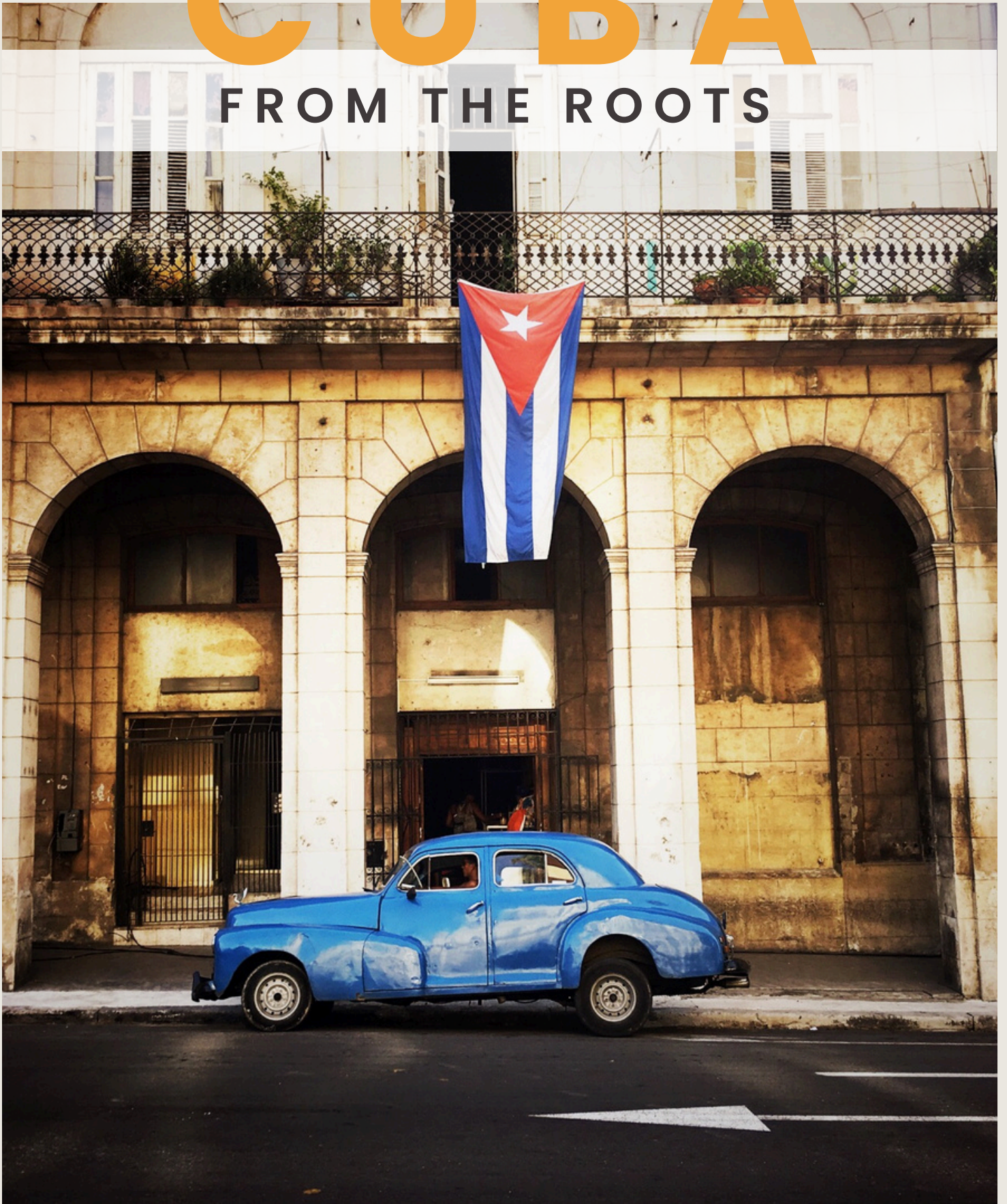


# CUBA

FROM THE ROOTS



## PURPOSE OF THE BACKGROUND

This backgrounder provides information about recent Cuban history, current country conditions, displacement challenges, and the experiences of Cuban nationals in the United States and other parts of the Americas. It aims to help U.S. resettlement agencies (RAs), local affiliates, service providers, and practitioners better understand and support Cuban migrants, newcomers, and refugees in the United States.

As the number of Cubans arriving in the United States continues to increase, this document can help service providers understand the cultural heritage of Cuban newcomers and migrants and provide them with culturally responsive services. Note that the document simplifies complex historical and traumatic events and does not fully represent all Cubans' needs, experiences, and challenges. Individual experiences, demands, and needs may differ and should receive full consideration.

This backgrounder is based on research papers, news articles, and reports from specialized organizations. The citations list the references used in the preparation of the backgrounder.



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CUBA FROM THE ROOTS:

# INTRODUCTION



**This backgrounder explores Cuba’s dynamic history and its impact on current conditions, tracing the island’s journey from early European contact in 1492 through its revolutionary era to the present day.**

The backgrounder outlines the legal pathways and protection in the United States for Cuban newcomers and provides an overview of the federal benefits for certain Cuban nationals, refugees, and other humanitarian migrants.

The backgrounder summarizes Cuba’s cultural landscape. Further, it discusses the country’s human rights record related to education, economic policies, and civic engagement, given the impact of ongoing concerns with human rights violations around civic action and government crackdown on dissent. This document further explores Cuban displacement and resettlement in the United States, including four major migration waves and more recent changes in migration routes and policies.



