

**Immigrant Workers in the Cleaning Industry:
The Central American Experience in Boston**

by

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine Central American and, more generally, immigrant employment in the building cleaning industry in Boston. Contract cleaning companies are responsible for cleaning most of the downtown office buildings as well as a growing number of corporate and educational institutions. Their labor force is almost entirely composed of immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, who are primarily employed as part-time cleaners. The goal of the study is develop a better understanding of why immigrant workers predominate in an industry like cleaning.

From this study of immigrant employment, I argue that the key factor linking cleaning work with immigrant workers are the social networks that exist in immigrant communities. Cleaning companies prefer immigrant workers over native workers because they are willing to do work that natives consider dirty and demeaning, they are easier to control and they can be easily recruited through informal, "word-of-mouth" hiring. Immigrants in turn work in cleaning, at least initially, because cleaning jobs do not require any formal training or English skills, workers are invisible to authorities and jobs can be accessed through informal channels.

This study suggests that immigrant workers do not necessarily perceive cleaning jobs as "bad" jobs. Immigrants' evaluation of cleaning work depends in part on their relationships with supervisors and co-workers on the job, and more generally, on the companies' attitudes towards their employees. Although immigrants see cleaning work as temporary, many appear to work in cleaning for long periods of time because of difficulties in securing better jobs.

Thesis Supervisor: Lisa R. Peattie

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

*People [in El Salvador] think that life in the United States will be easy.
But in the U.S., life is work.*

- Salvadoran cleaning worker

*We're taking individuals from the lowest end of the pay-scale and looking
for reliable, honest workers with rapid productivity rates.*

- Boston cleaning company official

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980s, thousands of Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan immigrants began to enter the United States, driven by the conflict and economic collapse in Central America. Although the most visible Central American communities formed in major cities in California, Texas, Florida and the District of Columbia, Boston has also experienced a dramatic increase in the number of Central Americans living in the area. As their numbers have increased, Central Americans have become an important part of the immigrant labor force in Boston. These workers appear to have become concentrated in a small number of sectors, including building cleaning, restaurants, hotels and manufacturing.

Contract cleaning companies, in particular, are major employers of Central Americans in the Boston area. These companies, which range in size from five employees to five thousand, clean most of the downtown office buildings in Boston as well as growing number of corporations and educational institutions. Contract cleaners in the Boston area employ several thousand low-skill workers as part-time cleaners. Their labor force is -- and has historically been -- almost exclusively composed of immigrants. Currently, companies

employ large numbers of Central and South Americans, as well as Dominicans, Haitians and Cape Verdeans.

In this study, I focus on one group of immigrant workers, Central American workers, employed in building cleaning in the Boston area. The goal of the study is to develop a better understanding of why immigrant workers predominate in certain industries like cleaning, and, conversely, why certain companies hire immigrant workers almost exclusively. In the remainder of this chapter, I provide a brief overview of Central American immigration to the United States in general, and to Boston in specific. In Chapters 2 and 3 I describe the building cleaning industry in Boston and discuss the experiences Central American immigrants employed in cleaning. Chapter 4 presents an analytical framework for understanding immigrant employment in cleaning. Finally, in Chapter 5, I briefly examine some of the policy and research implications of this study.

II. CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S.

a. Overview

Over the course of the 1980s, the number of Central Americans -- primarily Salvadorans and Guatemalans -- in the U.S. grew dramatically. Unlike previous waves of immigrations, which were stimulated in part by economic opportunities in the U.S., this rapid growth in Central American immigration reflected the rising violence in the region. By 1992, for example, more than a decade of conflict in El Salvador had left over 60,000 people dead, 400,000 people internally displaced and more than one million outside of the country's

borders. Similarly, in Guatemala, the military's campaign of violence against indigenous communities led to the destruction of over 400 villages, the deaths of at least 100,000 people and the "disappearance" of another 40,000 individuals.¹

The violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua led thousands of citizens to flee these countries. Many of these refugees, particularly Salvadorans, found their way to the United States, often to join friends or family members who had emigrated earlier. As the violence grew and the economies of both countries deteriorated over the 1980s, the flow of migrants continued. Estimates of the numbers of Salvadorans in the U.S. range from a low of 500,000 up to one million people. The number of Guatemalans in the U.S. is similarly elusive, but estimates range from around 200,000 to 500,000.² Most Central Americans appear to have settled in Texas, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C.³

Until recently, many, if not most, of these Central American immigrants were undocumented. The majority arrived too late to qualify for legalization under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Although thousands applied for political asylum, throughout the 1980s the Reagan and Bush administrations refused to grant refugee status to Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants, arguing that they were economic migrants and not political

¹ William Stanley, 1993. "Blessing or Menace? The Security Implications of Central American Migration," in Myron Weiner (ed.), *International Migration and Security*. Boulder: Westview Press, p. 239; and U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1992, *World Refugee Survey: 1992*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Refugees, p. 88.

² Stanley (1993), p. 236 and p. 239.

³ Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, 1991, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," *Latin American Research Review* 26: 99.

refugees. From 1981 to 1989 only 2% of Salvadorans applicants received asylum; rates for Guatemalans were similarly low.⁴

This situation changed with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990. This act specifically granted Salvadorans who were present in the U.S. before September 19, 1990, "Temporary Protected Status" (TPS) for one year. TPS is not a form of asylum; it is a temporary stay of deportation granted to entire classes of aliens.⁵ TPS holders are entitled to work permits and are eligible for most government benefits. In the case of Salvadorans, their temporary status has just been renewed for an additional eighteen months, or until 1994. It is not clear what will happen to TPS holders after 1994.

In addition, both Guatemalans and Salvadorans became eligible to apply or reapply for political asylum as a result of the 1991 court settlement, *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh* (ABC). The ABC suit was a class action on behalf of Salvadorans and Guatemalans who had arrived in the U.S. before certain dates, and who sued the federal government for violating their Fifth Amendment rights to equal protection by discriminating against them in asylum applications. As a result of the ABC settlement, class members are entitled to reapply for asylum under new asylum regulations. The settlement terms also stay deportations and grant work authorization pending the outcomes of the new asylum hearings.⁶

⁴ Peter C. Diamond, 1992, "Temporary Protected Status under the Immigration Act of 1990," *Willamette Law Review* 28(4): 860.

⁵ Diamond (1992), pp. 858-859.

⁶ Diamond (1992), pp. 871-872.

b. The Central American Community Boston

Although reliable data are scarce, it is clear that the Central American community in Boston also grew rapidly over the 1980s. The U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates that there were about 11,450 Central Americans living in the Boston area in 1990.⁷ The actual number is likely to be substantially higher, due to the undercount of undocumented residents and the inflows of new immigrants since 1990. The initial arrivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s were Salvadoran, followed a few years later by a growing flow from Guatemala.

Most Salvadorans and Guatemalans moved directly to Boston upon entering the United States in order to rejoin family or friends already living in the area. In addition, a few politically active individuals may have been encouraged to come by the active sanctuary movement in the 1980s, particularly in Cambridge and Somerville. In 1986 and 1987, for example, Cambridge and Somerville passed sanctuary city laws, which stated that city officials would not request proof of legal status in order to receive city services and would not report undocumented aliens to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Given that immigration to Boston was already well underway by these dates, it seems unlikely that the sanctuary laws had a large effect on immigration, but their passage reflects a greater openness to immigration in these communities.

Perhaps as a reflection of this greater openness, Central Americans initially settled in Cambridge and Somerville. Subsequently, however, immigrants began to move to other neighborhoods where rents were lower and housing more available. Chelsea and East Boston appear to have the largest concentrations of Central American residents, but immigrants are also dispersed

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population*.

throughout a number of other communities, including Revere, Everett, Quincy, Somerville and Jamaica Plain in Boston. According to individuals familiar with the Central American community, the rate of immigration has slowed since the 1980s, but the community continues to grow as new immigrants arrive, joining friends and family who have come before them. These new immigrants are likely to be undocumented because they are ineligible for either the TPS or ABC programs.

Not all of the immigrants who move to Boston plan to stay in the United States over the long-term. Return migration and cyclical migration, in which the immigrant moves repeatedly between the home country and the U.S., exist, although the magnitudes of the flows are unknown. Most of the individuals interviewed for this study said that they hoped to return to their countries of origin if the economic and political situations there improved. In some cases, family members had already moved from Boston back to the home country permanently. Other individuals had gone home for a few months, before returning to Boston, or had sent their children back to live with relatives in the home country. As I discuss in later chapters, this perceived impermanence of migration may have an important impact on the individual's social and economic assimilation into the American mainstream.

c. Employment in the Central American Community in Boston

Once in Boston, the new immigrants have to find jobs to support themselves. National and international studies of Central American migrants studies also suggest that rural and indigenous individuals were more likely to be displaced by violence than urban residents.⁸ According to individuals familiar

⁸ See, for example, Hamilton and Chinchilla, (1992), *op. cit.*

with the Central American community in Boston, many of these immigrants are from rural areas and have low educational levels and few job skills suited to an industrial economy. Data from Central American students enrolled in ESL classes in Cambridge supports this impression; the average numbers of years of education for the fifty students surveyed was 7.1 years. Prior to coming to the United States, individuals indicated that they had been employed in a variety of occupations, including agriculture, domestic work and small business ownership. There were also a small number of teachers and other professionals.⁹

In the United States, immigrants jobs search is complicated by their lack of English language skills and -- until recently -- the fact that the majority of these immigrants were undocumented. Because of the TPS program, Salvadorans are more likely than other Central Americans to have temporary legal status and work authorization, although no hard data exists. Legal status continues to be a problem for the most recent arrivals.

Most recent immigrants indicate that they hear about jobs through word-of-mouth and personal contacts. The social networks described in later chapters may help to explain the concentration of Central Americans in certain industries. Over the past years, Central American immigrants appear to have become concentrated in four sectors in the Boston area:

- The building cleaning industry, which includes a range of large and small contract cleaning companies;

⁹ Data supplied courtesy of Juan Gonzalez, ESL Director at Centro Presente in Cambridge. Of the 115 students enrolled in ESL and basic education classes in December 1993, 69 indicated that they were Central Americans. Educational and employment information was available for 52 of these Central American students.

- The restaurant industry, working primarily as dishwashers and busboys;
- Hotels, in housekeeping or as dishwashers and busboys in hotel kitchens;
- Assorted factory jobs, including shoe factories, chocolate factories, pillow manufacturers and envelope makers.

All four sectors contain typical "immigrant" jobs, which require few skills and limited English proficiency. These jobs are also characterized by low wages and few benefits, limited or non-existent opportunities for upward mobility and seasonal instability of employment.

