Causes of Salvadoran Migration to the United States

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CAUSES OF SALVADORAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES*

RICHARD C. JONES

ABSTRACT. *Underlying causes of Salvadoran migration to the United States are conflict related, but controversy continues over whether the immediate motivations are political or economic. Information from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service on department of origin of Salvadorans apprehended between 1982 and 1985 and from news accounts of Salvadoran political violence and economic setbacks are used to determine correlations between migration and political and economic factors. Results suggest that economic setbacks are more important than political violence.*

THE net emigration rate from El Salvador accelerated rapidly between 1979, when extensive civil unrest began, and 1981, after two years of widespread political killings. By 1981 the rate had reached forty-six persons per 1,000 population, more than eleven times its level of six years earlier.[1] Furthermore, the number of apprehensions by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of undocumented Salvadorans entering the United States has varied largely in tandem with levels of political violence (Fig. 1). If these data leave little doubt as to the root causes of Salvadoran exodus to the United States, they do not reveal its proximate causes, the immediate forces compelling migrants to leave their country.

These proximate causes remain the focus of intense debate in the United States. Organizations such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees, the sanctuary movement, various church groups, and the American Civil Liberties Union as well as a large component of the academic community maintain that most migration stems from direct fear of political violence and persecution.[2] The U.S. State and Justice departments, by contrast, believe that though increased violence has boosted the incentives to leave El Salvador, the migrants have been motivated chiefly by economic difficulties that the onset of civil war has worsened.[3] Until recently the INS, in accord with the latter interpretation, has framed a tough standard for evaluating petitions for asylum that requires demonstration that submitters face a "clear probability of perse-

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[1] Linda S. Peterson, Central American Migration: Past and Present, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Center for International Research, Washington, D.C., November 1986, 7-8.

[2] U.S. Committee for Refugees, Despite a Generous Spirit: Denying Asylum in the United States, Washington, D.C., December 1986.

[3] Elliot Abrams, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs, testimony before U.S. Congress, House Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law, 12 April 1984.

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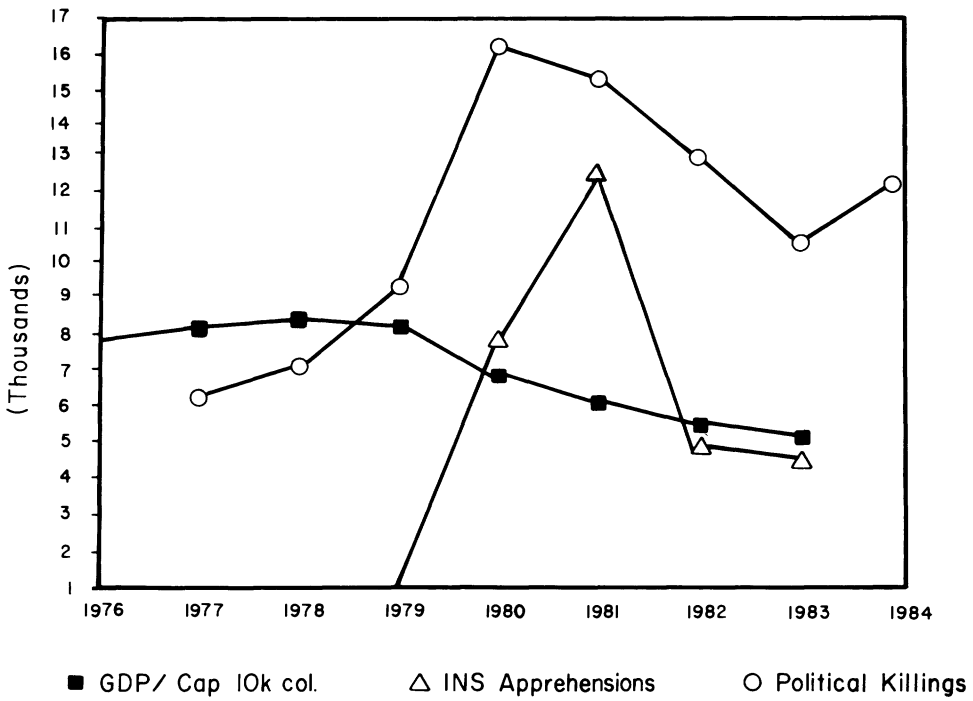


FIG. 1—Relationships among economic condition, migration to the United States, and political violence in El Salvador 1976–1984. *Source:* Redrawn from Stanley, text footnote 4.

cution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." On a case-by-case basis the INS rejected more than 95 percent of these petitions until May 1987, when the United States government offered extended voluntary departure to all Salvadorans who had entered the country illegally since 1982.

