

HAITI

UNDERSTANDING HAITI AND THE JOURNEYS OF HAITIAN MIGRANTS



PURPOSE OF THE BACKGROUNDER

“Understanding Haiti and the Journeys of Haitian Migrants” provides information about recent Haitian history, current country conditions, displacement challenges, and the experiences of Haitian 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 Haitian migrants, newcomers, and refugees in the United States.

As the number of Haitian arrivals increases, service providers need to understand the cultural heritage of Haitian newcomers and migrants to best provide them with culturally responsive services. Please note that this document simplifies complex historical and traumatic events and does not fully represent all Haitians’ 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 sources used to prepare this backgrounder.



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UNDERSTANDING HAITI AND THE JOURNEYS OF HAITIAN MIGRANTS

INTRODUCTION



Haiti is a small nation in the Caribbean, covering an area of 10,715 square miles, about the size of the state of Massachusetts. It is the second oldest republic in the Western Hemisphere and the first Black republic in the world. More than 11 million people live in Haiti.¹

Haiti is approximately 700 miles (or a two-hour flight) from Miami. This proximity contributes to the extensive migration history from Haiti to the United States and the longstanding and complicated relationship between these two nations. Haiti's history, ecological and geographical landscape, and culture are crucial to understanding the Haitian people, their journeys, and the nature of Haitian migration.

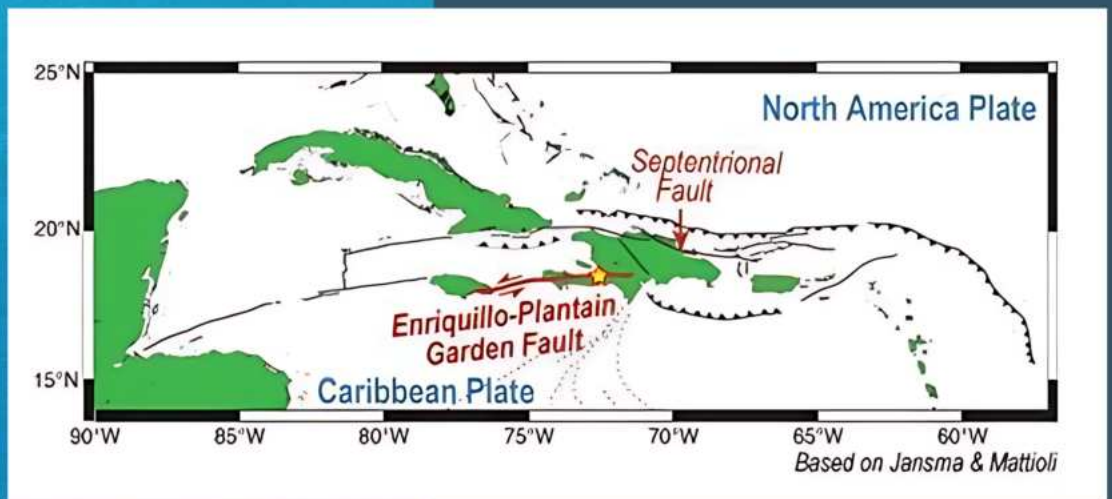


ECOLOGICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE OF HAITI²

Haiti, meaning “mountainous land” in the Taíno language, is situated on the island of Haiti (also called the island of Hispaniola by some inhabitants). It is located in the Caribbean Sea and is part of the Greater Antilles archipelago in the Americas region.³ Haiti occupies the western third of an island shared with the Dominican Republic; the two countries have a tumultuous relationship. Haiti is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the north, the Dominican Republic to the east, and the Caribbean Sea to the west and south. It is 50 miles (80 km) from Cuba to the northwest, separated by the Windward Passage.



Haiti is located between tectonic plates; the Enriquillo-Plantain Garden Fault runs through southern Haiti, the Septentrional Fault through the north.⁵ These fault lines make the nation prone to frequent large earthquakes, like those in 2010 and 2021.^{6,7} Haiti is situated in the hurricane belt and often sees damage from Atlantic hurricanes. The country's steep topography renders it susceptible to hydrometeorological disasters. Floods are a significant danger and major point of vulnerability.⁸ Other natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and landslides pose further threat to Haiti.⁹



Haiti is characterized by valleys and mountain ranges.¹⁰ Its rough terrain inspired the Haitian proverb, "Beyond mountains, there are mountains."¹¹ Haiti's highest peak is Morne La Selle (9,000 ft). Long distances between small mountainside settlements make urban planning projects prohibitively expensive, which has left inhabitants reliant on mountain footpaths, unmarked trails, or informal paths to travel. Roads and public transportation are severely limited, which makes the movement of people and goods difficult.

Coastal plains and a plateau in the central region of the country, known as Plateau Central, create a diverse physical geography. Most of the population lives in the plains, valleys, and plateaus.¹² Haiti has a 1,100-mile-long coastline adorned with beaches typical of those found on Caribbean islands.

Haiti has a horseshoe-shaped outline, with two main peninsulas in the north and south. Haiti's territory includes six satellite islands in the southern and northern parts; five of those islands are Ile de La Gonave (the largest such island), Ile de la Tortue, Île à Vache, Les Cayemites, and Grosse Caye. Navassa, the remaining island, is the subject of a territorial dispute between Haiti and the United States.¹³

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE



Haiti has a tropical, semi-arid climate with warm weather throughout the year, except for a brief cooler period in December. Instead of four seasons, Haiti has distinct wet and dry seasons, with heavy rainfall during the annual hurricane season, which spans from June to November.

