



# Belize: Decoding the Census

**Ilse Munoz and Dr. David V. Gibson**

As a small country of only 320,000 people, Belize is often forgotten in development agendas and when discussing development policies. Yet, problems with poverty and inequality are common in the small country, which is why it is important to understand the country in order to create development policy. This report focuses on the population profile of Belize, as like many countries in the world, has changing population dynamics. In addition, the report briefly discusses some of the characteristics of population growth, average household size, gender inequality, ethnicity, education, immigration, and economic inequality. These characteristics are discussed through the context of the 2010 Census, although other monitoring publications were also used. While many of these factors only seem to point towards decline, this report is overall positive, as Belize is at a point where it can best capitalize on its attributes for future growth and development. However, the choices to capitalize on these attributes ultimately fall at the hands of the Belizean government.

**IC2 INSTITUTE, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF BELIZE

### INTRODUCTION

In order for a country to develop both politically and economically, it needs to understand its population, including the needs within it. When basic needs are not met by the government or by the resources available, the people become more vulnerable as they are unable to, for instance, feed themselves and their families. Yet, vulnerabilities are not homogenous across geography, race, or gender and certain problems (such as lack of education) may be a large problem in one group while another (such as food insecurity) is a large problem for another group. With an internationally known environment, and a small population of approximately 360,000 people, Belize is a country that has a lot of potential for growth and development. However, not understanding the people can lead to maladaptive policy, which is why development strategies need to understand Belize's population profile before creating policies.

This report is separated into four sections. This report begins with a discussion of the link between population and development, with a focus on how immigration can affect development. The following section looks at Belize and its people broadly, looking through various demographic aspects such as ethnicity and education. The third section looks at immigration in particular, as there is a large population of Belizean expatriates currently living abroad and because of the stable government and economy, people immigrate into Belize. These immigration flows can affect the status quo and make strategy creation and implementation more complicated based on who is immigrating to Belize. The last section ties all of these factors together to discuss some of the key demographic concerns might affect the development of Belize politically and economically.

This analysis has been accomplished largely through GIS, or Geographic Information Systems, technology using the ArcGIS software. With this software, it is possible to use the census data collected by the Statistical Institute of Belize to create visual representations of key demographic factors of Belize through maps. The ArcGIS software is important for understanding geographic vulnerabilities in Belize by district, as poverty, education, and economic variables vary by administrative district.

### Population Growth and Developing Countries

Generally speaking, the world population has been steadily increasing worldwide, growing by over 2 billion people over the last 25 years, surpassing a population of 7 billion in 2010 ( UNDESA, UNFPA 2012). The total world population is likely to increase due to decreased mortality and longer livelihoods. Within this worldwide trend lies a lot of demographic diversity, as there are people of various groups that live different lives. Income and opportunity inequality remains an

issue at both the national and sub-national level, as different people have different access to resources based on their education, ethnic group, or nationality (UNDESA, UNFPA 2012).

Population dynamics, such as age, ethnic, and education structures, are linked to development challenges, as population growth is believed to exacerbate poverty and add pressure on the economy, health services, and the environment (UNDESA, UNFPA 2012). This concern affects developing countries in particular, as many of them are unable to deal with large populations due to their low economic capabilities. Problems are only magnified through the polarization of abundance and deprivation, where a small population uses the majority of resources while a large portion of the population has low access.

Ultimately, these population concerns affect the poorest the most, as they are the ones who rely on access to natural resources and live in vulnerable places (UNDESA, UNFPA 2012). Once other factors such as gender, ethnic status, and age come into effect, these vulnerabilities are magnified. The under these constraints thus tend to live in areas with low education, economic productivity, and health (UNDESA, UNFPA 2012).

While these concerns about population dynamics can affect all countries, including the United States, the majority of the global population is found in less developed countries, where populations are still increasing. In 2013, it was estimated that the population of people living in Less Developed Countries numbered 5.9 billion, while only 1.2 billion people lived in more developed countries (Graff and Bremner 2014). This population growth is more difficult for developing countries to deal with, as the government and economies of these less developed countries often do not have the infrastructure to meet health, education, and employment demands.

## **The Demographic Dividend**

While populations is increasing, the fertility rate is decreasing, which means that while the total population is increasing globally, the rate at which it is growing is decreasing. Countries and development groups can take advantage of these changes through the concept of the demographic dividend, which may act as a window of opportunity. The demographic dividend is defined as “the accelerated economic growth that may result from a rapid decline in a country’s fertility and the subsequent change in the population age structure” (Graff and Bremner 2014).

In simpler terms, the demographic dividend occurs when a dramatic change in the fertility and birth rates creates a large population of working-age young adults with few young dependents. Because of the large number of working-age people, the demographic dividend theory states that this is the perfect time to capitalize on the population and build the economy. However, to capitalize on the demographic dividend, countries need to invest in family planning, education, economic policies, governance, and infrastructure to create investments, jobs, and an educated labor force, all of which help accelerate economic growth (Graff and Bremner 2014).

## THE PEOPLE OF BELIZE

In 2010, the Belizean census calculated the population at 324,528 people, a 75,612 change from the 2000 population of 248,916 people (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). Other organizations, such as the World Bank, also keep track of statistics and indicators of Belize, estimating the total fertility rate in 2013 at 2.7 children per women, which had fallen from 3.6 in 2000 and from 4.5 in 1990 (World Development Indicators 2015).

Based on this information it would seem that Belize is currently located the demographic dividend, as there is a large proportion of young working-age people in Belize in addition to a smaller fertility rate. Yet, before broad infrastructural policy is implemented in the country, policy makers at both the Belizean government and at international aid agencies need to understand the population of Belize along with the implications that this population will have in its development, which is why the next section lays out some of the key characteristics of Belize.

