

# RECENT CUBAN EMIGRATION AND ITS PRINCIPAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REPERCUSSIONS

ALEJANDRO PORTES AND RYAN BAGWELL

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BRIEFINGS ON CUBA

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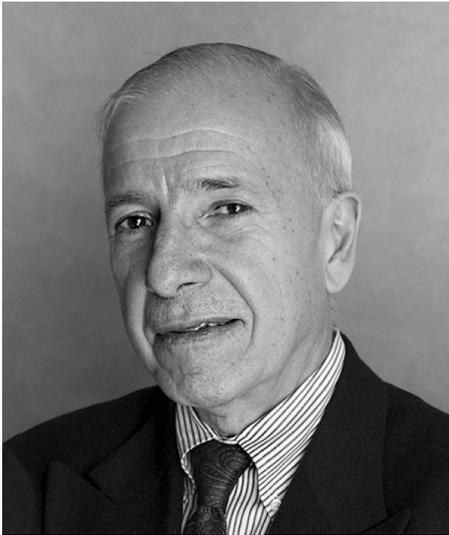
## Foreword

CasaCuba, the Cuban Research Institute (CRI), and the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU) are proud to continue the publication of *Briefings on Cuba*. The purpose of this series is to provide up-to-date analyses of Cuban politics, economy, culture, and society, by leading Cuba experts, often including public policy recommendations. This is the fourth instance of the series, inaugurated in 2020, with two essays by Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Rafael Rojas, and another by Ruth Behar, published in 2022.

In this briefing, Dr. Alejandro Portes and Ryan Bagwell review the history of the Cuban exodus to the United States since 1959, focusing on the differences between the first two waves of refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, and those who came aboard the Mariel exodus of 1980. The authors document the persistent gaps in income between pre- and post-Mariel immigrants in the United States. They then turn their attention to the current wave of immigrants from Cuba, which has displaced the number of arrivals during the Mariel boatlift, with almost 225,000 immigrants between 2021 and 2022. Portes and Bagwell conclude that Cuban migration is likely to continue indefinitely into the future, given the strong family and economic ties between Cuba and South Florida, as well as the generalized poverty and political repression on the Island. Nothing less than reforming the U.S. asylum system will slow down major changes in Cuba or the current migrant flow from Cuba.

*Jorge Duany*, Director, Cuban Research Institute  
*Anthony Pereira*, Director, Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center

## About the Authors



[Alejandro Portes](#) is a Professor of Law and distinguished scholar of Arts and Sciences at the University of Miami and Howard Harrison and Gabrielle S. Beck Professor of Sociology (emeritus) at Princeton University. Born in Havana, Cuba, he came to the United States in 1960 as a political exile. He received his Ph.D. and M.A. in Sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and his B.A. in Sociology from Creighton University. He taught at the universities of Illinois-Urbana, Texas-Austin, Duke, and Johns Hopkins before joining Princeton. In 1998, he was elected President of the American Sociological Association and in 2001 he became a member of the National Academy of Sciences. He has published approximately 275 books and articles on comparative urbanization, national development, immigration and ethnicity, and economic sociology. In 2019, he received the Princess of Asturias Prize from the Kingdom of Spain.



[Ryan Bagwell](#) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Miami. He focuses on the intersection of race, sports, media, crime, and organizations through a multidisciplinary approach. He completed his M.A. in Sociology at California State University-Fullerton.

In Miami, if one throws a stone, chances are that, more often than not, it falls on top of a Cuban restaurant.  
-Popular refrain

One of the most notable features of the durable Cuban revolutionary regime has been its reliance on emigration at key moments in its political and economic evolution. Opposite to the experience of other countries behind the now defunct Iron Curtain, Cuba never endeavored to keep its population tightly secured within the Island. From the very start of the Revolution, Fidel Castro let dissidents escape, heaping contempt on them as “worms” and confiscating their properties, but allowing them to depart.