The focus of this article is neither to evaluate the treatment of returnees to El Salvador nor to determine whether the United States should deport Salvadoran migrants, though both are important issues. Instead the purpose is to analyze linkages between civil unrest in El Salvador and migration to the United States. Is this a continuous process, a chain of fear initiated and terminated by the terror of persecution or violence? Or are there intervening subprocesses such as economic motives, stage-wise displacement, and selectivity that make the root causes different from the proximate ones?

The precedent for this study is work by William Stanley that includes a time-series multiple regression of the relationship, by month, between INS apprehensions of undocumented Salvadoran migrants and five measures of political violence in El Salvador during the 1979–1984 period. Those years saw intense civil war coupled with large numbers of internally displaced and emigrant Salvadoran populations. Stanley's measures of violence included political killings, principally by the government or right-wing terrorists, as recorded by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador and,

as dummy variables, government-army sweeps through rebel territory. He concluded that the five violence variables explained 44 percent of the total variance in Salvadoran apprehensions. As a whole, the three army-sweep variables explain the most, followed by the two political-killings variables, which lagged three and four months respectively. Neither leftist attacks and recruitment drives nor quarterly variations in exports, the inclusion of which was an attempt to account for economic factors in the model, were significantly related to apprehensions and thus were dropped from the model. Stanley asserted that "fear of political violence is an important and probably the dominant motivation of Salvadorans who have migrated to the U.S. since the beginning of 1979."[4]

In my judgment this statement is too strong. It implies that migrants to the United States were directly uprooted from their places of origin by political violence. However, other scenarios are possible. The migrants may have been persons from nonconflictual zones who were forced to emigrate when refugees from elsewhere in the country displaced them or because of general economic deterioration. The economic variable used by Stanley did not index these factors.

The proximate causes of migration cannot accurately be judged without an analysis of its spatial origins. One approach is to compare maps of political violence in El Salvador with maps of origins of Salvadoran migrants to the United States. Although this type of spatial disaggregation and map correlation cannot reveal cause and effect or indicate motivation at the level of the individual migrant, it allows a better approach than do other methods to proximate causes of migration.

The spatial model implied by Stanley's argument is referred to here as the political model (Fig. 2). It holds that political violence prompts migration to the United States from the affected departments both directly and indirectly through the intervening process of displacement within El Salvador. The first question then is whether any spatial relationship exists among political violence, internal displacement, and migration to the United States. This question can be answered with INS data on departments of origin of Salvadoran emigrants entering the United States and other relevant sources (Fig. 3). The study period is January 1982 through December 1985. Though lower in those years than during 1980 and 1981, the level of violence was still quite high and widespread in the country.

This study analyzes six variables (Table I). Political violence is measured in two ways: the number of political deaths recorded in news accounts of El Salvador during the study period, and the number of separate violent political incidents recorded in the same accounts.[5] Accounts in "Facts on

[4] William Stanley, Economic Migrants or Refugees from Violence? A Time Series Analysis of Salvadoran Migration to the United States, *Latin American Research Review* 22 (1987): 132–154.
[5] Facts on File Yearbook: The Indexed Record of World Events (New York: Facts on File Publications, annually 1982–1985).

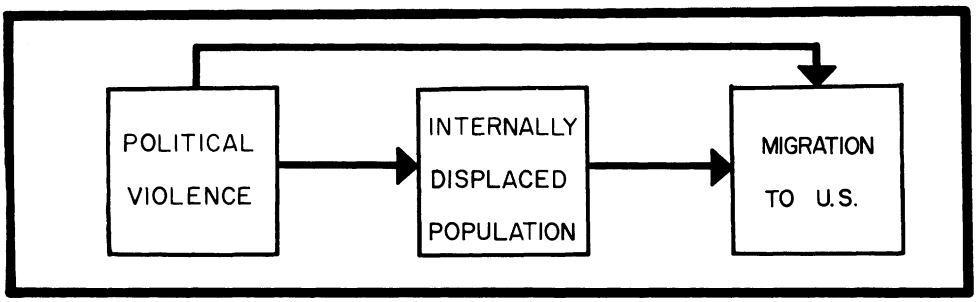


FIG. 2—Political model of Salvadoran migration to the United States.