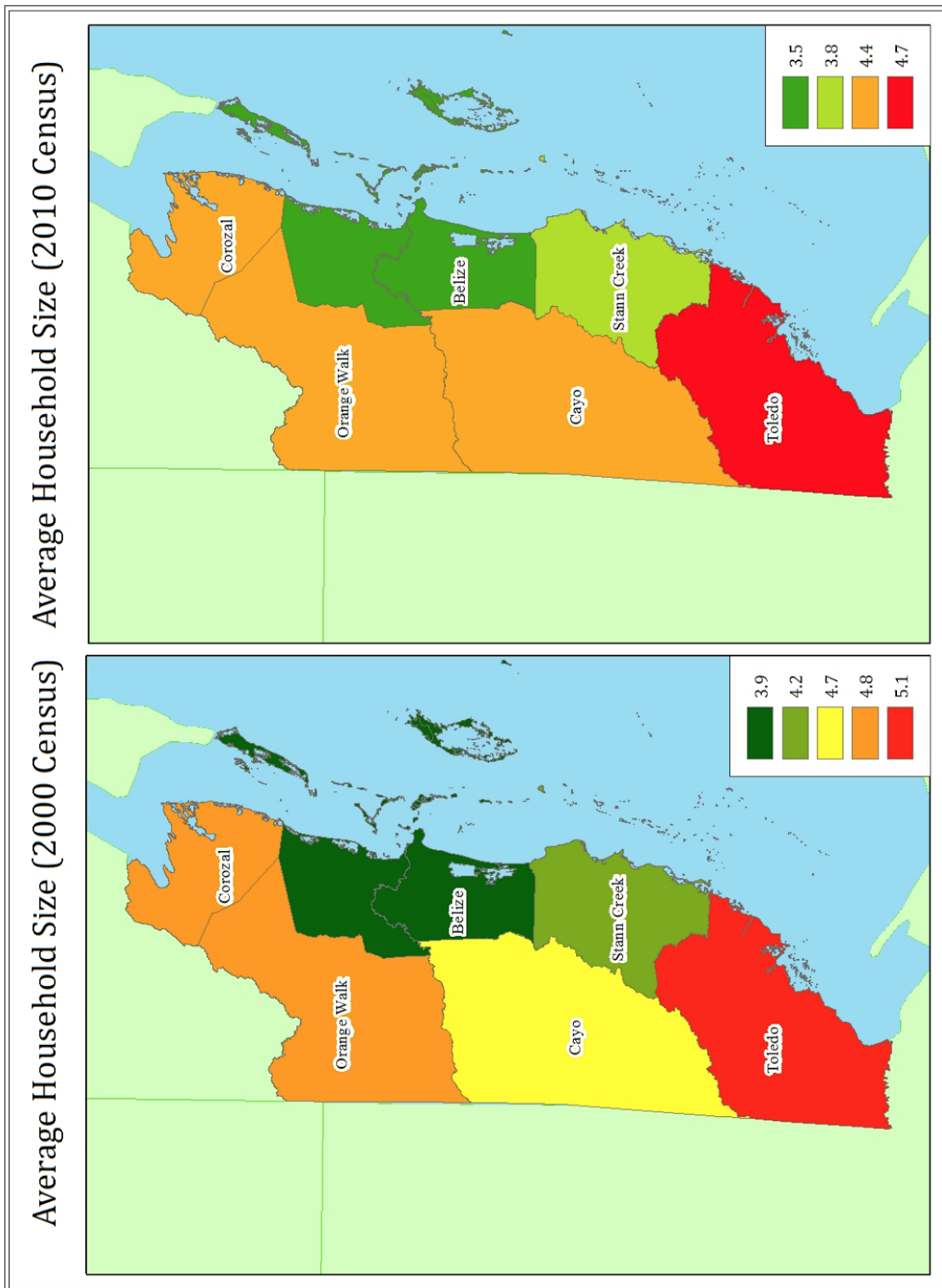
This section describes some of the key characteristics of population dynamics in Belize such as education and ethnicity, with discussions on some of the implications on future economic and political development for the country. In addition to the population dynamics, this section lists some of the key resources that Belize can use to capitalize on the demographic dividend.

### Population Growth and the Average Household

In the past 30 years, the population of Belize has more than doubled from 145,353 people in 1980 to the 2010 population of 324,528 (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). This population growth has led to concerns about food security and natural resources in particular, as each person needs to feed on an often limited agricultural environment (Bloom, Canning and Sevilla 2001). Despite this growth in the population, Belize maintains a low population density throughout the country, with an average of 36 persons per square mile of land (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

In addition to this breakdown, the population demographics should be discussed at the geographic scale. Household size is an important indicator for determining poverty and health, since the size of a household relates to exposure to communicable diseases and can indicate lack of access to health resources such as family planning. The geographic distribution of household size is available in figure 1, which compares the results from the 2000 census and the 2010 census.

As shown in Figure 1, the average household size (AHS) has decreased throughout Belize in the last 10 years, although the AHS in the district of Toledo remains the highest, with an AHS of 4.7 individuals per household. Yet, Toledo is the most rural and least populated districts of Belize, with a total population of 30,785 people, of which 81.7% of the people resided in rural areas (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). In comparison, the district of Belize has the lowest AHS with only 3.5 people per household. Belize district is also the most populated, with 95,292 people in 2010, of which only 22.2% resided in rural areas.



**FIGURE 1:** Average Household Size Across District, 2000 vs. 2010 Census (Data courtesy of the Statistics Institute of Belize and BERDS).

These two extremes in the population dynamics show one way in which certain populations may be vulnerable. Considering how AHS can be used as an indicator for health and education in particular, it might seem that there is a larger proportion of vulnerable people in Toledo in comparison to Belize. In addition, rural populations often have limited access to public resources such as schools and clinics in comparison to urban populations.

Lastly, the general population dynamics can give a lot of information about income and potential in different areas of Belize. For instance, San Pedro Town, an island in the district of Belize, has the smallest AHS at 3.1, as the urban area depends on people from the mainland working there in the tourism industry. Many of these people are single-person households, which leads to a low AHS for the area (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

## Age and Sex Composition

The total population of Belize can be analyzed further by examining the age and sex compositions of the population. This analysis can be accomplished through population pyramids, which help visualize the gender and age compositions of Belize (See Figure 2).

These population pyramids seem to show a demographic transition, as the number of children is closer to the number of young adults in 2010 than the number of children in 2000. In other words, there are more young adults and fewer children. This seems to be supported by difference in median age from 19.1 years of age, to 21 years of age from 2000 to 2010 (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). This seems to coincide with the data on AHS, as the working age young adult population are having fewer children, delaying having children, or both. This changing population dynamic also fits the pattern set forth by the Demographic Dividend Hypothesis, suggesting that the population of Belize is at a point where it can best capitalize on its resources for future economic and social growth.

