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**Author**

Vargas, Juan Carlos

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**California Center for Population Research**  
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*Juan Carlos Vargas*

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**PAPER PRESENTED AT THE  
THIRD INTERNATIONAL POPULATION CONFERENCE  
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**Nicaraguans in Costa Rica and the United States: Data from Ethnic Surveys**  
(Translation of Spanish Version)

*Juan Carlos Vargas<sup>1</sup>*

In Central America, Nicaragua is the only country with a clearly bipolar behavior regarding the destination of its emigration streams. Emigration from Nicaragua has Costa Rica as its major destination and the United States in second place. This behavior has not been static, insofar as it also shows the opposite pattern. From mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century through the end of the 70's, with the Sandinista triumph (1979), Costa Rica was the main destination. During the 80's, and the so-called Contra War, there was an increase in emigration and the destination changed, with the United States occupying first place. Once the armed conflict ceased, and the Sandinistas were voted out of office, Costa Rica again assumed the role of primary destination, and this time with a growth in the flow with regards to historic behavior (Vargas; 1999, 2003).

In spite of the size of this migration stream and the repercussions for Costa Rica, there have been few studies aimed at analyzing it systematically. One important effort was implemented by Jimmy Rosales *et al*, in their study of the “*nicaragüenses en el exterior*” (Nicaraguans abroad) (Rosales: 2001), with data from the Nicaraguan Census of 1995. Other time-limited studies with fieldwork have been carried out in some border communities with Costa Rica by FLACSO-Costa Rica researchers (Morales; 1997, 2000) (Morales and Castro, 2002).

Recently, using data from ethnosurveys (for 5 communities in Nicaragua and other countries), several studies have been prepared on specific topics. Fussell (2003) has reviewed the evidence for the theory of *cumulative causation* provided by this migration; Riosmena (2003) has studied the possibilities of return, and Hickes and Massey (2003), have studied the relations with armed conflict and political conflict in Nicaragua and migrant destination.

This paper analyzes the basic demographic characteristics of the migrants, as well as the migration streams with a comparative look at destinations. We are looking for evidence of the so-called “labor migration” to Costa Rica and the “political migration” to the United States and to contribute to a discussion on the adequateness of this distinction. Among other things, we analyze the prevalence rates and the differential characteristics of migrants between the two destination countries. Migrant data is related to community of origin together with some of the evidence on the *impact* migration has on these communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Social Anthropologist. Master's in Population Studies. Chief Researcher on the project *Etnoencuestas de migración: Nicaragua-Costa Rica-Estados Unidos*. CCP/UCR. Centro Centroamericano de Población, Universidad de Costa Rica, [jcvargas@ccp.ucr.ac.cr](mailto:jcvargas@ccp.ucr.ac.cr)

## **Introduction**

The countries of Central America (and Latin America in general) have a long-standing migration history towards the United States, the most important country of destination. There are also important migration streams among the countries within the region. In the Central American case, Nicaragua is the only country where the United States is not the major destination, but only the second. Historically speaking, Costa Rica has always been the main destination for Nicaraguans (Vargas, 1999).

The armed conflicts that occurred in Central America during the decades of the 70's and 80's greatly increased international migration, especially from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The process continued after these conflicts ceased (Castillo, 2001). In the midst of the conflict, migration was marked by *refugee* flows (whether they were covered by the UNHCR statute or not). Costa Rica was an important destination first for Salvadoran and then later Nicaraguan refugees. For the latter group, the refugee process extended into the 80's, with the *contrarevolution*, this was not the case in the second half of the 70's with the revolution and later assumption of government by the Sandinistas. Migration to the United States followed a pattern that was essentially the inverse.

Once the political and military conflicts ceased (or at least were significantly reduced), migration took on a *meaning* centered on aspects of an economic-labor nature, representing at this time (decade of the 90's up to the present) an unprecedented increase in the volume of the streams. Furthermore, different types of migration cropped up: *temporary* (with returns, repeated or not, depending on specific crop cycles), *circular* (with repeated returns, independent of a particular crop cycle), *unique* (migrating with a return to country of origin without a second migration), and *permanent*. Recent estimates on the basis of the Nicaraguan Health Survey indicate that 11% of Nicaraguan households have at least one person residing abroad (ENDESA, 2002).

