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Implications for Salvadoreans in San Francisco

By

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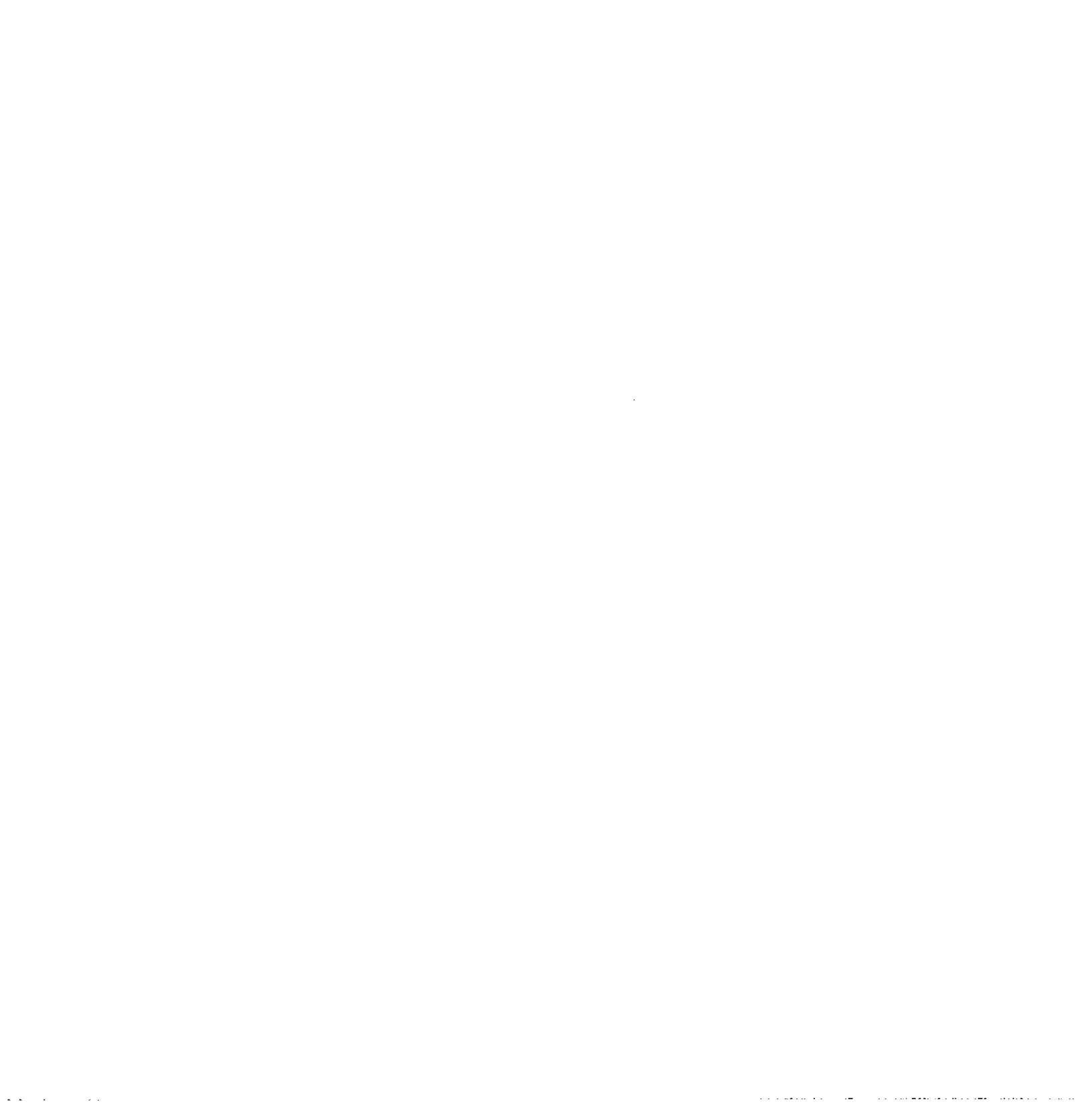
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Implications for Salvadoreans in San Francisco

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1990 U.S. Census estimates that there are over half a million Salvadoreans in the U.S., which means that approximately one of every six Salvadoreans may now reside in the United States. The experience of Salvadoreans differs from that of Mexican immigrants, the largest Latino immigrant group, in that Salvadoreans left a war-torn country and their large-scale migration to the U.S. is relatively recent. In this paper, I analyze the centrality of social networks in Salvadorean migration to the United States. In contrast to most studies of immigrant social networks that emphasize the supportive and generally cohesive side of these social ties, I focus on instances where networks may weaken and even break down, and the consequences of this situation for the lives of Salvadorean newcomers.

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in San Francisco, from late 1989 to 1992. Fifty Salvadorean men and women who had arrived in the U.S. within the previous five years were interviewed. In addition, important information was obtained through informal observations with the respondents and their families, as well as through interviews with community leaders and social service providers.

The central findings of this study point out that the broader context of reception, such as policies of the receiving state with respect to the immigrant group in question, the local labor market, and the organizations in the community of reception, together with a legacy of a war-ravaged country of origin manifested in traumatic disorders, affect kinship networks in important ways. In the case I analyzed here, the absence of an official reception by the government and a recessionary economic cycle have exacerbated the impoverished conditions of Salvadorean newcomers. The scarcity of resources undermines the reciprocity inherent in social networks, often leading to a weakening and even a breakdown of kinship support networks.

The results of this study point out that in order to assist Salvadorean immigrants to reestablish their social networks and to facilitate their incorporation into the U.S. society, federal and state government agencies must pursue two related policy strategies. There should be an effort to regularize the Salvadoreans' current Temporary Protected Status into a more permanent legal status, and these immigrants should have access to minimum social services similar to the official assistance provided to *recognized* refugee groups. Particularly, access to language instruction and job retraining, psychological counseling, and subsidized housing would alleviate the burden of the newcomers on the receiving relatives and would also assist the newcomers to make a less traumatic transition to the new society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The notion that social networks are an invaluable aid to their members before, during, and after the migration process has been widely acknowledged (Mitchell, 1969; Taylor, 1986; Massey and García-España, 1987; Boyd, 1989). Different forms of social relationships have been successful in meeting the material and emotional needs of migrants at the point of arrival (Massey, et al., 1987; Gricco, 1987). Presumably, the presence of relatives and friends at the place of destination lowers the costs, monetary as well as socio-psychological, of immigration (Lomnitz, 1977; Taylor, 1986; Massey, et al., 1987). Researchers argue that people pool resources to help their kinfolk and that contacts with kin provide information that reduces the risks of migration (Litwak, 1960; Tilly and Brown, 1967; Choldin, 1973; Taylor, 1986). The structure of social networks based on kinship and friendship allows for migrants to draw upon obligations implicit in these relationships in order to gain access to assistance at the point of destination, thus substantially reducing the costs of migration (Massey, 1989).