Figure 8: Age and Sex Structure, Belize 2000

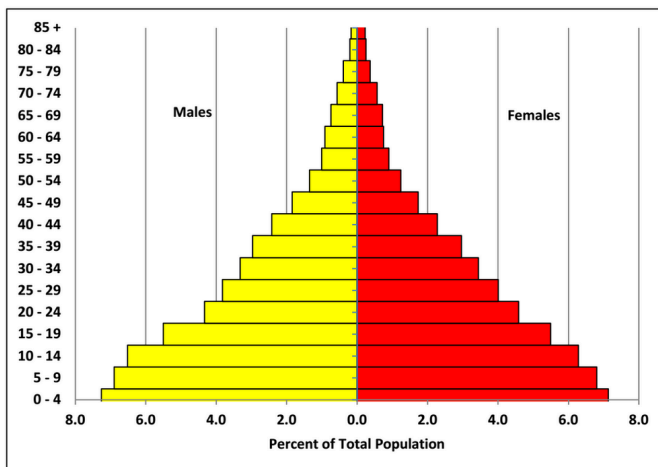
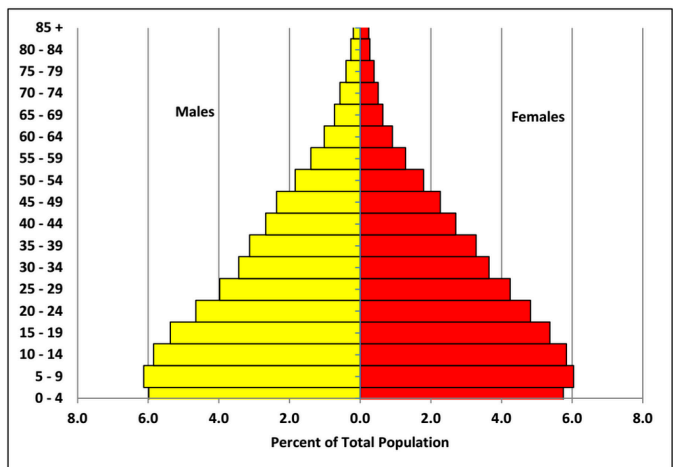


Figure 9: Age and Sex Structure, Belize 2010



**FIGURE 2:** Population pyramids across age and sex, 2000 Census vs. 2010 Census (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

## Ethnicities of Belize

In addition to total population and average household size is the issue of ethnicity as it relates to population dynamics. Poverty and lack of access to basic resources is often correlated with race or ethnicity, not only in developing countries, but also in “developed” countries like the United States. Belize is a largely heterogeneous country where Mestizos are considered the primary ethnic group, where approximately 52.9% of the population, or 170,446 Belizeans, identify as belonging to the Mestizo group, at least in part (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). In comparison, the second-largest ethnic group, the Creole, is composed of 26% of the population, or 83,460 Belizeans.

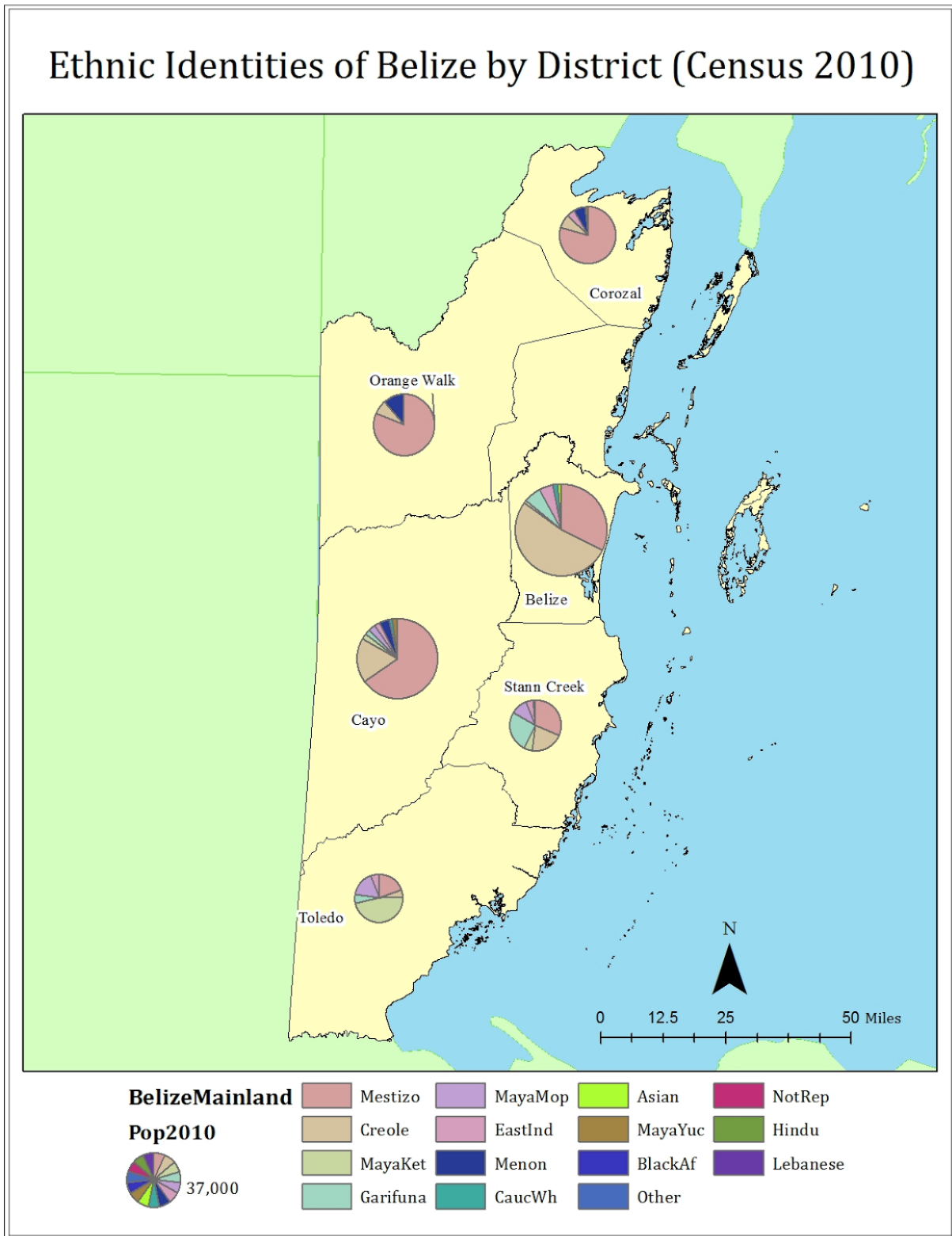
This proportion between Mestizos and Creole has been changing. While the proportion of Creoles outnumbered the proportion of Mestizos in 1980, by 2010, the Mestizos composed more than half of the Belizean population (See Table 1)<sup>1</sup>. This shift seems to be partially driven by emigration from Creoles into English-speaking countries such as the United States (Kent 2007). In addition, people from Central America make up the largest proportion, with Guatemala composing 41.3% of the foreign born population, with El Salvador (15.5%) and Honduras (15.3%) making the second and third largest proportions of the foreign-born population (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

These ethnic characteristics can be further explored through geographic means (see Figure 3). Using maps, it is thus possible to identify areas of high vulnerability based on ethnic group. In the case of Figure 3, combined with previous knowledge on the AHS and population of Belize, that the southernmost district of Toledo is potentially one of the most vulnerable. Average household size is high for the district and the Maya and Mestizo populations compose the majority of the ethnic groups of Belize, although Toledo is the smallest district population-wise.