## **Data**

The data come from simple random samples, carried out independently in five communities in Nicaragua. These were carried out using an ethnosurvey, which implies a database used to reconstruct the migration history of the head of the household and his/her spouse (if there is one), with detailed information on this experience. Similarly, information is gathered on the first and last migration of each household member, which was extended to all of the head of household's children even though they were *not* residing in the dwelling. Furthermore, socio-economic data were collected along with the history of: businesses and properties (both the dwelling and land, real estate properties in general) for each head of household. At the same time, data were gathered on the basic characteristics of the current dwelling and any evidence of receipt of (and impact from) remittances in the household.

The data for the first two communities in Nicaragua were compiled during the first quarter of the year 2000, as a result of a grant provided by the RAND Foundation to the author. The other samples were carried out in the first semester of 2002, with CCP resources coming from the Mellon Foundation. The methodology employed (ethnosurvey) corresponds to the MMP-LAMP (Mexican Migration Project – Latin American Migration Project), which in addition have contributed at all times with logistic support and advice. The questionnaires applied, with the necessary adaptations and slight modifications, correspond basically to those employed by MMP-LAMP, so that comparisons may be made with project data bases generated in different Latin American countries (<http://lamp.opr.princeton.edu/>).

In each of the communities, 200 households were interviewed, with a *complete migration history* for the head of household and his/her spouse (if there was one), both within the country as well as to Costa Rica and/or the United States.

Information was also gathered on the first and last trip of each household member and of the head of household's other (absent) children. Basic socio-demographic information was obtained for each household member, as well as the dwelling characteristics and living conditions. Finally, business and (agricultural) property histories and their related characteristics were explored.

This article used the databases for all individuals interviewed (*pers* file) and that of the dwelling (*house*). This includes all inhabitants in the household at the time of the survey (independent of their kinship relations) and of children of the head of household and the head, him or herself, even though they were not residing in the dwelling (including those deceased), as well as general household characteristics.

## **Results**

In Costa Rica, the immigration phenomenon becomes particularly interesting during the last inter-censal period (1984 through 2000), as it is precisely during this lapse that the increase in Nicaraguan arrivals occurs, especially during the 90's. According to the population censuses, between 1984 and 2000, the population born abroad grew from close to 90 thousand to around 300 thousand foreigners residing in the country, of whom 226 thousand corresponded to the Nicaraguan-born population. In relative terms, this growth implied that the percentage of foreign population doubled, growing from 4 to 8% of the total population, and the proportion of Nicaraguans grew to three quarters of all foreigners (INEC/CCP: 2004).

Table 1 provides general statistics on the samples by community, as well as population size and sex ratio. In general, in each community 200 dwellings were interviewed, achieving a total of 997 dwellings with information on 6811 persons. The gender distribution of the population shows a slight predominance of women (IM: 0.92).

While the fieldwork was carried out, we were impressed by people's disposition to provide the information. On the average, the interview lasted 40-50 minutes, and implied information that was *sensitive* and complex to reconstruct (a person's migration history, for example). Nevertheless, the percentage of rejections was low (4.2%), but varied by community.

Average household size in these interviews was 5.1 persons, including the head of household's children not *living* in the household. If we take just "real members", the average size was 4.3 persons. The 1995 Nicaraguan Population Census reported an average household size of 5.3 persons per household for the country as a whole (INEC-Nic: 2004)

Among the communities of origin, males constitute 48% of the population, but among emigrants they represent 58%. The average age at first migration is similar both for the population in general (28 years) and for the average age by destination: 27.8 for migrants to Costa Rica and 28.3 for those leaving for the United States.

Table 2 presents information on basic socio-demographic characteristics of the population under study and for migrants by destination. When we analyze some of these socio-demographic characteristics among the population with migration experience, important differences can be seen in the destinations of the Nicaraguans.

Education presents an *unexpected* behavior. For the population as a whole (age 6 or more years), the average level of studies is 7 years. Among emigrants to Costa Rica, the average level is 7 years for the total, but among heads of households it is 6.1 years. With regards to those that have emigrated to the United States, the levels are higher: 9.9 years for the total and 9.8 years of study among heads of household.

