of money, and [has] many resources, but the politics don't allow the people to take advantage of them".⁵⁹ However, she has witnessed how the separation of families has caused an increase in alcoholism, drug addiction, and gangs. She is aware of the War on Terror, but argued, "Terrorism comes back [to Nicaragua] through the deportation of delinquents that start gangs".⁶⁰

Aura is hopeful that her parents will return to Nicaragua next year; however there has been a long chain of failed promises of their return. She has tried to visit them herself, and has gone to the U.S. embassy five times, but has always been turned down because she is young and single. The embassy believes she will stay in the U.S. if they grant her a visa; yet little do they know, she doesn't think life is better there.⁶¹

There is no denying that the majority of immigrants suffer extreme hardship when they start life over in the U.S., but Aura's testimony shows that those that are left behind must deal with their own set of negative effects. She had to worry about and take care of everything: taxes, bills, food, and her younger brother. The tears that silently fell from her eyes during our conversation were strong evidence of the negative effects of immigration for some Nicaraguans.

⁵⁸ Ramírez, Aura Yeritza, Nicaraguan daughter of immigrants, Interview re: her parents in the United States. November 26, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Inez's Story, The NACARA Effect

Inez Perez offered me the testimony of another Nicaraguan who was left behind, but in her case the experience was very different than Aura's. Inez's family was benefited by the NACARA law that went into effect in 1997, allowing her father and mother who were already into the United States to send for four of her siblings. Unfortunately, the law was only extended to minors under 21 years old; Inez was too old to benefit from the law, but almost her entire family was able to reunite in Miami.

Inez's parents left Nicaragua for political reasons; her father went illegally and her mother followed four years later with a visa. In the beginning, her father had a difficult time but luckily was helped by his sister who lived in Miami. He was able to find odd jobs in construction, flower sales, and community maintenance in areas such as parks. Her mother arrived with the ambition to be able to provide for her family and accompany her husband. She began to work in child care when she arrived in Miami.

When NACARA was signed into effect Inez's parents read an article in the paper stating that one didn't need legal documents to apply for legal status, so they finally applied for their children to join them in their new life. Her family left Nicaragua with the anticipation of fulfilling their American Dream. Inez's mother and father wanted to leave Nicaragua behind; they were unhappy with the transition to Violeta Chamorro's Administration, and were ready to find stable work and a way to support their large family. NACARA gave them the opportunity to achieve this goal by reuniting the majority of the family.

Inez's younger brothers and sister confronted discrimination in school, largely due to the language barrier. They didn't realize when they left Nicaragua it was going to be permanent; they thought it was just for vacation. However, now Inez's brothers in Miami have all studied, secured jobs, and feel much more calm and safe. Inez has tried

herself to visit the U.S. but she was in the process of taking classes when she went to the embassy. After her interview the Consulate told her to come back after she was finished with school. Fortunately, her family visits every two to three years.

When asked about her opinion of the U.S. she explained to me that she “likes the dollar, there are good social politics, [U.S.] NGOs have helped Nicaragua greatly, but the politics conflict with [her] ideas”.⁶² She acknowledged that discrimination is a serious problem that many immigrants encounter, and mentioned that since September 11th the cost of living in the U.S. has increased and work opportunities have decreased. Inez is equally critical of her own government, stating that the government not only has misused resources, but makes decisions “not for ideology, but for money”⁶³. The government needs to confront the poverty and hunger in Nicaragua by making a plan for the use of Nicaragua’s plentiful natural resources and by gaining independence from the influence of the U.S. and Venezuela.⁶⁴

Inez is an example of someone who has both benefited and suffered due to immigration. Although she receives financial support from her family in the United States, she also has had to deal with their separation.

Connections across Testimonies

After interviewing many Nicaraguans, each with their own unique immigration experience, I found that there were general themes that united them all. These themes are important and have helped me to draw my final conclusions. First of all, the reason Nicaraguans leave Nicaragua almost always included one of the following: economic instability, the political situation, or family problems, such as divorce or separation. These reasons are interconnected; all have been perpetuated by revolutionary changes in

⁶² Perez, Inez, Managua resident, Interview re: NACARA and immigration. November 22, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

government, economic policy, and social and civil society reform, which have caused the poverty and hunger driving families to look to the United States as the means to survive.

Once immigrants arrive in the United States I have found many experienced common challenges. Aside from the difficulties of finding a job, looking for a place to live, and confronting an immense language barrier, many Nicaraguans have experienced discrimination. The discrimination immigrants have faced is usually due to one of two reasons, either because they are Latino, or because the immigrant is a woman. The degree of discrimination can be affected by the location of the immigrant; however, in multiple interviews my interviewees commented that their skin color and language caused them or their family to be the target of discrimination. Sara Hernandez shared with me her experiences as a tourist in the U.S. One day during her visit she was taking a public bus when the bus driver made derogatory comments about her. “[Discrimination] is much worse since September 11th. Political problems are not problems with immigrants. Things aren’t their fault, but people in the back of their minds think the immigrants are terrorists”.⁶⁵ Her perception of discrimination against immigrants, especially in regards to September 11th, was reflected by many of my interviewees.