## SUMMARY OF CUBA'S HISTORY

The Republic of Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea. Cuba is situated west of the North Atlantic Ocean, east of the Gulf of Mexico, and south of the Straits of Florida. It lies northwest of the Windward Passage, approximately 50 miles west of Haiti, and northeast of the Yucatán Channel. Its geographic position, situated just 90 miles from the United States of America, grants it geopolitical significance in relations between the United States and the Caribbean more broadly. Cuba's geographical position also makes the island vulnerable during hurricane season, which officially runs from June 1 to November 30.

1492–1898

## EUROPEAN ARRIVALS AND SPANISH COLONIZATION



In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived in Cuba and famously proclaimed, “This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen.” By 1521, Cuba had been colonized as part of the Spanish Empire. During colonization, gold mining was the primary enterprise. Inhumane conditions under colonial oppression led to mass deaths among Cuba’s indigenous population; other indigenous people fled Cuba by sea.

In response, colonizers enslaved hundreds of thousands of Africans and forced them to work in the burgeoning sugar cane industry.<sup>2</sup> The cohabitation of European colonizers with enslaved Africans and remaining Taíno, Ciboney, and Guanajatabey peoples led to a multiracial population.

On October 10, 1868, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes del Castillo, a sugar mill and plantation owner, became a pioneer in the abolition movement when he made “El Grito de Yara” (The Cry of Yara) by releasing those he had enslaved and declaring the fight for Cuba’s independence.<sup>3</sup> This declaration sparked what became known as “The Ten Years’ War.” Céspedes later became the Republic of Cuba in Arms’ first president, honored as “The Father of the Country.” The Ten Years’ War was followed by the “Little War” from 1879 to 1880, and the Cuban War of Independence from 1895 to 1898.<sup>4</sup>

## 1898–1925

# END OF SPANISH IMPERIAL CONTROL AND U.S. INTERVENTION

Cuba's Independence War was led by prominent Cuban patriots such as General Antonio Maceo and nationalist philosopher José Martí who both fought on the battlefield and traveled abroad to garner support and crucial funding for their cause, including from the United States.<sup>5</sup> In response, Spain dispatched General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, known as "the Butcher," to crush the insurgency. Weyler implemented a brutal policy of relocating civilians to camps near military outposts, resulting in the deaths of over 100,000 Cubans from starvation and disease.<sup>6</sup> American outrage over these events just 90 miles from their shores escalated U.S. diplomatic and military involvement.<sup>7</sup>

On February 15, 1898, the battleship USS Maine exploded and sank in Havana Harbor under suspicious circumstances.<sup>8</sup> A United States Naval Court of Inquiry later determined on March 28, 1898, that the Maine was destroyed by an underwater mine explosion.<sup>9</sup> This explosion led to a naval blockade imposed by the United States, demanding that Spain withdraw from Cuba. Historians have frequently framed this event as a pretext for U.S. intervention.<sup>10</sup>



Spain left Cuba after its defeat in 1898. The United States assumed control, and, by 1902, Cuba established a new government under U.S. supervision. This supervision, dictated by the Platt Amendment, granted the United States significant influence over Cuban international and domestic affairs. Per the amendment, the United States was allowed to lease or buy lands to establish naval bases (including Guantánamo Bay) and coaling stations in Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

## 1925–1959

### U.S. INVOLVEMENT AND BATISTA'S REGIME

Gerardo Machado served as President of the Republic of Cuba from 1925–1933. Machado campaigned against the Platt Amendment, which was officially repealed in 1934.<sup>12 13</sup> The amendment's full repeal remains a topic debated among historians, given the ongoing presence of the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay.

Despite his pledge to not seek reelection, Machado amended the constitution to extend his rule by another six years. This pursuit of power, coupled with economic depression, famine, and harsh repression of dissent led to a massive protest in 1933, forcing Machado to flee the country.<sup>14</sup>

On September 4, 1933, a military group led by Fulgencio Batista staged a coup d'état, seizing control of the Army.<sup>15</sup> Batista rose to power over the 1940s and led Cuba from 1952–1959.<sup>16</sup> Under Batista's dictatorial regime, Cuba's casinos and nightlife made it a top destination for many American tourists. While the island's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita ranked 7th among Latin America's economies, widespread economic inequality disproportionately affected Black Cubans and rural inhabitants. These conditions fueled intense discontent, especially among young people who desired change.<sup>17</sup>

In 1953, Marxist revolutionary Fidel Castro Ruz led an attack on the Moncada Barracks alongside anti-Batista recruits and other revolutionary leaders, including his brother Raúl Castro.<sup>18</sup> The assault failed, and Castro was imprisoned for nearly two years.<sup>19</sup> Upon his release, Castro traveled to Mexico where he befriended the Argentine revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara.<sup>20</sup> In 1956, Castro, Guevara, Raúl Castro, and 82 other men returned to Cuba aboard the yacht *Granma*.<sup>21</sup> Batista's forces were prepared, and the resulting conflict saw many casualties. Survivors, including Castro, regrouped in the Sierra Maestra mountains to engage in guerrilla warfare. Castro and his allies gained support and gradually expanded their forces, eventually leading to victory.