In the total community population, males represent 48 percent. Nevertheless, the gender composition of emigrants (Table 2) is very similar, regardless of whether the migration stream is towards Costa Rica or the United States. Figures 1 and 2 present population pyramids for the migrants by country of destination, according to age at *first migration*. Although there are no important differences overall by gender, the age structure by age groups shows a greater *concentration* among *young adults* in migrants to Costa Rica. On the other hand, there is a greater relative presence of children under 15 and elderly over 60 among migrants to the United States, which may be an indication of a *family* migration or that of family groups.

Table 3 presents the population distribution by type of migration. What stands out here is that the type of migration is *direct and unique*: few cases show both internal and international migration or have experience towards both destinations. The 2001 Nicaraguan Health Survey reported that the volume of international emigrants was 11% of the total population (INEC-Nic: 2002). The ethnosurveys carried out show a volume of 9.3% of the population (5% towards Costa Rica and 4.3% towards the United States). Among heads of household, in the ethnosurveys, the volume reaches 16% (9.8% to Costa Rica and 6.4% to the United States).

According to the sample in Table 3, the household heads have greater mobility. Among household heads, 47% have some type of migration experience (including internal) in contrast to only 25% of the total population. This table shows that migration is essentially *direct* in nature, i.e., only one movement is made: either towards Costa Rica or towards the United States, making internal and then international migrations is uncommon, although when it occurs, it is mostly among household heads. It was hoped that a *migration strategy* would appear where a person traveled to both countries, but this was very infrequent (0.1% among the population as a whole and 0.2% among heads of household). This goes to show that migration to Costa Rica or towards the United States are options that attract different populations.

Figures 3 and 4 present migrants by age at first migration for specific periods according to countries of destination. Migrants to the United States show an unequal behavior by age at first migration and period, where the 80's stand out with the highest volumes and an important concentration in the 20-24 year-old group, while in the following period (1990-1999) there was a relative "ageing" of the migrants to that country, the curve moves almost 10 years and the volume declines.

Among Nicaraguan emigrants to Costa Rica, the behavior of age at first migration is very regular among the different specific periods. All of the periods show a mode at 21 years and a median age of 26 years for the group as a whole. It is also possible to see how the population has increased across periods, with it reaching a peak volume during the 1990-1999 period.

Figure 5 provides migration rates for nine communities in Nicaragua (preliminary data), towards the United States and Costa Rica. During the periods of greatest armed conflict, prior to the triumph of the *Revolución* (1978-1979) and after the so-called *Contra War* (1982-1989), there was a significant increase in migration to the United States. Then, with the ascension to power of Violeta Chamorro and the termination of hostilities in the *Contra War*, as well as the toughening of U.S. migration policy (Clinton following on Reagan), migration rates to the north declined drastically.

On the other hand, emigration of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica has steadily increased since the beginning of the 70's, but it was in the 90's when the increase was *explosive*, climbing from 1.9% in 1984 to 5.9% in the 2000 Census. During this period, it reached its largest share in Costa Rica's total population, as well as among the total foreign-born population, representing 76% of all foreigners in the 2000 Census. Figure 5 also shows an important decline in Nicaraguan migration towards Costa Rica in 1999, approximately. This is in accord with a decline in births to Nicaraguan mothers shown by Vital Statistics starting in the year 2000.

## ***Discussion***

The differences found are not convincing, rather, they show a behavior that has similarities between the two populations of these countries.

Insofar as we are dealing here with a methodology seeking to reconstruct a *migration history* (particularly for the head of household and his/her spouse), the data clearly show that these are relatively recent movements. The largest volume towards both countries can be found during the 90's and in 2000-2002. Meanwhile, there is a slightly inverted behavior regarding age at first migration: greater "youth" towards Costa Rica than the United States. The age differential at departure for the latter country has been accentuated.

The volume of Nicaraguan emigration is largest starting in the 80's, regardless of whether the destination is Costa Rica or the United States. This process occurs with clear effects from factors we call *economic* and *political*. The former occurs in migration to the United States, reaching its largest volume during the 80's (during the so-called *Sandinista period*) with a median age of 24 years, later, the volume declines in the following decade, with a concomitant increase in the median age (31 years).