This singular attitude, contrasting with other Soviet bloc countries that Cuba joined, had many advantages, but also risks. The Cuban government benefited by increasing its internal political control through expelling opponents and, in the process, appropriating their wealth. On the risk side, these groups concentrated across the Strait of Florida organized militantly and sought to retake the country. Fidel despised these efforts and never feared them much. He was proven right in April 1961 by the swift defeat of the exiles’ invasion brigade by the Cuban armed forces.

The Cuban regime was consolidated by the solution of the Missile Crisis of 1962, by which the United States committed itself not to invade the Island in exchange for the removal of Soviet rockets from it. Thereafter Cuba had little to fear, militarily and politically, from its exiled population. After 1962, the United States, and especially South Florida, became a convenient disposal ground where revolutionary authorities could dump the disaffected within the country at regular times.

For this purpose, the Cuban regime adopted the practice of periodically opening a harbor to allow dissidents to leave. One early rehearsal took place in the Port of Camarioca in the north coast of Matanzas Province in the fall of 1965, when close to 3,000 people left the Island on boats rented or bought by Cubans already living in the United States. The Camarioca episode served as a precedent for the much larger Mariel episode of 1980. This well-known event started with a political commotion in Havana, as hundreds of Cubans climbed the fences of the unprotected Peruvian embassy seeking asylum from the regime. Rather than keeping them bottled up in the embassy, the Cuban regime opened the Port of Mariel, inviting relations of those wanting to leave the Island to come pick them up.

It was a masterful political move, compounded by the government’s decision to empty its jails of petty criminals and packing them on the boats of the unsuspecting arriving exiles along with other “undesirables.” In one fell swoop, the Cuban government relieved internal political pressure, proved to the outside world its openness and willingness to compromise, and got rid of tens of thousands of “scum,” as both the political escapees and the common criminals were labeled.

Another plus for the regime was the way in which Mariel permanently tarnished the image of the exile population in the United States. Whereas U.S. opinion previously regarded Cubans as a “model minority” and the “builders of the new Miami,” it demoted them to the lowest range in the U.S. ethnic/racial hierarchy as potential criminals and vagrants. For example, a 1981 Gallup poll found that Americans considered Cubans to be the second less desirable group of neighbors, after members of religious cults. The effects of Mariel on Miami and, in particular, on its exile community, were profound and last to our days. Suddenly cast in an extremely negative public light, many pre-Mariel Cuban exiles responded by creating economic and social distance from the new arrivals. The derogatory term, *Marielito*, made its appearance at that time. The networks of co-ethnic economic assistance and support, which had been so crucial for the survival and subsequent ascent of earlier exiles, were withdrawn from the Mariel arrivals.

With time, this new population became gradually incorporated into the South Florida economy, but the damage was already done. The Cuban exile community of Miami became progressively bifurcated into the pre-1980 exiles and their offspring—almost uniformly White and quite successful in the U.S. entrepreneurial, artistic, and academic worlds—and Mariel and post-Mariel arrivals often relegated to the working class and to fringe municipalities in the Miami metropolitan area. As seen in Table 1, the personal and family incomes of pre-Mariel Cubans doubled those of Mariel and post-Mariel arrivals by 2010. Incomes of pre-1980 Cubans and their offspring topped \$90,000 per year, significantly higher than the average for the entire Miami metropolitan area population and almost double the figure for Mariel and post-Mariel refugees.

**Table 1**  
**Family Incomes by Racial/Ethnic Groups**  
**in the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale Metropolitan Area, 2010**

	Total MSA	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Pre-1980 Cuban-born	1980 and Post-1980 Cuban-born	U.S.-born of Cuban Parentage	Other Hispanic	Others
Annual Family Average Income (\$)	79,797	101,697	63,147	98,508	56,887	90,820	64,349	83,937

Source: Alejandro Portes and Ariel Armony, *The Global Edge: Miami in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), Table 11.