## 1959–2024

### CUBAN REVOLUTION AND ITS LEGACY

On January 8, 1959, revolutionary fighters led by Fidel Castro entered Havana, marking the beginning of Castro's official leadership.<sup>22</sup> The Castro brothers' regime's six-decade control over Cuba, which nationalized every sector of Cuban society, is widely considered one of the longest-running dictatorships of the last century. In 2019, Raúl Castro, who succeeded Fidel Castro as leader of Cuba, was replaced by Miguel Díaz-Canel as first secretary of the Communist Party, the highest political entity of the country by law. The Castros' political party remains in power.<sup>23</sup> Cuba continues to grapple with its most profound economic crisis in decades, and numerous human rights violations persist.<sup>24</sup>





# CULTURE

Culture and Lifestyle



Cuba's culture has been profoundly impacted by its history. Christianity, especially Catholicism, is the main religion in Cuba. However, part of the population also practices the Yoruba religion, known as Santeria, which developed in Cuba during the late 19th century.

After Castro came to power in 1959, all religions were forbidden. Religion was no longer allowed in schools, and Castro declared Cuba an atheist state.<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II's visit in 1998 prompted the regime to show more tolerance toward religious practices.<sup>26</sup> Today, approximately 60 percent of the population identifies as Catholic.<sup>27</sup>

The prevalence of dance in Cuban culture traces back to the island's colonial past, where the fusion of European and African cultures gave birth to iconic dances such as danzón, mambo, cha-cha-cha, rumba, and salsa.

Sports are significant in Cuban culture, particularly baseball. Since the late 19th century, baseball has been ingrained in Cuban society, producing many talented players such as Martin Dihigo, Tony Perez, and Cristobal Corriente, who have excelled internationally.

Cuban cuisine is renowned for its distinctive sazón (seasoning) and cortadito coffee. Ropa vieja (stewed beef) is a celebrated dish that is often served with rice and black beans. Another traditional favorite is white rice, black beans, pork, and plantains, typically enjoyed during New Year celebrations.





# RIGHTS

Human Rights



## ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Cuba is a totalitarian state. The Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) is the only political party allowed in the country's constitution. Article 5 of the Constitution of Cuba establishes that the PCC is the "superior leading force of society and the State."<sup>28</sup> While elections are held, they are not truly democratic, as they are held within a single-party system with limited candidate choices, restricted political freedoms, and controlled media, which prevents genuine political competition and dissent.<sup>29</sup> Candidates are vetted and selected by government-run commissions. Only the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) candidates are allowed. No Cuban citizens who live abroad may vote.

## EDUCATION SYSTEM

In September 1960, Fidel Castro announced during his speech at the United Nations Assembly his intention to eradicate illiteracy in Cuba.<sup>30</sup> By December 1961, the government declared Cuba free of illiteracy. Academic achievement levels remain among the highest compared to other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>31</sup>

Though subjects like mathematics, biology, and physics are included in the academic curriculum, schooling is otherwise heavily shaped by communist ideology.<sup>32</sup>

In secondary education, students are also evaluated on their engagement in patriotic activities, such as attending marches in support of government political campaigns. For instance, during the Elián González incident in the 1990s, where the question of a five-year-old boy's repatriation to Cuba from Miami sparked international legal debate, schools introduced a mandatory course titled "Patriotic Duties." Failure to participate in marches advocating for Elián's return to Cuba could result in failing the course and repeating the academic year.<sup>33</sup>

While education is accessible to the population in Cuba, wages, even for professionals, are extremely low. Teacher hirings have declined significantly due to extremely low salaries, impacting the quality of education. Doctors earn \$30 a month or less.<sup>34</sup> These professionals are also required to complete years of mandatory social service, and their services are sold to other countries for substantial sums, of which they receive only a small fraction.<sup>35</sup> Upon graduating from university or a technical school, many professionals end up working in better-paying tourism industry jobs. For example, a taxi driver in Cuba can earn significantly more in tips than a doctor earns in salary.

## ECONOMY

For decades, Cuba's gross domestic product (GDP) has consistently underperformed. After the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in 1989, the nation experienced a 33% decline in its GDP.<sup>36</sup> Although tourism, production in sugar and agriculture, nickel mining, and health care services provide financial gains, the economy continues to decline. The private sector is highly limited, with government restrictions on small businesses and investments. For decades, the Cuban government has attributed this downturn to the U.S. embargo, known in Cuba as "*el bloqueo*" or "the blockade."<sup>37</sup>

On March 22, 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama made a historic visit to Cuba, known as the Cuban Thaw.<sup>38</sup> Despite the embargo remaining under congressional authority, Obama used executive action to relax some sanctions. Many hoped this would herald positive change for Cubans, while others were skeptical. Although restrictions against travel to the island and certain imports and exports were eased, these measures have not alleviated ongoing human rights violations affecting the Cuban people nor their economic situation.

More recently, with worldwide COVID-19 travel restrictions and the economy's heavy reliance on tourism, the crisis has worsened. In 2020, the national debt was \$19.7 billion and has since continued to grow. Furthermore, Cuba's dependence on Venezuela for essential resources such as petroleum is further complicated by Venezuela's profound economic crisis. These interrelated factors underscore Cuba's recent substantial economic challenges.