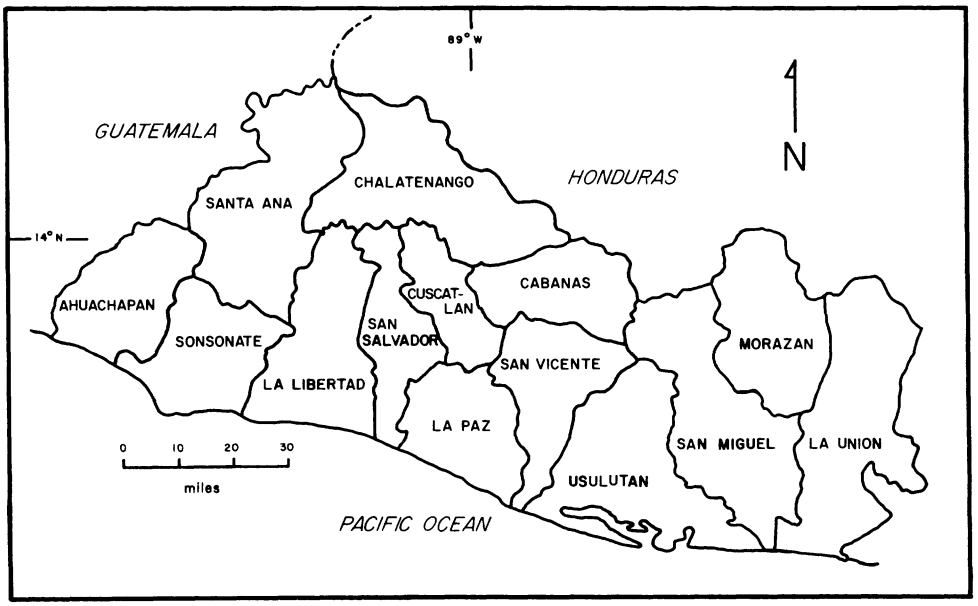


FIG. 3—Departments of El Salvador.

File" give exact dates and locations of deaths from government sweeps and bombings, from leftist counteroffensives, from assassinations by death squads, by the military, and by the Faribundi Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), which is the principal leftist organization, and from other causes. Additionally all violent political incidents, both lethal and nonlethal, are identified separately, with the latter category including sabotage, kidnappings, and coercive recruitment drives by the right and the left. The coverage in "Facts on File" tends to be more balanced than that of either governmental agencies or church and refugee-service groups. The number of political deaths is expressed per 100,000 of 1981 population, which in turn is derived from the 1961–1971 growth rates in the 1971 Salvadoran census. Base-ten logarithms of the death figures are used to dampen extreme values.

Internal displacement by department gives the total of politically displaced persons as of October 1983, recorded by the Salvadoran National

Commission for Assistance to Displaced Persons (CONADES).[6] October 1983 is the approximate midpoint of the study period. These numbers are also expressed per 100,000 of resident population.

Migration to the United States was indexed by the number of deportable aliens whose permanent residence was a department listed in a sample of I-213 forms from the INS files in three administrative districts: San Francisco, San Antonio, and Miami. Recent research shows that these districts accurately represent the migrant-origin profiles of the INS apprehension regions, western, central, and eastern, in which they are located.[7] In determining which

TABLE I—VARIABLES

DEPARTMENT & POPULATION[a]	VARIABLES					
	LPD[b]	VPI[c]	IDP[d]	MDR[e]	MDB[f]	IES[g]
San Salvador (1,161.0)	1.03	32	4,531	3.88	3.36	18
Morazán (204.0)	2.46	20	30,980	1.96	2.94	10
Usulután (418.7)	1.29	12	5,374	1.91	2.39	14
Chalatenango (230.0)	2.39	11	9,435	0.87	1.74	3
San Vicente (208.0)	2.27	9	13,798	0.00	0.96	5
Cuscatlán (206.6)	2.45	8	9,584	2.42	2.42	6
San Miguel (443.4)	1.22	7	2,526	4.51	6.09	12
Cabañas (181.7)	2.14	6	5,338	0.00	0.55	2
La Unión (329.7)	1.18	4	1,365	5.16	3.94	12
Santa Ana (435.3)	0.92	2	528	2.07	2.53	1
La Paz (253.2)	0.00	2	2,923	0.79	1.58	3
La Libertad (400.7)	1.22	1	4,193	0.25	0.25	3
Sonsonate (336.7)	1.05	1	832	0.30	0.00	2
Ahuachapán (243.7)	0.00	0	616	0.82	0.82	1

Sources: Census of El Salvador, 1971; Facts on File, text footnote 5; U.S. Committee for Refugees, text footnote 6; data from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

[a] 1981 estimate in thousands.

[b] Log of political deaths per 100,000 1982–1985.

[c] Violent political incidents reported 1982–1985.