Year	Mestizo %	Creole %
1980	33.4%	40.0%
1991	43.6%	29.8%
2000	48.7%	24.9%
2010	52.9%	26%

**TABLE 1:** Ethnic Composition, Mestizo and Creole, in Belize (1980-2010) (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2000), (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

<sup>1</sup> Pre-2000 Belize data should be taken with some skepticism, as Belizean statistical capabilities are relatively new (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010)



**FIGURE 3:** Ethnic Composition Across District, 2010 Census. The size of the pie chart represents the number of the total population of each district (Data courtesy of the Statistics Institute of Belize and BERDS).



However, most Mestizos are not in Toledo but instead in the districts of Corozal, Orange Walk, and Cayo, accounting for approximately four fifths of the northern population and two thirds of the Cayo population. Meanwhile, over half of all people of the district of Belize identify as Creole (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). Stann Creek is the district with the second-lowest Average Household Size of 3.8 people per household as well as the most culturally diverse (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

## Education

Household size and ethnic group are not the only two markers that can be used to gauge vulnerability, however. Education levels in particular are useful to evaluating access to basic government resources, as education is internationally recognized as a basic human right crucial for personal and national development, which is why it is often used as an indicator for a country’s level of socioeconomic advancement (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

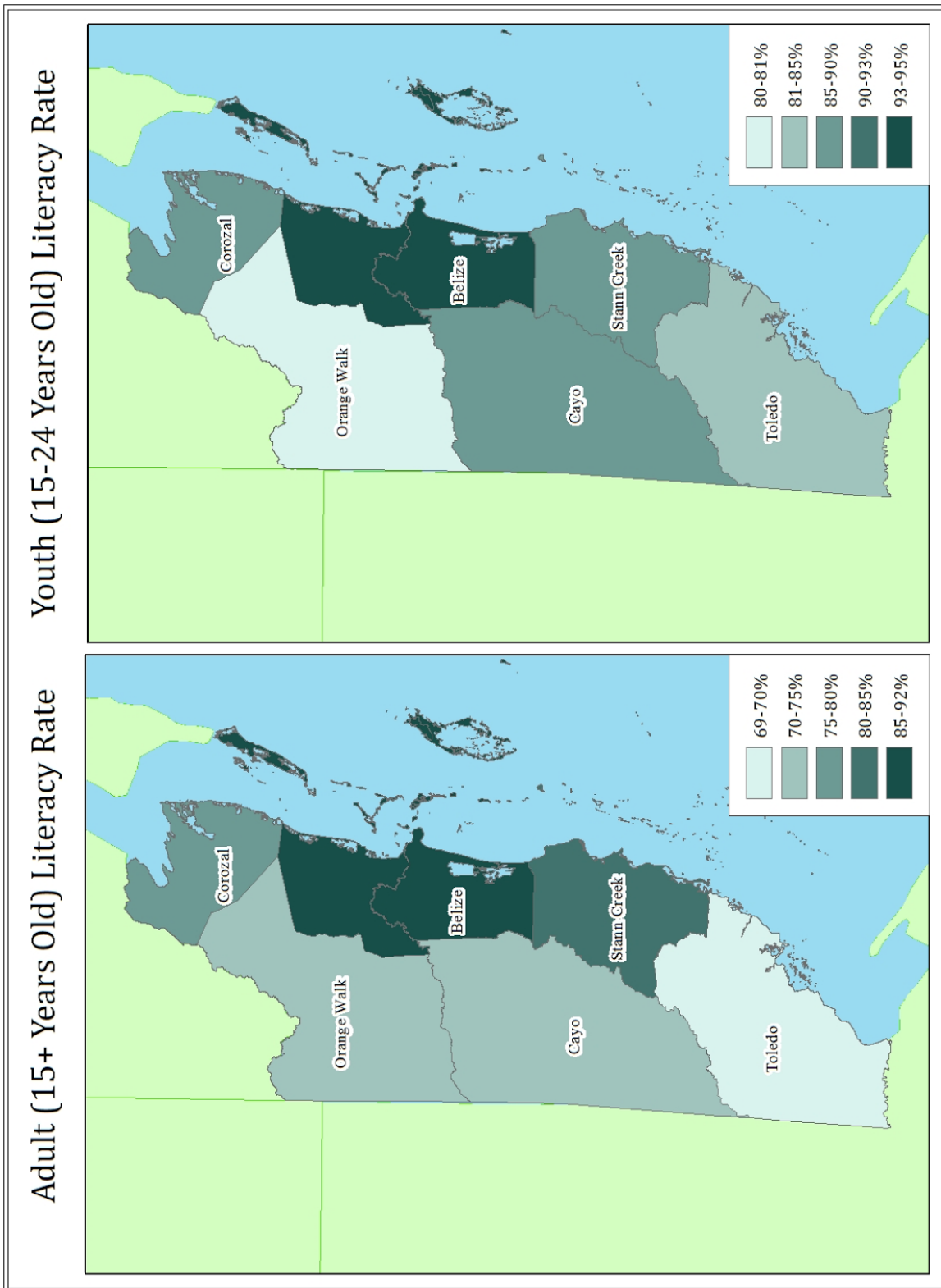
One-third of the entire population of Belize two years or older is enrolled in the formal education system, with no significant difference between male and female enrollment. Meanwhile, 95.9% of primary school age children (5-12 years old) are enrolled in school, an improvement over 93.7% in the year 2000 (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). Despite this high enrollment, only 72.9% of the population age 14 or older has completed at least primary school, despite primary school enrollment being a government law for children ages 5 and up (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

Meanwhile, the youth literacy rate is significantly higher than the adult literacy rate across all districts (see Figure 4). Considering the high literacy rate for youths, it indicates that the next generation will be better educated and thus better able to participate in professional and academic fields.

Despite these growing education, enrollment, and literacy rates, many ethnic groups continue to be under-educated. For instance, the Lebanese literacy rate is 95.5%, while the literacy for Mennonites is only 22.7% at the lowest, followed by the Mayan and Mestizo literacy rates (See Table 2) (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010).