Central American immigrants began to arrive in Boston at a time when the local economy was booming. Low unemployment rates and a high demand for low-skill labor made the process of finding employment relative easy for the first arrivals. This situation, however, did not last. With the onset of the recession, later waves of Central American immigrants have faced a much more difficult situation. Immigration has not stopped as a result, but immigrants have been forced to take lower-paying jobs and to rely heavily on social networks to find employment.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data concerning the Central American community in Boston are scarce, and data concerning employment, in light of the fact that many Central American workers are undocumented, are non-existent. Consequently, this thesis is based primarily on interviews with Central American workers, cleaning company representatives, real estate managers, social service providers and

activists familiar with the Central American community in Boston. The list of individuals interview includes:

- Eleven immigrants working in seven different cleaning companies and one private facility. These included seven Salvadorans, one Guatemalan, two Nicaraguans and one Colombian.¹⁰ Seven were men and four were women. Interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 60, and length of stay in the U.S. ranged from a low of six months to a high of seventeen years. Workers were identified through ESL classes in the Boston area and through personal information from individuals familiar with the cleaning industry.
- Representatives of five cleaning companies located in the Boston area. The companies ranged in size from 5 employees to 5,000 employees.
- Representatives of four real estate management companies in Boston. Real estate companies are the principal clients for cleaning companies. One person interviewed worked in the suburbs, the rest in the downtown market.
- Union officials representing cleaning workers in Boston and elsewhere in the United States.
- Central American community activists and staff members of non-profit organizations and government agencies familiar with the Central American community in Boston.

In all, thirty-eight interviews were conducted from December 1993 to April 1994. The majority of interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Seven interviews were conducted by telephone. All interviews with immigrants were conducted in Spanish. Appendix 2 lists the names of the persons interviewed; however, in order to protect their privacy, the names of immigrants workers interviewed are not given.

¹⁰ Although the thesis focused on Central American workers, I interviewed one Colombian worker because this individual was very familiar with the industry and had contacts with other workers in various companies.

Because this study is based on data from a small number of non-randomly selected interviews, the results are not in any way generalizable to the cleaning industry or to cleaning workers as a group. Rather, this study should be seen as a first step towards developing a better understanding of the immigrant experience working in cleaning, and more generally, of the interactions between employers and immigrant workers in the Boston market.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CLEANING INDUSTRY IN BOSTON

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, there were over 100 building services companies in Suffolk County alone in 1991.¹¹ In total, these companies employed about 6,500 people. As Table 1 indicates, most area companies were very small; more than half of the companies in Suffolk County had fewer than five employees. These Suffolk County figures, however, do not accurately represent the number of cleaning companies and workers in the Boston area because many companies are located in suburban areas, including parts of Middlesex, Norfolk and Essex Counties. In 1991, there were over 615 companies in this four-county area employing almost 18,000 people.

Table 1: Number of Cleaning Companies and Employees, 1991
(by county)

County	Cleaning Companies by Number of Employees								
	Total Employees	Total	0-4	5-19	20-99	100-249	250-499	500-999	> 1000
Essex	1,722	103	54	31	14	3	1	0	0
Middlesex	7,595	281	157	79	32	9	1	2	1
Norfolk	2,088	128	82	30	11	4	1	0	0
Suffolk	6,520	103	51	22	15	9	5	0	1
Total	17,925	615	344	162	72	25	8	2	2

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *County Business Patterns 1991*.

Contract cleaning companies provide a variety of services, depending upon their size. Smaller companies offer basic janitorial services as well as some specialized cleaning of carpets, drapes or windows. Larger companies provide a range of additional building services, including mechanical maintenance, pest

¹¹ Cleaning companies were identified by four-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code. All firms in with the code 7349, "Building Cleaning and Maintenance Services, not elsewhere classified," were counted.

control, landscaping and security. Cleaning company clients include the real estate companies that manage major downtown office buildings, government agencies and, increasingly, corporations and educational institutions.

Cleaning can be big business. As Table 2 indicates, cleaning companies in the Boston metropolitan area earned over \$250 million in 1987 alone.¹² The list of companies in Boston includes a number of national and international companies with annual sales in the hundreds of millions of dollars. For example, ISS -- one of the three largest companies in Boston market -- had annual sales in the U.S. of about \$1 billion and worldwide of about \$2.5 billion in 1993. These larger companies manufacture their own line of cleaning supplies and equipment which they distribute nationwide to their different branches. Moreover, in some cases, building services represents only a fraction of the company's overall activities.

Table 2: Growth in Cleaning Company Payrolls and Receipts, 1967-1987
(for the Boston SMSA)

Year	Companies	Current Payroll (\$1,000)	Constant Payroll (\$1,000)*	Current Receipts (\$1,000)	Constant Receipts (\$1,000)*	Change in Constant Receipts
1967	225	17,563	52,566	27,959	83,681	N/A
1972	343	27,140	64,892	42,746	102,206	18%
1977	335	45,521	75,064	92,537	152,594	33%
1982	376	74,789	77,407	123,771	128,103	-19%
1987	571	150,676	132,595	257,609	226,696	43%

* Data were converted to 1982-84 constant dollars using the Consumer Price Index prepared by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as an inflator/deflator.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1967 and 1972 Census of Selected Service Industries*; *1977, 1982 and 1987 Census of Service Industries*.

¹² Because of the nature of the data available, information on company receipts is provided for the Boston Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), whereas data concerning the number of companies and employees are for a four-county area which includes Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk and Suffolk. While the geographic areas covered are roughly similar, these figures are not strictly comparable.

II. THE GROWTH OF THE CLEANING MARKET

The market for contract cleaning services has grown enormously in the past 30 years. As Table 3 indicates, the number of companies and employees grew dramatically over the past 25 years, from 218 companies and 6,757 employees in 1967 to 615 companies and 17,925 employees in 1991. Total receipts in constant dollars grew from approximately \$84 million to \$227 million. This growth can be attributed to two principal factors: a national trend towards contracting out of property management and, consequently, of cleaning services, and the rapid growth of the Boston real estate market.

Table 3: Cleaning Companies and Employees, 1967-1991
(for a four-county area including Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk and Suffolk Counties)

Year	Cleaning Companies by Number of Employees							
	Total Employees	Percent Change	Total	0-19	29-99	100-249	250-499	> 500
1967	6,757	NA	218	165	39	7	6	1
1972	8,061	16%	286	225	40	12	8	1
1977	9,034	11%	316	245	53	10	5	3
1982	12,304	27%	377	282	68	15	9	3
1987	18,764	34%	635	521	74	21	10	9
1991	17,925	-5%	615	506	72	25	8	4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *County Business Patterns 1967, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987 and 1991*

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, most corporations and commercial office buildings had in-house janitorial staff who took care of the routine cleaning in the building. Many of these individuals were full-time employees with full benefits. According to individuals familiar with the cleaning business, the janitorial labor pool at that time included both native and immigrant workers. Beginning in the late 1960s, building owners began to contract out the management of buildings to professional real estate management companies

who in turn subcontracted specific services such as cleaning and security to other companies. The impetus for the change was primarily economic; property management companies could provide the same services more cost-effectively. In addition, hiring a property manager meant that the building owner only had to deal with one company instead of a host of different contractors. The property managers would then act as the "general contractor" for many other building services.

Commercial office buildings were among the first to shift to contract management, and consequently, to contract cleaning. This type of building -- which range in size from the Prudential Center, with 4.1 million square feet, to small office buildings in the suburbs -- still constitutes the bulk of cleaning company portfolios in the Boston area. In addition, a number of other commercial and mixed-use properties such as Logan Airport and the Wonderland dog track contract directly with cleaning companies for regular janitorial services.

In recent years, corporations and educational institutions have gradually begun to replace in-house cleaning staff with contract cleaning services. The change has been slow; these institutions have traditionally been reluctant to out-source cleaning out of concern for internal security and because of resistance from in-house staff. However, the economic and administrative incentives are potentially large. An in-house janitor in a corporate office may earn \$12-13/hour or more plus full-time benefits. Most contract cleaners work part-time, earn less than \$8/hour and receive few if any benefits. Moreover, hiring, training and supervising in-house staff can create significant administrative costs, which are shifted to the contract cleaner when cleaning is out-sourced. Cleaning company

representatives agree that the corporate and educational markets represent important growth areas for cleaning services in the future, particularly in light of the stagnation of the commercial real estate market in recent years.

The growth of the contract cleaning industry is tightly linked to the overall growth of the real estate market, as well as to the condition of the local economy in general. During the real estate boom of the 1980s, contract cleaning companies expanded rapidly. The number of companies in the four-county area around Boston doubled from 1977 to 1987, from 316 to 635. Not only were there many more properties to be cleaned, but the overall shortage of low-skill labor during this period encouraged a number of building owners and corporations to contract out cleaning in order to shift the cost of finding cleaning workers to contractors. Annual turnover rates among cleaning workers, which are always high, could easily be over 100% in these tight markets because low-skill workers had many more jobs from which to choose.

Cleaning company representatives refer to the 1980s as the "golden age" of cleaning. When the commercial real estate market expanded, rents increased, vacancy rates were low and building owners were willing to pay more for property management -- and through the managers, for cleaning. Profit margins were high and the nature and number of the cleaning services demanded grew. Managers were willing to pay to have many services performed nightly that in a slacker market like the current one would be performed every other day or weekly. A number of cleaning company officials cited the same example to illustrate the change in service levels being demanded. In the 1980s, managers wanted carpets vacuumed wall-to-wall every night. Today, wall-to-wall

vacuuming occurs once a week, with only the high-traffic areas being cleaned nightly.

Employment in cleaning also grew in this period. From 1977 to 1992, employment in cleaning increased by 27%, and from 1982 to 1987, by another 34%. In fact, cleaning companies during this period had to scramble to find enough workers to meet the demand. The only criteria for getting a cleaning job at this time, according to one company official, was to be able to breathe. It was typical for a company to hire a new cleaner and send him or her to work the same day. Some companies offered cash bonuses to cleaners who recruited new workers or paid above-union wages; others transported cleaning crews across town in order to ensure that their properties were cleaned.

The recession transformed the market for cleaning services in Boston. With rents falling and vacancy rates rising, property managers were pressured to cut costs, and they passed this pressure on to their subcontractors. Cleaning company officials interviewed for this study agreed that profit margins in the commercial real estate market have fallen dramatically in recent years, with companies feeling the pressure to offer more services for less in order to stay competitive. Many companies responded by cutting back on the size of their labor forces. A building that used to be cleaned by 50 people, for example, might now be cleaned by 30 or 40 people working at a faster pace. As Table 3 indicates, employment in building cleaning decreased by 5% between 1987 and 1991. Part-time work in many cases was cut back from four hours per evening to between three and three and a half hours. Even with cuts in labor and types of services offered, one official noted that profit margins on commercial properties

are currently so low that companies have a strong incentive to look for new markets into which to expand.

