

BEYOND MIAMI:
THE CONCENTRATION OF CUBAN MIGRANTS IN NEW JERSEY,
1950-2000

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If by diaspora we mean displacement, dispersion, and relocation, among other things, the making of a post-1959 Cuban diaspora in the United States was facilitated by the role of the Cuban Refugee Program (CRP), the federal program that relocated Cubans to many states in the union after they arrived in Miami from Cuba.

During the first months of the Cuban exodus in the early 1960s help was provided by the state of Florida, but the extent of the migration overtaxed state resources and exacerbated frustrations among local residents about this massive human flood in their community. The Cuban Refugee Program created a resettlement system to relocate refugees to different states. There were various organizations through which help to the refugees was channeled: the United States Catholic Conference, the Church World Service (Protestant), Hebrew Immigrant Aid, and International Rescue Committee, which was non-sectarian. Whether refugees were going to join relatives in other states, to sponsors, or were simply taking jobs at a distance, they were given money for their transportation expenses and also money in the form of a transitional grant from CRP to help in their adjustment. In addition, Cubans received food, clothing, medical care, job training, college tuition loans, and other benefits. This help is, to a lesser degree, available to all immigrants coming from Cuba now. Other immigrants, especially from Latin America, complain because they do not enjoy the same advantages. But the most

significant benefit for Cubans is the controversial Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, by which all Cuban immigrants can apply for legal residence after a year and one day after continuous residence in the United States.

Resettlement of refugees brings me to Union City in Hudson County in New Jersey. A significant number of Cuban migrants were relocated in New Jersey. Although there were many destinations in New Jersey, for example Newark, Elizabeth, and Irvington, most Cubans were relocated to Union City and West New York. This community held the second highest concentration of Cubans in the United States after Miami. Why did so many Cubans go to Union City? One reason was that many migrants had relatives there because there was a small pre-revolutionary Cuban community there. Another reason was that Hudson County at the time had an abundance of manufacturing jobs. Union City and West New York attracted the many working class Cubans who were arriving in the United States in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies. Most of these migrants were part of the second wave of Cuban immigrants from 1965 to 1973 when the nationalization of small businesses by the government in Cuba pushed many small entrepreneurs and working class members to leave the island.

The first Cuban families to come to Union City arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s and they followed in the footsteps of many other immigrant groups that had settled in the area before them. Like in other parts of the Northeast, immigration waves contributed to the urbanization of Hudson County, a 46.4 square mile area located within minutes of New York City. The first settlers of Union City in Hudson County were 18th-century Dutch and English merchants. Later, many Germans came. For some time, Union City was a German-speaking town. After the Germans, the city became the home of the Irish, Eastern Europeans,

Armenians, and Italians who came in search of economic opportunities. During the early 20th century, Union City became established as the home of the American embroidery industry. By the 1960s, upwardly mobile European American residents of Union City started to disperse, mainly by going to the suburbs. Around that time too, the small number of Cuban families living in Union City were joined by thousands of Cuban exiles that were relocated by the Cuban Refugee Program in Miami. Cubans became the first Hispanic group to populate Union City. In 1960, the percentage of foreign-born Hispanics in Union City and West New York was 0.1. In 1970, the Census separated Hispanic into national categories. The percentage of Cubans in Union City and West New York rose to 51.1 percent. Early migrants were from Las Villas province. As more exiles arrived, more people from Havana and other provinces were represented. Although there were many middle-class and professional immigrants, a significant number of Cubans who came to Union City, as said before, were from working-class, rural, and semi-rural backgrounds.

With the arrival of the Cubans, Union City experienced an economic boom. From the 1960s to the 1980s there was a vibrant economic enclave. Cuban businesses thrived and community institutions emerged. During that time, community building included the establishment of social clubs such as the Liceo Cubano. Municipal clubs and other organizations fulfilled very important social and often political functions. As Cuban entrepreneurial activity grew, storeowners and some professionals became organized. One example was the Federación Mercantil Hispana. Its purpose was to protect Hispanic entrepreneurs and develop a good relationship with the police. There were Cuban lodges, whose purpose was to foster

Cuban patriotism and fervor. Cubans formed the Leones Cubanos en el Exilio as part of the International Lions Club.

Cuban women formed the National Association of Cuban Women, still in existence. Women played a significant role in the success of the Cuban community in Union City. In the 1970s and 1980s Cuban women in Union City and West New York had a very high rate of labor force participation: 69.6 percent of all economically active women worked outside the home.