**TABLE 2:** Youth Literacy Rate by Ethnic Group (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010)

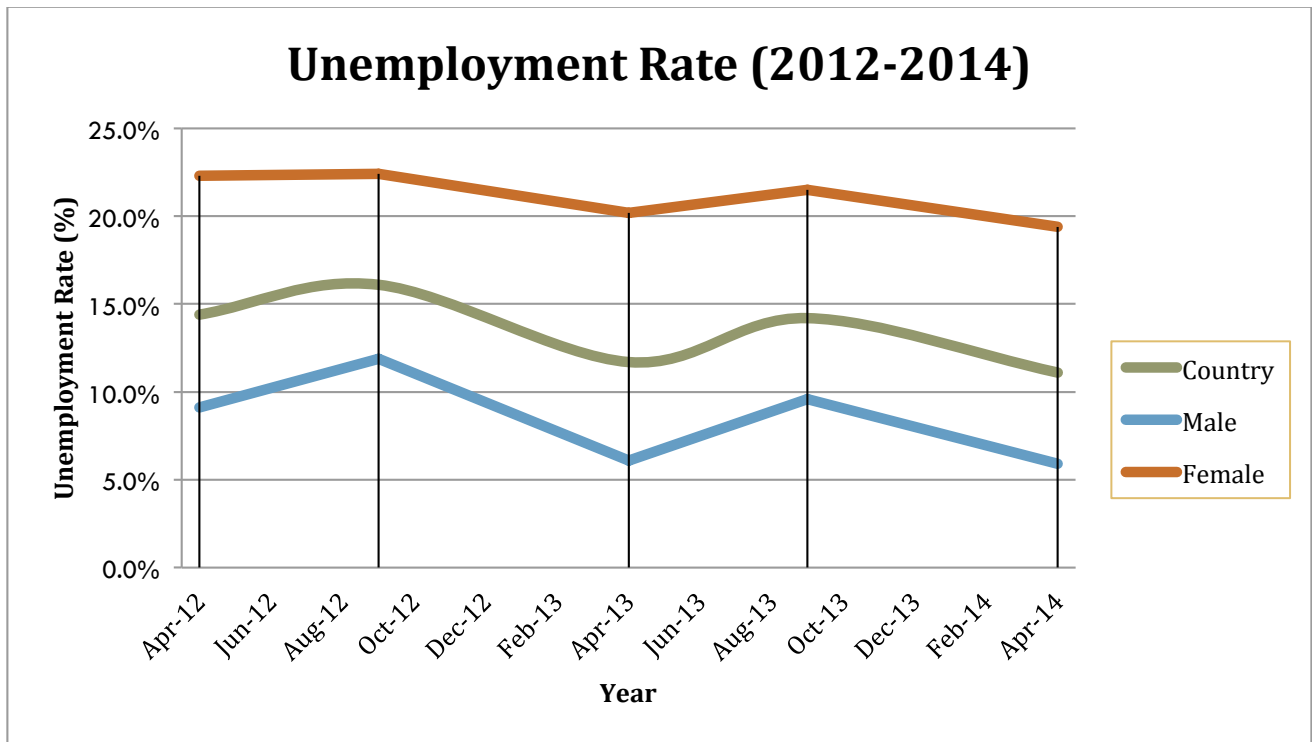
	Creole	Garifuna	East Indian	Lebanese	Black	Hindu	Asian	Yucatec Maya	White	Mestizo	Maya Mopan	Maya Ketchi	Mennonite
Literacy rate	96.4	96.4	95.8	95.8	95.7	94.6	94.5	95.4	93.4	88.3	88.1	82.9	25.0



**FIGURE 4:** Youth vs. Adult Literacy Rate by district, 2010 Census. The differences in literacy rates indicate that nation-wide access to basic education is improving (Data courtesy of the Statistics Institute of Belize and BERDS).

## Gender

Despite the same level of educational attainment, Belize was in the last position of 131<sup>st</sup> on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2010 in the area of political empowerment of women (Caribbean Country Management Unit 2011). In addition, the United Nations has classified Belize as off target in regards to promoting gender equality and empowering women, goal #3 of the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2013). This classification was based upon the share of women employed in the non-agricultural sector and the proportion of seats in National Parliament held by women. Beyond the MDGs, the female unemployment rate is significantly higher than both the male and the countrywide unemployment rate, although overall the unemployment rate is high (see Figure 5).



**FIGURE 5:** Unemployment rates by gender (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2014).

Reducing the degree of gender inequality can be incredibly helpful to developing countries beyond the context of human rights. Greater equality, for instance, can enhance economic efficiency and improve other development outcomes, such as the ones below (The World Bank 2011).

- Reduced barriers to efficient skill allocation across gender can create economic growth
- Improving gender equality can shape positive outcomes for the next generation
- Increasing women’s individual and collective agency produces better outcomes, institutions, and policy choices

## Immigration

The last facet that this report covers is the aspect of immigration. As stated briefly in the section about ethnicity, a lot of Creoles are migrating out of Belize and into the United States while Mestizos from Central America are migrating into Belize. However, these two factors do not provide the full picture of the immigration dynamics of Belize, as the demographics of the immigrant flows both in and out of Belize provide insight into the push and pull factors that might attract certain people (e.g. American retirees) while repelling others (e.g. educated Belizeans unable to find employment).

This section breaks down migration patterns of Belize, providing some context into ways in which Belize is affected by both immigrants and emigrants. However, it's important to note that while there are detailed census reports on the foreign-born population in Belize, it is more difficult to assess the people who have left the country, as there's a lack of data on the exact number of expatriates as well as the exact demographics of this population. Instead, the section on emigrants will provide estimates and general trends, compared with the previous sections, which have been centered on data and reports collected by the Belizean censuses.

### What attracts immigrants?

In Belize, there appear to be two primary groups of people moving into Belize. The first of these are Central Americans from the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (72.1% of the foreign born population). The second group of immigrants, while much smaller, is composed of people from the United States, Canada, and other unidentified countries<sup>2</sup> for a total of 16.2% of the foreign-born population (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). Considering this discrepancy in the type of countries with the largest number of immigrants, there seem to be two reasons for people to immigrate to Belize, although these are only hypothetical:

#### ECONOMIC STAGNATION IN HOME COUNTRY

While there are no recent surveys or studies specifically targeted on the Central American immigrant population, the 2000 Census hypothesizes that most immigrants from Central America arrive for economic reasons as well as to escape conflict (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2000). There are also agricultural job opportunities available for migrants, who are willing to work for less than native Belizeans (U.S. Embassy 2002). Overall, Central American immigrants compose the largest proportion of the foreign-born population and are thus the most influential (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2010)

#### RETIREES AND INVESTORS

Considering the environment and landscape of Belize, it seems likely that a significant number of the foreign-born settle into Belize as retirees. In the case of retirees, the process to become a resident in Belize is very simple, especially when compared with countries such as the United

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<sup>2</sup> Considering the high degree of trade between Belize, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, the number of European migration is likely high (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2015).

States. Two primary avenues for immigration seem to be aimed at investors and retirees, which requires economic investment in the country (Titoff Realty Ltd 2015).

### **What pushes away Belizeans?**

The United States has seen resurgence in immigration by foreign-born blacks starting in the 1970s from Africa and the Caribbean. In regards to just Belize, 2011 predictions estimated the foreign-born Belizean population currently residing in the United States at 48,2010 people, which does not include the children of Belizeans born in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center 2011). Outside of the United States, it's unknown exactly where Belizeans settle, although English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and other Caribbean countries are likely candidates.