III. THE STRUCTURE OF THE DOWNTOWN CLEANING MARKET

The cleaning market appears to be segmented in a number of ways. The first division, between commercial real estate, usually managed by professional property managers, and the corporate and educational markets, has already been mentioned. In addition, the commercial real estate market is segmented by building size and to a lesser extent by a unionized/non-unionized company split. Individual offices and small buildings may employ one of the myriad of "mom and pop" cleaners in Boston, whereas larger buildings -- particularly the luxury high rises -- employ one the larger, better known and unionized cleaning services.

a. The Commercial Market

A small number of large companies dominate the downtown office market. One cleaning company official estimated that fewer than ten companies clean major downtown properties; in fact, most of the major properties appear to employ one of three companies -- ISS, UNICCO and Janitronics. All three provide basic janitorial services and a variety of other building services. The market is fiercely competitive; in addition to the rivalry among the "big three," there are number of other medium-sized companies, including Boston branches of large national companies, that are looking to expand their market share. As one property manager noted, "the supply of properties to be cleaned is finite but the supply of cleaning companies is infinitely elastic."

For cleaning companies, the key to expanding market share lies in their relationships with property managers in the major Boston-area real estate companies. Most of the downtown properties are managed by real estate companies who either have an ownership stake in the properties or are hired on a contract basis by building owners. These property managers in turn contract with cleaning companies for regular cleaning services. Large properties are generally bid out separately; smaller properties may be bid out as a package deal. Cleaning contracts can be very large; cleaning costs are generally the second highest category of operating costs, after utilities (excluding taxes), representing between 12-18% of operating costs. Typically, the property manager will prepare a bid document that specifies the nature of cleaning services to be provided and then invites a select number of companies to bid on the contract. On occasion, the property manager will open the bid process to all companies, but for large properties some preselection generally takes place.

The property managers interviewed for this study cited three general criteria that guide company selection: financial standing, capacity and reputation. The first criterion, financial standing, refers not only to the financial stability of the company but also its ability to secure the large amount of liability insurance required. Capacity is roughly equivalent to company size; property managers want to be sure that the cleaning company has enough experienced workers available so that the start-up will go smoothly. Managers do not want companies to bring in totally new crews and supervisors.

The third criterion, reputation, may be the most important of all. Most property managers want to hire a known quantity, a company with a reputation for delivering a certain quality of service. Managers will consult with colleagues

at other properties and companies in the selection process and may also rely on personal contacts with managers in various cleaning companies. The Boston real estate market, one cleaning company official remarked, is not that big, so that word travels quickly about events like personnel changes and upcoming bids.

Reputation is not necessarily limited to the quality of service cleaning companies provide. Some property managers indicated that they wanted to hire a company with a reputation for treating its workers well. At the most pragmatic level, real estate companies do not want to become involved in lawsuits over labor law violations. Moreover, they are indirectly affected by the turnover rate in cleaning companies, which in turn reflects the cleaning worker-company relationship. According to property managers, their tenants prefer to have the same individuals clean their offices because it gives them a greater sense of security. Managers, consequently, prefer companies that strive to retain and motivate their workers.

In addition to these three criteria, it is generally accepted that to work in the downtown commercial market cleaning companies must be unionized. According to property managers, the decision to hire a union company is dictated by their tenants' preferences, particularly their desire to avoid union protests. Almost all of the medium to large size properties in the downtown area employ unionized cleaning companies. As a result, all of the larger cleaning companies that work in the Boston area are unionized in Boston, although not necessarily in other cities. Cleaning workers in these companies are represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) - AFL/CIO Local 254. In smaller properties and in the suburban market in general, however, it is more common to find non-union contractors.

Unionization does not appear to be a significant issue for real estate companies in the downtown area. As is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, Local 254 is not generally considered to be a very effective advocate for cleaning workers in the Boston area. One property manager noted that he worked with a company for a year and a half before he found out that it was unionized. Another real estate company official noted that the wage difference between a unionized company and a non-unionized company with the capacity to clean a large property is not that significant.

Once a cleaning company is selected, any future changes in contractors depend upon the relationship between cleaning company, particularly the manager stationed on-site, and the property manager, as well as on the attractiveness of alternatives. Some real estate companies re-bid all of their contracts on a regular basis, regardless of their degree of satisfaction with the contractor. Others prefer to retain a contractor who is performing up to expectations while keeping track of the market conditions through informal networks to ensure that they are paying a fair price.

Property managers have become much more knowledgeable about the cleaning business over the years. When the property management business began to grow in the 1970s, most real estate management companies had very little experience in hiring and supervising the work of contract cleaners. Today, property managers often demand a very detailed breakdown of the cleaning company's costs and are quick to spot ways to improve service and cut costs. One manager commented, for example, that he had recently asked the cleaning company to cut 15 minutes of the evening cleaning shift after noticing that

cleaners seemed to be hanging around and chatting while at work. Such a minor adjustment in hours can represent a significant savings from the property manager, as well as a significant reduction in income for cleaning workers.

b. Corporations and Educational Institutions

The corporate market is not very different from the commercial real estate market, except that cleaning companies are hired directly by the corporation rather than by a third party property manager. Within cleaning companies, corporate contracts are generally managed by the same office that handles commercial contracts.

The educational market, in contrast, appears to be somewhat more specialized. Cleaning company officials note that educational institutions want to hire a company with experience in the educational market. Moreover, schools officials are not just concerned with the ability of the company to handle the type of cleaning required to clean classroom, laboratory and residential buildings. They are also concerned with the security issues involved in bringing outside cleaners into campus residential facilities. As a growing number of schools and colleges contract out all or part of their cleaning, many of the larger cleaning companies in the Boston area have set up separate divisions to handle their school and university clients.

When a cleaning company takes over a new corporate or educational property, they may also be required as part of the contract to absorb the former in-house cleaners into their labor force. This can be problematic because of disparities in wages and benefits between in-house and contract cleaners. In general it appears that wages are either cut or held constant until the union wage

equalizes the in-house wage. One cleaning company official noted that they tend to lose a number of in-house cleaners through attrition because these workers do not like working in the faster-paced and lower-paying contract cleaning environment.

c. Smaller properties

In addition to the large downtown commercial and institutional properties, there are also a range of smaller commercial properties, banks, individual offices and miscellaneous properties such as supermarkets and light industrial spaces that are also cleaned by commercial cleaners. Large companies are willing to take on smaller properties, in the range of 50,000-100,000 square feet, for example, if they are come packaged together or if they are located near a larger building that the company cleans. Otherwise, the cost of supervising the cleaning of a small property outside of the company's principal service area exceeds the potential revenue.

However, larger cleaning companies must compete with a host of smaller, local companies that also want to clean these smaller properties. These companies may employ as few as three or four workers and clean buildings within a comparatively small geographic area. A company with five workers, for example, may be able to clean buildings of up to 100,000 square feet. Larger companies, in contrast, clean buildings over a wider geographic area and have the capacity to handle properties several hundred thousand square feet in size.

Smaller companies advertise their services both through word-of-mouth and through the Yellow Pages. In addition to small office buildings, these "mom and pop" companies may be hired to clean individual offices, stores or

supermarkets. Unlike the larger companies, small companies may or may not be unionized. According to company officials, clients are much more concerned with the bottom line, the cost of cleaning, than with the company's union status. The union, in turn, is not really focused on conditions in the smaller cleaning companies in the area.

IV. NATURE OF CLEANING JOBS

a. Part-time versus Full-time

One cleaning official interviewed for this study described cleaning as a people business. This is true -- in more ways than one. In one sense, companies depend on personal networks and relationships to bring them clients. At the same time, cleaning companies depend on the availability of a cheap, reliable labor force. Labor represents the single most important expense for these companies; capital equipment and supplies come in a distant second. For example, as Table 2 indicates, annual payroll of cleaning companies in the Boston area in 1987 was equal to almost 60% of the companies' annual receipts.

The vast majority of cleaning jobs are part-time in the evening after the daytime workers have gone home. Cleaning company officials estimated that between 65% and 95% of their employees are part-time, depending on the company. Part-time workers do the bulk of the regular office cleaning. Full-time workers include porters and matrons who work in office buildings during the day, making sure that bathrooms and common areas are kept clean and attractive; some night cleaners who may work an eight-hour shift; workers in facilities open 24 hours, such as Logan Airport; and specialized cleaners such as window-washers.

According to cleaning company officials, employment in the industry has always been primarily part-time. Part-time work has a number of advantages for companies. First and foremost, it represents a significant cost-savings for the industry because part-time workers earn less and receive fewer benefits. Currently, the part-time union rate is \$7.75/hour versus \$8.00/hour for full-time. Part-time workers are entitled to 10 paid holidays and vacation time; full-time are supposed to receive 12 paid holidays, vacation time and pensions and health care managed by the union. These wages and benefits are set out in a contract negotiated by the companies and the union every three years. Wages in the smaller, non-unionized companies can be substantially lower -- between \$4.25 and \$6.00 an hour -- with no benefits.

In addition, one company official noted that they can expect part-time workers to work at a faster pace than full-timers because they have shorter shifts. Moreover, part-time work in the evening, usually between 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., fits in well with office schedules, allowing cleaners to work quickly when offices are empty. The timing also implies that companies employ workers who generally have daytime jobs. This may decrease pressure to increase wages and benefits, since workers do not depend solely on cleaning for their income.

One consequence of the part-time nature of the work is the high turnover rate among cleaners. One company official noted that turnover rates may average between a 100% and 150%, depending on the state of the economy. Not surprisingly, when the economy is doing well, turnover rates are higher because dissatisfied workers can easily find other low-skill jobs. Officials noted that turnover had decreased significantly since the current recession began.

Moreover, even high turnover rates do not mean that all the employees change over the course of the year. As is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, some workers may stay with a company for years on a part-time basis.

b. Organizational Hierarchy

Most of the larger cleaning companies have several levels of supervision and management. At the top of the hierarchy is a general manager who is responsible for all contracts in the Boston area. Suburban contracts are usually overseen by a different person. Under the general manager are a number of operations managers who are each responsible for several properties. The operations managers supervise the work of the project managers who are located on-site in the larger buildings the company cleans. If the building is too small to support an on-site project manager, they will be overseen by an area manager who is responsible for a number of small properties.

The on-site project manager holds a key position in the administrative hierarchy for larger companies, because he or she (usually he) is responsible for the day-to-day interaction with the clients. If there is a problem in the building, the tenants or the property manager will contact the cleaning company project manager. The relationship between the property manager and the on-site project manager can be an important factor in the cleaning company's ability to retain a contract over time. One property manager noted, for example, that his company had terminated its contract with a particular cleaning company largely due to the fact that they felt that the on-site supervisor was inexperienced and unresponsive to their needs.

A project manager may work at times during the day, in order to be available to the client and tenants, and at times in the evening to keep an eye on the actual cleaning work. Depending on the size of the property there may be one or more supervisors who report directly to the project manager or to a night supervisor who oversees the nightly cleaning. In a large property, supervisors may be responsible for all the cleaning on a certain number of floors; in a smaller building, a supervisor may oversee the whole building.

Supervisors oversee the work of the part-time cleaners. In general, each worker cleans the same area each night, working alone or in pairs. The work is very mechanical; the same tasks are performed every night, five days a week. New workers in a building will usually follow experienced workers around for two to three days to learn how the work is done and then begin to work on their own. Larger companies may offer additional training on topics such as how to handle cleaning agents.