Acts of discrimination do not always come from white Americans; in a number of my interviews I was told that other Latinos can be just as insulting. In the case of Teresa Flores’s mother in New York, she was targeted by a Guatemalan family that she worked for because she was both a Nicaraguan and a woman. She was working as a maid and the family “started to exploit her and stopped paying her”.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Hernández, Sarah Indiana, Nicaraguan citizen, Interview re: family in the United States. November 16, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

⁶⁶ Flores, Teresa, Nicaraguan citizen, Interview re: her experience with the U.S. and Americans. November 16, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

During and after the political and economic instability of the 1980's, many Central American women such as Teresa's mother migrated to the U.S. with hopes of supporting their families at home in Nicaragua. Many of these women entered into new roles, becoming their family's main earner.⁶⁷ This has had consequences for these women's social status, gender roles, rights, and experiences. Nicaraguan women in the U.S. are more vulnerable to discrimination than their male counterparts due to *machismo* (gender subordination) in their own families, combined with their status as a Latino immigrant with limited opportunities.

The last commonality from my interviews that I would like to focus on is the widespread positive perception of the United States many Nicaraguans have before leaving, and the mental change they experience upon arrival. In the majority of my interviews, when I asked my interviewees about the immigrant's expectations for their new life in the U.S., responses in some way articulated the American Dream mentality. This term, "American Dream" generally refers to the idea that success depends on hard work, not class, and that the U.S. offers opportunities to succeed that are not available anywhere else. Due to political, economic, and social conditions in Nicaragua, many people imagined their problems would be solved by moving to the U.S. Often, these positive views and perceptions changed once immigrants faced the reality of life as an immigrant in the U.S. The testimonies that are given in this paper demonstrate this change. Rosa argued that everyone wants the American Dream, but no one sees the reality of how hard immigrants work for the little money they have.⁶⁸ Aura opined that her parents anticipated grand opportunities in the U.S. before they left, but have seen the

⁶⁷ Menjivar, Cecilia. "The Intersection of Work and Gender: Central American Immigrant Women and Employment in California." Ed. Pierrette Hondagnen-Sotelo. *Gender and US Immigration-Contemporary Trends*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 101-126.

⁶⁸ Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

people that live in the streets and suffer as much as those in Nicaragua.⁶⁹ These perceptions have their own implications which I will analyze in my conclusions.

Conclusions and Analysis

After compiling my data, research, and interviews, I have been able to identify patterns and common experiences that have led me to make a set of conclusions regarding the current Nicaraguan immigration experience. This experience is marked by a series of obstacles, but, fortunately, during this process a small number of positive effects or characteristics have emerged as well.

Currently, the most emotionally, physically, and mentally damaging aspect of immigration is the War on Terror's effect. Immigrants are targeted as terrorists and this leads to heightened levels of discrimination and endangerment of their lives and families. One thing I believe the majority of Americans misunderstand is the network of people depending on each individual immigrant. Throughout my time in Nicaragua I have met many families whose survival depends on the remittances they receive from a relative abroad. In some cases, entire communities' economic survival is dependent on this exchange. The War on Terror has reduced the immigrant to a simple target by labeling them a terrorist and framing their action (immigration) in black and white. The argument that immigrants not only threaten the security of the U.S., but also the culture and economy, diminishes the importance of understanding why immigrants come to the U.S. and inhibits addressing the fundamental causes and problems.

Immigrants are said to take away jobs from U.S. citizens, drag down the economy, and abuse the welfare system. Ironically, undocumented immigrants' main support comes from the wealthy minority of Americans who have the disposable

⁶⁹ Ramírez, Aura Yeritza, Nicaraguan daughter of immigrants, Interview re: her parents in the United States. November 26, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

income to spend on the personal services undocumented labor provides.⁷⁰ If the U.S. wishes to resolve this issue, the economic and social divide between North and South must be confronted. Research conducted at the Urban Institute has shown “immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits, generate more jobs than they take, and are less likely to be on welfare than U.S. born residents. Plus, the majority of undocumented immigrants are those who overstayed their visas, making increased border enforcement useless”.⁷¹ I believe by passing further legal obstacles to immigration, and by promoting a national anti-immigrant sentiment, immigrants will not stop immigrating. Instead, their vulnerability is increased by pressuring them to utilize the dangerous underground network of *coyotes* and exposing them to more discrimination.