[d] Internally displaced persons per 100,000 October 1983.

[e] Migration to U.S. by department of residence, number of INS apprehensions per 100,000 1982–1985.

[f] Migration to U.S. by department of birth, number of INS apprehensions per 100,000 1982–1985.

[g] Index of economic setbacks, weighted number of incidents reported 1982–1985.

migrants to include in the 1982–1985 period, the date of last entry into the United States, rather than date of apprehension, was used, because the former was closer in time to the migration decision.[8] Department of birth recorded on I-213 forms became the basis for a separate analysis. Migration figures

[6] U.S. Committee for Refugees, Aiding the Desplazados of El Salvador: The Complexity of Humanitarian Assistance, Washington, D.C., 1984.

[7] Richard C. Jones, Micro Source Regions of Mexican Undocumented Migration, *National Geographic Research* 4 (1988): 11–12; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Statistical Yearbook of the INS, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., annually 1982–1985.

[8] Stanley, footnote 4 above; Charles McElroy, El Salvadoran Refugee Patterns of Migration to Belize, paper presented at annual meeting of Association of American Geographers, Portland, Ore., 24 April 1987.

are expressed per 100,000 population of the department for both permanent residence and birthplace. The sixth variable, dealing with economic setbacks, is described later in this article.

Mappings of political deaths and violent political incidents show the same general pattern, with high values in the northern and central parts of the country (Figs. 4 and 5). During the study period, the northern departments of Morazán and Chalatenango experienced the terror of both large-scale sweeps by government forces and counteroffensives by the FMLN. Many incidents occurred in San Salvador, but there were relatively few deaths in this department. The east-central departments of San Vicente and Usulután were the sites of leftist sabotage of roads, power stations, and dams, as the FMLN carried its "final offensive" eastward toward the national capital. The map of internally displaced persons closely reflects these patterns (Fig. 6). The great majority of internal refugees settled in the capitals of Morazán, Chalatenango, and San Vicente and at Suchitoto in Cuscatlán, near the FMLN stronghold around the Guazapa volcano. However, these patterns have no clear association with the origins of undocumented Salvadorans in the United States (Fig. 7). Chalatenango and Morazán had relatively few migrants, but there were many from comparatively nonconflictual San Miguel and La Unión.

These map relationships are reflected in the simple Pearsonian correlation coefficients for linkages of the political model, in which place of residence is the apprehension variable (Table II). Political deaths are related to internal displacement ($r = .675$) but not to migration to the United States ($r = -.084$). Neither is internal displacement related to this migration ($r = -.115$). Importantly, violent political incidents correlate less with internal displacement ($r = .485$) than do political deaths, but the former correlate better with migration to the United States ($r = .356$) than do political deaths ($r = -.084$). When these relationships are calculated with birthplace rather than permanent-residence data, results are much the same. Deaths appear to reflect the political terror that leads to internal displacement; incidents tend to indicate sabotage, economic distress, and other nonlethal violence that encourages migration to the United States. If true, the sabotage and economic-effect factors need further examination.

The previous results suggest two possible alternatives to the political model. A joint political-economic model implies a pattern in which both political violence and economic setbacks across departments generate migration to the United States and in which political violence directly spawns economic setbacks (Fig. 8a). A segmented political-economic model assumes two separate processes. In one, political violence directly influences internal displacement and migration of refugees to nearby countries; in the other, economic setbacks influence migration to the United States (Fig. 8b). Under the latter, migrants tend not to come from zones of conflict.