Smaller companies have much more simplified management hierarchies. The owner may take a much more active role in overseeing the work and in soliciting new clients. Because the properties they clean are too small to require on-site cleaners, crews travel from building to building in the course of a day or night. In general, each crew has a supervisor, possibly the owner, in charge of overseeing the work.

As is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, supervisors are the principal conduit by which cleaning workers interact with the company, particularly in the larger companies. Supervisors, for example, often play a role in hiring new workers. In addition, they assign workers to different tasks and

have the authority to discipline and fire individual workers. Moreover, given the ethnic composition of the work force, as discussed below, the supervisor may be the only member of the management that speaks the native language of the worker.

c. Ethnic Composition of the Workforce

Almost all contract cleaning workers in Boston are immigrants. Cleaning company officials noted that the work force had been primarily immigrant since they entered the business, although the ethnic composition has changed over the years. Twenty-five years ago, many cleaners were Portuguese, with fewer numbers coming from Poland and other eastern European countries. Today, cleaning workers are primarily from Central and South America (especially El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil and Colombia), the Caribbean (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and Cape Verde.

When asked why their labor force was almost exclusively immigrant, company officials uniformly said that immigrants were the only people willing to take cleaning jobs with their companies. They would be willing to hire native workers, but few, if any, apply. These officials felt that natives tend to perceive cleaning as dirty, demeaning work, and consequently preferred to seek alternative employment or to remain unemployed rather than work in cleaning. The immigrant cleaning workers I interviewed echoed these beliefs.

Supervisors are also almost uniformly immigrants, often having begun in the company as cleaners. A higher proportion appear to be Portuguese when compared with cleaners, which may reflect the composition of the earlier pool of immigrant labor in the industry. It is also possible to find other immigrants -

again, primarily Portuguese - at higher levels in the management hierarchy. These are usually individuals who began as cleaners and worked their way up. However, in general, positions from project supervisor up are filled by external recruitment. Several company officials said that it was difficult to find cleaners or supervisors who had the necessary skills to become project managers. Project managers must have a good command of English, including the ability to read and write in English, and strong interpersonal skills. Most cleaners, according to company officials, lack these skills. Whether this is indeed true or whether it reflects a form of discrimination against immigrant workers is impossible to determine from this research.

Some company officials said that the perception of cleaning as a "dirty" industry also hampered their ability to hire professional management personnel. Few people set out to work in cleaning; many managers enter the business from a related field such as security or because the industry offered greater opportunities to individuals with high school degrees. These officials said that only recently have significant numbers of MBAs and other college-educated professionals entered cleaning companies directly from universities. These individuals are attracted by the stability of professional jobs in the industry, particularly in a recessionary economy.

d. Hiring and Firing of Workers

New workers can apply for work in one of two places: at the company headquarters or at a particular building in which they want to work. During the mid-1980s, when companies were desperate for workers, workers were hired through the headquarters as well as at the building level. Today, however, most hiring appears to occur at the building level. Because of the large number of

people looking for jobs, it is almost always necessary to have a personal contact in a building in order to get hired.

In general, individuals must complete an application and present proof that they are legally authorized to work in the U.S. in order to be hired. However, it is not clear how rigorously companies comply with these requirements. Most workers interviewed for this study said that they had to present work permits. One worker who had come to Boston from Los Angeles noted that companies in Boston were much more likely to ask to see work permits than in Los Angeles. However, immigrants and INS officials say that it is relatively easy to obtain false papers locally. According to federal law, companies are only required to check whether workers have papers that appear to be legitimate -- they do not have to verify the legitimacy of these papers.

In theory, the IRS should inform companies when they find that the social security numbers employees have given for the purposes of withholding income taxes are false. The company is then supposed to request a legitimate number from the worker. In reality, even if the IRS finds the discrepancy, there is rarely any attempt to follow up and determine whether the worker has a proper work permit. One individual familiar with the system noted that the whole process of hiring undocumented workers depends on the failure of the bureaucracy to effectively enforce immigration laws. INS officials will readily admit that they do not have the necessary manpower to comply with their mandated enforcement responsibilities.

Supervision of cleaning workers is very decentralized. Higher level managers make regular tours during the day to check on the status of buildings;

however, they do not necessarily have any contract with the workers who do the cleaning at night. On-site supervisors and managers assign tasks, discipline workers, and if necessary, fire workers. Workers receive warnings for infractions of the work rules ranging from unexcused absences to breaking an object while cleaning. Three warnings are grounds for dismissal.

V. CONCLUSION

The nature of the contract cleaning business in the Boston area has an important influence on the types of workers found in these companies. Based on the discussion in this chapter, three important features of the cleaning business stand out. First, contract cleaning work is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and fluctuation in demand. Second, companies employ a large number of low-skill, part-time workers, and because of high turnover must constantly hire new workers. Finally, companies have a very decentralized and relatively informal administrative structure to handle the hiring and supervision of cleaning workers. The importance of these features for employment in the industry is discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

I. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

a. Social Networks and Immigration

Past studies of immigration have stressed the role of social networks in propagating migration between countries.¹³ Once the first immigrants arrive in a community in the receiving country, they begin to send information about conditions and opportunities back to friends and relatives in their home country. The existence of a community of immigrants reduces the cost of immigration for subsequent individuals, who can rely on the "pioneers" for information about how to enter the receiving country and for assistance in finding housing and jobs once they arrive. Over time, the process of immigration creates social and economic linkages between sending and receiving countries. Industries in the receiving country, for example, may come to rely on immigrant labor. Immigrants send money to their families back home and assist family members who immigrate to the new community. They may also subsequently return home -- sometimes permanently and sometimes temporarily -- where they communicate their experiences to potential immigrants directly.

The Central American experience in Boston exemplifies the role of social networks in migration. When asked why they had to come to Boston, the immigrants interviewed for this study inevitably said that they had come because they had a sibling or a cousin or some other relative already living

¹³ See, for example, Monica Boyd, 1989. "Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas," *International Migration Review* 23(3): 638-667; and Douglas S. Massey, 1990. "The Social and Economic Origins of Migration," *AAPSS* 510: 60-72.

here.¹⁴ Although it appears that more men immigrate than women -- as in many immigrant communities -- there are still a substantial number of families represented. In many cases, husbands come first, followed by their wives a year or two later. Children may accompany their mothers or may remain behind with relatives in the home country. There appear to be several reasons why children remain behind. It is less expensive to provide for children in the home country, particularly when both parents are working. Moreover, the journey across the border can cost several thousand dollars if the individual lacks a legal entry visa. In addition, parents may feel that their children are better off growing up in a familiar environment rather than in a strange country.

The fact that children remain behind may also be a sign of the fact that immigration is not always perceived as permanent. In many cases, individuals said that they would like to return to their own countries eventually, although they expected to stay in the U.S. for the foreseeable future. They do not see returning home permanently as an option until the conditions which prompted their immigration -- that is, the destruction wrought by the wars and subsequent economic hardship in the region -- improve. Individuals, however, do visit their home countries for a few weeks or months before returning to Boston and resuming their activities. In order to do so, they have to leave their jobs and either find new employment upon their return or hope that there will still be an opening with their former employer.

¹⁴ Presumably, one or more persons must have been the first Salvadoran, Guatemalan, etc. to move to Boston, but I did not identify these pioneers in my study.

b. Social Networks and Employment

Just as social contacts influence where individuals migrate to, they also influence the types of employment individuals find once they arrive. Only one of the people interviewed for this study said that he had found work by contacting employers directly. The others had either heard about openings from friends or had actually accompanied friends or relatives to their workplace to apply for a job. Consequently, in cleaning companies, where hiring is often building-specific, it is common to find relatives working in the same building. This word-of-mouth hiring leads to variations in ethnic groups across work sites. Some buildings may have a large number of Haitian workers, others a majority of Latinos or Brazilians. As discussed further below, the extent to which different ethnic groups are represented in a building often depends on the ethnicity of supervisors and other managers.

According to individuals interviewed for this study, social contacts can be particularly important for undocumented workers. If an undocumented worker with false papers applies for a job at the main office of a cleaning company, for example, he or she runs the risk that the company will check the social security number immediately and discover that it is false. In contrast, when the same individual fills out an application at a particular building, the paperwork is sent to the main office and may pass unquestioned. Even if company officials are aware that individuals are undocumented -- as they appear to be on many occasions -- this strategy enables the company to claim that they did not know that a worker was undocumented and to lay the blame for hiring the worker on individual managers.

Although these social networks ease new immigrants' transition into the labor market, they also circumscribe the types of jobs which these immigrants find. New immigrants typically move into occupations in which other immigrants from their home country are already employed. According to a number of people interviewed for this study, the majority of Central Americans are employed in a relatively narrow range of low-skill jobs, such as cleaning, hotel and restaurant work and some manufacturing employment. It is not clear from this study whether the concentration of immigrants in certain sectors reflects underlying structural barriers to employment in other industries, or whether the jobs in these sectors are particularly suited to immigrant labor.

II. THE CLEANING EXPERIENCE

a. The Company's Role

The broad parameters of cleaning work are established by company policies. The company determines the number of workers to be assigned to each building, sets work hours and to some extent -- depending on whether the company is unionized -- determines benefits. Companies can reassign workers to other buildings, a strategy which they use to control perceived trouble-makers. Management decisions about the number of worker hours to allot to each building influence the pace of the work. Some companies, for example, have the reputation for pressuring their workers to work very quickly, especially after the cost-cutting measures of recent years. In general, part-time workers are more likely to feel pressured and hurried. Full-time workers, particularly those who work as daytime porters and matrons, appear to have a more adequate amount of time to complete their assigned tasks.

Workers in unionized companies did not generally complain about problems in collecting their wages, but they did highlight numerous instances when companies tried to restrict their access to benefits to which they were legally entitled. One worker noted that when he began working in a particular company the owner did not pay workers for holidays, as specified in the union contract. After he complained, the owner eventually agreed to pay holidays. Other workers said that they did not receive paid sick days -- as required by the contract -- or that the company tried to limit the use of sick days by requiring them to present medical excuses for any days missed. (State law requires a medical excuse only for absences longer than three days). Most workers do not protest these restrictions, either because they do not know they are legally entitled to benefits or because they are afraid to complain.

Workers in non-unionized companies have even fewer protections. Wages in these companies are lower, ranging from minimum wage to \$5.50-6.00/hour, with no benefits. Moreover, non-unionized workers in these companies appear to have more trouble collecting the wages due to them. They may, for example, work extra hours for which they are never paid, or in extreme cases, may be fired at the end of a month without ever collecting a paycheck. According to immigrants and other individuals familiar with the cleaning industry, non-unionized companies, particularly those with the most abusive labor practices, are more likely to employ illegal, uneducated workers who are desperate for work.

