

# A Demographic Perspective to El Salvador's Internal Struggle

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## INTRODUCTION

El Salvador is gripped in a multifaceted revolution which has been long lasting and whose problems have defied solution. Differences in the philosophy of political economy and governmental orientation are often identified as the underlying causes of the revolution. Yet, a more fundamental aspect of Salvadorean society is perhaps the root cause, not only of the revolution, but also of the revolution's timing: the demographic character of the country and the means of relieving population pressure. This paper examines several aspects of El Salvador's population history as a means to explain the events leading to the present internal conflict.

## DEMOGRAPHIC HISTORY

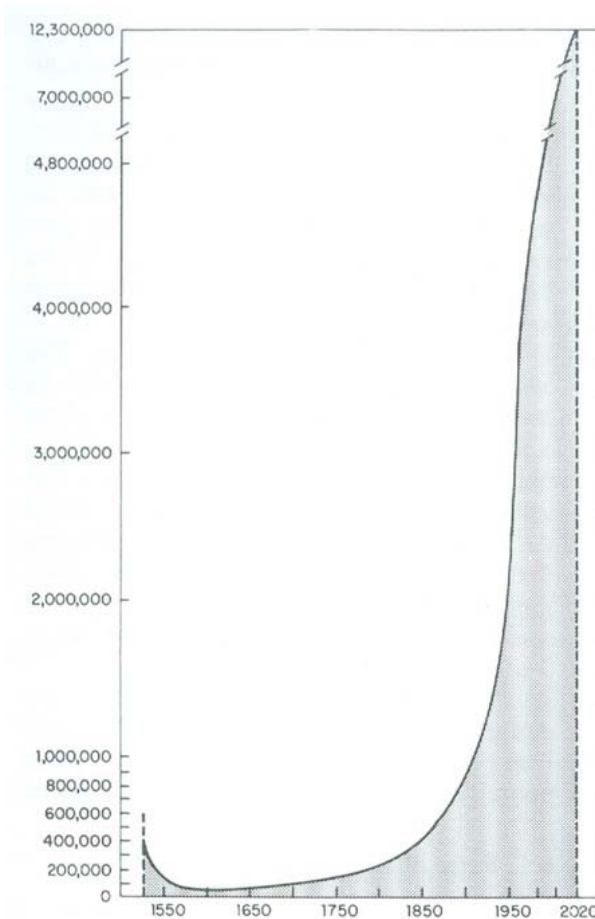


Fig. 1. El Salvador population growth: 1524 projected to 2020. Source: Daugherty 1973, and Haub and Kent 1987.

We know little of El Salvador's pre-Columbian population characteristics other than what can be inferred from studies in adjacent areas. At the time of European contact it is estimated that the country contained some 500,000 people, but within a century the population decreased by as much as ninety percent (Figure 1). It was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the population increased to its pre-Columbian level (Daugherty 1973, 17).

The twentieth century, however, has marked a period of rapid population growth: 1,855,000 by 1950; 2,510,000 by 1961; 3,549,000 by 1971; and an estimated 5,100,000 by mid-year 1989. El Salvador's population is projected to increase to 6,300,000 by the end of this century and 8,800,000 by 2020 (Haub and Kent 1989).

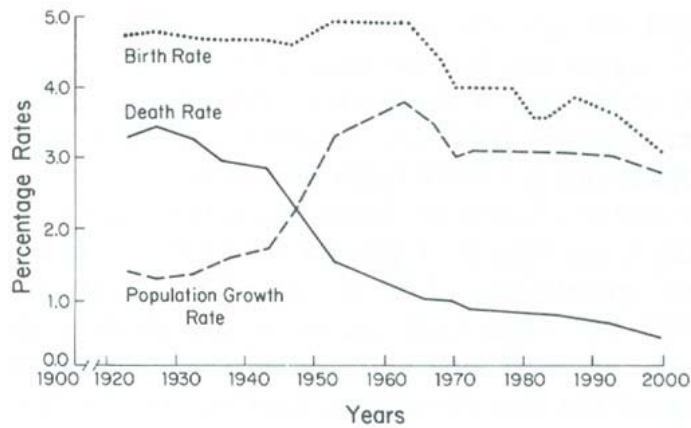


Fig. 2. Population growth rate, and birth and death rates. Source: Fox and Huguet 1977.