For many years, the Cuban government remained unaware of the rift that its policies had caused in the exile community. For it, that population was an undifferentiated whole of defectors led by an increasingly anti-communist cabal of politicians. The city and its environs remained essentially a dumping ground for the disaffected. However, the partition of the exile community since the Mariel episode began to have significant social and economic consequences for Cuba as time went by.

By 2010, the pre-1980 Cuban population of Miami was at par with native Whites in terms of yearly family incomes. By contrast, the post-1980 Cuban population suffered a significant economic handicap—a deficit of U.S. \$14,302 for those who arrived between 1980 and 1989 and an insurmountable \$30,6453 for those who came after 1990. These negative figures held even after controlling for gender, U.S. work experience, and type of employment (self-employed). Such economic differences translated into spatial settlement patterns and what may be called “life projects.” The old exile population and its children settled in upper-middle and upper-class areas of Miami-Dade, including Coral Gables, Coconut Grove, and Kendall. Mariel and post-Miami refugees went to live in working-class communities—initially the inner-city area eventually baptized as “Little Havana” and then sizable municipalities such as Hialeah.



In terms of “life projects,” the pre-1980 exiles gradually abandoned their hopes of return and settled into their new American lives. Their tangible economic success devolved into attendance by many of their offspring of private bilingual schools in Miami and then entrance into elite U.S. universities. Gradually, concerns with Cuba and the hope of return faded away. Older exiles died off and their progeny turned increasingly to their American lives and goals. For them, Cuba became, steadily, a nostalgic and fading memory.

Not so for the newer refugees. They had been educated under the Revolution and their departure was motivated much less by the goal of defeating it politically than by that of allowing their families to live in better conditions. For this purpose, once they got settled in Miami or elsewhere in the United States and found employment, one of their first priorities was to send money remittances and other material aid to their relatives on the Island. A steady flow of resources followed, gaining quantitative and qualitative importance as time went by.

The older exile community generally took a dire view of these activities, regarding them as a significant benefit for the Cuban regime. “They are not like us,” wealthy exile matrons told one of the authors, while prominent members of the Cuban American political machine, including Florida Senator Marco Rubio, more than once sought to stem the inflow. Clear evidence of the rift between the two blocks of the exile community came in January 2017 when, shortly before leaving office, President Barack Obama suspended the “wet foot, dry foot” policy of allowing free entry into the United States for Cubans who arrived at the southern border. Not one voice in the powerful Cuban American political establishment of Miami rose in opposition to this measure. Although they were predominantly Republican and the cessation of the inflow had been decreed by a Democratic president, this policy change agreed fundamentally with their own point of view. Precious little sympathy was found in most of the old exile community to the life project of its younger compatriots.

## Our Colony of Miami?

In 1928, Leland H. Jenks, a reputed U.S. historian, published *Our Cuban Colony*, a book that chronicled the profound dependence of the Island and its prime industry, sugar, on the United States. This book became a classic and went on to serve as reference material for later economists and historians. It took a single lifetime, 63 years of revolutionary government in Cuba, to turn the tables. In more than one way, Miami became a colony of the Island. Old-time exiles would surely find this statement absurd, and they would be joined in that judgement by most social scientists and journalists—but consider the facts.

First is the concentration of the Cuban expatriate population. By 2020, the U.S. Census reported that 1,150,061 Cuban-born persons resided in the Miami metropolitan area, a figure that more than doubled the sum total of Cubans living in the next fourteen largest areas of concentration, including New York City, Jersey City, Tampa-St. Petersburg, and Orlando. Of the 73,040 persons granted lawful permanent U.S. residence in Miami-Dade County in 2019, the last year before the pandemic, one-third (23,781) were Cubans, the figure being far larger than any other nationality, including Haitians, Jamaicans, and Venezuelans. Over 90 percent of Cubans admitted as refugees at the southern border before the end of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy in 2017 intended to move to South Florida.