One company in the Boston area achieved local notoriety for the way in which it treated its workers. This company would transport workers -- crammed fourteen or more in a van designed to hold eight or nine -- from East

Boston to clean supermarkets in a number of suburban towns. Individuals would be paid only for that time they actually spent cleaning, not for the time spent traveling from site to site. Consequently, a worker might be paid for only eight hours out of a twelve- or fourteen-hour day. With the assistance of local activists, a group of disgruntled workers successfully sued the owner for back wages, but instead of paying the owner declared bankruptcy and reconstituted the enterprise under a different name. According to immigrants, company vans still pick up workers in East Boston every night to take them to work in the suburbs.

b. The Manager's Role

Within the general parameters set by the company, work conditions vary tremendously from building to building. Supervisors and other on-site managers have an important influence on the work environment. Because of the decentralized structure of cleaning work -- individuals work in specific buildings rarely ever coming into contact with headquarters personnel or visiting the main company office -- on-site managers wield a great deal of power. Supervisors, for example, can recommend individuals to be hired, assign tasks, discipline workers and recommend workers for firing. Moreover, supervisors, who are usually drawn from the pool of cleaning workers, are often the only people who speak the workers' native language.

Consequently, the quality of the work experience depends in large measure on the quality of the supervision. In fact, a worker's future with a company may be contingent upon his or her relationship with the supervisor. If the supervisor assigns tasks in an even-handed way and imposes warnings in a consistent and fair manner, workers may have a generally positive attitudes

towards the work. Their feelings about the actual work in this context may be quite different from their attitudes towards the companies for which they work. People may find the work satisfactory while feeling frustrated or antagonized by the company's treatment of its workers.

Problems arise, however, when supervisors and managers abuse their authority. The two most common types of problems cited by workers are favoritism along ethnic lines and sexual harassment. A number of interviewees noted that supervisors tended to favor members of their own ethnic groups at the expense of other workers. Given the composition of the labor force, friction occurs most commonly between Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking workers and supervisors and between Haitian and non-Haitian workers and supervisors. Some supervisors will try to hire members of their own ethnic/national group, sometimes by forcing out workers from different ethnic groups. They may also assign easier tasks to these individuals, leaving the more undesirable work to the other workers. As a result, the workers become polarized along ethnic lines. Some workers interviewed felt that companies deliberately treated ethnic groups differently in order to split the labor force. However, even if these ethnic divisions are not deliberately created by the companies they benefit companies in the end by making it harder to organize workers.

Sexual harassment by supervisors also appears to be a very serious problem for female workers. Both male and female workers said that harassment of women was a problem in their place of work. Supervisors, for example, may pressure women to have sex with them in exchange for more desirable assignments or for perks such as being able to leave early. If the

woman refuses, the supervisor may threaten her with being fired. Under these circumstances, immigrant women who do not speak English and are not familiar with American laws may find it hard to protect themselves.

Moreover, working conditions make women vulnerable to harassment and actual assaults. Cleaners often work alone at night on empty floors. If other workers speak different languages, a woman may not be able to communicate the fact that she is being harassed to her co-workers, and she may be equally unable to complain to higher-level management. One woman interviewed had been seriously harassed by three different supervisors; the last supervisor beat her and almost raped her before she escaped. She tried to call the police, but was unable to explain her predicament because the officer who answered the phone did not speak Spanish. Despite the harassment, she stayed at the job for almost a year -- until she was assaulted -- because she needed the work and the night hours allowed her to go to school during the day.

Companies appear to be unresponsive to the problem of sexual harassment. This may reflect the fact that higher-level managers, particularly in larger companies, are often American, white and male, and have little contact with the actual cleaning workers. In the case described above, the company's response to the woman's initial complaints about her supervisor's harassment was to transfer her to another building, not to discipline the supervisor. Another woman noted that when she complained to managers in the main office about harassment "they laughed at her." It was only after she went to the press and threatened to sue that the company fired the supervisor. However, they also cut her hours and transferred her to a different building.

Supervisors can also abuse their authority in other ways. One worker noted that he had had a problem with a supervisor who was constantly criticizing his performance. He solved the problem by paying the supervisor off, giving her a few dollars each week so that she would leave him alone. In general, because workers have limited contacts with managers outside of their building, they have few avenues for recourse. The union, as discussed below, is often more likely to support the company than the workers when disputes arise.

c. Organization in the Workplace

Cleaning workers in Boston are represented by SEIU-AFL/CIO Local 254. Workers automatically become union members after 30 days on the job; union dues are deducted directly from their paychecks. Local 254 is an amalgamated union, which means that it represents workers in a number of work places across several sectors. In addition to building services employees, the union represents college maintenance workers, clerical staff and public employees. Of the approximately 17,000 members the union claims, about 8,000 are employed in the building services industry.¹⁵

Local 254 has a reputation among workers, labor activists, real estate managers and other individuals familiar with Boston cleaning industry for failing to adequately represent its members. Overall, it appears that the local has chosen to retain its control of the downtown market by minimizing the demands it places on companies. As discussed further in Chapter 5, Local 254's apathy stands in stark contrast to the activism of SEIU locals in other cities. In Boston, cleaning companies do not appear to find union membership particularly

¹⁵ SEIU-AFL/CIO Local 254.

burdensome. Consequently, the people who lose out in the end are the workers who find themselves with no one to represent their interests.

A number of workers noted that they had no idea they were members of a union or that they were protected by a union contract. Because they do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the U.S. system, many do not even realize that union dues are being deducted from their paychecks. Many workers have never come into contact with the union or participated in a union election. If shop stewards are present in a building, they are often named by the union or by the company rather than being elected by the workers. According to workers, companies sometimes take advantage of the union's non-involvement by naming stewards who do not speak the language of the majority of the workers. In this way, they restrict workers' access to the union.

When workers do pursue a grievance with the union, they may find that the union sides with the company instead of the workers. Workers said that union officials would meet privately with company officials to discuss workers' grievances before they met with workers, or sometimes *instead* of meeting with workers. Workers told stories of being accused by union officials of being trouble-makers when they tried to pursue a grievance or to organize other workers in their buildings. Moreover, workers said that until recently the union only had one representative who spoke Spanish, and this person had a reputation for always siding with the companies. Workers said that they would depend on his translations when meeting with company officials to pursue a grievance only to discover that he had deliberately mistranslated the entire conversation. Eventually a group of angry workers with the aid of area activists complained so vociferously to the union that this individual was fired.

The union's ineffectiveness appears to stem from a number of causes. Local 254 is a large union which represents workers in several sectors across a large number of work sites. It would be very hard for any union under these circumstances to reach out to all of its members. Moreover, until the growth of the contract cleaning industry in the 1970s, most union members were natives. It appears that Local 254 has not made a significant effort to adapt to the changing ethnic composition of its membership by hiring staff with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In fact, the opposite seems to have occurred. Workers feel that the union, like the companies, takes advantage of immigrant workers' lack of familiarity with the system. According to these workers, the union deducted full-time dues from the paychecks of part-time workers for a number of years. Only when workers complained did the practice change, but the past overcharges were never returned. In addition, workers say that the union often does not return the money they have paid into the retirement systems when they leave the company. As a result, the union can take advantage of the high turnover in the cleaning sector to support their pension system with dues paid by immigrants who do not use these services.

The union can get away with such practices because they, like the cleaning companies, know that the majority of immigrant workers will not protest. Immigrants are very concerned with earning money to support themselves and their families. Even if they are aware of the union's existence, they do not necessarily want to jeopardize their jobs by complaining. Moreover, because cleaning work is part-time and often perceived as temporary, workers do not have as much stake in improving working conditions.

Despite these difficulties, some workers do organize to defend their rights. During the course of study, I spoke with several individuals who had become very active in the struggle to improve working conditions for cleaning workers. Some of these individuals were familiar with labor organizations in their home countries; others became politicized as a result of their experiences working in the U.S. Cleaning workers in the Boston area have participated actively in organizations dedicated to assisting immigrant workers and have pressured the union to take a more active role in the work place. In the process they have taken on both the companies and their own union, forcing a meeting with the union president to air a range of grievances, which resulted in a short-term improvement in the union's responsiveness followed by a rapid return to the status quo. Their willingness to become involved is particularly striking given the isolation and insecurity that characterizes cleaning work. Workers may very well risk their jobs by deliberately opposing their employer's actions.

d. Isolation and Insecurity

Ironically, the reasons why immigrants work in cleaning are also the principal reasons why it is difficult for workers to achieve better working conditions. Immigrants, as discussed further in Chapter 4, are attracted to cleaning work in part because they do not have to have to speak English or come into contact with natives, and because no special training is required. Cleaners work at night, often alone or with other immigrants workers.

The isolation of cleaning work reinforces to the isolation that immigrants experience in other spheres. Many immigrants live with relatives, work multiple jobs, usually in places with many other immigrant workers, and socialize with people from their own country or region. As a result, they have few

opportunities to learn English or to become familiar with American laws and customs. A number of people commented, for example, that even if they do study English they rarely practice outside of class because most of their co-workers and friends are Spanish-speaking. This combination of unfamiliarity with English and the separation of immigrant social networks from native networks makes it harder for immigrants to learn about and qualify for better jobs. The existence of discrimination and structural barriers to entry into other occupations may further restrict economic mobility.

Because of these barriers and the perceived lack of employment alternatives, immigrant workers can find themselves very isolated and subject to manipulation by employers. At the individual level, this can take the form of harassment by supervisors and other managers. At the company level, it can lead to pressure not to organize or to cause any kind of trouble. One worker noted that he felt too intimidated to attend union meetings -- despite the fact that he had been named steward -- because he did not want to be labeled as a trouble-maker. The fact that many cleaning workers are undocumented gives companies additional leverage. Workers, for example, noted that when they attempted to organize the election of a new shop steward to replace a steward named by the company, managers threatened the illegal workers specifically with being fired if they participated. Workers also reported that the union had on at least one occasion refused to pursue a grievance filed by undocumented workers who had been unjustly fired unless the workers could produce legal work permits.

III. IMMIGRANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLEANING WORK

Central American cleaning workers are aware that natives look down on cleaning work. After all, they have only to look around and note the lack of native American workers to deduce that natives do not want these jobs. However, this realization does not appear to cause immigrants themselves to look down on cleaning work. As far as they are concerned, they work in cleaning because cleaning is one of the few sectors -- along with restaurant work, hotel housekeeping and kitchen jobs, and manufacturing assembly work -- that they perceive as open to them.

In fact, cleaning work can be one of the more desirable types of employment, at least initially. Several workers noted that they would prefer to hold down a full-time cleaning job instead of their current employment in a restaurant or factory. While they recognize that cleaning is considered to be a "dirty" job, they note that it pays better than many other dirty jobs available to immigrants. If a worker can secure a full-time cleaning job he or she will also receive minimal benefits.¹⁶ Moreover, because many friends and relatives are employed in cleaning, there is no social stigma attached in the Central American community to this type of janitorial work.