The index of political violence used in this further analysis is the log of

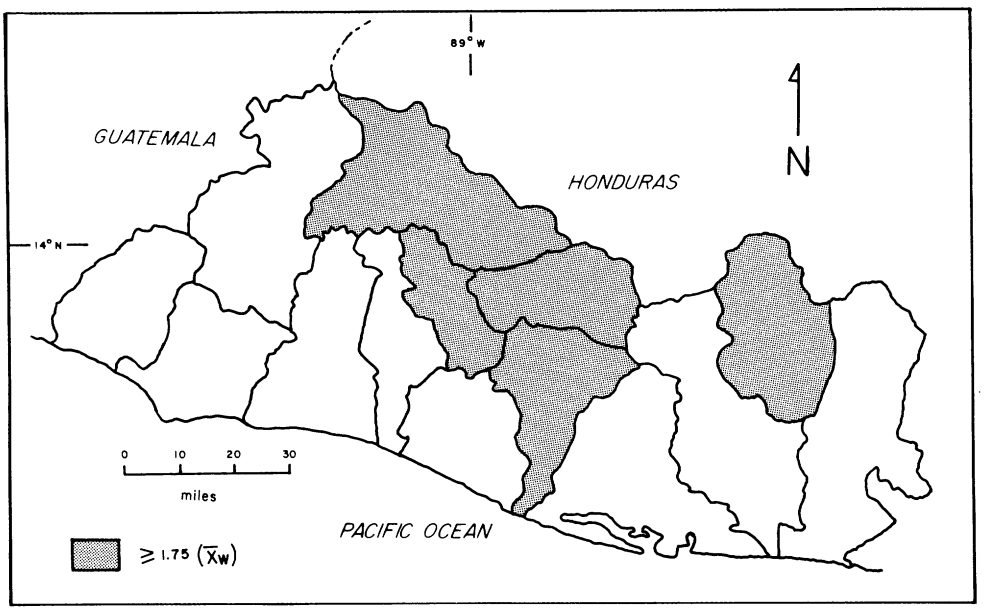


FIG. 4—Log of Salvadoran political deaths per 100,000 population 1982–1985. Departmental data for this variable appear in Table I.

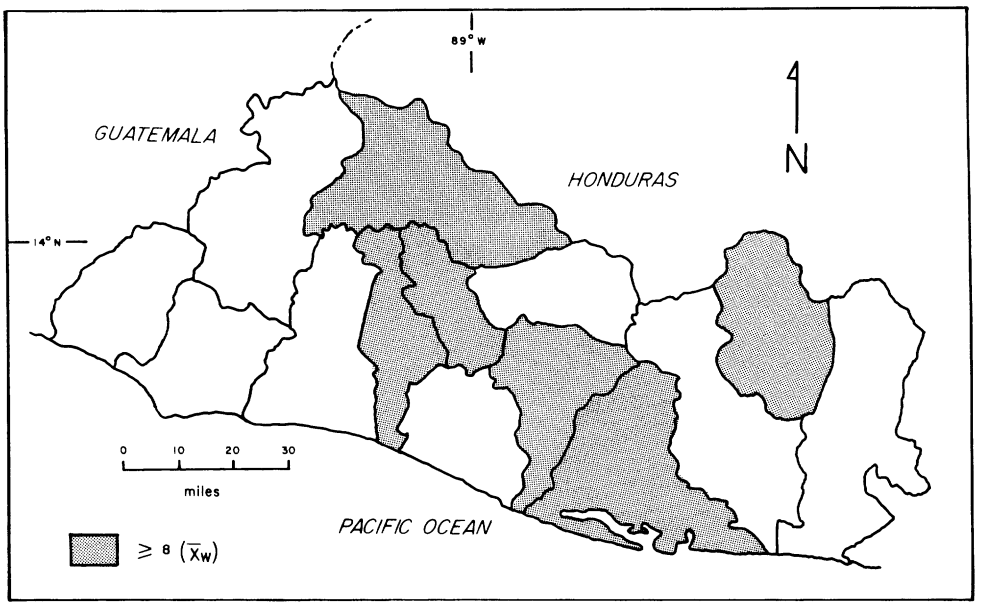


FIG. 5—Violent political incidents 1982–1985. Departmental data for this variable appear in Table I.

political deaths (Table I). The measure of economic setbacks includes incidents of economic sabotage, particularly destruction of dams, roads, electric stations, and bridges by leftists. This measure also covers incidents with broad economic effects such as strikes by governmental employees and gov-