Second, the demographics of the Cuban population of Miami have changed steadily with the gradual disappearance of the pre-1980 exile population and its substitution by more recent arrivals that, by now, constitute the majority. Third, the “life project” of this more recent population, as seen previously, does not focus on primarily defeating the Revolution but on aiding kin and friends on the Island. Now consider the parallel with colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leaving their European home countries—Spain, Portugal, England, and France—to settle in the Americas. They came to make their fortunes and indeed many succeeded in that goal. Their home countries encouraged this migration for the wealth it created and eventually brought back to the metropolis.

In parallel fashion, many Cubans emigrate today to make their fortunes in the United States, largely for the benefit of those left behind. While, for many years, the Cuban government considered Miami just a dumping ground for dissidents, in more recent times, its leaders have become increasingly aware of the economic significance of the remittances in hard currency and in goods of all kinds, as well as the growing commercial traffic with South Florida. This traffic—formal and informal—is evident in the areas of greater Cuban concentration in South Florida. With a Cuban-born population of 176,616 in 2020, Hialeah teems with all kinds of small businesses with connections to the Island—from travel agencies to auto shops that package replacement parts for Soviet Ladas and ancient U.S. car models for transport by returnees to the Island.

A final phenomenon illustrates the parallel of Miami to the old European colonies in the Americas. In the nineteenth century, many enriched Spanish colonists in Cuba returned to their mother country to the applauses of families and the cities where they settled, such as Barcelona and Seville. There they were then known as *indianos*. By an ironic twist of history, the new *indianos* now come from Miami to be received with gratitude and admiration by the families and communities left behind.

## Recent Developments

In October 2022, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported that 224,607 unauthorized citizens of Cuba had been apprehended seeking to enter the United States during fiscal year 2022, which began in October 2021. That figure is about 99,800 more than the total arrivals during the massive Mariel exodus of 1980. Reasons for this development are worth noting. The situation of generalized poverty and intense political repression has continued in Cuba and actually increased after the harsh official reaction to the public protests of July 11, 2021. Indeed, the “push” to leave the Island has been a near constant, only getting worse in recent months. The key factor governing emigration, however, is what happens at the receiving end. The termination of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy in 2017 seemed to spell the end of near free entry at the border, leaving only penurious and expensive ways of leaving the Island such as visa processing at the U.S. Consulate in Georgetown, Guyana.

Then a new ray of hope appeared with the discovery by desperate Central Americans of the complex and dysfunctional U.S. asylum system. By law, any person arriving at the border and claiming asylum is entitled to a hearing. If not immediately deported for an obvious false claim, the person then enters the asylum system. Incapable of housing so many people at the U.S.-Mexico border, Border Patrol and Customs and Border Protection (CPB) agents then release the person, often with a tracking device, but otherwise free to go anywhere in the country. Given the backlog of cases, court dates assigned to asylum claimants are often months away and the process can extend for years, because of legal rights to appeal denegation of asylum by a CBP officer or an immigration judge. The complexities of the asylum system mean that a person can remain legally in the United States for a longer period than legal temporary immigrants arriving through established channels.

For Cubans, the Kafkaesque character of the U.S. asylum system is still more advantageous because of the Cuban Adjustment Act, a relic of the Cold War from the 1960s, which entitles any Cuban person who has lived in the United States for one year and a day to claim legal residence. The Act was never abolished and, in combination with the slow asylum processing system, provides a ready means to gain legal permanent residence in the United States.

No mystery then about the quantum increase of Cuban outmigration in recent months. Not surprising either that the bulk of new arrivals—about 225,000 in the last fiscal year—are single adults, mostly men sent by their families to make their futures in the United States. Unless the situation changes at either end of the flow, it can be predicted to continue indefinitely into the future. New Cuban asylum-seekers would move, almost inevitably, to South Florida, there to increase the low-wage labor force and reinforce the peculiar colonial relationship of Miami with its unsuspected island metropolis.