For most workers, cleaning jobs are second jobs which they take on in order to earn enough to survive and, if possible, to send money back home. This does not mean, however, that workers do not value these jobs. Employment plays a central role in immigrants' lives; most of the people I spoke with, for example, could remember the exact date when they began to work in

¹⁶ However, even full-time cleaners usually need to hold down a second part-time job to make ends meet, particularly if they are supporting a family.

cleaning. Many of these workers take pride in doing their job well and are frustrated by the disdain with which they are treated both by their companies, and to some extent, by the broader American society. When asked what they would do to improve their jobs, workers did not focus on issues of remuneration and benefits. Rather, they were uniformly concerned with the lack of respect with which the companies treated them. Several workers noted that the key to improving the work place would be for the companies to treat workers respectfully and to indicate their appreciation for the work that cleaners do.

Most workers in this study indicated that they did not want to stay in cleaning jobs long-term. Given the choice, they would like to move up into higher-skilled, better-paying occupation. However, they appear to encounter significant barriers to upwards mobility. These barriers include language, educational background and professional certification, as well as access to information about other jobs, legal status and discrimination in the labor market. As a result, some Central American immigrants find themselves working in cleaning on a permanent part-time basis. Despite the high turnover in the industry, there appear to be a core group of workers who work in cleaning on a part-time or full-time basis for years on end. Whether these workers differ in systematic ways from workers who move on to other types of work is not clear from this study.

IV. CONCLUSION

There are a number of factors that influence the nature of the employment Central Americans in Boston find, and the experience they have in these jobs. These factors include the existence of social networks among immigrants, the

perceived temporary nature of immigration, skills and experience of workers, and legal status, among others. In the next chapter, I discuss in greater detail the process by which cleaning companies tap into the immigrant labor pool.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

I. ELEMENTS OF A FRAMEWORK

There are a number of economic theories which explain the role of immigrants in the labor force. Traditional neoclassical theories, for example, see immigration as a response to labor shortages. As the economy expands and native workers move upwards to better jobs, new workers immigrate to take the jobs that open up at the bottom of the labor hierarchy. In this view, immigrant workers are not different from native workers, except that they are new entrants into the labor force and have less experience. Other theories see the use of immigrant labor as a direct attempt by capitalists to control the wage demands of natives workers or, alternatively, argue that immigrant workers occupy different segments of the economy from the majority of native workers.

In order to understand the role of immigrant workers in the cleaning industry, it is necessary to explain not just why industries hire immigrants, but why immigrants become the dominant labor force in some industries. Almost all contract cleaning workers in the Boston area are immigrants, although the ethnic composition of the immigrant work force has changed over time. Managers, in contrast, are more likely to be natives. An explanation of the role of immigrant labor in this context must focus on the dynamic process by which immigrant workers move into jobs in the cleaning industry.

Such a dynamic model of immigrant employment needs to address a number of issues, including:

- The characteristics of firms that employ immigrant workers;

- The differences, from the perspective of the employer, between immigrant and native workers;
- The process by which immigrant workers are recruited;
- The nature of jobs available to immigrants workers in these firms and the processes by which workers are sorted into different jobs;
- The formal and informal interactions between employers and workers;
- The differences in the ways in which immigrant and native workers perceive and evaluate jobs in these firms.

For the purposes of analyzing the building cleaning industry, these issues can be categorized into three broad areas: characteristics of the industry; employers' perceptions of immigrant workers; and immigrants' perceptions of cleaning work. Each of these categories is discussed in greater detail below.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INDUSTRY

In many ways cleaning work resembles the typical secondary labor market employment described in segmented labor market theory. Segmented labor market theorists argue that the economy is divided into two principal sectors that differ systematically in the skill and training involved, job security and attachment, opportunities for advancement, level of worker participation in decisions and compensation.¹⁷ The primary labor market contains "good jobs" that involve significant amounts of training, worker control, opportunities for upward mobility and higher compensation, whereas the secondary labor market

¹⁷ Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, in press, "Capitalist Work and Labor Markets," in *Handbook of Economic Sociology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 19.

contains low-wage, dead-end jobs.¹⁸ It is far easier for workers to move within a segment than between segments.

According to Michael Piore, the division between primary and secondary segments grew out of the struggle between employers and workers over wages and job security in a fluctuating economy. The primary labor market contains oligopolistic firms that control a significant portion of their market and consequently have a relatively stable demand. These firms seek to develop stable relations with their workers by bureaucratizing the production process and by creating internal markets for hiring.¹⁹ The secondary sector, in contrast, consists of smaller firms that operate in an unstable economic environment subject to fluctuations in demand for their product. Because they lack market control, they cannot pass on their wage bill to consumers. This leads to a downward pressure on wages and the use of layoffs and firing to keep wages down and to respond to changes in market demand.

As I described in Chapter 2, the cleaning market in Boston is highly competitive. Even the largest firms, which employ hundreds or thousands of workers, do not control a significant market share. A cleaning company can lose a contract at any moment if the building manager finds a more affordable or more effective alternative. Most contracts in fact have a provision by which any party can terminate the agreement with a 30-day notice, although this option rarely exercised. This competitiveness leads cleaning companies to look for any

¹⁸ Tilly and Tilly (1993), p. 19.

¹⁹ Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach, 1985. *Latin Journey*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 17; and Michael Piore, 1979. *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 36-39.

and all available ways to control their costs and expand their services in order to improve their market position.

Overall employment in the cleaning sector fluctuates with the state of the economy, as segmented labor market theory predicts. When the real estate market boomed in the 1980s, the number of cleaning workers grew rapidly as companies scrambled to meet the demand for cleaning services. Once the recession set in, companies began to lay off workers and to cut back on hours, in many cases using fewer workers to clean the same square footage of property. Moreover, because labor represents the single largest expense for cleaning companies, companies have developed other strategies to control labor costs. As Chapter 2 detailed, cleaning work is primarily part-time, offering few benefits, minimal job security and few opportunities for advancement. In most cases, the highest position a cleaning worker can hope to achieve is that of supervisor, which is only marginally better paid than ordinary cleaning work.

Not all aspects of the cleaning industry, however, agree with the traditional secondary labor market model. In the first place, the industry contains a number of jobs that are not strictly secondary labor market jobs. The cleaning business draws workers from two different, essentially non-overlapping labor pools. Management workers are primarily native, barring the presence of a few immigrant workers who have risen through the ranks. Cleaning workers are almost exclusively immigrants. Management positions are generally stable, well-paid and increasingly occupied by college-educated professionals. One cleaning company official remarked that management jobs in the cleaning business were in fact more secure during the last recession than

professional jobs in other, more prestigious occupations. The same is not true, however, for cleaning jobs.

Furthermore, interviews with cleaning workers suggest that the definition of good jobs and bad jobs when seen from the workers' perspective is more complex than segmented labor market theory suggests. Full-time cleaning workers in unionized companies earn \$8.00 with benefits -- certainly not a fortune but better than many comparable low-skill jobs. As discussed in Chapter 3, workers appear to consider full-time cleaning jobs to be relatively desirable, especially in light of other types of work available to them. Even part-time workers in unionized companies earn more per hour than in many other low-skill occupations in the Boston area. The distinction between bad jobs and good jobs, from the perspective of the workers, is not solely a function of the wages and opportunities for advancement but also of working conditions, particularly of the way in which management personnel treat cleaning workers. I return to this point later in this chapter.

III. THE EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE

In the United States, low skill workers in service jobs tend to be drawn disproportionately from marginal groups -- women, minorities, teenagers and immigrants. From the point of view of cleaning companies in the Boston market, however, I argue that these low-skills workers are not all the same. The immigrant labor force, particularly low-skilled, non-English speaking immigrants, represents a uniquely tractable and self-generating labor pool.

a. Immigrants as a Tractable Labor Force

Building services companies need a large pool of docile workers who are willing to accept the instability that characterizes the cleaning market. Companies need workers that can be easily hired and easily laid off, who are willing to accept part-time work at odd hours and who will do a job that many natives consider to be dirty and demeaning. In addition, companies want workers who are reliable and can be trusted to work alone in very expensive offices and yet who will not make demands for higher wages and improved working conditions. As one cleaning company official noted, "we're taking individuals from the lowest end of the pay scale and looking for reliable, honest workers with rapid productivity rates."

Immigrants in general represent a more tractable labor force than natives for a number of reasons. First, immigrants -- especially illegal immigrants -- are in a much weaker labor market position than native workers. Previous studies suggest a number of reasons for this weaker position: immigrants are often desperate for work, may be unfamiliar with labor market relations in industrialized economies and are constrained by their lack of permanent legal status.²⁰

According to the Central Americans interviewed for this study, immigrants in Boston find themselves with few employment alternatives from which to choose. Once in a cleaning job, these workers are more easily manipulated by fear and misinformation than native workers because they are

²⁰ See, for example, Manuel Castells, 1975. "Immigrant Workers and Class Struggles in Advance Capitalism: the Western European Experience," *Politics and Society* 5: 33-66; and Edna Bonacich, 1976. "Advanced Capitalism and Black/White Relations in the United States: A Split Labor Market Interpretation," *American Sociological Review* 41: 34-51.

not familiar with their legal rights and because they feel that they have few employment options. The workers interviewed for this study cited numerous cases in which companies denied them wages and benefits they were owed, including pay for extra hours worked, sick leave and holiday pay. Companies know that workers will usually not object because they do not necessarily know they are entitled to these things, they are afraid to object, and/or they do not know how to pursue a complaint. The disinterest and inefficacy of the union adds to the workers' powerlessness.

Fear plays an important role in the workplace. Workers expressed concern over the possibility of losing their jobs if they attempted to organize or lobby for their rights. In fact, the nature of the disciplinary system allows for arbitrary decisions by supervisors and other managers. Workers are given warnings by supervisors for any infraction of the rules, such as tardiness, absenteeism or failure to complete work up to the required standard. Three warnings are grounds for dismissal. Unless the worker can reach a higher level manager -- who often does not speak the worker's native language -- the only route for appeals is through the union, which is notoriously poor at defending the rights of cleaning workers.

In addition to the fear of being dismissed, which is not a trivial concern in a recessionary economy, many workers may also be afraid because they are undocumented. To get cleaning jobs, these workers present false papers. According to the individuals interviewed for this study, managers and supervisors often know which workers are undocumented. One immigrant, for example, described an instance in which workers in a building were trying to organize to protest a violation of their union contract. In this case, a company

manager singled out the illegal workers and threatened them with dismissal if they supported the organizing effort.

However, fear of reprisal is not the only factor which underlies immigrants' reluctance to organize. Workers in many cases may not be interested in improving the conditions of the work place. Their goal is to earn as much money as possible in order to support relatives at home, to bring additional family members to the U.S., to improve their quality of life in the U.S. or eventually to return home. Because they see their cleaning work as transitional, they have less of a stake in changing the system. In addition, many people are too preoccupied simply with trying to survive in a new country to become involved in any kind of labor struggle. From this perspective, it is not surprising that most workers do not organize; on the contrary, it is remarkable that any workers organize at all.

b. Immigrants as a Self-Generating Labor Force

The second dimension of the immigrant labor force that appeals to employers is the fact that immigrant labor is self-generating. As discussed in Chapter 3, once immigrant workers begin to move into a company, social networks arise that link these workers to the broader community of immigrants from the same country. When positions become available, workers will inform fellow immigrants about these vacancies. Because hiring usually occurs at the building level, supervisors and managers can hire friends and relatives of current workers. In this way the company saves the cost of recruiting new workers, which in light of the high turnover rate may represent a significant savings, and ensures that the original workers will have a stake in training and monitoring the behavior of the new employee.