Many Cubans struggle to afford necessities such as cooking oil, bread, medicines, clothes, or toilet paper. Cubans, however, have met this lack of resources with inventiveness. For example, the scarcity of gasoline and transportation has led to innovations like water-motor-propelled bicycles, among other creative solutions.<sup>39</sup>

The country operates with a dual currency system comprising the Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Freely Convertible Currency (MLC). During the economic crisis of the early 1990s, known as the Special Period, Cuba introduced the Cuban convertible peso (CUC). Originally intended for use in tourism and foreign transactions, the CUC has gradually been phased out due to inefficiencies. Recently, the government implemented the MLC, a digital currency, used in specific stores to purchase imported and higher-quality goods not commonly available for purchase with CUP. However, these goods are priced significantly higher, often twice as much as average monthly salaries and pensions, which are some of the lowest in the Americas.

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND CIVIC ACTION

For Cubans, obtaining unbiased information has been an ongoing challenge. Until recent years, Cuba broadcasted only two government-controlled television channels. While opportunities for information have broadened, the government continues to monopolize the television, radio, and newspapers. Internet access is similarly restricted and heavily censored, with all content under government control.<sup>40</sup> To navigate these limitations, many Cubans depend on relatives in other countries to buy them prepaid mobile phones from a non-Cuban carrier.<sup>41</sup>

Despite restrictions and high costs, the use of the Internet has provided a newfound gateway to information for Cubans. Gradually, the veil of censorship is being lifted, allowing Cubans to use the Internet to resist oppression, advocate for freedom of speech, and expose human rights violations.

2021

## MASS PROTESTS

On July 11, 2021, widespread protests erupted across Cuba amid one of its severest economic crises in history.<sup>42</sup> Citizens took to the streets to voice grievances over food shortages, power outages, soaring prices, and inadequate health care worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The peaceful protests quickly spread across the country as demonstrators used their phones to livestream and share videos on social media, which rapidly gained viral attention. Videos depicted a passionate populace demanding freedom and better living conditions. They chanted “freedom” and “homeland and life” (*patria y vida*), an inversion of the longtime government slogan “homeland or death” (*patria o muerte*). In response, President Miguel Díaz-Canel said, “We call on all revolutionaries to go to the streets to defend the revolution.” “The order to fight has been given.”<sup>43</sup>

The government severed Internet access, and security forces used tear gas, physical violence, and mass arrests against protestors. Hundreds, including children, were arrested; many now face up to 25 years in prison for sedition. Survivors reported being detained for extended periods without being permitted contact with family or attorneys, suffering beatings from members of the military and intelligence services, and undergoing criminal proceedings overseen by biased prosecutors and judges.<sup>44</sup> In the ensuing days, Cuban exiles, along with people of various nationalities in Miami, Spain, across Latin America, and around the world, joined in protests in solidarity with those in Cuba.





# MIGRATION

Migratory History and Immigration Waves



## 1959

### **POST-REVOLUTION**

The 1959 revolution triggered a significant wave of emigration, spearheaded by members of Batista's government and military, who feared reprisals, as well as individuals with resources who were concerned about the direction of Castro's revolution. Nearly 250,000 fled the island. This wave was dubbed the Golden Exile because many immigrants belonged to upper and middle classes of Cuban society.<sup>45</sup> According to the U.S. Social Security Administration, about 87,000 Cubans registered at the Miami refugee center from February through December 1961.<sup>46</sup>

## 1960–1962

### **OPERATION PEDRO PAN (PETER PAN)**

The initial reforms implemented by Cuban revolutionaries focused on restructuring the education system, which stirred concerns among parents regarding potential communist indoctrination of children. In response, Cuban parents sent thousands of children, ranging from infants to teenagers, to the United States through Operation Pedro Pan.

Since there was no U.S. embassy in Cuba after the revolution, the U.S. State Department partnered with the Catholic Church to grant children special visas to safely come to the United States by themselves. Each child was allowed only one 40-pound bag of possessions. Many children stayed with family members in Miami until their parents arrived. Others, who did not have families in the United States, stayed in orphanages run by the Catholic Church, after which they were placed with foster families. During Operation Pedro Pan, an estimated 14,000 to 16,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors were relocated to the United States.<sup>47</sup>

## 1961–1962

### **BAY OF PIGS AND MISSILE CRISIS**

On April 17, 1961, 1,400 Cuban exiles supported by the CIA and trained in Guatemala launched an invasion at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of Cuba, with hopes of toppling Castro. Although President Kennedy provided some support, many of the Cuban exiles who launched the invasion were killed and others captured. Ultimately, Castro agreed to exchange the prisoners for \$53 million worth of baby food and medicine.<sup>48</sup>

The Cuban government's victory bolstered Cuba's ties with the Soviet Union, culminating in what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis—a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. On October 16, 1962, President Kennedy disclosed the discovery of nuclear missiles in Cuba, which led to intense diplomatic negotiations as military preparations unfolded between the United States and the Soviet Union, pushing global tensions to the brink of nuclear warfare.<sup>49</sup>

This led to the second U.S. naval blockade of Cuba. The situation eventually de-escalated through diplomatic efforts.