In the case of Costa Rican-bound migration, the largest volumes occur during the 90's, with a median age of 24 years, and for the period 2000-2002, when both the volume and median age (30 years) increased.

Our data show that the migration is primordially *male*. In Nicaragua, there is a greater similarity among genders, whether the stream was headed to Costa Rica or the U.S., but in Costa Rica, the immigration flow is heavily male.

The migrant population can be defined *between North* and *South*, so that you either migrate internally or you emigrate, and either you go to Costa Rica or to the United States. Thus the migration is *unique* and *direct*, in addition, it is a recent migration, due to the large volumes starting in the 90's. In a personal communication, Elizabeth Fussell<sup>2</sup>, working with the same data, after analyzing the "event history", reported a highly significant variable, that of having relatives (particularly siblings) in Costa Rica as a way to predict migration to that country.

The data from these ethnosurveys show that migration to Costa Rica or towards the United States corresponds to *different populations*. With the information available, we propose that it is *not optional* to migrate to one country or another, insofar as they are different sub-populations in which the socio-demographic characteristics and the existence of networks at the destination (among others) seem to be key in the *selection*.

The behavior of the Nicaraguan migration and reflected in the migration rates described in Figure 5, propose an "end" to the *high* migration of Nicaraguans. Nevertheless, "international perspectives as a consequence of the spread of open markets throughout the region, as well as life-style changes, within the framework of globalization could affect population mobility within the Central American region, all of which could lead to changes in the panorama of international migrations" (Barquero, 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> Researcher from the Department of Sociology at Tulane University, New Orleans.



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**Table 1. Ethnosurveys: Nicaragua. Basic Statistics for Community Samples. 2000-2002**

Site of interview	Sample size (# households)	Percent refusals	Total population in sample	Sex ratio
Nic1	200	3.8	1494	0.94
Nic2	195	2.5	1410	0.87
Nic3	202	5.2	1297	0.95
Nic4	200	2.0	1252	0.94
Nic5	200	2.9	1358	0.90
<b>Total</b>	<b>997</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>6811</b>	<b>0.92</b>

**Table 2. Ethnosurveys: Socio-Demographic Characteristics for Total Population and Heads of Household by Sample Population and Emigrants by Country of Destination. 2000-2002**

Socio-demographic characteristics	Total sample	With migration to...	
		Costa Rica	Estados Unidos
<b>Total population</b>			
Percentage of households	100	14.0	8.0
Percentage of population	100	5.0	4.3
Average age /*	28	27.8	28.3
Average years of schooling	7.0	7.1	9.9
Proportion males	48	58	57
<b>Heads of household</b>			
Percentage	100	9.8	6.4
Average age /*	48.7	32.0	35.0
Average years of schooling		6.1	9.8

/\* For the population with migration experience, this refers to age at first migration.

**Table 3. Ethnosurveys: Relative Distribution by Type of Migration According to Total and Heads of Household. 2000-2002**

Type of migration	Total	Heads of household
Non-migrant	75.5	53.1
Only internal migration	15.4	31.2
Only to Costa Rica	3.8	5.9
Only to USA	3.1	3.4
Migration to CR and internal	1.0	3.4
Migration to USA and internal	1.0	2.5
Migration to CR and USA	0.1	0.2
All destinations	0.1	0.3

(N=6811, Heads of household =997)

Figure 1. Relative Distribution of Migrants to **Costa Rica** by Gender and Age Groups at Age of First Migration. 2000-2002