Although the positive effects of social networks have been widely recognized, some researchers have argued for different effects of kinship-based networks on immigrant groups. For instance, Tilly and Brown (1967) argue that migrants who rely on kinfolk may assimilate more slowly than those who are left alone. And Kritz and Gurak (1984) argue in their study of Colombian and Dominican immigrants that kinship relations may actually be detrimental to the adjustment of immigrants, because they prevent members from establishing social networks outside their immediate group. The debate has centered around the positive or negative effects of networks for immigrants, without questioning the underlying assumption that networks always provide a haven of support for immigrants. However, it cannot be expected that networks always function smoothly; as researchers have pointed out, social exchanges within networks imply power transactions, which generate power differentials (Blau, 1964; Mitchell, 1974).

In this paper I will examine the dynamics of kinship-based social networks among recent Salvadorean migrants to the United States. Although in some instances these social relations continue to provide support for Salvadorean newcomers in the United States, there are as many cases where these

social relations become conflictual and even break down. In the latter situations, the presence of relatives in the place of destination no longer represents the familiar comfort and mutual assistance that these networks supposedly embody. Therefore, instead of lending support to the assumption that kinship-based networks are invariably sources of assistance to the newcomers, I analyze a more complex situation in which networks sometimes fail to provide the expected assistance to newcomers. Keeping in mind that there are many Salvadorean immigrants who rely extensively on their kin for support, I will focus mainly on the experiences of those for whom this is not the case because their story also needs to be told.

The analysis will demonstrate how the dynamics of immigrant networks and their efficiency are affected by larger processes in the politico-economic arena, as well as by community-level factors. Central to this work is the assumption that the contextual forces that shape network dynamics are patterned differently across groups, and thus, the efficacy of networks of support will vary accordingly. I believe that we can begin to shed light on the dynamics of social networks among recent Salvadorean migrants through an analysis of the interaction of factors in the receiving context, such as state policies of reception, the economy and labor market opportunities, and the reception in the local community.

Recent advances in research on immigrant households may be useful to analyze networks of exchange among immigrants. This latest research has moved away from treating the "household" as a unit to focus on the complex dynamics of intra-household relations and how these are shaped by larger processes. Researchers in this new tradition criticize the view that households "act" as units. This view, these researchers argue, presupposes that everyone shares resources and views within the household, which conflates the individual behavior of its members and assumes that members have collective interests focused on the household (Kearney, 1986; Rouse, 1989; Hondagneu, 1990; Smith, et al., 1991). Empirical evidence in this tradition demonstrates that decisions are guided by kinship and gender ideologies as well as by hierarchies of power within households (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991), and sometimes household members cannot even agree on what constitutes a family (Rouse, 1989). By focusing on the complexity of migrant households, this approach can be extended to analyze kinship-based networks of support among migrants. In this way, rather than treating networks as analytical units,

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where everyone shares resources due to obligations implicit in kinship and friendship ties, the researcher can attend to the manifold intricacies and asymmetries in these networks.

Importantly, by assessing the effect of larger forces on network dynamics and consequently on the varied effectiveness of networks among immigrant groups, we may envision what lies on the horizon for the immigrants in the new environment. Whether new immigrants actually encounter a haven of support in their kinfolk as they arrive, or they find that their expectations about such help are unfulfilled may effectively influence their decision to remain, relocate, or return. Furthermore, an analysis of this nature has both theoretical and policy relevance. It questions the assumption that networks invariably represent sources of support for immigrants, with an eye to explaining their success or failure. Given the central role that kinship-based networks play in immigrant settlement and the emphasis immigrant-related policies place on kinship networks--from family reunification to a host of social services--a critical examination of networks may have important policy implications.

II. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The major sources of data for this study come from intensive interviews with fifty Salvadorean immigrants conducted from 1990 to 1993 in San Francisco, complemented with important ethnographic observations. Ethnographic studies seldom yield generalizable conclusions or precise statements about large populations, but I am confident that the method utilized in this study generated important insights into key dimensions of the effect that structural forces have on immigrant social networks.

The interviewees had to be "recently arrived," that is, resided in the U.S. for not more than five years, and were selected from language schools and community service agencies for interviews that lasted from an hour and a half to two hours. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and took place in the location of the respondent's choice. At least one fourth were interviewed more than twice over the course of my fieldwork. The interviews were complemented by informal conversations with the respondents as well as interviews with community leaders and workers.

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Slightly more than half of the respondents were females, the average age was 30.7 years, and the average educational level was 9.4 years (See Table 1). In El Salvador, the respondents worked as teachers, soldiers, homemakers, laborers, small business owners, nurses, factory workers, and electricians; others were students, a street vendor, a housekeeper, and a university professor. Two thirds of the sample came from large cities in El Salvador, and more than half indicated that they had knowledge of English before coming to the U.S., though none were fluent speakers. Slightly fewer than half of the people in the sample were single; the remaining were or had been married or in consensual unions--ten were married, twelve were in consensual unions, three were widows, and two were divorced.

III. KINSHIP-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKS

The respondents were about equally divided between those for whom kinship networks were a haven of support and those for whom these networks provided little, if any, assistance. Approximately one half of the fifty subjects said that they lived at a relative's house while they learned English, where they were not expected to contribute monetarily until they began to earn a salary. For instance, Ileana and Sofia are sisters who came to live with an older sister and a brother. Only the older sister had a job, and the three younger siblings took care of everything around the house. The sisters told me that they felt they had to care for one another because they are a family, and they have only each other to count on. Ileana stressed the importance of relying on her family for help, telling me that she "...would not like to have someone from the outside taking care of what is supposed to be a family affair. If it stays within the family, it's no problem." Also, Lety, a 40-year-old woman who lives with her sister, her sister's family and a cousin, told me:

> I cannot separate from my sister, my brother-in-law, my relatives. They lent me money to come here; they have helped me in everything. I live with them, and we all contribute to the expenses of the house, and in case anyone of us needs something, we are there to try to do whatever we can. I think it's much better than to live with strangers, even if they are from your country. You cannot really trust people here, so it's better to stick with your own blood.