Following the Missile Crisis, between 1962 and 1965, an estimated 6,700 Cubans traveling mostly by small craft and makeshift boats (*balseros*) arrived in Florida. In addition, nearly 56,000 Cubans migrated to the United States from other countries like Mexico and Spain, which maintained diplomatic relations with Cuba.<sup>50</sup>

## 1965–1973

### **FREEDOM FLIGHTS AND CUBAN ADJUSTMENT ACT**

Tensions between Cuba and the United States continued to escalate, and commercial transportation between the two countries was suspended until 1965.<sup>51</sup> On October 10, 1965, the Cuban government unilaterally opened the port of Camarioca, allowing nearly 4,500 people to leave before closing it again on November 15. This was the first of three major events in which the Cuban government allowed people to leave the island without U.S. authorization.<sup>52</sup>

Because Camarioca ushered a second migration wave, and to prevent further maritime disasters connected to the increase in boat travel, the U.S. government initiated the “Freedom Flights” between the port of Varadero and Miami in December 1965.<sup>53</sup> These flights, operated by Pan American Airlines, took 3,000 to 4,000 Cuban refugees per month to the United States until April 1973. In total, over 260,000 Cubans migrated to American soil during that eight-year period.<sup>54</sup>

In 1966, Congress passed the bipartisan Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA), which granted work authorization permits and lawful permanent residency to any Cuban native or citizen who had resided in the United States for at least one year and met other legal eligibility requirements. Millions of Cubans have benefitted from the CAA.

## 1980

### **PERUVIAN EMBASSY AND THE MARIEL BOAT LIFT**

In April 1980, six asylum-seeking Cubans crashed into the gate of the Peruvian embassy in Havana. When the gates remained open, over 10,000 people followed suit.<sup>55</sup> Castro allowed those who wished to depart to leave through the Port of Mariel. Thousands of boats came from the United States to retrieve loved ones in an event called the “Mariel Boat Lift.” The 126,000 refugees who left during this boat lift were called “Marielitos.”<sup>56</sup>

Several thousand of these newcomers had been convicted of crimes in Cuba, while others were found “mentally incompetent.” This group, deemed “excludables,” was not granted parole.<sup>57</sup>

1994

## EL MALECONAZO AND THE BALSEROS EXODUS

In the 1990s, Cuba faced formidable challenges exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its economic subsidies. This period was marked by frequent power outages, food shortages, and a scarcity of diesel fuel that severely tested public patience.

Between 1991 and 1996, approximately 95,000 Cubans were admitted to the United States. On August 5, 1994, widespread frustration boiled over into massive protests along the pier (malecón in Spanish) in Central Havana, later referred to as “*El Maleconazo*.” In a rare move, Castro personally took to the streets to appease demonstrators who clamored for freedom and better living conditions. This did not ease escalating tensions. A mass exodus ensued, known as the “*Balsero Exodus*,” where Cubans constructed makeshift rafts in attempts to navigate the perilous waters to the United States.<sup>58</sup> Approximately 35,000 Cubans emigrated during this crisis between 1991 and 1994.<sup>59</sup>



In response, President Clinton implemented the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy. Under this policy, those who touched U.S. soil (“dry foot”) were eligible for permanent residency through the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA), while those intercepted at sea (“wet foot”) were sent back to Cuba.<sup>60</sup> Those who entered the United States under the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy were issued parole.<sup>61 62</sup>

In January 2017, President Obama terminated the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy as part of broader efforts by the Obama Administration to normalize diplomatic ties.<sup>63</sup> The policy’s abrupt end caught many Cuban immigrants off guard—as well as the Cuban American community, policy makers, and advocates—as the change had implications about immigration pathways for new arrivals.<sup>64</sup>

## 2018–2024

# SHIFTING MIGRATORY PATTERNS

With the end of the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy, Cubans seeking to migrate to the United States to seek protection or to be reunited with families faced a new challenge. In December 2018, the Trump administration announced the creation of a new program called the “Migrant Protection Protocols” (MPP 1.0) also known as “Remain in Mexico.” The program, established to deter illegal entry into the United States, required migrants to wait in Mexico during the processing of their asylum applications. MPP did not provide due process to migrants.

Legal representation rates for the people subjected to MPP were exceedingly low. Data suggests that only 7.5 percent of individuals subject to MPP ever managed to find or hire a lawyer. The lack of counsel, combined with the danger and insecurity that individuals faced in border towns, made it nearly impossible for anyone subjected to MPP to successfully win asylum.

By December 2020, of the 42,012 MPP cases that had been completed under MPP 1.0, only 521 people were granted relief in immigration court. By February 2021, the Biden administration began formally winding down MPP and ultimately began MPP 2.0 in December of the same year. The MPP program formally ended in October 2022.<sup>65</sup>

Individuals enrolled in the Migration Protection Protocols, including Cuban nationals, may have faced some of the following complications.

- 1. Increased risk and vulnerability:** Asylum seekers faced heightened dangers while waiting in Mexico, including violence and exploitation, due to high-crime areas and limited services.<sup>66</sup>
- 2. Delays in asylum processing:** The MPP exacerbated delays in asylum hearings, worsening the already lengthy wait times and affecting migrants’ mental health.
- 3. Limited access to services:** Cubans struggled with inadequate legal and social services in Mexico, complicating their asylum process.
- 4. Family separation:** Some Cuban families have been separated, with some members detained in the United States and others stranded in Mexico, increasing their stress.
- 5. Children of Cuban parents born in other countries:** Children born to Cuban parents en route to the United States may not qualify as Cuban Entrants, given that they are not considered Cuban nationals under Cuban law.<sup>67</sup>



Land-based border crossings present different dangers than sea-based crossings, including the risk of blackmail, kidnapping, human trafficking, and rape. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Title 42 restrictions, and the “Remain in Mexico” policy slowing entries, 36,000 Cubans submitted asylum applications in Mexico from January 2022 to November 2023.<sup>68</sup>