The existence of social networks is not unique to the building cleaning industry. In his study of immigrant workers in New York city restaurants, for example, Thomas Bailey described a process of network hiring by which immigrant employees told their friends about openings in their place of employment.²¹ He also found examples of similar networks in garment factories, retail outlets and other establishments with small work forces that rely on non-bureaucratized, informal procedures for recruitment, training and promotion.²² Although cleaning companies at the aggregate level may have very large workforces, hiring is decentralized to managers and supervisors in individual buildings, making them comparable to the smaller firms Bailey describes.

Bailey also notes that network hiring can promote solidaristic behavior among workers in a business.²³ In Chapter 3, I described how such behavior does indeed occur among cleaning workers. However, the outcome of such solidaristic behavior often benefits the employer more than the workers. Supervisors, for example, will favor members of their own ethnic groups in hiring or in the assignment of more desirable tasks at the expense of individuals from other ethnic groups. Workers from different backgrounds, particularly those who speak different languages, may find it difficult to work together. The overall effect is to split the labor force, pitting immigrant against immigrant, which makes organizing much more difficult.

²¹ Thomas R. Bailey, 1989, *Immigrants and Native Workers: Contrasts and Competition*. Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 27-28.

²² Bailey (1989), p. 35.

²³ Bailey (1989), p. 28.

IV. THE WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE

Scholars such as Michael Piore argue that the transitional nature -- or perceived transitional nature -- of immigrants' work in the U.S. explains why immigrants are willing to take low-wage, undesirable jobs. According to Piore, jobs in general are not simply strategies by which workers gain a desired economic outcome, but rather, they are embedded in larger system of social relationships.²⁴ Employment in this context serves two functions: the economic function of earning money and the social function of establishing prestige and status in the community. Jobs in the secondary sector are low status, so natives, except for low-status groups such as women and teens, will not take them.

Immigrants, according to Piore, have a different attitude towards work, at least at the outset. Piore argues that new immigrants do not intend to stay in the United States permanently. Consequently, they are *target earners*, for whom the function of the job is strictly economic. Their social standing is defined by ties in the home country.²⁵ Moreover, the willingness to take low-status jobs is reinforced by the fact that many of new immigrants come from rural, underdeveloped economies. Job hierarchies in these countries overlap with hierarchy in the U.S., so that jobs that are low status in the U.S. are of low-medium status in the countries of origin.

As Piore's theory might suggest, immigrants interviewed for this study indicated that they worked in cleaning strictly for economic reasons. When immigrants arrive in Boston, they must find employment as quickly as possible

²⁴ Piore (1979), pp. 52-53.

²⁵ Piore (1979), p. 54.

in order to support themselves, to send money to relatives in their home countries and often to pay off the thousands of dollars that the journey to the United States can cost. These immigrants learn about employment opportunities through networks of relatives and friends, many of whom are already employed in cleaning. As a result, new immigrants often end up working in cleaning because it is one of the most available and, in some cases, most desirable types of jobs they find.

Although immigrants are aware that natives see cleaning jobs as dirty and undesirable, individuals interviewed for this study did not appear to be in any way apologetic or embarrassed by the nature of their work. They did not appear to focus, as Piore suggests, on the "status function" of employment. They worked in cleaning because cleaning work was available to them. Some individuals did see the fact that the work available to immigrants -- cleaning, dishwashing, housekeeping -- is generally dirty and low-status as a sign of the prejudice American society has against immigrants, especially non-English speaking immigrants. Workers felt in some cases that as immigrants they were relegated to the jobs that natives did not want to take.

However, even though many Central American workers indicated that they would like to return to their home countries, they did not appear to have any concrete plans for doing so in the foreseeable future. Consequently, it is not clear that it is the transitional nature of employment that makes cleaning work acceptable to immigrant workers. From the immigrant's perspective, there are a number of logical reasons for working in a job like cleaning. Cleaning jobs provide an entree into the American labor force. Cleaning does not require any previous training, education or familiarity with English. Workers do not even

need to be able to read in any language because training is done by example and the work is very repetitive. Moreover, cleaners work at night, when they are unlikely to have to deal with English-speaking office workers or to come into contact with officials who might question their legal status. The evening schedule permits workers to hold down other full-time jobs, which is a priority for workers oriented towards earning as much money as possible in a limited period of time.

Furthermore, cleaning jobs can be accessed through informal channels preferred by immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants. In many cases individuals do not have to go to the company headquarters to complete an application. Instead, the individual will accompany a friend or relative directly to a building, meet the supervisor or on-site manager and fill out an application on the spot. Although a number of immigrants do go directly to employment offices to seek jobs, the odds of getting hired are much higher if one has personal contacts.

Despite the high turnover rates, cleaning work is not necessarily a transitional job for some immigrant workers. Several of the people interviewed for this study had worked in cleaning either full or part-time for more than five years and had co-workers who had been employed for similar or longer periods of time. These individuals did not appear to stay in cleaning because they particularly liked the work, but rather because they had not found better jobs. Most were working two or three jobs -- typically a full-time day job in cleaning or restaurant work and one or two part-time jobs in cleaning. Many individuals indicated that they would prefer to hold down a single full-time job but could not find employment that paid enough to survive. Consequently, cleaning

remained an attractive alternative because wages are relatively high and the schedule accommodates daytime work.

V. UNDERSTANDING IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT IN CLEANING

a. The Importance of Social Relations

The picture of immigrant employment in the building cleaning industry that emerges from this description is of a system based on social networks and personal relationships. In fact, Central American employment in cleaning parallels -- albeit on a smaller scale -- the process by which Central Americans immigrate to the U.S. Studies of immigration suggest that the creation of social networks between sending and receiving countries lowers the cost of migration for migrants who can move into a community where they have social contacts and support. Social contacts in the receiving country assist the migrant in finding jobs, often working with, and sometimes for, fellow immigrants.

The structure of the cleaning industry takes advantage of the social networks that exist in the immigrant community. Companies recruit new workers from among the friends and relatives of current workers; in the tighter markets of the 1980s, some companies used to offer bonuses to workers who brought in new employees. In general, hiring is informal and decentralized, usually taking place at the building level. In any given building, it is possible to find individuals who are related to each other or who come from the same area in their some countries. The fact that they are working together is not coincidental but is instead of indicative of the social networks that shape employment in the industry.

The workers' principal contact with the company is through supervisors and other managers who work on-site. Supervisors assign tasks, sanction workers and recommend individuals to be hired and fired. Consequently, the way in which supervisors treat workers on the job greatly affects working conditions for immigrant cleaners. However, even workers who got along with their supervisors expressed frustration with their companies for such things as attempting to intimidate the workers or for pressuring them to work too quickly in order to save money.

b. Employment and Assimilation

It could be argued that the same social networks that facilitate the individuals entry into the U.S. ultimately create obstacles to assimilation. Because immigrants live and work with other immigrants, they do not develop social contacts outside of their community that would help to find jobs in other sectors with fewer immigrants, or to become familiar with American social patterns. The social networks that structure immigrants interactions with their environment are in this case closed. This makes it more difficult for information from non-immigrant sources to penetrate into immigrant communities.

The second factor that may limit the extent of Central American assimilation into U.S. society is the perceived impermanence of their stay in the United States. Most immigrants interviewed for this study spoke of returning to their home countries if conditions improved. Moreover, legally many Central American immigrants are in a state of limbo; they are either here without papers or hold temporary work permits that will expire in December 1994. In many cases, close family members -- including children -- are still living in the home country, either because it is too expensive to bring them to the U.S. illegally or

because the environment in the U.S. is seen as inhospitable. As a result, workers find themselves in an ambivalent position in which they retain strong ties to their home countries but do not plan to return there in the near future.

Finally, there is a third set of factors that may influence economic mobility, factors which have only been alluded to in this study. In the context of the overall labor market, there may be systematic structural barriers that limit immigrants' economic mobility, including discrimination by employers or the inability to enter unions or other professional organizations that are gateways to better jobs. Identifying such barriers would require a broader understanding of labor market segmentation in Boston, which is beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, the potential importance of such factors should not be discounted.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that immigrant employment in cleaning is the result of a deliberate process that reflects both employer and worker characteristics. Employers favor immigrant workers because they are tractable and self-replacing. Immigrants, in turn, find cleaning work attractive because it is readily accessible, essentially invisible and requires no previous training. The key factor linking the jobs in cleaning with the pool of immigrant workers are the social networks that arise in immigrant communities. In the next and final chapter, I explore some of the research and policy implications of this study of Central American employment in cleaning.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

I. THE CENTRAL AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN BOSTON

a. Central Americans and Cleaning: A Summary

As economic theory suggests, cleaning work primarily serves an economic function for Central American immigrants in Boston. Immigrants have to meet a number of financial obligations: they must support themselves and any dependents who may have come with them, pay off the expenses from their journey and send money back home. Consequently, these immigrants' most immediate problem upon arrival in Boston is to find employment. Typically, low-skill jobs are the easiest to find, because they do not require formal language or educational skills or professional certification, and because they are often more anonymous and more easily accessed through informal channels.

However, Central Americans do not appear to be scattered across the spectrum of low-skill jobs in Boston, despite the fact many immigrants arrived during a period of the 1980s when there was a critical demand for low-skill labor. On the contrary, Central Americans appear to be concentrated in a small number of sectors, among which contract cleaning figures prominently. This study suggests two reasons for the concentration: the "special characteristics" of immigrant workers and the role of social networks.

First, from the immigrant's perspective, not all low-skill jobs are the same, and similarly, from the company's perspective, not all low-skill workers are the same. Immigrants, at least initially, need low-skill jobs that do not require English ability, can be accessed informally and allow workers, particularly

undocumented workers, to remain "invisible" to legal authorities. Companies, at least in the cleaning sector, are interested in a tractable, self-generating labor force composed of responsible, hard-working individuals who are less likely to cause trouble.

Second, the process of employment, like the process of immigration itself, is mediated by social networks. Immigrants come to Boston to join family members and find cleaning jobs through relative and friends. They appear to evaluate their cleaning work in part by the quality of the social environment, particularly their relationship with supervisors, and in part by the way the company in general treats its employees. Outside of their jobs, both in cleaning and in other sectors, the individuals interviewed for this study seemed to move within a circle composed almost exclusively of other Spanish-speaking immigrants, often from their own country.