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Graciela, who joined her cousins in San Francisco after her New York partner had left her pregnant, told me that without her cousins she would have been lost. Her cousins work at a restaurant, and Graciela stays home taking care of household chores. She said they have told her not to worry, that as long as they are able to help her, she should worry only about the baby. Hector said that his cousin had taken him to the union everyday, to see if he could get a job, and had also allowed him to stay at his house for as long as he needed. He said he could go to him for anything he needed in this country. In addition to Graciela and Hector, Victor and Alina mentioned that they were really grateful to their relatives here, because without their assistance, they would have been forced to seek any job they could find, instead of enrolling first in English courses.

All the respondents who mentioned that they had received material assistance from their relatives stressed that the relatives had been financially capable of helping them. They said that even though everyone was having a hard time economically, their relatives had reasonably stable jobs, earning at least minimum wage. Eduardo told me that he had a brother in San Francisco with whom he lived, and a sister in Los Angeles, whom he only contacted once in a while. I asked him about this difference, and he explained:

> Actually, it's quite easy. My brother helps me financially, and my sister doesn't. Simple. Not that I don't love her, but she just cannot support me, and I want to get ahead in this country. My brother has a more stable and better paying job; she works cleaning houses for rich people. She always has problems, and it's difficult to live like that. She has never been able to give me much, and I want to live a bit more comfortable, calm. That's the reason.

As exemplified in the preceding anecdotes, almost one half of the interviewees did receive help from their kinfolk; still, the other half of my 50 respondents mentioned that they had not received such support. They told me stories of family conflict that ranged from disagreements and minor daily disputes to members throwing them out of the house, taking away their wages, and even threatening them with the most dangerous weapon: reporting them to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Those who described tense, troubled relations that often interfered with obtaining help from relatives said that this friction had erupted once the respondents had arrived in the United States. I do not

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wish to imply that conflict is absent among other migrant families: Both Rouse (1989) and Grasmuck and Pessar (1991) have observed family conflict among Mexicans and Dominicans, respectively. However, the magnitude and expression of conflict, and importantly for the objective of this study, its consequences for networks of assistance among Salvadorean families is significant and, therefore, needs to be examined closely.

Of all my 50 subjects, approximately one-half were not living with a relative in San Francisco at the time of the interview, even though all but two had relatives in the area. Of course, simply not living with relatives in the same house does not automatically mean that relatives do not contact or assist each other. However, the respondents mentioned several reasons for and consequences of not living with their relatives, which have important implications for networks of assistance.

For instance, Jose said that when he remained in El Salvador, he had a chance to learn about social justice and became active politically, a stance of which his family in San Francisco did not approve. When he came to join his siblings and parents, he felt they had little to share. He moved in instead with some Salvadorean friends with whom he felt much more comfortable; they all shared similar ideas and lifestyles. In another instance, Marta said that her brother did not want her to associate with any solidarity groups, and he practically had her locked up in the house. But she contacted a solidarity group that helped her to find a job, a room in a house, and to pay the first month's rent. Marta eventually moved out of her brother's house.

In other cases, my respondents felt their relatives had changed in their behavior and habits, especially with regard to rearing children. Hilda said that she did not want to live with her daughter and grandchildren because she did not feel her daughter was educating them properly. She said "...the habits of children here, are just so...pardon me, the country might be very beautiful, but the children don't grow up with good manners. They can't be reprimanded, they grow up too liberal, and I don't like that." And Marta, who seemed terribly upset at the behavior of her brother's children, told me:

> My brother and his wife are good people, but the problem is with their children. The children are so bad mannered. Their parents have to work double shifts and the children grow up like the majority of the children here, alone, and when the parents want to do

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something, it's too late. Once, I reprimanded my niece, and she told me that I could go to the police, where I had been before--they know about the time I was a political prisoner. My nephew told me that if I tried to put restrictions, he would deport me. The laws say that you can't talk bad to the children, but this harms them. I just couldn't stand them.

What is important to note in the cases of Jose, Marta, and Hilda, is that once they moved out of their relatives' houses, they lost the little--but steady--support that they had while living with relatives. This support often consisted of an occasional small loan for a bus fare or for an application fee, or food and shelter when the newcomers did not have the money to pay for these resources themselves. At least with housing assistance, the relative did not have to incur any extra expenses in order to provide the newcomer with this modest, yet vital support; by simply living in the same physical space, kinfolk facilitated the newcomer's resettlement.

Many others, such as Rosario, Antonio, and Maria, said that they considered the scarcity of resources and resulting family friction the main reason for not living with their families and thus, not obtaining assistance from them. Rosario said that she had not liked it when her cousins argued over everything, from the volume of the television set to who ate what from the refrigerator. She said she felt embarrassed because they often made her feel as if she was a burden to them. Rosario soon decided to move in with a friend, where with the help of a community organization, she paid for all her needs herself.

Antonio said that when he first came, he lived with his family, but he never felt comfortable there because of the constant arguments about resources. He said that because he had not been able to get a job quickly after he arrived, he had to depend on his brother and sister for help, but he felt there was not enough money to go around. After he got a job, he decided to go live with some Salvadorean friends whom he had met in San Francisco in order to stop being a burden on his siblings. Living with friends was easier because Antonio never expected them to help him financially. In a similar vein, Maria said that "at first, my cousin used to help me, but because she doesn't work, only her husband does, I did not want to push her, so now we only visit each other once in a while."

Again, what is important to note in the cases above is that since assistance from relatives was expected and was actually forthcoming in the form of sharing food and shelter in the same house, not

living in the same household often contributed to a break in this vital channel of support. Sharing living quarters with relatives appeared to have facilitated opportunities for assistance, and in many instances, the exchange of in-kind services, such as baby-sitting or help in repairing something around the house. This exchange of in-kind services enables both the newcomer and the receiving relative to participate in other spheres of life, particularly in the labor market and in educational endeavors. This is accomplished by freeing either the newcomer or the relative from domestic activities such as caring for children and by subsidizing the living expenses of a member of the household either to earn an income or to obtain language or occupational training.

For other respondents, familial strife went beyond arguments that ended with one person moving to another house. Margarita, whisking away tears, told me that at first she tried to contact her relatives in the United States, but they were reluctant to establish any relation with her; as she put it: "They were probably afraid I might ask them for food, since they have jobs and are fairly well-off." After Margarita gave birth to her daughter, she contacted her relatives again, and this time her cousin offered her a job as a baby-sitter, paying Margarita $50 a week for ten hours of baby-sitting, six days a week. She accepted because she did not have any prospects for other jobs, but a new problem emerged. Her cousin skipped several payments and ended up owing Margarita $700 at one point.