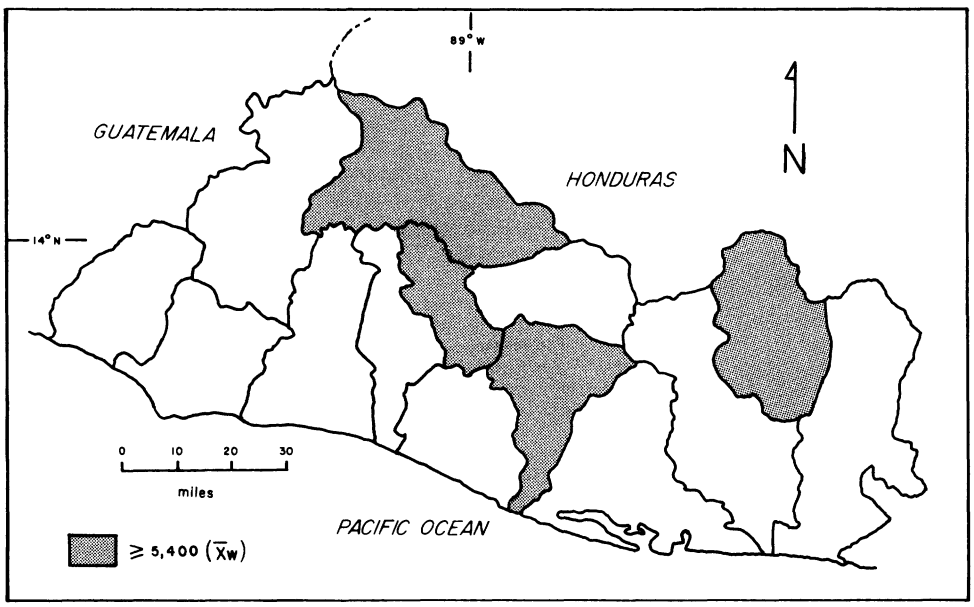


FIG. 6—Internally displaced Salvadorans per 100,000 population October 1983. Departmental data for this variable appear in Table I.

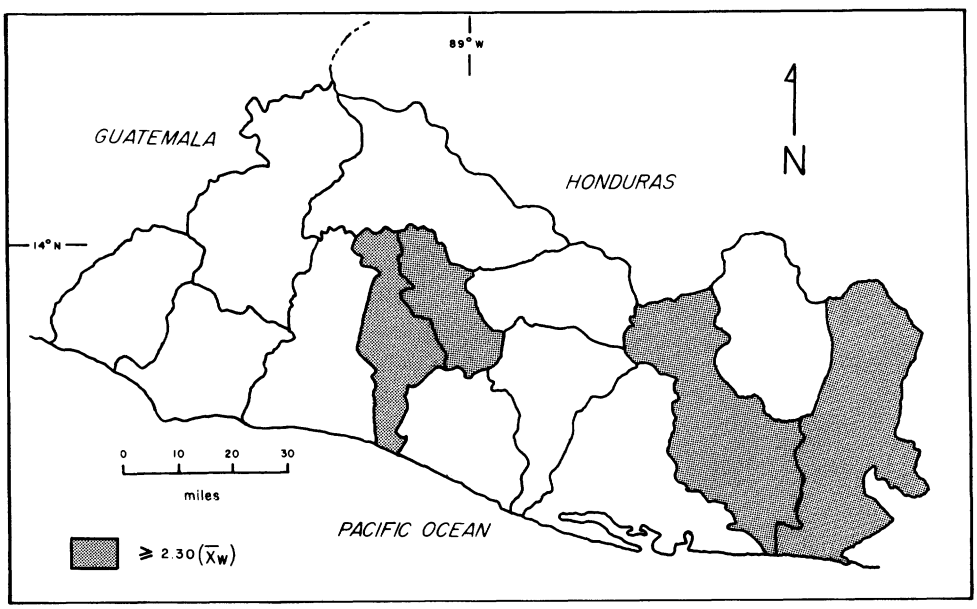


FIG. 7—Permanent residence of Salvadorans apprehended by U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service per 100,000 population by department 1982–1985. Departmental data for this variable appear in Table I.

ernmental decisions to reinstate, expand, or extend temporally phases I to III of the 1980 land-reform program. The index also reflects actions against the interests of the business and elite classes in El Salvador, as opposed to the political-deaths variable, which predominantly indicates actions against peasants, leftists, and worker-unionist groups. Specific economic setbacks that tend to affect several departments concurrently have been subjectively weighted to account for their varied effect on different places.

The map of economic setbacks shows the same basic pattern as does the one for migrant origins (Fig. 9). Departments in the eastern third of El Salvador faced regular interruptions of transportation and utilities during 1982 and 1983. Additionally the early-1983 reinstatement and support of land reform had important negative repercussions on the planting of coffee, sugar, and cotton in Usulután and San Miguel. Finally incidences of economic sabotage in San Salvador, especially during 1984 and 1985, led to a high index for that department.

