



# Salvadoran single mother heads family, helps others

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The American Community Survey, which works with the U.S. Census Bureau for population updates, says 14% of San Francisco's 2013 population was Hispanic, with half from Mexico, half Latino. The leading Latino nationality, Salvadoran, is 2%, or 16,700 here legally. Undocumented Salvadorans and other Latinos likely add thousands more.

Few Salvadorans live in the Tenderloin, Perez believes, as she's found no Salvadoran-owned businesses here. Census figures don't break out the "Latino or Hispanic" category into nationalities. Juan Carlos Cancino, a project manager focused on sections of the central city neighborhood for the Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, says it's his "understanding" that "most of the Latino residents of the neighborhood are from the Yucatan area of Mexico and Guatemala."

Perez, a handsome woman given to beautiful smiles and laughing eyes, grew up on a small coffee plantation and farm an hour outside of San Salvador in a family of 10 with four girls, four boys. The farm had cows and a horse, "and we could run around like little animals," Perez says with a laugh. Fruit was plentiful, especially pineapples, but the country's leading crop of the 1980s, coffee, is now only 5.7% of exports, behind knit T-shirts at 14%.

She left the farm at 14 to go to school in a town nearby but too far to live at home. The civil war was in full swing, officially 1979-92. It had a significant impact on California and San Francisco, too. She remembers the 6 p.m.-to-6 a.m. curfew

and rebels coming to the house and confiscating her father's two pistols.

Her father died at 52. With her mother in her 60s, the farm fell into disrepair, was vandalized, then sold to timber harvesters who wanted its tall pine trees. Thus ended Perez's precious vision of her childhood. Meanwhile, two of her sisters moved to the Bay Area.

Perez's American-born children have never seen verdant, mountainous, coffee-rich El Salvador. The size of Massachusetts, it's the smallest, most densely populated country in Central America. Of its 6.3 million people, 84% are mestizos, like Perez, a mix of indigenous Indian and European.

"I think it's time to go to San Salvador," says Perez, 44, reminiscing at the kitchen table of her two-bedroom, fourth-floor apartment. "I'm planning to go this summer and stay two to three weeks" with relatives. "My kids have to see where I came from. But I'm scared. And it's too dangerous to take them to the farm."

The war was fought in the countryside, but now in San Salvador, the capital, it may be as dicey. El Salvador in March had more killings, 481, than in any month in the last 10 years, an April 10 story in the Chronicle from its news services said, citing data from the National Civil Police. "At this rate," it said, "El Salvador is on pace to surpass Honduras as the deadliest peacetime country in the world."

"It's too dangerous there now," she continues. "Many bad people." She searches for the words. "Delinquents on the buses. Drugs. And the bad people know the people who don't live there, the tourists" (and see them as targets). "I want

them (her children) to see how poor the people are."

Poverty pockets are everywhere there. Per capita annual income is \$7,500, Perez's take-home is twice that. Malnutrition, especially among children, is El Salvador's leading health concern.

"Before it was nice," Perez glances at her son Jeffrey, 10, and daughter Tracy, 12. She has been such an ever-present volunteer at their schools and at the school of Salvadoran-born daughter Rosmi, 24, and Rosmi's daughter, Labelle, that Perez has picked up perhaps eight, she can't remember exactly, merit and appreciation certificates.

"And kids there (in El Salvador) eat everything," she says. "Here, they are picky."

The Tenderloin streets that she's known since moving out of her sister's place on Potrero Hill pose fears, too. She works graveyard shifts, 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., stocking the clothing and shoe department shelves at Target's Fourth and Mission store. Leaving home at 10:30 p.m., she walks down Taylor Street, past the 21 Club and the Taylor Street Center — the half-way house for former state prisoners — looking nervously over her shoulder. If she walks fast, she's at Target in 15 minutes.

"Sometimes I take the bus from Sixth and Market to Fourth," she says. "A lot of people laugh at me. But there are crazy people out there."

Early one dark morning when she got off work, a man began following her and tried to talk to her. Scared, she said nothing and kept walking. He was behind her until she arrived home, safely. She can't forget.



Still, her life in the Tenderloin is good. Her \$1,035 rent is up only \$50 from the \$985 when she moved in 10 years ago. She doesn't know how to make pupusas, a favorite food of Salvadorans, but weekly food drops to Curran House help add fresh fruits and vegetables to her kitchen. She and her family, as back on the farm, shun pork and beef but eat chicken and fish.

An avid volunteer, Perez tries to improve the neighborhood and keep it safe for schoolchildren. She has been a Safe Passage corner captain for three years, donning the yellow vest and carrying a walkie-talkie as a corner captain on the toughest corners on the 11-block route of oversized, yellow bricks.

She reports Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:15 p.m. at the Boeddeker Clubhouse for her 2:45 p.m. to 4 p.m. sidewalk assignment, her presence there discouraging dope dealers and shifty adults from hanging out.

"Having residents feeling as she (Morena) does about the need to be there is the key," says Dina Hilliard, Safe Passage executive director. "It's personal for them and everyone's responsibility, not just the police."