In addition, Margarita's relatives were reluctant to let Margarita know the whereabouts of her brother in San Francisco because, Margarita said, "they don't care what happens to me, to my brother; they just care about themselves." Margarita and her brother, who was not even allowed to leave his clothes at their relatives' house, told me that they have had too many bad experiences with their relatives and therefore preferred to tell people that they do not have any relatives at all in the area. Margarita summarized her relations with her relatives as follows:

> It's really awful, you don't imagine what it feels like when your own relatives turn their back on you and they even try to hurt you. And I don't know why. At the beginning I didn't tell anyone I had these relatives here, because it's very embarrassing. I got so much more help from strangers, from Americans, even from Nicaraguans, who don't have very much themselves. But with my cousins it's a constant struggle, and I have to be alert and guard myself so that they don't try to cheat me or something.

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Margarita did not receive any help from her cousins when she made her journey from El Salvador and only contacted them when she arrived in San Francisco. However, it is very important to note that in the great majority of cases of conflictual family relations, the newcomers had received substantial support at some earlier point--in the form of information about the journey or a loan to come over here--from the same relatives who later refused to help them. Once they joined the family members in the United States, the assistance they had received in the early stages of migration process disappeared, and instead, a series of hostile relations developed.

Paula came to the United States with her youngest son at the urging of her sisters and brothers who lived in San Francisco. They made all the arrangements for her to come, including payment to the *coyote*[1] and money for her journey. All seemed fine, until she arrived. Initially she lived with her brother, but this ended when he asked her to leave his house; he told her that he was tired of supporting her. She then went to live with her sister, for whom she baby-sat for a couple of months, but Paula's sister became upset with her for not being able to find a job. After quarrels with this sister about the financial strains she said Paula had created, Paula was next forced to move in with her third brother, who also threw her out of his house for similar financial reasons.

This time Paula and her three-year-old son spent two nights sleeping in the stairwell of the apartment building where her brother lived, but her brother seemed oblivious to her situation. A tenant informed Paula about the refugee organization that runs a small shelter, which is where I contacted her. While she lived at the shelter, Paula maintained contact with only one of her brothers. Paula cried when she told me that she did not know why her siblings had helped her so much to come here, but upon her arrival had turned her aside. Two months after I met Paula she told me she had met a man, and they were considering moving to Canada, where as she said, "everything sounds much better, there are more opportunities, and I will forget what it is to have a family like mine." I asked for her after not seeing her around, and I was told that she had indeed left for Canada with her new partner.

Another example is Juan, who had been staying on and off at a shelter for Central Americans in the Mission District. Although he came from Los Angeles to San Francisco because he had relatives here,

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[1] A coyote is a person who is paid to smuggle people who lack immigration documents across the border.

he had to turn to community organizations for food and shelter. After he had trouble contacting his cousins, at first because of a wrong address, he finally found them and moved in with them, but soon after, one of them asked him to leave. This cousin told Juan that he needed the sofa on which Juan was sleeping. Juan said that he had expected to receive help because he had relatives in the area, and if he had known what would happen, he would never have come to San Francisco.

One of the most striking cases was that of Eliza and her husband Pedro. Eliza left her house in San Salvador immediately after soldiers searched it because they had found blood stains on her doorstep. She and her children spent four months in Guatemala, and at the insistence of her mother-in-law, they came to San Francisco. Eliza and Pedro had been separated for five years. Pedro had been living in Los Angeles, but two months after Eliza and the children arrived in San Francisco, Pedro moved to join them. The first time I went to Eliza's house she was living with her mother-in-law, who seemed sincerely concerned with Eliza's situation. Three months after our initial conversation, Eliza invited me to her new apartment for coffee because she had news to tell me.

The news was that Pedro's mother had evicted Pedro, Eliza and the children from her house. For years, it seems, Pedro's mother had been keeping the money Pedro gave her to send to Eliza in El Salvador. In addition, Pedro's mother had been collecting clothes and money, supposedly for Pedro's children, from charity organizations, which she had never passed on to them. When Pedro found out what had been happening, he confronted his mother; they had a heated argument, and she ended up putting Pedro, Eliza, and their three children out in the street immediately, at ten at night. Pedro shared with me what he thought about the situation:

> This is the worst, your own mother to do this to you, just because she wants to keep some extra cents, or additional little things. Put yourself in my position and picture this, your own mother threatening you with calling the *migra* on you, that she will tell the owner of the apartment that we lived there illegally, with accusations of all sorts. I don't want anything to do with her or with my sister. I feel as if my mother doesn't exist anymore for me. And what could be worse in this life than to lose your mother?

I talked to community workers who confirmed the situation I had been observing, and none of them seemed surprised by the stories of family conflict I mentioned. In addition, other researchers have

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observed similar situations among Salvadoreans in other cities in the U.S. In a preliminary study of Central American migration to Los Angeles, Hamilton and Chinchilla (1984) indicated that even though Salvadoreans came to join an established relative in the U.S., their relations were not always smooth. The authors reported instances of relatives refusing to take any new arrivals or throwing them out after a short stay. In another exploratory study, Chinchilla, et al. (1986) pointed out that for the majority of Salvadoreans, as well as *ladino* Guatemalans in Houston, the initial supporting household mainly plays a transitory function. According to the authors, these migrants move from their initial household within a few days or weeks of arrival, due to the instability and financial difficulties of these households.

A worker in charge of one of the major refugee organizations in San Francisco told me that over three quarters of the people who ask for help from her organization have relatives in the San Francisco area. The person in charge of helping immigrants to find employment at another refugee organization attributed these problems within Salvadorean families to their economic situation and to the lack of resources in the community that serves them. She emphasized that the lack of counseling programs is particularly problematic, since many Salvadoreans still bear searing scars from the civil war, which according to her, tend to exacerbate their tense relations with relatives. I also talked to a local priest who mentioned that instances of family conflict among Salvadoreans are very common. He related its frequency to the emotional scars and family separation resulting from the political upheaval in their country. It is important to note that poor immigrants draw on services provided by these organizations to complement their incomes, particularly when there is a breakdown in the kinship network.

I need to make two points regarding these networks. First, although not all of them were harmonious and peaceful havens of support, this does not automatically imply they were all riddled with strife. There were many shades of gray, where disagreements and conflicts did not lead to violent episodes or threatening situations. Second, in cases of supportive as well as in cases of troubled kinship relations, extended kin as well as close family members were involved. Support often came from immediate family members, but in several cases more distant relatives were as active in providing assistance. Likewise, distant and close family members were as likely to be involved in cases of tense kinship relations.