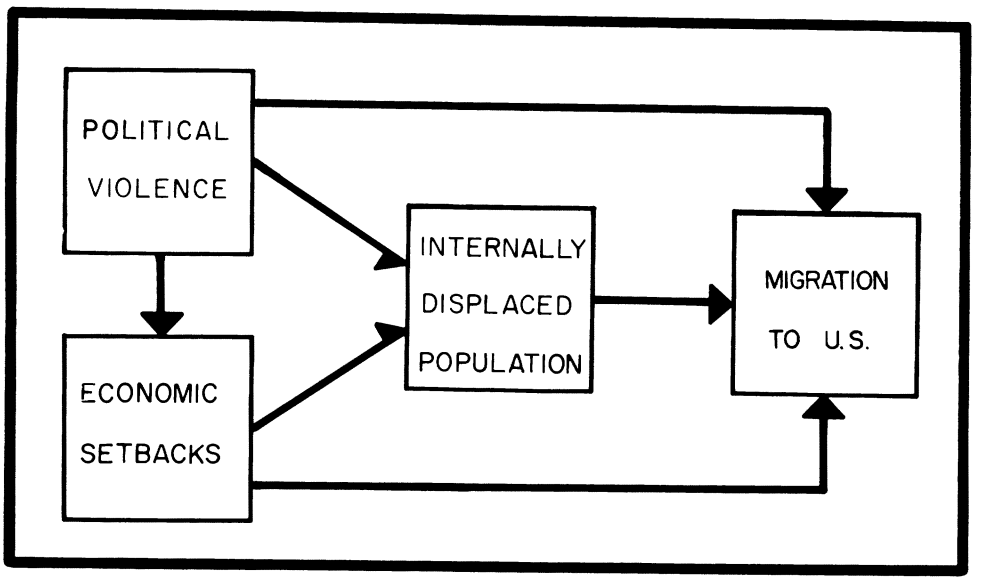
TABLE II—VARIABLE LINKAGES[a]

VARIABLE	CORRELATION COEFFICIENT (r_p)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Political deaths (1)	—	—	0.675[b,c]	0.087[c]	−0.084[b,c]
Incidents of violence (2)	—	—	0.485[b]	—	0.356[b]
Internally displaced population (3)	—	—	—	—	−0.115[b,c]
Economic setbacks (4)	—	—	0.169[c]	—	0.751[c]
Migration to U.S. (5)	—	—	—	—	—

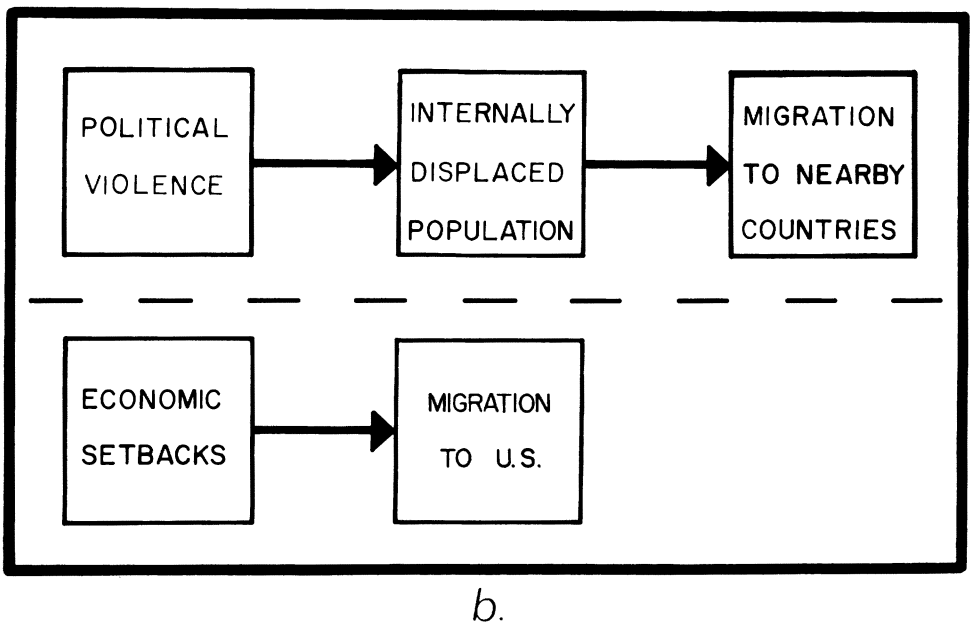
[a] Linkages not shown on Figs. 2 and 8 are omitted.
[b] Linkages shown on Fig. 2.
[c] Linkages shown on Fig. 8.

With political deaths as the measure of political violence and migrant origins by permanent residence as the measure of migration to the United States, the joint political-economic model suggests that economic setbacks correlate well with migration to the United States (r = .751) (Table II). On the other hand, political deaths by department is only weakly related to the incidence of economic setbacks (r = .087); these two phenomena occur in different areas, although they may be related in a broad sense. The limited relationship between economic setbacks and internal displacement of the Salvadoran population (r = .169) indicates that economic conditions generally do not create the huge numbers of internal refugees. Deleterious economic conditions appear to influence only migration to the United States.