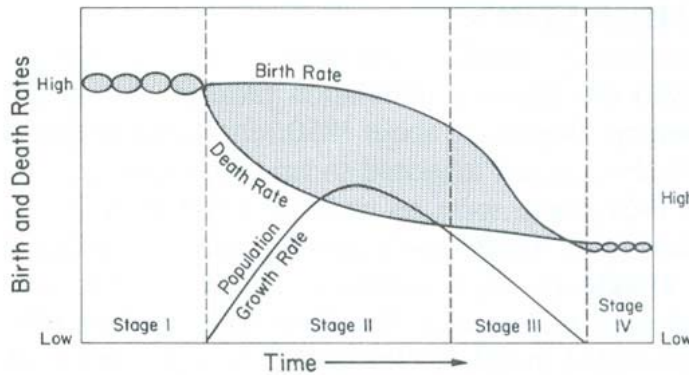


Fig. 3. Model of demographic transformation.

**CONTEMPORARY POPULATION GROWTH**

El Salvador has one of the higher population growth rates in Latin America, 2.6 percent annually, and like many developing countries it has become a victim of its own progress. Mortality rates decreased steadily since the end of World War II, while birth rates remained at high levels (Figure 2). Although population projections for the twenty-first century show a downturn in fertility, they also point out a decided drop in mortality rates which would permit continued population growth. In many ways El Salvador has the characteristics of a country in the second/third stage of the demographic transition model (Figure 3). Given the present socioeconomic structure of the country, it will be well into the twenty-first century before El Salvador reaches the fourth stage of the transition model, if then.

**POPULATION PYRAMID**

High rates of population increase tell a familiar demographic story. As in most developing countries, high birth rates and falling death rates generate a population pyramid with a broad base, representing a high percentage of young people (Figure 4). Dependency ratios (the relationship of people under 15 years and over 64 years to the population between 15 and 64 years) remain high, placing economic stress on the public and private sector to finance programs of health, education, and welfare for the young and old. These monies otherwise might be used to support more direct development sectors of the economy.