For over half a century now, the relationship between Cuba and South Florida has moved in multiple directions and gone from one extreme to the other. The peculiarly named “wet foot, dry foot” policy, agreed upon by the Cuban and U.S. governments to put an end to the “rafter crisis” of 1994, allowed a steady flow of escapees from the Island for over two decades. The termination of that policy in 2017 would have seemed to spell the end of mass Cuban emigration. This has not been the case for reasons explained in this brief. Each episode in this long saga has come about suddenly and unexpectedly. Based on that history, it is likely that new surprising developments will take place in the future.

As of October 2022, the policy of the Biden Administration amounts to a de facto continuation of the “wet foot, dry foot” policy in which Cubans apprehended at sea are normally returned to the Island, while those arriving at the southern border are let in. The change in status, from “refugee” to “asylum seeker,” is purely nominal since, after a year and a day, they become eligible for permanent U.S. residence. The present Democratic administration appears helpless to stem the Cuban inflow, as it does the much larger one from Venezuela. Only a drastic reform of the U.S. asylum system would modify the situation. Until that happens, Cubans and others will continue to avail themselves of what many perceive as their only and golden opportunity to enter the promised land. Of late, the Department of Homeland Security has announced a complex program of cooperation with Mexico to send back Venezuelans (not Cubans) who fail to comply with a series of requisites for entry. It is unlikely that, as framed at present, the program will succeed in stemming the flow.

If the U.S. asylum system is reformed, a better policy would be to maintain and expand the program of orderly departures set up by both governments after the “rafter crisis” of 1994. This would allow individuals and families wishing to leave the Island to do so in a legal dignified manner, avoiding the enormous risks of crossing several countries in order to arrive at the U.S. southern border.

## FIU CasaCuba

CasaCuba at Florida International University is bringing together scholars, policymakers, business leaders, students, and the community at large to realize a multidimensional Cuban cultural center and think tank that facilitates the discussion and study of Cuban affairs - history, policy, business - and the celebration of the Cuban heritage. CasaCuba has attracted influential board members, recruited a uniquely qualified team, secured a prominent site on campus, and received significant philanthropic support, including prestigious grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Florida Division of Arts and Culture of the Florida Department of State. CasaCuba will feature galleries for interactive exhibits, as well as a state-of-the-art venue for events, performances, and dynamic programming.

## Cuban Research Institute

FIU's Cuban Research Institute (CRI) is dedicated to creating and disseminating knowledge about Cuba and its diaspora. The institute encourages original research and interdisciplinary teaching, organizes extracurricular activities, collaborates with other academic units working in Cuban and Cuban American studies, and promotes the development of library holdings and collections on Cuba and its diaspora. Founded in 1991, CRI is the nation's premier center for academic research and public programs on Cuban and Cuban-American issues. No other U.S. university surpasses FIU in the number of professors and students of Cuban origin.

## Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center

The Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at FIU was founded in 1979 to promote the study of Latin America and the Caribbean in Florida and throughout the United States. By forging linkages across the Americas through high quality education, LACC's research is aimed at better understanding and addressing the most urgent problems confronting the region. LACC is designated by the US Department of Education, funded by Title VI, as a National Resource Center on Latin America, recognizing it as one of the top Latin American and Caribbean Centers in the country. LACC draws upon the expertise of one of the largest concentrations of Latin American and Caribbean Studies scholars of any university in the country, spanning a multitude of disciplines across colleges.

# Briefings on Cuba

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[casacuba.fiu.edu](http://casacuba.fiu.edu)

305-348-6631 | [casacuba@fiu.edu](mailto:casacuba@fiu.edu)

[cri.fiu.edu](http://cri.fiu.edu)

305-348-1991 | [cri@fiu.edu](mailto:cri@fiu.edu)

[lacc.fiu.edu](http://lacc.fiu.edu)

305-348-2894 | [lacc@fiu.edu](mailto:lacc@fiu.edu)