Perez is active in La Voz Latina, a women's and mothers' political activist organization at 48 Turk St. She has been at City Hall demonstrations as La Voz lobbies for better schools, a safe community, foot patrols, Muni passes, rental subsidies and affordable housing. And she has been a counselor and adviser to those it serves.

"She was on the leadership team, a small group of ladies from the neighborhood that were the face of the organization, alerting people to workshops, services and events," says Kelly Guajardo, La Voz's director. "To be honest, she gave me an orientation on organizing. And our leaders have been almost exclusively single mothers."

Perez helped lead the polling of 100 TL families to find why Sgt. Macaulay Park at Larkin and O'Farrell streets wasn't being used during Boeddeker Park's makeover.

Most said they feared what was going on outside the park fence, an iffy crowd of buyers and sellers of various drugs. So

La Voz decided to hold family events at Macaulay Park once a month, attracting 100 or more each time, sending the suspect crowd to other corners and boosting the mothers' confidence.

"We have been a voice," Perez says with obvious pride. "Some (Latinos) are hiding, scared. My job is to talk to them — we have places to go where they (officials) will help us. And also tenants rights," she adds, a topic on which she has become an expert. "I tell them. Sometimes the people ..." and she raises a hand and zips her mouth, letting the gesture make the point.

There have been a few Salvadorans at La Voz, as Latinos keep coming into the Tenderloin as "one of the last affordable hubs" in the city, Guajardo says. She estimates the TL Latino population at 12% to 25% and increasing. "If you walk around you can see it."

In the 2010 census, the Tenderloin was 20% Latino, or 6,255 of the TL's 31,600 population. In 2000, Latinos had been 16%. These figures are based on people responding to official inquiry by mail, which almost certainly understates reality.

There may be more drift to the Tenderloin from the high Latino population of the Mission, too.

Guajardo says Perez has had to cut back her hours at La Voz. "She has a lot on her plate."

Twice a week she set up workshops to advise newcomers of their benefits, services including legal help. She also helped TNDC's Lorenzo Listana distribute tenant information.

"I'd go door to door in this building and in the Tenderloin and SoMa," Perez says. "But I can do only so much. I stopped volunteering at TNDC and I only go to La Voz once or twice a month now. I say, 'No more! The weekends are for my kids.'"

On a Saturday morning, Guillermo Martinez answers her door. He has been vacuuming the living room. No one else is stirring yet. Coffee, sent from family in El Salvador, is brewing and he offers some to two guests.

Soon Perez comes into the room and then Tracy and Jeffrey. Daughter Ros-

Clockwise from top left, **Morena Perez** (left) shares a laugh with Tammy Walker, general manager of Curran House where Perez has lived for 10 years. Her son, Jeffrey, takes a sip of her coffee as daughter Tracy, amused, looks on. On a Saturday morning, Perez's boyfriend, Guillermo Martinez, talks with Tracy and Jeffrey about basketball. Afterward, they walk around the corner to Boeddeker Park where Jeffrey hits four out of five baskets. Perez, an avid volunteer, says she's cut back some of that work: "I can only do so much. The weekends are for my kids."

mi lives with her 7-year-old daughter in SoMa and works for Salesforce. Rosmi watches the kids weeknights when Perez is at Target.

Perez calls Rosmi "my amazing daughter" who finished high school at the Ruth Asawa School of the Arts while working part-time. Perez then was the head of household for her three children and granddaughter baby Labelle. How did she do it? she was asked.

"I am-a strong," Perez says, flashing a big smile and laughing as she throws her arms up to flex her muscles. Martinez has a big grin and nods approval.

Tracy and Jeffrey both play basketball. She goes to Hamilton Middle School, but last semester missed the deadline for getting in her medical clearance slip and couldn't be on the school team. She says she's good at making free throws.

Jeffrey played on the basketball team at Bessie Carmichael where his niece, Labelle, also is enrolled. The family attended all of his games. He transferred a month ago to the Creative Arts charter school at 1601 Turk St. and expects to play next fall on a SoMa team fielded by the anti-violence youth group United Playaz.

The kids used to be in a Curran House play group, but now say it's for "little kids." Their mother says: "They have school friends. But they know more people here than I do."