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Initially, Salvadorean newcomers had expectations of support from relatives as a result of the latter's involvement in the early stages of the migration process. When they arrived in San Francisco, people found that support was very difficult to obtain. Impoverished migrants, as individuals or as a group, are simply unable to render much needed material assistance in the form of financial support and housing to their newcomer relatives. The disappointment for those already in the United States comes when the newly arrived person cannot procure a job or repay a loan and becomes a further drain on the already strained resources of the family.

I encountered most cases with hostile, and in some instances, violent familial relations among people at community organizations, where those with the greatest economic need find support. Concomitantly, kinship relations among those at language schools, where those who are better off financially are able to obtain language training, seemed relatively conflict-free. I do not mean that friction is absent among those with more resources. However, the expression of hostility within families may differ based on economic standing. For instance, members of families with more resources may disagree about issues that are not as immediate as food and shelter, and thus, are less visible and pressing. Furthermore, with resources, these families may be able to manage problematic relations in a less violent and dramatic way than those families confronted with scarcity.

IV. FACTORS INFLUENCING KINSHIP-BASED NETWORKS

For families with fewer resources who experience conflict, their financial situation seems to play a fundamental role in the nature of familial relations. And because in general, Salvadoreans in the U.S. are not faring well economically, the relationship between their economic standing and kinship network dynamics is of particular importance for assessing the fate of these immigrants. For instance, the median per capita income for Salvadoreans in San Francisco in 1990 was $9061, compared to $19,695 for the general population in the city, and $26,222 and $11,400 for Whites and Hispanics respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993). In Los Angeles, where half of all Salvadoreans in the U.S. reside and three quarters of those in California, the median per capita income was $6,284 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993).

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Although larger households among Salvadoreans may translate into higher incomes, there are more children in these households and for the working-age adults, it has become quite difficult to obtain employment during the current recessionary cycle.

However, attributing the outcome of these social relations solely to the migrants' economic situation would offer an easy explanation of a very complex situation. I suggest, therefore, that in addition to the economic situation of Salvadoreans, there are other interacting factors that shape the nature of these kinship relations. I believe that by examining contextual forces at the place of destination, one can begin to understand the dynamics of kinship-based networks. Based on the Salvadorean cases in this study, I propose to examine three interconnected factors at the place of arrival that contribute to kinship network dynamics: The state reception of migrants; labor opportunities for migrants in the economy; and the organization of the reception in the community. In discussing these factors I emphasize their interconnectedness to avoid simply presenting them as a compartmentalized list of plausible explanatory variables. Furthermore, these factors are not meant as a full explanation of network dynamics. The discussion is meant to emphasize that contextual forces, such as macro-structural events, shape in important ways the nature of network dynamics.

State--Policy of Reception

The linkage between the categorization of migrants as either political or economic migrants and foreign policy interests has been researched extensively (Zolberg et al., 1989; Surkhe, 1985; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985). The argument essentially states that when the sending and the receiving states have friendly relations, the immigrants are likely to be labeled as economic migrants, regardless of their plight; conversely, when states maintain hostile relations, the receiving state will stamp migrants as political refugees. From the outset of the Salvadorean conflict in the 1980s, the U.S. government conceptualized it as another case of Soviet/Cuban expansionism that needed to be contained. The Reagan administration implemented policies in El Salvador that concentrated on military operations to fight the "Marxist-Leninist" threat, relegating social and political reforms to a lower priority. The United States' aid package to El Salvador amounted to over $3.5 billion in the 1980s, an amount that a recent Pentagon analysis by

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the RAND Corporation found "disproportionate to any conventional conception of the national interest" (Long, 1992). Against this background, it would have been antithetical to U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador to accept Salvadoreans in the U.S. as refugees. Salvadoreans could not be migrating *en masse* from a country that was trying to establish a democracy by fighting the Communists, with full economic and military support from the U.S. Therefore, in line with U.S. foreign policy and national interests, Salvadoreans were consistently categorized by the Immigration and Naturalization Service as "economic" migrants, even though potential deportees faced volatile wartime conditions in El Salvador.

Once on U.S. soil, Salvadoreans could apply for political asylum, which was an almost meaningless process, for only two to four percent of Salvadoreans' petitions were granted. (National Asylum Study Project, 1992). Furthermore, the majority of Salvadoreans in the U.S. were not eligible for legalization under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) because most arrived in the U.S. after 1982. (The Salvadorean population in the U.S. multiplied almost fivefold from 1980 to 1990 [U.S. Census Bureau, 1993]). In practice, then, a high percentage of Salvadoreans were in the country without documents and thus subject to deportation, an extremely precarious status, especially insofar as IRCA stipulated sanctions against employers who hire undocumented workers. Of the 565,081 Salvadoreans enumerated in the 1990 U.S. Census, the latest estimates by the Immigration and Naturalization Service indicate that over 60 percent of them are undocumented (Warren, 1994).[2] In addition to being unable to work legally in the U.S., Salvadoreans were largely ineligible for government assistance, except for limited benefits such as Medi-Cal for pregnant women and related Women with Infant Children (WIC) programs.

During the time I was conducting fieldwork, Salvadoreans were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). In September 1990, under mounting pressure from immigrant and refugee rights groups, the Justice Department agreed to provide TPS to undocumented Salvadoreans who had entered the United States prior to September 19, 1990. This program allows Salvadoreans to live and work in the U.S. for a period of 18 months, during which the Salvadorean conflict was to be resolved. Not surprisingly, given

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[2]This estimate includes the 100,000 Salvadoreans who applied for Temporary Protected Status (discussed further) because of the uncertainty of their status.

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the intractable nature of Salvadorean political unrest, this program has been extended twice, and its current expiration is December 1994. This is not a blanket amnesty to all Salvadoreans, and it is only temporary status; technically, it is neither asylum nor refugee status. The only privilege bestowed is essentially the conferral of a work permit; refugee status and its concomitant access to social services are still denied.

Reception by the Economy

Although migrants have always entered the lower rungs of the work force, recent contractions in the economy have severely constrained the possibilities for employment and mobility. The nationwide recession that began in the late 1980s (I conducted this research from 1990 to 1993) has given way to a period of slow economic growth, with a new cycle of economic downturn overlaid on the longer-term structural changes that have been in place since the 1970s. This latest recessionary cycle has affected every sector of the economy, particularly the booming service sector in San Francisco, which had been the basis for the growth this city experienced during the past decade. The service sector includes both the highly paid and specialized jobs such as those in engineering, finance and real estate, as well as the low-wage jobs required by high-income residential and commercial gentrification, such as those in restaurants, gourmet shops, hotels, and house cleaning (Sassen, 1991, 1988). The corporations that once fueled the economic growth of San Francisco are currently focusing on cutting costs, in part by reducing their permanent work force. For instance, the number of jobs in engineering, accounting, and management industries declined from 29,300 in 1990 to 25,900 in 1992 (Employment Development Department, 1993).