Finally, it is important to note that the reasons described above relate to immigrant employment *within* the context of the building cleaning industry. In order to understand the broader labor market performance of Central American immigrants, it would be necessary to understand how the characteristics of low-skill jobs vary across sectors, and the nature of factors that influence immigrants' access to alternative sources of employment.

b. Evaluating Cleaning Work

Based on objective conditions -- wages, part-time hours, lack of benefits -- it is easy to consider cleaning jobs to be "bad" jobs. For Central American immigrants, however, the evaluation of cleaning work is more complex. Cleaning work meets an immediate short-term need for these immigrants.

Cleaning jobs in unionized companies pay relatively well compared to other low-skills jobs and enable immigrants to work in an environment with co-workers who share their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Over the long-run, however, cleaning work is more problematic. The immigrants interviewed recognized that working in cleaning would not lead them into better-paying and more stable jobs. Nevertheless, they often did not feel that they have any better alternatives. This perceived -- and real -- lack of choices reflects in part the nature of cleaning work and the nature of Central American immigrants themselves. As discussed in Chapter 3, cleaning work is very isolating; workers have few opportunities to develop their English skills or to develop contacts with natives outside of their immediate social networks. One individual familiar with the cleaning business noted, for example, that one of the reasons why immigrants do not establish their own building cleaning companies was the fact that they do not make any contact with potential clients while working as cleaners because they work only at night when offices are empty. Moreover, Central Americans' uncertain legal status and future plans, moreover, make it potentially less attractive to invest in upgrading their job skills.

II. IMPROVING CLEANING JOBS

The results of this study suggest a number of ways to improve both the nature of cleaning work and immigrant workers' access to information about other types of jobs. These efforts would not necessarily impose any additional costs on companies, although they could be perceived as working against the companies' best interests. In general, these strategies would focus on

overcoming the isolation that characterizes cleaning work and improving immigrants' understanding of their employment options and legal rights.

a. Addressing Harassment

Within the context of day-to-day cleaning work, there is a clearly a need to improve the quality of supervision on the job in order to reduce the incidence of harassment by supervisors, particularly of sexual harassment. The first step in such an effort would require the establishment of a process workers can report harassment without risking their jobs, coupled with a strong internal effort to inform workers of the existence of this internal grievance process. In addition, company officials would need to better train supervisors, and to make it clear to all employees that harassment would not be tolerated, and would represent grounds for dismissal.

An anti-harassment policy of this sort would not cost companies money, but it would require the recognition of harassment as a serious problem. It is not clear whether the current "corporate culture" is receptive to such an idea. One way to facilitate this process would be through the creation of an outside advocacy organization that would pressure companies to deal with the problem of harassment, and more broadly, to comply with existing labor laws. Such an organization could also take on the informational/educational functions described further below.

b. The Need for ESL Classes

Language represents a critical barrier to advancement for immigrants. Although a number of non-profit organizations in the area offer English as a Second Language (ESL) training, workers noted that they often have trouble

finding the time to take classes, particularly when they are working two or three jobs and have family obligations. Most of the immigrants interviewed for this study had at least two jobs -- a full-time day job, and evening cleaning job and often a weekend job in cleaning or in a restaurant.

One way to make ESL training more accessible would be to bring it on-site by offering classes in larger buildings before the evening cleaning shift begins, so that both day cleaners and evening cleaners could attend. A group of volunteers in a downtown office building did just this recently, and found that their classes were very popular among cleaners. However, the company which employed these workers was less supportive. According to one person familiar with the program, the company did not like the idea of ESL classes because they felt that if workers learned English they would move on to other jobs.

c. The Importance of Organization

The inability to speak English is only one of the factors that contributes to the isolation and powerlessness of immigrant cleaning workers. The language barrier reinforces the problems caused by the immigrants' lack of familiarity with the American system, including their legal rights in the workplace, making it even more difficult for information to filter into the immigrant community and creating opportunities for abuse. Unfortunately, any efforts to overcome this information barrier by organizing and educating cleaning workers must first find a way to overcome the union's lack of support.

Local 254's unresponsiveness to its immigrant membership probably represents the single biggest barrier to improving the working conditions for cleaning workers in the Boston area. The union in Boston still has control of the

downtown market, unlike in many other cities where the union's base has been eroded by the incursion of non-unionized contractors. An activist union could take advantage of this situation to -- at the very least -- enforce the provisions of the union contract concerning vacation time, sick leave, and union representation. The union could also play a critical role in overcoming the information barrier by educating workers about their rights, providing assistance with navigating through the bureaucracy both in the workplace and in everyday life, and increasing access to information about ESL classes and other services in the area.

Union activities in other cities demonstrate the potential power of organization in immigrant communities. In the mid-1980s, SEIU launched the Justice for Janitors organizing campaign in cities such as San Jose, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., in which many cleaning workers are immigrants. The goal of the campaign was to reverse the trend of declining union membership by pressuring property managers through pickets, leafleting and protests to hire unionized contractors. The Justice for Janitors Campaign has become one of the most successful organizing campaigns in labor history. A key elements in the success of this campaign in cities like Los Angeles, where the work force is almost exclusively Latino (mostly Central American) was the presence of Spanish-speaking union officials who came from similar backgrounds as the workers.

It could be argued that the presence of undocumented workers weakens any such attempt to organize. While it is impossible to determine from this study the proportion of Boston cleaning workers who are undocumented, anecdotal evidence indicates that undocumented workers make up a significant

fraction of the labor pool. However, the experience in other cities such as Los Angeles, where some 60% of cleaning workers are thought to be undocumented, suggests that legal status does not have to be a limiting factor. Activists in Los Angeles argue that other factors, such as the immigrants length of residence in the U.S, urban/rural background, and familiarity with labor organizations in their own countries, are more important than legal status.²⁶ Similarly, in his study of restaurant workers, Thomas Bailey concluded that legal status has only a secondary influence on the labor market status of these immigrants.²⁷ Moreover, as one union organizer noted, "If you're not willing to organize the undocumented, you may as well not bother organizing."

Unfortunately, Local 254 does not show any signs of taking up the cause of cleaning workers. Consequently, efforts to assist cleaning workers are currently limited to the work of legal assistance agencies, social services organization, and government agencies charged with enforcing labor laws and health and safety regulations.²⁸ In the late 1980s, an organization by the name of IRATE (now called the Immigrant Workers' Resource Center, or IWRC) was formed to protect the rights of immigrant workers. The organization was active among cleaning workers for several years, educating workers, developing leaders, and pressuring the union to be more responsive to workers' needs. The organization still exists, but seems to be much less active in the cleaning sector. One strategy for improving the situation of cleaning workers would be to

²⁶ Peter Olney, 1993. "The Rising of the Million." *Crossroads* (July/August): p. 13.

²⁷ Bailey (1989), p. 131.

²⁸ From the perspective of immigrant supporters, reliance on government agencies can be a two-edged sword. Although all workers, regardless of their legal status are protected by U.S. labor laws, pursuing a labor violation case on behalf of an undocumented worker can make the worker vulnerable to investigation by immigration officials.

strengthen IWRC, or to establish another similar organization, in order to create a more effective advocate for immigrant cleaning workers.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As I noted in Chapter 1, this study is based on a very small numbers of interviews with immigrants and company officials in the Boston area. The goal of the study was to present an initial description and analysis of immigrant employment in cleaning by focusing on the experiences of one groups of immigrants, Central Americans. While the results are suggestive of the types of experiences immigrants have working in cleaning, they do not in any sense represent a complete picture of the Central American experience, much less of the overall immigrant experience in Boston. A more complete analysis demands a more extensive, scientific study than the one I have undertaken.

Within these very real limitations, the analysis presented in the previous chapters highlights a number of avenues for further research. For example, I have only indirectly alluded to the process of Central American immigration in Boston. There remain a multiplicity of questions to be explored in order to develop a portrait of the Central American community in Boston. Some of these issues have been mentioned, including: the social and education backgrounds of immigrants, the importance of cyclical and return migration, and the creation of social networks among immigrants. From a policy perspective, it is equally important to understand the patterns of assimilation and the extent of economic mobility within the Central American community. This in turn requires a better understanding of overall labor market structure in the Boston area.

In addition, a number of questions about the process of immigrant employment in the cleaning industry remain unanswered. I did not in this study focus in any detail on cleaning companies in suburban areas or with non-unionized cleaners. Consequently, my findings are most relevant for understanding the role of the larger companies in the downtown market. Moreover, I have postulated a theory of deliberate employment of immigrant workers in cleaning that bears much closer scrutiny. It would be important, for example, to understand the extent to which an "ethnic shift" actually occurred within the industry during the move from in-house cleaning to contract cleaning, and the strategies by which companies recruit cleaning workers, both currently and in the past. Moreover, it would be very interesting to compare the role of immigrant labor in the building cleaning industry to other low-skills sectors in the Boston economy.

APPENDIX 1

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APPENDIX 2

Individuals Interviewed

Vincent Anastas*
Owner
Holmes Cleaning
Somerville, MA

Louis M. Amaral
Branch Manager
American Building Maintenance
Boston, MA

Dimas M. Botelho
Regional Manager of Operations
Ogden Services Corporation
Boston, MA

Gregory L. Brown
Hines Interests Limited Partnership
Boston, MA

Vincent A. Calderone
Account Executive
Ogden Services Corporation
Boston, MA

Oscar Chacon
Director
Centro Presente
Cambridge, MA

Don Coleman
Business Agent
Local 254 SEIU - AFL/CIO
Boston, MA

Maggie Cook*
Manager, Customer Service and
Systems Training
Boston Edison, Inc.
Boston, MA

Lourdes De Jesus
Immigrant Workers Resource Center
Boston, MA

John C. Feitor
Vice President for Technical Services
Boston, MA

Pamela E. Galeota
Assistant Director, Operations
R.M. Bradley Real Estate
Boston, MA

David Gifford
A.W. Perry
Hingham, MA

Marcos Garcia
CAAS
Somerville, MA

John Gregg*
Property Manager
The Beal Companies
Boston, MA

Rosa Imbacuan
Employment Connections
Chelsea, MA

Dan Meyers
Employer Service Representative
MA Dept. of Employment and
Training
Cambridge, MA

Peter B. Olney*
SEIU
Los Angeles, CA

Ann Philbin*
Former Director
IRATE/IWRC
Boston, MA

Peter Prins
Employment Manager
Employment Connections, Inc.
Chelsea, MA

Armando Ramos*
Cambridge-Somerville Legal
Services
Cambridge, MA

Luz Rodriguez
Greater Boston Legal Services
Boston, MA

Silvia Saavedra-Keber*
MA Office for Refugees and
Immigrants
Boston, MA

Nelson Salazar
Substance Abuse Task Force
Cambridge, MA

Paul Sterling
Supervisor and Special Agent
U.S. INS
Boston, MA

Ismael Vasquez
Community Organizer
CAAS
Somerville, MA

Raymond L. Vitolo
Division Vice President
ISS
Somerville, MA

Rand Wilson
Jobs with Justice
Somerville, MA

** indicates telephone interview.*

Note: To protect their privacy, the names of cleaning workers interviewed for this study are not given.