The segmented political-economic model shows only the strong linkages. It adds a link between internal displacement and migration to proximate countries, for which no data by department were available for this study but for which ample evidence existed elsewhere. One study found significant relationships (r = .520–.560) between the number of Salvadoran internal



a.



b.

FIG. 8—Alternative models for Salvadoran migration to the United States. a: joint political-economic model. b: segmented political-economic model.

refugees by department during the 1979–1983 period and the number of migrants by department interviewed at the Valley of Peace in Belize. This research also displayed a connection (r = .700) between the original department of the interviewees and the tally of political or terrorist events there

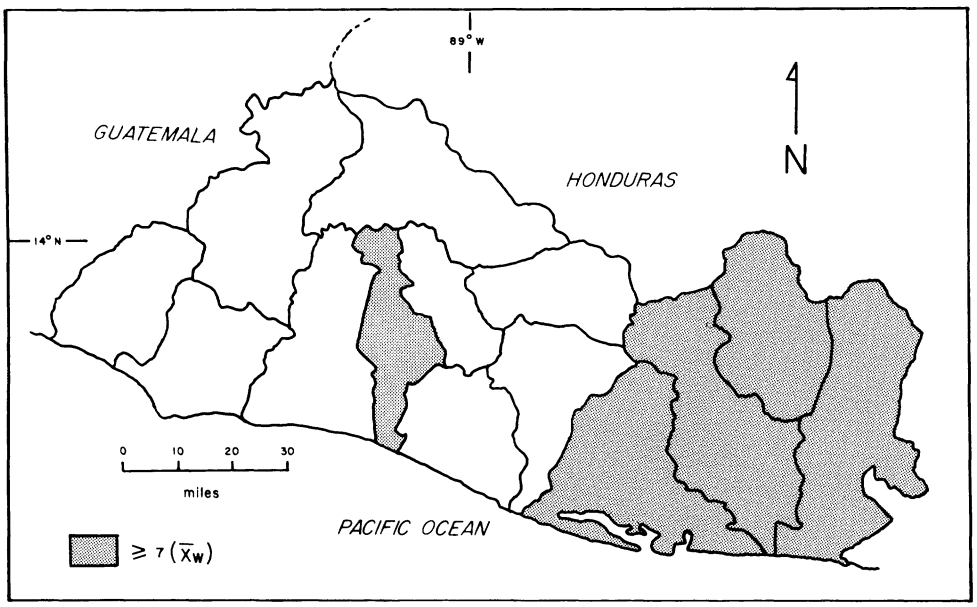


FIG. 9—Weighted incidence of economic setbacks 1982–1985. Departmental data for this variable appear in Table I.

during the same period.[9] Another source noted that Salvadoran refugees in Honduras tended to come predominantly from Morazán and Chalatenango, which were among the departments with the highest incidences of political deaths and internally displaced persons.[10]

CONCLUSIONS

This study has three main conclusions. (1) The origins of undocumented Salvadoran migrations to the United States between 1982 and 1985 had no systematic spatial relationships to the areas of political killings in El Salvador or to the areas containing large numbers of internally displaced persons. (2) Such origins related to the spatial incidence of economic setbacks deriving from the conflict, including sabotage by the FMLN, land-reform measures bringing about disinvestment in productive export sectors, and incidences of strikes by workers. (3) Three principal migration streams were a response to the crisis: poor villagers from the northern zones who migrated to Honduras and Belize; poor villagers from the northern and central regions who became internal refugees in the departmental capitals there; and better-off, more-urbanized persons from eastern departments and San Salvador who went to the United States.

These results are tentative. The nature of the data is such that firm conclusions cannot be drawn now; specifically the migrant decision process

[9] McElroy, footnote 8 above.
[10] U.S. Committee for Refugees, footnote 6 above.

at the individual level remains unknown. Economic setbacks do not lead generically to long-distance international migration, and political violence does not automatically bring internal displacement and migration to adjacent countries. Only in the context of Salvadoran physical and social geography does this pattern occur. Political violence has most affected the relatively poor northern provinces, but a lack of money and knowledge makes flight to the United States out of the question. If political violence were to become concentrated in the economically better-off southern provinces, politically induced migrations to the United States might indeed increase.

These results do not necessarily support the arguments advocating immigration restriction by deporting Salvadoran refugees. Undocumented Mexican aliens who are deported return to the United States with relative ease, at little cost, and with benefits to American society that restrictionist research has not disproved. Salvadorans are employed in many of the same job categories as the Mexicans and with the same societal benefits; however, the Salvadorans on deportation face great, if not impossible, difficulties in returning to the United States. Finally, few would dispute that the civil war in El Salvador is the root cause of migration to the United States.