The World after September 11th

The changing tide of immigration dialogue since September 11th can be seen by contrasting two George W. Bush speeches. In a 1995 press conference, the former Texas Governor George W. Bush, “cautioned [the U.S.] against alienating Mexico, and said only a strong Mexican economy and middle class will reduce illegal immigration”.⁷² Now as President Bush, the former Texas governor, stated at his 2006 State of the Union address, “Keeping America competitive requires an immigration system that upholds our laws...Our nation needs orderly and secure borders. To meet this goal, we must have stronger immigration enforcement and border protection”.⁷³ In the past ten years he has transitioned from focusing on the economic and social causes of immigration, which is the root of the problem, to a restrictionist mentality.

⁷⁰ “The Immigration Backlash.” NACLA Report on the Americas. Vol. 24, No. 3 (November/December 1995).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Embassy of the United States-Mexico Homepage. “Press Releases 06.” 31 January 2006. 3 December 2007. <http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov/eng/releases/ep060131message_state.html>.

In the years following September 11th, immigrants have only seen increases in discrimination, danger, and human rights abuses. This has further polarized immigration expectations and realities. I found that when questioned about their family members' experiences with life in the U.S., my interviewees' knowledge often was very limited. I believe that many of the responses I received depended on two factors, the relationship my interviewee has with the immigrant, and their own personal experiences, primarily whether or not they have visited the U.S. Mothers of immigrants were more likely to respond that their child has not faced any discrimination in the U.S., whereas siblings and children of immigrants often told detailed stories of their family member's difficult transition to American life and their volatile relation with American people. I also discovered the interviewees who had visited the U.S. had a much more realistic perspective of the reality of immigrant life in the U.S. They more readily admitted that there are pros and cons to life in the U.S., such as more educational opportunities but less family unity.

Whenever there is a transnational movement of people, the uprooted people bring with them their own set of values, traditions, and culture. In the case of Nicaragua one of the positive aspects of immigration to the U.S. is the immigrant community in place in areas such as Miami, which provides a structured support system to new immigrants. Rosa explained that family and friends are the most important things immigrants have to rely on when they arrive. Immigrants face a new language, clashing culture, and an unfamiliar environment that is bridged by Nicaraguan families and friends abroad.⁷⁴ These immigrant communities also serve as a defense mechanism against the maltreatment of immigrants.

⁷⁴ Fuentes, Rosa, Immigrant and U.S. Citizen, Interview re: illegal immigration. November 25, 2007, Barrio Máximo Jerez, Managua.

Considering both the positive and negative themes and conclusions that have come from my interviews and research, it is important to ask what can be done. Both the Nicaraguan and United States governments affect the lives of those who immigrate. The Nicaraguan state needs to take a more active role in confronting an outdated dialogue that no longer addresses the needs of the people and resolving the driving forces of immigration: poverty, hunger, unemployment. The United States government must also focus on the roots of immigration and seek to address the issue at its source. Using the Mexico-U.S. border fence as an example, the Bush Administration is putting a Band-Aid on an issue that requires more serious attention. Investment and inversion are needed in Central American countries such as Nicaragua to create an infrastructure that can support their populations. Until the conditions in Nicaragua change, the people will continue to be forced to look at the U.S. as a means of survival.

I also believe that in order to confront the rising anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. and the disillusionment that many Nicaraguans experience when they relocate to the U.S., more knowledge needs to be available to the people. In the U.S. the American people are taught to see immigrants as a nameless, borderless, terrorist threat to their lives. I believe this misperception comes from the government and, therefore, it is the government's responsibility to inform the public of immigrants' reality. The Nicaraguan state and people must also address the misinformation and skewed perception of the U.S. that is prevalent among Nicaraguans. The American Dream does not exist for the majority of people, yet because immigrants are afraid to admit failure or wish to protect their families in Nicaragua, they hold back the truth about their lives abroad. Without a combined effort by Nicaraguans in the U.S. and the Nicaraguan government, this false dream will continue to drive Nicaraguans to leave and seek a

better life in the U.S. It is critical to both American and Nicaraguan interests to confront this reality and increase access to the truth.

Final Thoughts

After reading this analysis of the current immigration situation between Nicaragua and the United States, I hope it is clear that immigration is an issue that affects not only these two countries' peoples, but their economies, cultures, politics, and general wellbeing. For all of these reasons I believe analyzing immigration is critical to a contemporary understanding of international relations between Nicaragua and the United States, as well as U.S. foreign and domestic policy. The politics of immigration have severe consequences for Nicaraguans and Americans alike, and for these reasons I have found my study of the immigration process and experience to be a bridge between many components of my course of study: political science, Hispanic studies, and my study abroad program in Nicaragua.

It is difficult to predict where immigration policy and law will lead. However, with the current negative sentiment towards immigrants in Washington balanced by the U.S.'s economic dependence on immigrant labor, I believe barriers to legal immigration will continue to be implemented, but the demand for undocumented workers will not change. This combination of barriers and demand will continue to increase the negative effects of immigration and the discrimination and danger of illegal immigration. Until the root causes of immigration in Nicaragua and the reasons for dependency on illegal labor in the United States are addressed, the forecast for immigration and the immigrant experience will remain bleak.

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