While there is a lack of knowledge on current emigration trends, the 2000 Census found that most emigrants were young (15-34 years old), female, from urban areas, and educated. In other words, at least in the year 2000, Belize was exporting valuable young, educated, and productive people (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2000). While the ethnic makeup of the emigrants is unknown, it appears that most of them are Black or Creole, as there are an estimated 25,000 foreign-born black people from Belize (Kent 2007). The same study found that most black immigrants from Belize entered the United States through family connections.

Despite the lack of data, the large Belizean population in the United States, combined with findings from the 2000 census, it appears that emigration can have a very negative impact in Belize. Considering the profile of the "average" emigrant, it appears that Belize has few economic incentives for young, educated people, as Belizeans are unable to use their skills and education, further creating economic stagnation as the future leaders of Belize emigrate.

### **Economic Inequality and Poverty**

Combined, the factors of education, gender, immigration, ethnicity, and more have profound effects on the economic development of Belize, which is tied with concepts of socioeconomic advancements and human rights. While Belize's economy has been growing, Belize is considered off target in regards to the Millennium Development Goal #1 to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (UNDP 2013). In fact, poverty has actually increased, partially because of the global economic situation and floods in 2008, from 24% in 2002 to 41% in 2009 (Caribbean Country Management Unit 2011).

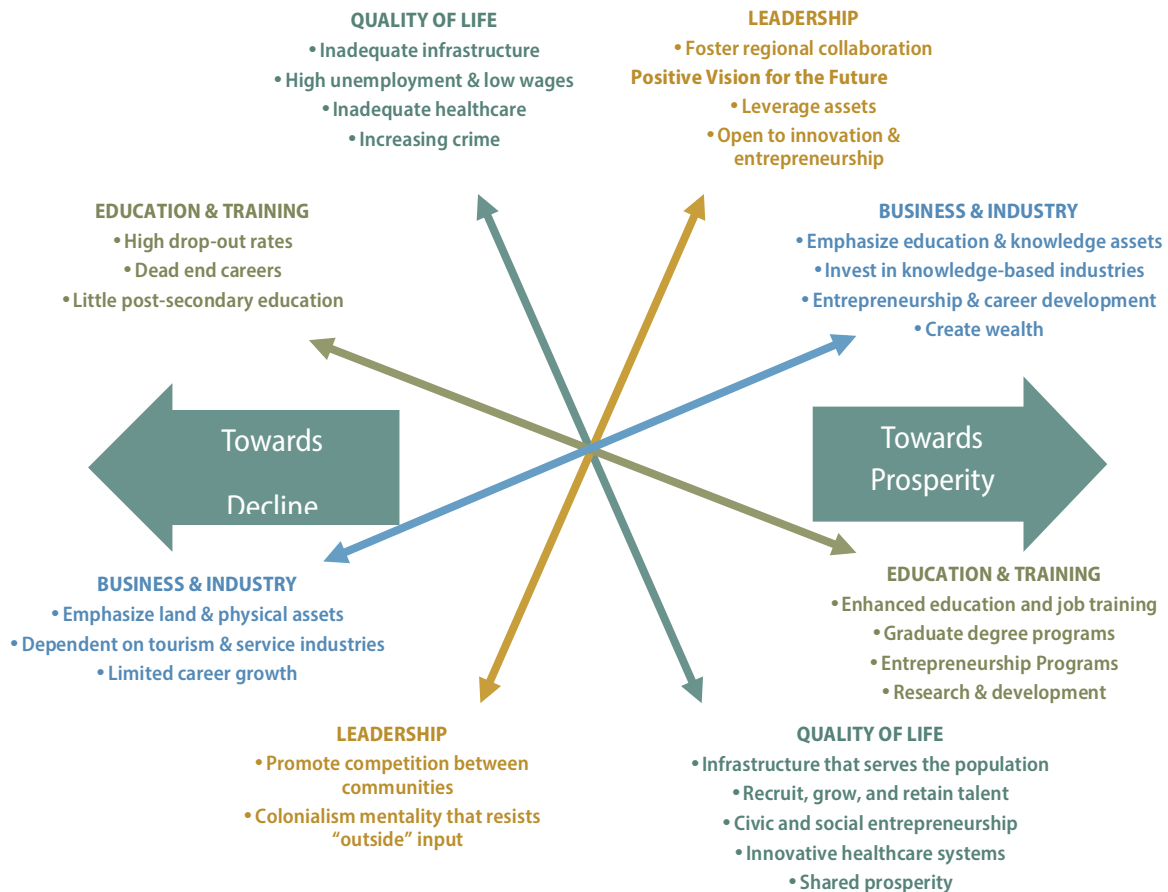
Combined with high unemployment rates (refer back to Figure 5 on page 10) and emigration, it would seem that Belize's socioeconomic situation is very poor. In addition, many parts of its population, particularly the population of rural Toledo as well as the Mestizo and Mayan populations, are very vulnerable to change. The poorest people, in addition, often live in rural areas and their livelihoods depend greatly on the natural environment and especially agriculture. Yet, despite problems with education, gender, immigration, poverty, and ethnic disparities, Belize has a very high potential for positive change.

## BELIZE'S POTENTIAL

### Belize at a Crossroads

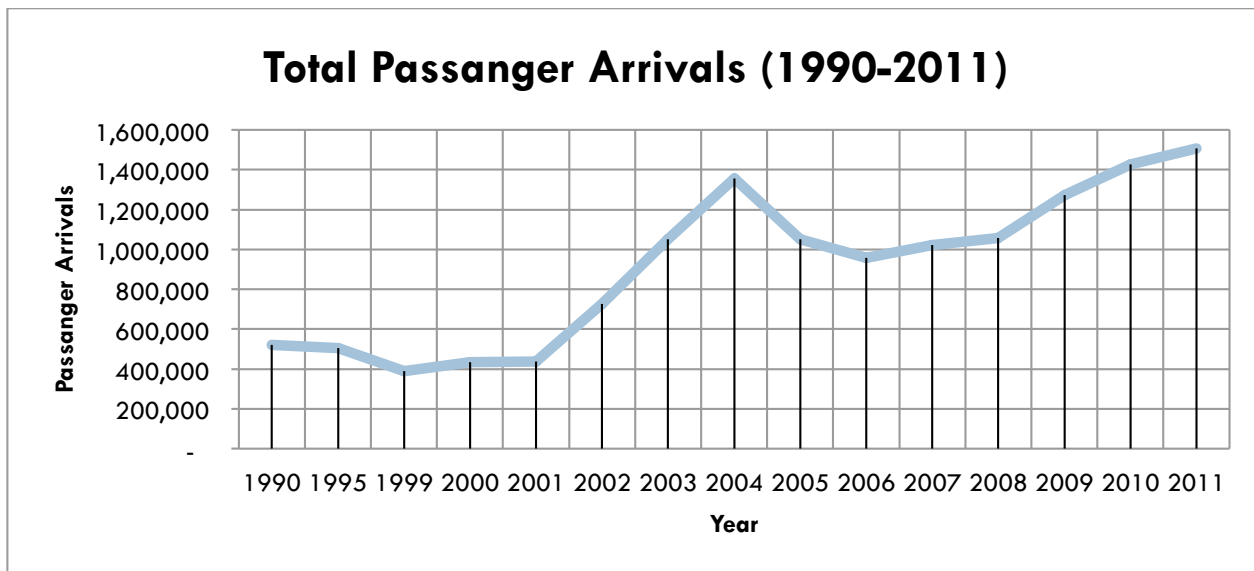
There are a large number of things that we can learn about a country by examining the census. While a census can be taken as a status report for a country, a census can be used to find vulnerable populations and vulnerable areas. In addition, a census can be helpful for evaluating how a country can capitalize on its people and its resources for the future.