Thus, highly paid workers in the upper echelon of the service sector are now facing increasing employment uncertainty. In a recent poll taken in the Bay Area, half of the respondents indicated that they feared unemployment (Marshall, 1992). This gloomy outlook has had repercussions for the life styles and consumption patterns of highly paid professionals. The capacity of these professionals to maintain their life styles, to hire housekeepers, and to patronize the restaurants and services that employ immigrant labor has weakened. The result of this trend has been a serious shortage of employment for

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immigrant workers, since as Sassen (1988) indicates, they are highly concentrated in the low-wage end of the service sector.

All of the Salvadoreans who were employed at the time I interviewed them held low-paying jobs in the service sector, the overwhelming majority working without documents. Regardless of differences in educational level or age, the men were concentrated in restaurants--mostly as busboys or dishwashers-- and in construction jobs, whereas the women held jobs as housekeepers or baby-sitters. Only a few of the men and women had jobs as office clerks or as salespersons. The majority of my respondents had temporary or part-time jobs, often both. But even these jobs were hard to get. For instance, Mariana, a physics instructor in El Salvador, told me that in the face of the current crisis in the U.S., she cannot risk leaving her job as a sales clerk to look for something better.

All my interviewees stressed the difficulties they had experienced in procuring jobs in San Francisco, especially in contrast to their friends and relatives who had arrived in the city earlier in the 1980s. They all pointed out the financial stress this situation created not only for them, given that they had expected to find work rather quickly, but also for the relatives who received them, who had not anticipated the additional burden of supporting the newcomer. For instance, Adela, who is unmarried and has three children, works as a chamber maid in a hotel near the airport. She shared with me her experiences in an increasingly tight labor market:

> I prefer the hotel because when I work, I earn a bit more. I am on the list of people who are "on-call," so many times two weeks go by and I am not called to work. I am lucky because at least I am on their list. But I feel that I have to sort of grab whatever comes to me, squeezing my way in because there are so many of us anxiously waiting for those hours that the hotel wants us to work. I feel we are like children trying to get candy from a *piñata*, but it's not funny, it's tough.

There was an interesting twist in the pattern of employment by gender in the Salvadorean group I interviewed: There were more women employed than there were men. This situation may be due to gender ideologies and the resultant sexual division of labor. Men do not get "domestic" jobs; thus, they must work for an employer such as a business owner in areas such as construction, landscape gardening, and restaurants. This requirement poses two challenges. First, there are fewer jobs in these areas, for they

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have been severely affected by the recession; and second, workers are more visible in these places of employment than in domestic jobs. In a tight labor market situation, where the employer is supposed to be held accountable by the INS, it becomes more difficult for undocumented men to fill vacant jobs. Women, on the other hand, perform domestic jobs, such as house cleaning and baby-sitting, inside a house, away from the public eye. For this reason, it is easier for their employers to hide them from the INS. Thus, women are able to procure employment more easily than men, even without documents. However, this situation does not automatically mean that women have more economic advantages or are in a better situation vis-a-vis employment than men are. The flexibility inherent in the work these women perform quite often translates into instability because they can be called to work at any moment, but likewise, they can be told not to show up. And when both women and men work, men earn on average higher wages than women do.

Moreover, according to my interviewees and the social service providers, when women become the principal wage earners, they often encounter problems in relations with their male partners. For instance, Rosa's partner abandoned her in her fifth month of pregnancy, and she explained to me that to her the reason was obvious: she always had work, but he had not been able to find work in months. She said that she believed her role as a breadwinner made him very frustrated so that he turned to drinking heavily and finally left her.

Community Reception

In an effort to make up for the shortfall in official services designed to ease the newcomers' transition to an alien environment, North Americans joined efforts with recently arrived Salvadoreans to set up community organizations. These organizations provide a range of services, from legal defense to shelters and other emergency services. Without government support, church and organizations must privately fund efforts to provide these services. Consequently, their budgets are tight. In addition, these community organizations do not usually serve as many Salvadoreans as they could because of a belief among new Salvadorean immigrants that these organizations have links with the guerrillas in El Salvador. Since many workers in these organizations openly express disapproval of U.S. policies in Central America,

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Salvadoreans with opposing views, and with at least some resources, prefer not to associate with these groups, mostly out of fear of reprisals back in El Salvador. However, this is a minority, and importantly, it is a group with the potential to obtain help from other channels, including their own families. But for the Salvadoreans in greatest need, such as those who regularly obtain help from community organizations, this ideological divergence does not matter as much. An additional problem is that those Salvadoreans who have organized to help their newly arrived fellows are newcomers themselves, still trying to cope with a new environment, with little or no assistance from long-time Salvadorean residents in San Francisco. However slight the help these community organizations are able to provide, however, it represents an alternative to newcomers who otherwise would have to rely entirely on their relatives.

The assistance to newcomers through community organizations helps alleviate the added burden of taking a new member into a poor household by providing help with housing costs, food and clothing. This aid eases what otherwise could become tense and explosive relations between the newcomers and relatives. In addition, church groups provide shelters, which represent invaluable alternatives when a situation at home becomes unbearable. And impoverished Salvadoreans in conflictual situations do turn to these organizations for help.

Records of one of the major refugee organizations that serve Central Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area show that it serves, with varying amounts of assistance, an average of 11,000 persons annually. And the director of one of the shelters for Central Americans in San Francisco mentioned that approximately 100 people stay at his shelter for up to one month, but the majority only stay a few nights. The most commonly utilized services were a weekly food distribution program, housing assistance, legal services, a job-search cooperative, a free clinic and medical referral services. In some cases, people sought assistance in line with the concerns of local organizations, such as legal aid and health care matters. But in other cases, the newcomers solicited assistance that would otherwise be provided by the kinship network, such as food and housing; in the absence of support from relatives, economically marginalized newcomers turned to community organizations for help.

More recently, the recession has affected the lives of Salvadorean immigrants in yet another respect, mainly by influencing the manner in which these organizations offer support to newcomers.

Across-the-board budget cuts have aggravated the fiscal difficulties of these already constrained organizations, and in some instances, entire programs for immigrants that the City of San Francisco had financed have been suspended. Moreover, the immigration backlash that has accompanied the recession has profoundly affected the lives of newcomer immigrants. People are afraid to search for jobs, to ask for help from organizations, to report crime, or even to send children to school for fear of hostility by the native population.