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported that approximately 425,000 Cubans were encountered at U.S. ports of entry during fiscal years (FY) 2022 (October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022) and 2023 (October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023), with over 142,000 Cubans arriving in FY23 alone.<sup>69</sup> This surge surpasses previous immigration waves such as the Freedom Flights, Operation Peter Pan, the Mariel Boat Lift, and the *Balseros* crises combined. In the first ten months of FY24, over 120,000 Cubans were encountered at the U.S. Southern Border.<sup>70</sup>

Some Cubans could be eligible to apply to Spain’s Democratic Memory Law, also known as the grandchildren law, which could potentially grant thousands of descendants of Spaniards worldwide the opportunity to obtain Spanish nationality.<sup>71</sup> This process would allow Cubans with a Spanish passport to enter the United States lawfully without a visa. Once in the United States, they would qualify for CAA application. However, the process to apply for Spanish citizenship can take years.

Many Cubans have sought asylum in countries like Brazil, Uruguay, and Russia. Some such promises of asylum are fraudulent, however, and some Cubans have fallen prey to online criminals promising money and Russian citizenship in exchange for fighting in Ukraine.<sup>72</sup>

## CUBANS IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the Pew Research Center, Cubans constitute the fourth-largest Hispanic origin group in the United States, comprising 4% of the U.S. Hispanic population in 2021. Other states with substantial Cuban American populations include Texas (140,482), California (100,610), New Jersey (97,842), and New York (74,523).<sup>73</sup> These numbers vary due to ongoing migration patterns.



# PATHWAYS

Legal Pathways and Protection in the U.S.



## **PATHWAYS AND PROTECTION IN THE UNITED STATES**

This section outlines several common pathways that Cubans take when seeking to enter or remain in the United States for humanitarian reasons or to reunite with family. Note that this overview is not comprehensive and should not be interpreted as legal advice. Individuals seeking detailed guidance on their legal options should consult a licensed immigration attorney or a Department of Justice (DOJ)-accredited representative through resettlement agencies. These pathways do not indicate eligibility for public benefits; for eligibility information, see “Federal Benefits for Cuban Nationals” below.

### **WET FOOT, DRY FOOT POLICY**

Under the Wet Foot, Dry Foot policy, which ended in 2017, Cubans were regularly granted parole upon entry to the United States and were thus eligible to apply for lawful permanent residence under the Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA).

### **U.S. BORDER ENTRY**

Policy changes since 2017 have resulted in considerable confusion over Cubans’ legal standing and eligibility for adjustment under the CAA. Cubans are now subject to the same processing as other migrants who are either seeking to enter through ports of entry currently using CBP One appointments or who have been apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after entering between ports of entry. However, if they are not eligible for humanitarian parole, Cubans can be subject to expedited removal. If they express a fear of persecution and are determined to have a credible or reasonable fear of persecution or torture, they are placed into regular removal proceedings where they can seek relief from removal before an immigration judge.

After being taken into DHS custody, Cuban newcomers may be released on conditional parole or released on recognizance (RoR). The process for seeking adjustment of status under the CAA becomes more complicated when a new arrival is in removal proceedings, however. In addition, many Cubans released from DHS custody with conditional parole or release on recognizance are not considered to have parole for the purpose of eligibility for adjustment under the CAA.

As a result, Cubans in the United States who have been detained and released from DHS custody are strongly advised to consult with a licensed immigration attorney or DOJ-accredited representative to determine their options for immigration relief.

## **HUMANITARIAN PAROLE**

Under U.S. immigration law at Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) section 212(d)(5), individuals may be granted humanitarian parole, which is authorization to enter and remain in the United States for a temporary period for urgent humanitarian or significant public benefit reasons. Those granted humanitarian parole may apply for permission to work in the United States. However, humanitarian parole does not provide a pathway to permanent status, and individuals wishing to lawfully remain in the United States beyond the authorized parole period must identify another pathway to maintain status under U.S. immigration law. Over the past several decades, thousands of Cubans have arrived in the United States under the special humanitarian parole programs described below.

## **CUBAN FAMILY REUNIFICATION PAROLE (CFRP) PROGRAM**

Created in 2007, the CFRP Program allows certain eligible U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) to apply for parole for their family members in Cuba. If granted parole, these family members may come to the United States without waiting for their immigrant visas to become available. Once in the United States, CFRP Program beneficiaries may apply for work authorization while they wait to apply for lawful permanent resident status. To be eligible, individuals must have an approved family-based immigration petition filed on their behalf by a qualified U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident relative.

## **PAROLE PROCESS FOR CUBANS, HAITIANS, NICARAGUANS, AND VENEZUELAN (CHNV PAROLE)**

In October 2022, the Biden Administration announced a special parole process for nationals of Cuba. Since January 2023, thousands of Cubans have entered the United States under the Parole Process for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans, or “CHNV Parole.” To qualify for CHNV Parole, individuals must first have a qualified supporter in the United States submit a Declaration of Financial Support on their behalf. Upon approval of the Declaration of Financial Support, applicants must undergo security checks, meet additional eligibility requirements, and qualify for a favorable discretionary decision. For the most up-to-date information, please refer to the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\) page on CHNV Parole](#).