Currently, Belize is at a crossroads. As a developing country, there are many who are poor or unemployed, and many, especially adults, do not know how to read. However, Belize is at a crossroads where it must create strategy towards prosperity and move away from policy that creates decline (see Figure 6). In particular, Belize needs to diversify its economy, which is greatly reliant on tourism, while expanding into professional and service sectors that attract young professionals and educated citizens.

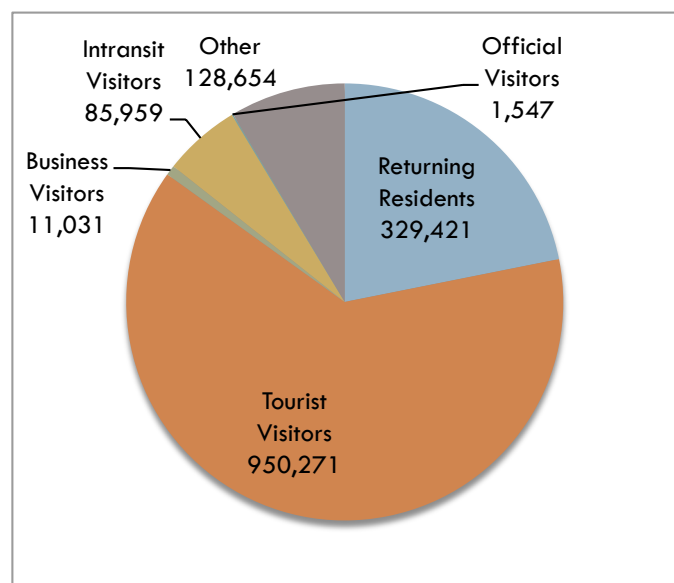


**FIGURE 5:** A model for Belize's development (Castellano 2013)

Existing sectors, however, should not be ignored, as tourism has high potential to be both economically and environmentally sustainable. Approximately 40,000 jobs in Belize are in the tourism sector, nearly 30% of all national employment and government policy such as the National Sustainable Tourism Master Plan (NSTMP) suggests the continued relevance of tourism to the country (Castellano 2013). Once again, there is a lack of recent data on tourism and foreign arrivals, although it appears that there is a large number of arrivals in general (see Figure 6) as well as a high number of returning residents (see Figure 7). Taken together, this suggests that people are considering the potential of Belize for visitors. In addition, Toledo, the poorest and most vulnerable district of Belize, has a very high potential in particular, as there are many protected areas in Belize with a high potential for tourism (see Figure 8)

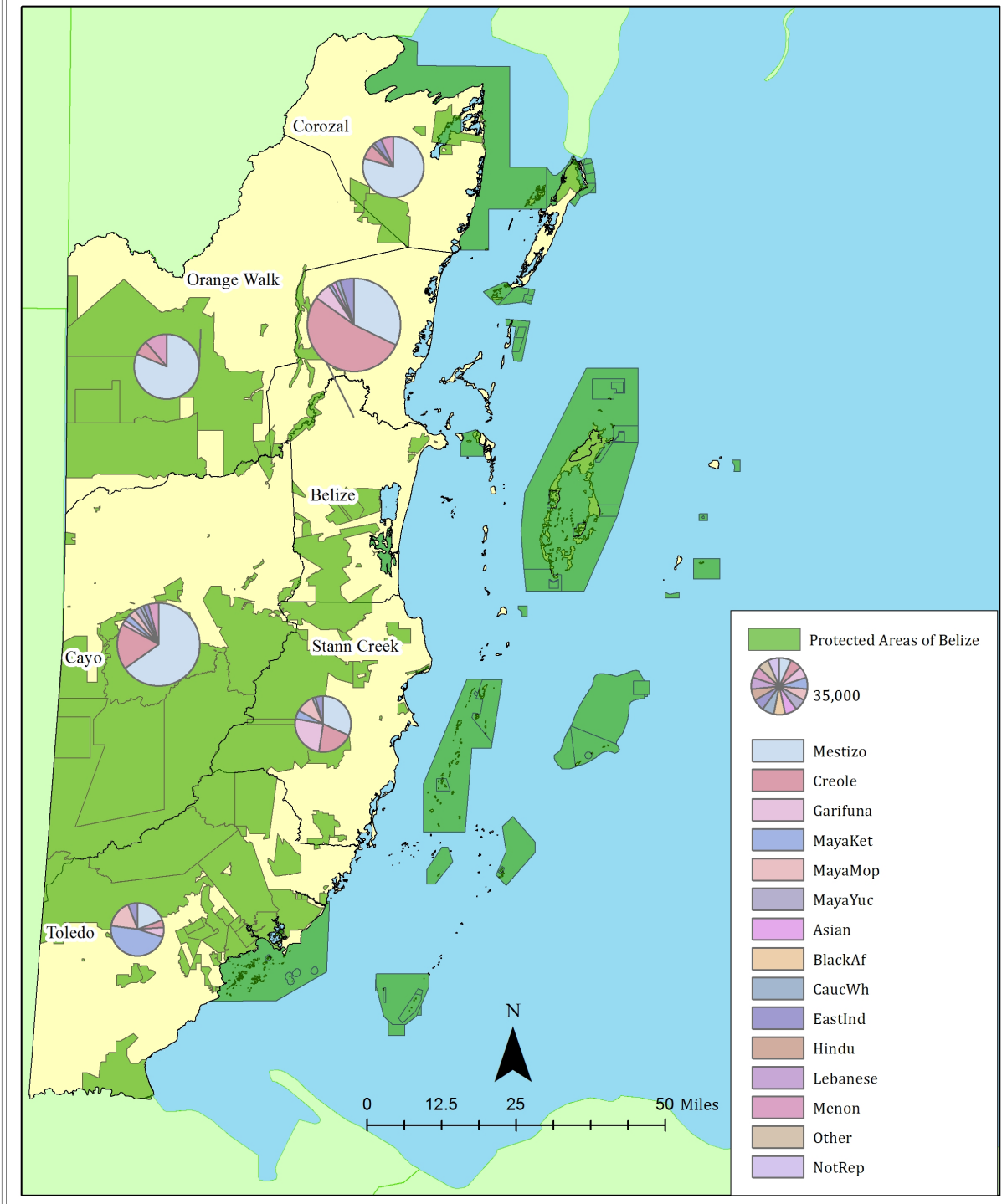


**FIGURE 6:** Total passenger arrivals, 1990-2011. Arrivals to Belize surpassed one million in 2003 and only dipped below one million in 2006, with 958,813 visitors (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2015).