Therefore, at the community level, the short history of large-scale Salvadorean migration to the U.S., the financial constraints of community service organizations, the divisions along political lines, the absence of participation by long-time residents--the better off segments of Salvadoreans in the U.S.--and recently, the anti-immigrant backlash have influenced the way in which the Salvadorean community is developing informal networks of support.

V. THE RECEIVING CONTEXT AND KINSHIP NETWORKS

Because Salvadoreans were *de facto* refugees who lacked *de jure* recognition by the U.S. government, they were not given a refugee reception and thus had no access to state support. Also, in the face of a deep economic recession, they endured precarious labor market opportunities in San Francisco coupled with steep housing costs in the city. Without state recognition, Salvadoreans did not have access to social services that could help them to cope with the effects of the economic crisis, with crowded housing conditions, and with the psychological effects of family separations and war trauma. Because of their undocumented refugee status, Salvadoreans were not entitled to the many forms of assistance available to officially recognized refugees, such as training programs or language instruction, which further hindered their already dim opportunities for secure and better-paying jobs.

Even though Salvadoreans were granted Temporary Protected Status, it is a liminal state, and many Salvadoreans, due to poverty but also to their temporary situation in the U.S., must concentrate more on fulfilling their immediate needs and less on making long-term plans. A person who does not know if he or she will still be in the same city or in the country in a couple of years may find it difficult

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to make plans for the future. For instance, these immigrants may focus on working and earning a minimum amount to be able to survive, rather than investing in a more secure future, for instance, by learning the language. Of course, many of these immigrants would like to learn English, but their irregular work schedules and long hours prevent them from regularly attending language instruction. This failure to develop their human capital is particularly harmful for skilled immigrants (and ultimately for the society) because they only need minimal retraining to be able to get a job commensurate to their educational level and previous work experience.

In addition, TPS was granted on a temporary basis under the assumption that the conflict in El Salvador would be resolved, after which Salvadorans in the U.S. could return home. This point, worthy of another study in itself, deserves to be mentioned. The situation in El Salvador continues to be uncertain, and many, perhaps most, Salvadorans would like to remain in the U.S. The war-ravaged Salvadorean economy, dependent on remittances from immigrants for a third of its total GNP, is still recovering and may offer at best, limited job opportunities. And in the political arena, the fear that there may still be death squads operating, evident in a series of assassinations of political leaders prior to the March 1994 elections, provides an all too real reminder of the horrors that made many refugees flee their homeland in the first place.

This combination of factors placed considerable strains on kinship networks: Salvadoreans arrived only to share a condition of poverty with those upon whom they had expected to rely for assistance. As the newcomers tried to rely on their kinfolk for help, their relatives' resources became inadequate to accommodate additional family members in the face of worsening economic times. Of particular significance, newcomers had based their expectations regarding labor market opportunities on the experiences of their earlier counterparts. Very often, the newcomers' inability to procure jobs soon after they arrived created problems. On the one hand, the newcomers could not earn money to start supporting themselves quickly after they arrived. On the other, the relatives already in the U.S. not only had to support the newcomers, but could not even get back the money they had lent the person to make the trip over here. These circumstances were often the basis for hostile and potentially explosive situations within families. By cutting off the flow of material assistance and hindering the sharing of in-

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kind services, this situation effectively debased the viability of a network because it undermined the reciprocity upon which kinship support networks are sustained.

Tight budgets, a relatively short history of migration, and a lack of political clout have prevented the institutionalization of an infrastructure of support--formal or informal--for Salvadoreans. The community organizations that have formed to assist Salvadoreans do not have enough resources to meet the need. This lack of resources affects directly the mechanisms by which informal sources of support, such as those based on kinship ties, operate. The assistance provided to newcomers through community organizations helps to alleviate the added burdens of accepting a new member into a household, and these organizations provide alternative forms of support when the receiving household or family can no longer support the added burden. In the absence of this assistance, the newcomers and their families have minimal alternatives for support.

The geographical distance and the situation of war did not allow Salvadoreans to travel back and forth between the U.S. and their home country. Relations within families became strained or even broken with the migration of one or more members due to the uncertainty of seeing each other again. In a more indirect way, the geographical separation of family members has affected intra-family relations among Salvadoreans. Life styles and political ideologies have been affected by the war, and often members of the same family have diametrically opposed views with respect to the political conflict in El Salvador. In many cases Salvadoreans come to join relatives in the United States with whom they find little in common as a "family," a condition exacerbated by the lack of access to subsidized housing or mechanisms to cope with these reunifications. This internal division creates an emotionally volatile environment in which family members find it difficult to live together. Many Salvadoreans have been directly affected by the civil strife in El Salvador and still bear the trauma of damaging experiences from their war-torn homeland. This psychological distress places a heavy burden on relatives in the U.S., who themselves are still trying to cope with life in a foreign environment, and creates the conditions for potentially explosive relations within Salvadorean families.

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VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The configuration of factors that many Salvadoreans have come to encounter in the U.S. has created a "worst-case scenario" for solid kinship-based networks to prosper. This reality suggests a critical situation for Salvadoreans. They do not have access to government social services. They come to face a recessionary economy that offers bleak opportunities for employment for themselves as well as for their relatives already in the U.S. who otherwise might have supported them. Their community is highly divided politically. Compatriots and others with whom they could establish community networks are also struggling to cope with difficult aspects of life in the United States. Consequently, those upon whom they expected to rely for aid, their kinfolk, are not always in a position to support them financially or emotionally. The conflict that ensues effectively undermines the reciprocity that lies at the core of social networks and thus leads to network breakdown.

This case exemplifies a critical issue regarding the organization of kinship-based sources of assistance among migrants: The structure of the receiving context matters in crucial ways for the development of these networks. State reception and other structural events such as the war-stricken area where the migration originates, the dynamics of the receiving economy, and the political agenda of the receiving state--all of these factors can hinder the flow of reciprocal obligations, thus shaping in significant ways kinship-based sources of assistance. As with other social relations, social networks are conditioned and modified by the combined effect of macro-structural events and the socio-cultural organization and characteristics of the relevant migrant group. Therefore, we should expect that these relations differ not only among groups, but also within groups according to the geographical area and particular macro-structural configurations at a specific point in time.