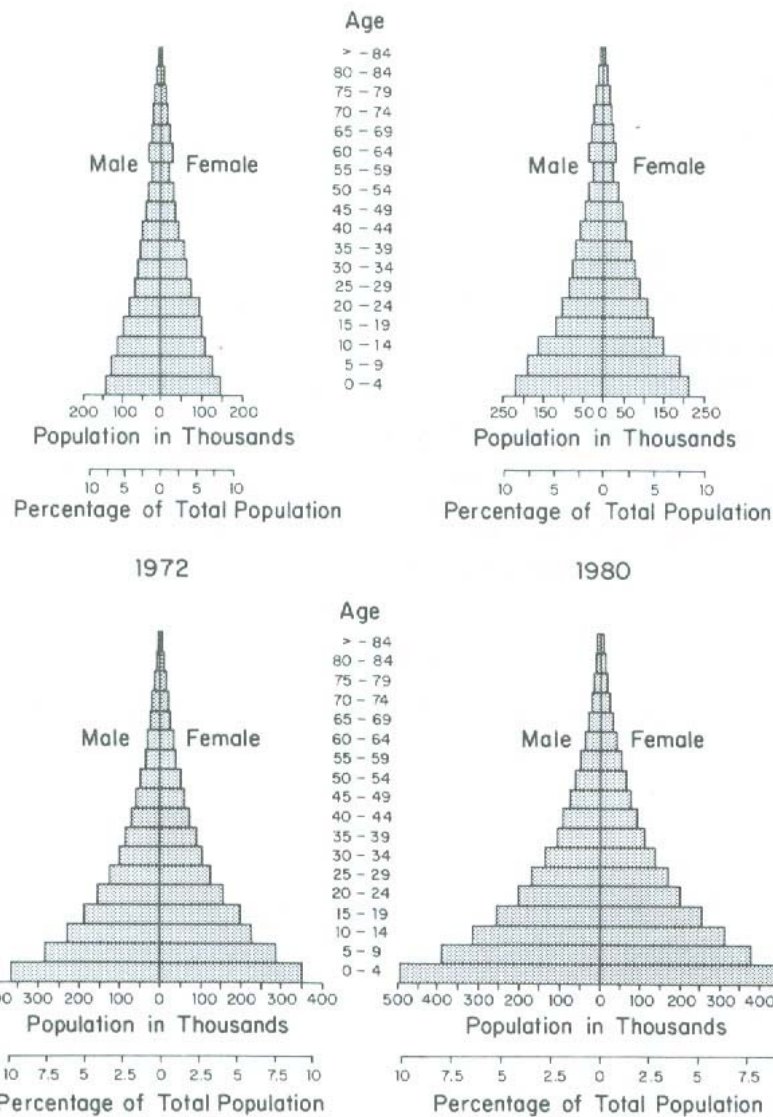


Fig. 4. El Salvador population pyramids, 1950-1980. Source: Daugherty 1973.

**POPULATION DENSITY**

Population increase, however, does not occur within a vacuum; it takes place within the context of land or area (Durham 1979). With approximately 8,260 square miles (21,393 square kilometers), El Salvador is one of the smallest mainland Latin American countries. Estimated at 640 persons per square mile (250 persons per square kilometer), its population density is considerably greater than its neighbors, Honduras with just over 100 persons per square mile (42 persons per square kilometer), Guatemala with approximately 200 persons per square mile (77 persons per square kilometer, and Nicaragua with 70 persons per square mile (25 persons per square kilometer). However, the relationship of population to arable land generally is a better indicator of population pressure and further accentuates the density problem in El Salvador (Table 1). Its arable land density is almost twice that of Guatemala and over three times that of Honduras and Nicaragua.

Table 1. Ratio of population to arable land

COUNTRY	ARABLE LAND		POPULATION DENSITY	
	Hectares	Acres	Hectare	Acre
El Salvador	560,000	1,383,200	9.46	3.83
Guatemala	1,480,000	3,655,600	5.67	2.29
Honduras	1,560,000	3,853,200	3.01	1.21
Nicaragua	1,340,000	3,309,800	2.61	1.05
Costa Rica	283,000	699,010	9.89	4.0
Panama	458,000	1,131,260	5.02	2.03

Source: J. W. Wilkie and A. Perkal, 1987, p. 24.

Table 2. Rural to urban percentage shift for 7 Latin American countries, 1960 and projected to 1980

COUNTRY	PERCENT URBAN		PERCENT URBAN INCREASE
	1960	1980	1960-1980
El Salvador	19	23	+4
Argentina	60	71	+11
Brazil	31	47	16
Chile	50	65	+15
Costa Rica	26	31	+5
Guatemala	16	23	+7
Mexico	52	62	+10

#### LAND TENURE

Land tenure plays an important role in the relationship between population and land resources. El Salvador represents a worst-case scenario. During the 1970s, almost 90 percent of all farms in the country were too small to sustain a family. When such an inequitable land tenure system prevails, small landholders and landless peasants survive from day to day since they depend on limited and highly seasonal employment on large estates. Aggravated by rapid population growth, which increases the number of workers in the labor force, rural wages are kept low, essentially at the subsistence level, and employer/employee relations become semifeudal in nature (Díaz-Briquets 1986,6). Furthermore, there is a grave imbalance of labor and land. Some 200,000 peasants are without land and there is no agricultural frontier to settle (James and Minkel 1986, 88).

#### RURAL SECTOR GROWTH

As alarming as the country's high population density and imbalance of labor and land may be, another aspect of the demographic problem causes concern: El Salvador continues to show high rates of population increase in its rural sector. Where the urbanization process in other Latin American countries has drained many people from the countryside, rapid city growth, which could relieve rural population pressure, has not occurred in El Salvador to the extent that it has in most other Latin American countries (Table 2). Moreover, although rural populations for other Latin American countries increased at a low or moderate rate between 1961-80, only Costa Rica at 76 percent neared El Salvador's rural growth rate of 82 percent (Fox and Huguet 1977, 94). This high rate of rural population increase in itself may not present a major problem were it not that virtually all land suitable for agriculture in El Salvador presently is cultivated. No agricultural frontier exists, as in many parts of Central America and Mexico.