**FIGURE 7:** Passenger Arrival by Category, 2011. The largest proportion of arrivals is tourism, followed by returning residents (The Statistical Institute of Belize 2015).

## Ethnic Groups and Protected Areas (Census 2010)



**FIGURE 8:** Ethnic composition and protected areas, 2010 Census. Protected areas include archeological zones, national parks, wildlife reserves, and more (Data courtesy of the Statistics Institute of Belize and BERDS).



Beyond the tourism sector, Belize has potential in the energy sector, as Belize Natural Energy discovered oil in 2005 in Belizean land. While drilling began soon after, environmental concerns and lack of proper regulation led to Belize's Supreme Court declaring offshore drilling contracts null and void April 2013. One month later, drilling operations began after some restructuring (Castellano 2013). In addition, there are concerns that drilling, especially offshore drilling will have an impact in the natural environment of Belize, particularly its coral reefs.

Going back to the theory of the demographic dividend and considering all of the information demonstrated thus far, does Belize have the potential for growth and development? The short answer is yes. The long answer is that Belize's development is highly dependent on national government policy that takes into account the complexities of Belize's people. The international community, especially development agencies, will have to understand the complexities and vulnerabilities of Belize as well, especially the geographic component of vulnerability and poverty.

The process will be difficult and require large investments, although other developing countries with similar demographic profiles have previously taken advantage of a window of opportunity for socioeconomic growth. One of these countries, Thailand, experienced a rapid period of growth when the fertility rate declined in from 5.5 to 2.2 children from 1970 to 1990. With fewer births, the Thai government invested more resources in the health and education of its citizens, who were increasingly productive in the adult labor force (Graff and Bremner 2014).

Following a similar pattern, its possible to see ways in which Belize can invest in its people and its unique environment for future socioeconomic growth. While there are many factors in which Belize can improve its country and work to provide better services, working within the context of the census, it's possible to see possibilities for growth.

### **A Positive Trend: Belizean Investment**

Within the international development field, it's very easy to become focused on the problems of the world without considering the progress that countries have made in development. In Belize, literacy rates have increased while fertility rates have decreased, indicating smaller, better educated families with easier access to basic government services. Thus, this report ends by discussing some key projects and programs, both theoretical and in practice, focused on improving the socioeconomic situation of Belize.

#### **Poverty**

Although poverty and unemployment are high, the Government of Belize has many pro-poor initiatives such as BOOST (Building Opportunities for our Social Transformation), which is a conditional cash transfer program that provides cash grants to poor families and individuals who keep their children immunized and in school. So far, the World Bank has classified the BOOST program as successful, with 8,600 beneficiaries (UNDP 2013). In addition, the Food Pantry Program provides a weekly basket of food to beneficiaries at half price, with over 3,400 families benefitting, mostly in Belize City and the Cayo and Toledo Districts (UNDP 2013)

Beyond these policies, Belize should work on other sectors to provide diverse employment opportunities, especially for the educated young. It should also focus on the poorest sections of the population, such as the Central American immigrants, the Mayans, and rural areas, especially Toledo.

### **Education**

Government expenditure on education averages about one-quarter of the national budget, the single largest item of public expenditure (UNDP 2013). These investments have created an improved education system with higher literacy, enrollment, and completion. Challenges remain, however, in differences in educational opportunities for certain populations, especially rural, Mayan, Mennonite, and Mestizo populations. Thus, educational programs should be diverse, taught by trained teachers, and allow students to pursue education beyond the primary level.

### **Gender equality and fertility**

Although women and girls achieve the same level of education, especially in the tertiary level, gender inequality remains a concern in Belize, especially in regards to female representation in the government at both the local and national level. In addition, women remain underrepresented in non-agricultural sector. Thus, Belize has two main courses of action in regards to reducing gender inequality. The first is the slow process of cultural shifts that devalue female work and intrinsic value. The second feeds into the first, as Belize needs to strengthen the support mechanisms and services that encourage female employment and political involvement, such as employment protection, entrepreneurial mentorship, and family planning resources.

Family planning, in particular, is particularly important as lower fertility rates coincide with better socioeconomic conditions. Low fertility rates also coincide with stable populations while high reproductive health coincides with health, gender equality, and lower infant and maternal mortality rates. By providing better access to family planning and reproductive health resources, Belize thus has the ability to improve socioeconomic conditions, reduce population growth, and empower women. Based on female education and average household size, it appears that Belize is on a path towards better gender parity.

### **Immigration**

Considering the differences in migration flows in and out of Belize, migration policy needs to focus on specific migration concerns instead of creating a single immigration policy. In regards to the “brain drain” of skilled Belizeans leaving the country, Belize started the Belizean Diaspora Returnee Incentive Program in 2010 to encourage Belizeans in the diaspora to return (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Foreign Trade 2010). The program encourages Belizeans to invest in the national economy by providing tax incentives to returnees seeking to start businesses and services.

Meanwhile, in regards to immigration into Belize, the government would need to provide different controls. The largest section of the foreign-born is impoverished people from Central America who migrate to Belize because of conflict and the lack of economic opportunities in their native countries. Thus, controlling immigration from Central America is highly dependent on the

economic situation in other countries, a situation where Belize has little control. Therefore, Belizean action in regards to high levels of immigration would be to maintain contact with other Central American countries and protect immigrant human rights.

There is also concern with the opposite spectrum of immigrants—educated foreigners from developed countries—migrating to Belize as either retirees or investors. The effect of this influx is unknown, although it's possible that non-Belizean investments are marginalizing Belizean entrepreneurial attempts by taking limited job opportunities in ventures such as hotel management. Belize's best course of action for now is thus carefully monitoring immigration from the developed world and working to evaluate on its effects.

### **Ecotourism and the environment**

Goal #7 of the Millennium Development Goals is to ensure environmental sustainability. In this regard, Belize is on target for all indicators, where over 60% of its forest remains intact (UNDP 2013). In addition to the forest, archeological sites and marine ecosystems (especially the world-famous coral reef) have made Belize a prime location for ecotourism (Blersch and Kangas 2012). However, ecotourism should not be the only solution for Belize, as other economic sectors, such as the service industry and the medical field, are important for future socioeconomic development in Belize. In short, while ecotourism has a high economic potential, especially in rural parts of the poorest districts of Belize, it should not be the only economic venture for the Government of Belize to encourage.

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