## ADJUSTMENT TO LAWFUL PERMANENT RESIDENT STATUS UNDER THE CUBAN ADJUSTMENT ACT (CAA)

The Cuban Adjustment Act (CAA) of 1966 established a streamlined process for Cubans who were paroled into the United States to attain LPR status after residing in the country for one year and one day. When the CAA was introduced, U.S. immigration law did not offer a formal pathway for individuals fleeing persecution to seek asylum or refugee status. Consequently, the CAA played a crucial role in providing humanitarian protection. Since its inception, the CAA has enabled thousands of Cubans to secure permanent residency in the United States.

## ASYLUM

Under U.S. law, individuals within the United States or arriving at the U.S. border (such as the Southern Border) can request asylum if they are unable or unwilling to return to their home country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. If granted asylum, they can remain in the United States and work and may apply for lawful permanent resident status after one year of physical presence. Asylum seekers may also include their spouse and unmarried children under 21 in their claim, either in the initial asylum application or after being granted asylum.

Applications for asylum must be filed within one year of arrival in the United States, though exceptions to this deadline may be made for extraordinary circumstances. Applicants can pursue asylum “affirmatively” through USCIS or, if they are in removal proceedings, “defensively” in immigration court as a defense against removal. More information on asylum may be found [here](#).

## LEGAL ASSISTANCE

People who want assistance with their immigration status should consult a licensed immigration attorney or Department of Justice (DOJ)-accredited representative. One resource for pro bono or low-cost attorneys may be found [here](#).



# BENEFITS

Federal Benefits for Cuban Nationals

# CUBAN AND HAITIAN ENTRANTS (CHES)

Cuban and Haitian Entrant (CHE) is not an immigration status but rather a designation for public benefits eligibility. Cuban and Haitian nationals may meet the definition of CHE and be eligible for ORR benefits and services if they meet specific criteria related to parole status, asylum applications, removal proceedings, and/or orders of removal. Eligibility guidelines and definitions may change, so refer to federal guidance often for the most up-to-date information. For an in-depth overview of CHE eligibility, see [Understanding Immigration Context and Eligibility for Cuban and Haitian Entrants](#).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funds programs that provide benefits and services for eligible migrants through grants to state governments, resettlement agencies, and other nonprofit community-based organizations. Although many programs refer specifically to refugees, ORR-funded benefits and services are available to refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian Entrants, Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, Amerasians, Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrants, and Certified Victims of Human Trafficking. ORR programming encompasses:

- health or medical assistance
- employment/economic development programs such as cash assistance, employment preparation, job placement, English language training
- integration through cultural orientation classes
- specialized services for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)
- other core services such as case management

ORR provides [a directory of benefits-granting agencies by state](#). Individuals who are eligible for ORR benefits may also be eligible for mainstream (non-ORR-funded) federal benefits, such as cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), health insurance through Medicaid, and food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Access to benefits and services is time limited. Refugee Cash Assistance and Refugee Medical Assistance are available for a maximum of 12 months from the date an individual acquired an eligible status, so it is important that new arrivals apply as soon as possible. Newcomers will need proof of status to apply. Contact local benefit-granting agencies for more information and assistance.

ORR benefits (up to 12 months from the date of eligibility):

- **Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)** is available for those not eligible for SSI or TANF who may receive up to 12 months of RCA to help cover essential needs, including food, shelter, and transportation.
- **Matching Grant (MG)** focuses on early self-sufficiency. This program, available to newcomers who don't receive TANF or RCA, offers limited enrollment slots by location and provides cash assistance, intensive case management, and employment services to help new arrivals quickly secure and retain employment. The aim is for participants to achieve economic self-sufficiency within the 240-day service period. Newcomers should enroll in the MG Program promptly after becoming eligible.
- **Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA)** may offer up to 12 months of assistance (starting from their eligibility date) to individuals who are not eligible for Medicaid. RMA offers the same health insurance coverage as Medicaid.
- **Refugee Support Services (RSS)** offers qualifying refugees a variety of resources to aid in employment and self-sufficiency. These include employability services, job training and preparation, help with job search, placement and retention, English language training, child care, transportation, translation and interpreter services, and case management. Eligible clients are able to receive RSS services for up to five years.
- **Specialized Programs** include health services, technical assistance for small business start-ups, financial savings programs, youth mentoring, or other targeted support initiatives. Some Cuban newcomers may qualify.

More information on ORR programs may be found [here](#).





# CULTURAL

Cultural Considerations

## CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Life in Cuba and the United States can be profoundly different, particularly in terms of community dynamics and cultural expectations. In Cuba, community and social bonds are central to daily life. Cubans often experience a strong sense of collective responsibility and mutual support. Cubans commonly rely on family and friends for support, and social interactions are deeply integrated into everyday life. This communal way of living fosters a close-knit environment where collective well-being is prioritized over personal achievement. Frequent social gatherings and shared experiences encourage a strong emphasis on cooperation and mutual assistance. In contrast, U.S. culture tends to prioritize individualism and personal achievement. The emphasis is often on self-reliance, personal goals, and independent decision-making. This can mean that people in the United States may approach problems and opportunities with a focus on individual effort and personal responsibility, rather than collective support.

When transitioning from Cuba to the United States, individuals may find the shift from a community-oriented to an individualistic society challenging. Adapting to the U.S. emphasis on personal autonomy and self-sufficiency may require a period of adjustment. Providing clear, supportive guidance on how to navigate this new cultural landscape while recognizing and respecting the differences in community dynamics can help ease this transition.



# EMPLOYMENT

Cuba's economic system has led to specific employment considerations:

## State Employment

Most Cubans work in the state sector, which includes fields like education, health care, and government administration. This sector traditionally offers job security and benefits, but wages can be low compared to the cost of living. Cubans find it challenging to make ends meet on their state salary alone.