#### EMIGRATION

Historically, another demographic process has relieved the growing population pressure within the country. Beginning about 1950, significant numbers of Salvadoreans migrated to neighboring countries. In 1969, there were an estimated 12,000 living in Nicaragua, 30,000 in Guatemala, and over 300,000 in Honduras. Approximately 250,000 of the Salvadorean migrants in Honduras were farmers who had settled mainly in the underdeveloped tracts of land in sparsely populated areas of the interior and north coast (Fox and Huguet 1977, 87.)

To understand the importance of emigration and how it directly affected Salvador's population problem, we must look into the country's history. Many

Salvadorean migrants living in Honduras had been there for decades; they had married Hondurans and frequently had only a vague memory of their native land. But, in 1969 when the Honduran government invoked article 68 of their agrarian reform law which stated that only native-born Hondurans could own land, many Salvadoreans were given 30 days to leave the country (Verner 1985, 63). The tales of forced evictions and atrocities against the Salvadorean peasants were given front-page attention in the Salvadorean press, provoking calls for immediate retaliation. Honduran newspapers carried headlines proclaiming, "Salvadoreans cleared from ten towns in Yoro," as thousands of refugees crossed the border from Honduras into El Salvador. In the process, the Salvadoreans returned to a country where 20 percent of the work force was unemployed and another 40 percent underemployed.

While this exodus was occurring, the two countries met on the soccer field as part of the Inter-American play-offs for the World Cup. The games were marred by rowdiness and cries of foul play by both sides. National pride became the issue. On July 14, 1969, when Salvadorean Air Force planes bombed the airport at Tegucigalpa, the now famous five-day "Soccer War" began, a war which might better be named a "Demographic Struggle." Before the Organization of American States was able to bring about a cease fire, more than two thousand persons died and over four thousand more were wounded (Cable 1969, 658-662).



Fig. 5. Areas of guerrilla activity and area outside the migration fields of major Honduran cities. Sources: Thomas and Croner 1975; Capos and Broder 1983, 10; Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo, personal communication, 1988.

Not only did the conflict bring about a cessation of diplomatic relations and trade between the two countries, but also the war helped to create a "no-man's land" along their respective borders. In this isolated area Salvadorean guerrillas established a base of operations more or less unmolested by either country. That was in 1969, and for the next decade while guerrillas trained in the "no-man's land," El Salvador went through a decade of political change and reform (Frank 1982, 31-32).

When population researchers identified the major migration fields for Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, Honduras, the border area along the frontier with El Salvador was found to be outside the migration fields of Honduras' two major cities (Figure 5). This area lacked sufficient infrastructure and linkages with both Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, so that in essence this border area was isolated from the economic and social networks of the rest of the country (Thomas and Croner 1975). Furthermore, in 1968 when the Honduran Economic Planning Council divided the country into regional planning units based on major trade centers, this same frontier region was excluded from the discussion. The report concluded that, in reality, the frontier area lay outside the effective national territory of Honduras and functioned economically with local trade centers in El Salvador (Consejo Superior de Planificación Económica 1968). Even these economic ties were broken after the 1969 war, leaving the area socially, economically, and politically isolated from both El Salvador and Honduras. Since Honduras had little economic or military control over the border region, the Salvadorean revolutionaries were free to train there without fear of retaliation from either the armed forces of El Salvador or Honduras. The stage was set for the present internal struggle within El Salvador.

Today the border region remains outside the effective control of both the Honduran and Salvadorean governments and continues to provide an important refuge for the Salvadorean guerrilla forces (Capos and Broder 1983, 1A). From this staging area the anti-government armies support insurgent campaigns in El Salvador with little fear of attack (Figure 5). Perhaps one reason for the United States military and economic aid to Honduras is to assist the-Honduran government in entering the area militarily (through road building and other infrastructural improvements), thereby bringing the border region under the direct control of the government in Tegucigalpa.

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