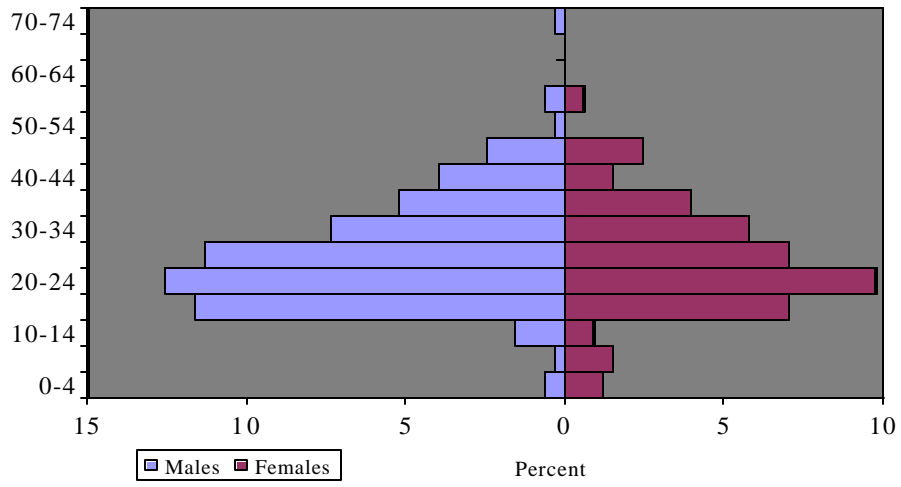


Figure 2. Relative Distribution of Migrants to the **United States** by Gender and Age Group at Age of First Migration. 2000-2002

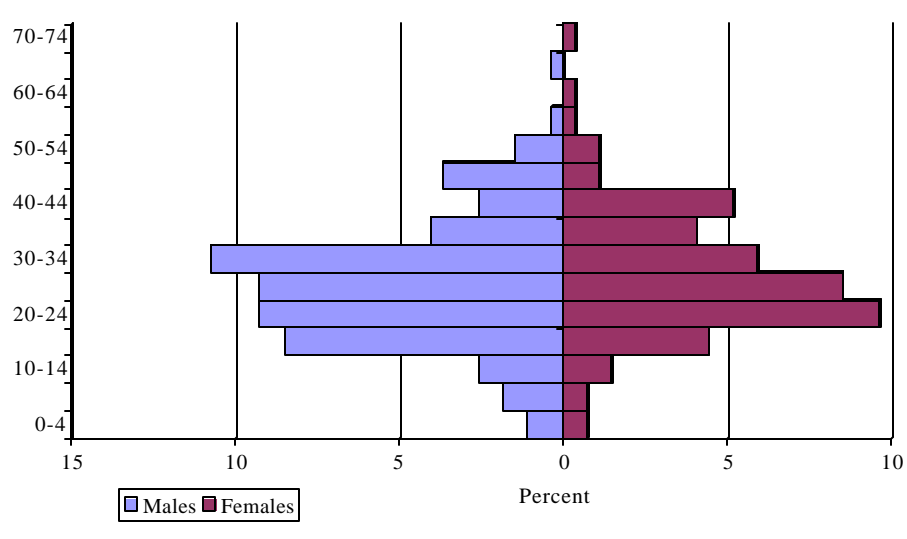


Figure 3. Ethnosurveys: Nicarugan Migrants to **Costa Rica** by Age at First Migration by Periods: Prior to 1979 to 2002

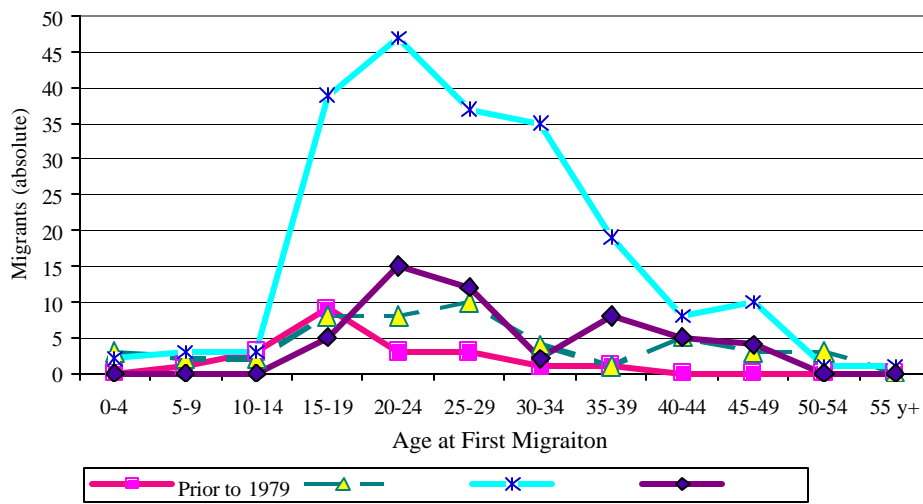


Figure 4. Ethnosurveys: Nicarugan Migrants to the **United States** by Age at First Migration by Periods: Prior to 1979-2002