## Private Sector and Self-Employment

Over the past few decades, the Cuban government has allowed more private enterprise and self-employment; it remains challenging, however, for small business owners to survive in the current system. Private sector activities are regulated and often face bureaucratic hurdles. Entrepreneurs may deal with restrictions on the types of businesses they can run, difficulties in accessing supplies, and other regulatory constraints.

## Tourism

Tourism is a significant part of the Cuban economy and provides numerous employment opportunities, especially in hospitality and related sectors. The sector also attracts foreign investment, though this comes with its own set of regulations and complexities.

Overall, employment in Cuba is a complex issue influenced by a range of economic, political, and social factors. The government's dual approach of maintaining a strong state sector while gradually expanding private enterprise reflects its efforts to navigate these challenges.

# HOUSING

Cuba's housing system operates under a centralized model that reflects the country's framework. In Cuba, almost all housing is state-owned. Private property rights are very limited compared to many other countries. The government controls the allocation and maintenance of housing, and most people live in state-owned apartments or houses. Cubans are allowed to do what is known as "permutas" (legal exchange or home swap). Overall, access to housing faces the constraints of the Cuban economy and political system, which can result in long waiting times and maintenance issues.

# LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Spanish is the official language of Cuba. Cuban Spanish has its own distinctive accent. Its vocabulary and expressions are influenced by the island's history, culture, and the mix of African, Taíno, and other Caribbean languages. Nearly 100% of the Cuban population is fully literate.<sup>74</sup>



## TRAUMA

The immigration experience for Cubans coming to the United States can be deeply traumatic and complex, shaped by a combination of personal, political, and socio-economic factors.

### **Political and Economic Instability**

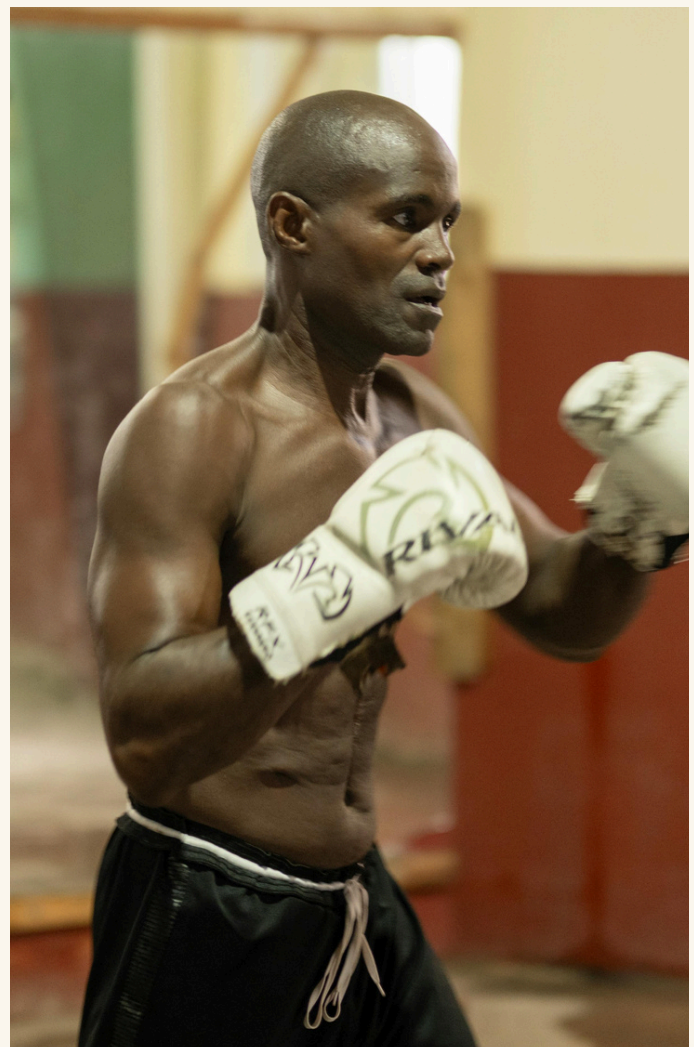
Many Cubans leave their homeland due to severe political repression and economic hardship. The Cuban government's policies and the economic embargo have created significant challenges for many residents. This environment often pushes individuals to leave in search of better opportunities and safety.

### **Dangerous Journeys**

The journey from Cuba to the United States can be perilous. Some Cubans undertake dangerous boat trips across the Florida Straits, risking their lives to escape. Others take long journeys crossing borders throughout Latin America with the goal of arriving at a legal point of entry in the United States. This treacherous voyage, often in overcrowded and unsafe conditions, adds to the physical and emotional trauma of their migration.

### **Separation from Family**

Immigrants frequently leave behind family and friends. Separation can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and guilt. In many cases, reunification with family members can be a long and uncertain process.





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Yali Nunez Albalate is an independent journalist, published author, and senior communications expert with over 12 years of experience directing communications for esteemed institutions and organizations across the United States. She has served as a spokesperson and Director for the Republican National Committee in Washington, DC, and for a United States Senator as well as local officials in South Florida. Prior to her work in politics, she spent five years as a TV journalist with prestigious national and international media outlets, including FOX and Univision. Yali holds a BA in Mass Communications with a major in Broadcast News and a minor in English Technical Writing from the University of South Florida.



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