My findings warn against the commonly held notion that a common background, constant contact, and a shared migration experience automatically breed congenial relations among immigrants. This study demonstrates that policy markers and scholars must be attentive to the varied effectiveness of networks across groups and contexts. These findings challenge the unquestioned theoretical assumption that social networks represent viable sources of aid and familiar comfort to immigrants. These results

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may serve to warn academics and policy makers alike to avoid romanticizing immigrant social networks by evoking exaggerated images of havens of support. As this study demonstrates, immigrant kinship networks do not always provide consistent support to newcomers; in many instances, such networks are weak and break down. Adhering to an image of kinship networks as unflagging sources of support may prove to be convenient for policy makers because it divests the state of responsibilities toward immigrants. However, as this study has shown, immigrants suffer the consequences of this embellished imagery.

The results of this study should not be overgeneralized; policies directed at the Latino population should attend to the heterogeneity of this group. This does not mean that there will be specific policies drawn for each immigrant group. However, for general policies to be effective, adjustments that would accommodate such heterogeneity may be necessary. New Latino groups, such as the Salvadorean, face barriers to resettlement common to other Latino newcomers, particularly with regard to labor market opportunities and neighborhoods they come to inhabit. But newly arrived Salvadorean immigrants also experience unique difficulties in their incorporation into the U.S. For instance, dissimilarities in backgrounds and time of arrival within the Latino population beget different needs and concerns. The history of Salvadorean migration, its relative newness, and the point in time at which most of these immigrants have entered the U.S. present significant differences that require modifications in policy to reach this group.

There are two sets of policy recommendations that can be drawn from this study. The first deals with research needs. More investigation needs to be conducted in the area of immigrant social networks, preferably relying on in-depth observations of the group in question, so that their experiences will be included in generating policy. In researching immigrant networks, the method utilized is critical in targeting a different aspect of these social relations. Assisting fellow immigrants involves a complex web of social relations that defy simplification. It is not enough to know how many people a person knows, whether relatives or friends live close by, or even who was financially responsible for the individual's migration. As this study has shown, simply asking these questions would have proven misleading. Additionally, researchers need to focus specifically on what kind of help--emotional or financial—

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immigrants actually receive (not just ask for) and from whom—families or friends—and how much. This kind of research would serve to further refine theoretical frameworks in migration studies and would also help policy makers decide how much and when the state should intervene in helping immigrant families.

The second set of recommendations deals with practical suggestions for targeting and structuring services aimed at recent Salvadorean immigrants. Researchers have pointed out that being embraced by solid networks may have detrimental long-term effects for newcomers because it prevents members from establishing contacts beyond the immediate group. But based on evidence from this study, I believe that in general, strong kinship support networks represent a positive element in the experiences of Salvadorean newcomers. The reciprocity inherent in strong network ties benefits both the receiving relatives and the newcomers by enabling them to become productive members of society through relationships of mutual support. For recent arrivals, asking for and obtaining assistance from a familiar source represents an important bridge in an otherwise traumatic transition to a foreign environment. The policy recommendations that follow are based on this general assumption.

As I indicated before, the great majority of the cases of conflictive kinship networks occur within families with the fewest economic resources. And in general, Salvadorean newcomers--who constitute over three quarters of this group across the nation--experience poverty and marginalization. Therefore, these suggestions may prove useful as a general approach to helping this group, again with the caveat that additional research is needed to confirm and expand on the findings of this study.

The critical problems disrupting intra-family relations, and thus hindering the successful incorporation of Salvadorean newcomers, stem from their temporary and unstable immigration status. Although Salvadoreans were not classified as refugees during the years of the civil war in their country, they were nevertheless granted Temporary Protected Status in 1990. This special dispensation expires in December of 1994. However, as I mentioned earlier, TPS is neither permanent nor refugee status; thus, it does not assure these immigrants anything more than a temporary work permit. Therefore, the majority of Salvadoreans in the U.S. are either relegated to the limbo of uncertainty about a new expiration date for TPS, or they simply remain undocumented. This situation leads to a host of problems that may leave Salvadorean immigrants at a permanent disadvantage in integrating into the new society. Salvadoreans

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could be greatly assisted by granting them a more permanent status or at least regularizing their temporary status, to allow them access to similar aid packages that the government offers to other immigrants fleeing from political persecution. Aid to Salvadoreans, as in the case of recognized refugee groups, should be forthcoming as access to a package of minimum social services. And based on evidence from this study, this assistance could be channeled through existing community organizations operating in Salvadorean neighborhoods because of the familiarity immigrants have with these organizations, which are run by co-nationals.

The segmented labor market into which Salvadoreans newcomers are incorporated has been deeply affected by the latest recessionary cycle, with a resulting contraction in labor opportunities for these newcomer immigrants. This economic downturn has undoubtedly worsened the already precarious position of this largely impoverished refugee population. With a regularized permanent or refugee status, Salvadoreans could have access to government-funded job-retraining programs and English-language instruction. The acquisition of language skills may be particularly useful to those Salvadorean refugees who arrive with professional or technical degrees and whose skills are otherwise being wasted in menial and unskilled jobs. Presently, the long hours and unpredictable work schedules prevent Salvadorean newcomers from regularly attending language classes, effectively thwarting their chances to improve their skills in an ever more competitive job market.

With a minimal social service package, Salvadoreans would qualify for subsidized housing, which would certainly ameliorate harsh living conditions due to exorbitant housing costs. Housing assistance would reduce over-crowded living conditions, which spark family tensions when economic and other material pressures are present. Additionally, Salvadorean immigrants would be allowed access to health care, including mental health services. As a rule, Salvadoreans work long hours for low wages with no benefits such as health care. And, as community workers and leaders repeatedly mentioned, there is a widespread and urgent need for psychological counseling in this group. These immigrants have carried memories of their troubled land across the border, and many of them still experience recurring war-related flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions represent serious problems

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for the newcomers but also have a profound effect on their relations with family members, who are themselves trying to cope with life in a new environment.

Tackling the problems of Salvadoreans in this manner would alleviate the burden of receiving relatives and assure the newcomers an improved chance for a better future in this country. An investment in stability and security could reduce the long-term costs of immigration by preparing newcomers to lead productive lives and permitting their families to provide supplemental assistance. To ignore the particular needs of Salvadoreans at this early stage of their migration experience may end up costing dearly. Informal networks of support buckle under the strain of financial and emotional insecurity. The breakdown of kinship networks and the lack of government support will have the undesirable consequence of further marginalizing a disempowered group and condemning it to chronic poverty and isolation.

Table 1. Main Demographic Characteristics of the Sample
of Salvadorean Immigrants

Mean Age	30.7
Mean Education	9.4
Sex Ratio*	48.6
Time of Arrival	1985-1990
N	50

*Number of males per one hundred females.

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