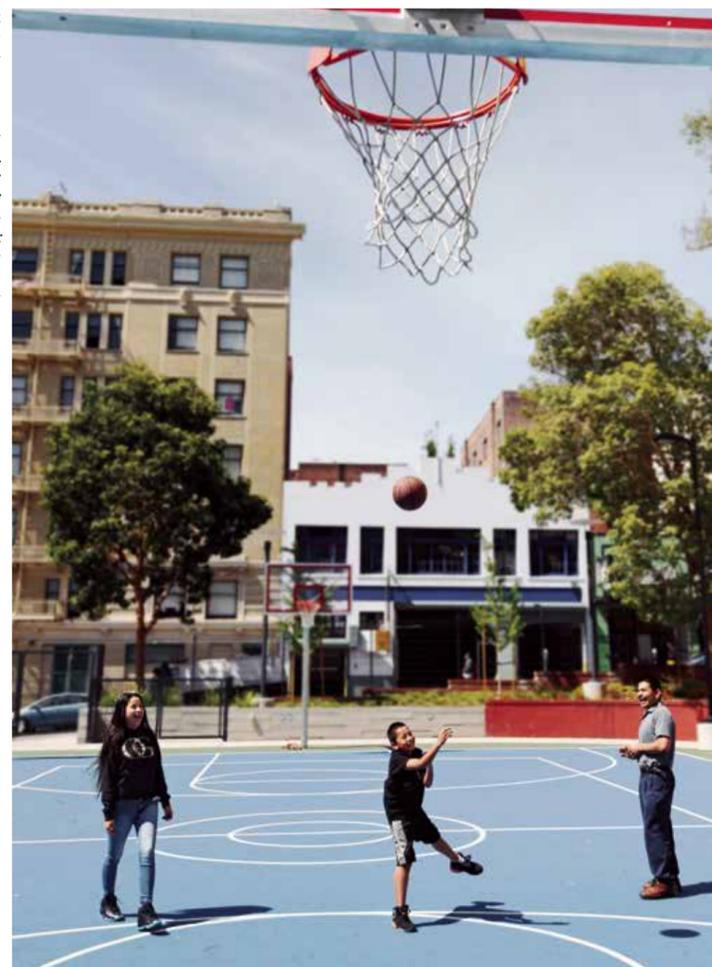
That's not many. Perez's hands have been pretty much tied up for the decade she's been at Curran House after separating from her husband. She says she knows people in the building by face but only five or so by name; four of those speak Spanish. She's content with her exclusive motherly focus.

"We are a close family," she says. They speak Spanish at home. According to the 2004 American Community Survey, only 1 in 20 Salvadoran families speak English at home.

Martinez, 44, also of El Salvador, is her boyfriend of "8½ months," he says, with obvious adoration. They were introduced by a mutual friend, began dating, and then "she wanted to kidnap me," he jokes, as they both crack up.

Many Saturdays they go in his car to the Christian Church on Bayshore near the Old Clam House, then to one of the half dozen Salvadoran restaurants in the Mission, El Majahual on Valencia Street being their favorite.

They don't patronize the half dozen



or more Mexican restaurants in the TL, as none is Salvadoran.

Martinez lives in Antioch. He's a repairman for Contra Costa Appliance, using the trade he learned in El Salvador before coming to the Bay Area a year before Perez.

At the kitchen table, they're all asked about their American dreams. Perez wants to take child development classes at City College and get a degree to eventually undertake a new career. Jeffrey's is a no-brainer, a basketball player. Tracy wants to be a doctor.

"It's interesting work," she pauses. "Or maybe work for the FBI."

Martinez doesn't hesitate to say he wants them all to live together as a family, and one day he wants to have his own appliance repair company.

A discussion ensues about basketball free throws. Jeffrey says he can make 8 out of 10. Tracy, who aspires one day to a spot on the Washington High School girls basketball team, says she can do that, too, but she's too "lazy" to go around

the corner to the Boeddeker Park court for proof.

With urging, the adults wanting them outside moving in the fresh air, the group decides to take a ball and go for the demonstration.

At the court Perez chats with a Latina, her baby in a stroller, a fellow Safe Passage volunteer. On the court, the kids trade shots at the foul line and Martinez fields the rebounds. Jeffrey sinks his first four out of five. But Tracy struggles, finally making a bucket after a half dozen attempts.

Jeffrey trots over to the deep corner to try those long three-point shots that get no backboard help. For a little guy, he's okay with the range and gets the ball close, showing promise.

"I don't know how he can do it," Perez says, marveling at her son. "He practices more than Tracy, and Guillermo helps him. He knows a lot about soccer and basketball and questions Jeffrey about his mistakes."

The workout breathed promise. ■

## From El Salvador to sanctuary

The most dramatic result of El Salvador's 13-year civil war was the flight of nearly 1 in 3 Salvadorans from escalating unemployment and deepening poverty. Possibly 1 million headed to the U.S.

Refugees came up across Mexico, through tunnels, over rivers and desert to America, El Norte.

The U.S. government was not generous, approving only 2.1 percent of applications to immigrate. Those turned down faced deportation. But some U.S. communities stepped up and became sanctuary cities where city employees are not required to check the immigration status of people they serve.

The first, where the greatest number of Salvadoran refugees settled, was Los Angeles in 1979. Ten years later, San Francisco became a sanctuary city. Now, more than 160 cities and counties bear that distinction — 31 in California — despite a 1996 federal law requiring the officials to report illegals to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department.

San Francisco's official policy is to ignore that responsibility.

Salvadoran Consul General Ana Valenzuela says 200,000 documented Salvadorans live in Northern California, her territory. She won't wager a guess how many are in San Francisco.

"It's very hard to determine general data because of undocumented people."

"Salvadorans want to come to California because it's easier on immigrants than some other states, and especially here in San Francisco," Valenzuela says.

In San Francisco's 14% Latino/Hispanic makeup, the leading three groups are Mexicans, 7.4%; Salvadorans, 2%; and Nicaraguans, 0.9%. And that's those who wanted to be counted. Two percent of the city's 837,000 population means about 16,700 Salvadorans live here. ■

— Tom Carter