Community institutions helped the newly arrived group. Churches were an example. St. Augustine's church was very important in the settlement process of Cubans. Catholic Charities set up offices there. This church, together with other religious institutions in the area, helped Cubans find jobs and apartments. It helped with the translation of legal documents. Cuban parishioners paid back in kind. Among them, especially the professionals became leaders in the church.

The ethnic identity of Cubans has been so far (maybe not so much among the newly arrived) inextricably related to politics, specifically to Cuba politics. In Union City, anti-Castro political organizations flourished at the beginning of the political exodus. The older generation tends to participate in anti-Castro organizations, while the young Cuban Americans participate in the American political system. Union City has elected many local Cuban representatives and there is one local politician who is a U.S. senator.

In 1980 two fundamental changes occurred in Union City. One was the increasing number of immigrants coming from other parts of Latin America. The other was the Mariel boatlift that brought many new Cubans to Union City. Earlier Cubans gave Mariel refugees a warm welcome at first. They organized fundraising activities and collected money to help the

newly arrived Cuban refugees. The majority of Mariel refugees came to join relatives, but many had criminal records in Cuba and a high proportion of them were dark-skinned, unlike the early arrivals. There were tensions. At times Mariel immigrants were discriminated against, even by their own compatriots. In time, most exiles from Mariel adjusted to life here and many have thrived, but for a long time, they carried the stigma of being “different.”

In the 1980s, many Cubans started to leave Union City for Miami and for the New Jersey suburbs. The story repeated itself. Cubans were again following in the footsteps of European immigrants. The latest U.S. Census revealed that while Hudson County experienced a 23 percent decline in its Cuban population, affluent Bergen County gained a 34 percent increase. Cubans, especially younger Cubans, started to move to the suburbs. As many early Cuban migrants moved up socioeconomically, they left Union City.

What happens to recent Cuban arrivals? Many Cubans who come to Union City now resemble the traditional migrants who come in search of economic opportunities. Many are young professionals or students who, as they say, want to expand their horizons. Most are not interested in politics that much, and are mainly curious about the world outside Cuba. New arrivals have come on homemade rafts, mainly during the *balseo* crisis in 1994, and others come through the lottery system. Some overstay their visas when they come for visits, and others go to a third country first and successfully enter the United States later. As the old Cubans leave and Latin Americans from other countries and new Cubans continue to come to Union City, the city changes. Now, besides the Cuban cafeteria known for its great “sandwich cubano,” there is also the *pupusería* restaurant, where El Salvadoran *arepa*, or soaked maize, is sold. At the same time, what is Cuban is also changing. New Cuban arrivals are bringing

different elements of Cuban culture that were underrepresented before. One example is the growing Afro-Cuban presence, notably in religious forms but also culturally. *Botánicas* and Afro-Cuban clubs are part of the new Union City. At the same time, many of the organizations discussed before are declining because of the Cuban exodus from the area. In terms of economics, Cuban businesses are less visible, although Cuban capital is still dominant. For example, Cubans are the realtors, the ones other immigrants pay their rents to.

Union City is not so Cuban anymore. Why? Demographically, the Cuban migration of 1959 to this country was “older” than other Latin American migrations. Many of the early Cuban migrants have died. Others have left for Florida or moved to more affluent New Jersey suburbs. Historically, one of the most important factors in the dispersion of immigrants is upward mobility. Sociologists talk about queuing theory in immigration where groups are continually replaced as previous ones move up in the socioeconomic ladder. Cubans, then, are no different.

The recently arrived Cubans in Union City are bringing a piece of the island’s culture. They seem to be less political. There is a need to study the various ways in which these new Cubans become integrated into their new environment. For one thing, the recently arrived Cubans have more of a relationship with their country of origin and with their families in Cuba. A loosening of restrictions by the Obama administration about family travel and remittances allows for more contact. Also, the newly adopted migration reform in Cuba is already having an impact on Cubans’ movements across the state of Florida. This recent migration is more transnational in nature than the earlier Cuban exodus. The fact that newly arrived Cubans want to maintain a close relationship with their families and with Cuba is having a political

repercussion in Cuban areas in the United States. Cubans are supporting political candidates who will open up relations with the island. The Cuban participation in the 2012 presidential elections in the United States is one and perhaps the best example.