Haiti faces longstanding environmental challenges and risks. French colonizers forced enslaved Africans to cut trees for sugar cane plantations, which led to severe erosion and deforestation—effects that persist today. The loss of arable land (land fit for farming), landslides destroying crops and goods, and worsening food insecurity significantly impact the economy and the lives of many Haitians. Deforestation continues due to the demand for fuelwood, charcoal, and land for agriculture. Reforestation projects have not brought about noticeable change.





DEMOGRAPHY

Demographics and Social and Cultural Characteristics

DEMOGRAPHY



As of 2021, Haiti's population is approximately 11.9 million people.¹⁴ Until the 1950s, 90% of the population lived in rural areas and worked as farmers, due to a primarily agricultural economy based on the colonial plantation model.¹⁵ Rapid urbanization, however, has led approximately 60% of the population to now live in cities.¹⁶

Haiti is one of the most densely populated countries in the Caribbean region and the world, with a population density of 1,282 people per square mile (495 per square km) of land.¹⁷ The population is predominantly young, with over 50% of the population under 25 years old.¹⁸ Haiti has the lowest life expectancy at birth in the Latin American and Caribbean regions, with an average of 64 years. In comparison, neighboring countries such as the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Cuba have life expectancies of 74 years, 71 years, and 78 years, respectively.¹⁹



The vast majority of Haitians are of Black African origin. There are no statistics on ethnicity or the presence of different ethnic groups in Haiti. The descendants of the Taínos and Arawaks, who first inhabited the territory, are very few and are mixed with the Black population. Some elements of Taíno and Arawak culture remain in Haiti, but unlike other regions in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are no large groups that claim direct descent. Some individuals in small communities have been identified as such, but they have mixed ancestry. Few Haitians have French or other European ancestry; this is less common in Haiti than having predominantly Black African ancestors.

LANGUAGES

French and Creole are Haiti's official languages, but most people speak Haitian Creole. Due to discrimination, people may feel compelled to say they speak French, even if they do not. *Haitian Creole is its own distinct language, not a dialect or a deformation of French.*

While Haitian Creole is French based, speaking one language does not guarantee fluency in the other, although it does make it easier to understand many words. Despite similarities between Haitian Creole and other Creole languages spoken in the Caribbean, a Haitian may have difficulty understanding someone speaking a different variant of Creole from another part of the Caribbean. *When discussing Haitian linguistic contexts, specify Haitian Creole instead of simply saying "Creole."*



DISCRIMINATION AND ACCESS TO SOCIAL RIGHTS

The legacy of slavery, colonization, and the plantation model persists in Haiti. This history feeds discrimination and social stratification based on various factors such as skin tone, language spoken, level of education, place of residence, and place of birth.²⁰

The wealthiest Haitians are predominantly descendants of white foreigners who settled in Haiti. This group is sometimes described as “white Haitians,” a contentious term that has been used both to reify colorist social divisions and to frame this group as separate from other Haitians despite their longstanding investment in the country. The prevalence of colorism in Haiti stems from the association of light skin with privilege and wealth. This arises from discriminatory practices in colonial times when descendants of colonizers were treated better than those whose parents were both enslaved.^{21 22 23} This division of social and financial status according to skin color persists; the economic elite is mostly white or light skin while the majority living in poverty has darker skin, making people associate their skin color with a status. Skin bleaching is becoming increasingly popular due to colorism and the perceived privilege of having lighter skin. The label “peasant” on the birth certificates of Haitians born in rural areas was not removed until 1995. Stigma against rural origins persists, leading many Haitians, when asked about their hometown or their place of birth, to name the nearest town or city instead of the true location.



Access to some circles and positions depends on fluency in French.²⁴ Only 62% of the Haitian population is literate.²⁵ Many Haitian newcomers are unable to read or write. Eighty percent of primary education institutions in Haiti are private, particularly the country's best schools.²⁶ The demand for public education far exceeds the supply; the state's underinvestment in education has created challenges for public education, including lack of materials, unpaid or absentee teachers, and insufficient classroom space. Religious organizations and other private actors have filled this gap between educational needs and state funding for schools, though these private options are often prohibitively expensive. Access to health care is poor in Haiti, with health insurance only accessible to privileged groups. Public services are either nonexistent or very limited. Access to water and electricity remains challenging in many parts of the country. Those who can afford it frequently rely on their own electricity and water backup systems. Only about 49.3% of the population has access to electricity, which is generally only available for five to six hours a day.^{27 28}

FAMILY STRUCTURE, GENDER RELATIONS, AND COMMUNITIES IN HAITI

In Haiti, the average household has four members.²⁹ Families are often led by single mothers who bear the primary responsibility for raising children. Female headship in Haiti, where a female is the sole parent of children under the age of 15, is at 70%.³⁰ This situation is partly due to a tradition in which men lead multiple households and are often completely absent from the lives of many of their children. Children fathered outside the main household are referred to as *pitit deyò* or "outside children." Women are expected to take responsibility for unplanned pregnancies, while neither law nor society compels fathers to do the same.

The absence of a strong legal system to enforce parental responsibilities on absentee parents often leaves mothers to shoulder the burden alone. This strongly affects teenage mothers, who often can't return to school due to expulsion or financial hardship after pregnancy. These consequences leave Haitian women and children disproportionately affected by violence and socio-economic crises. In acknowledgement of this, Mother's Day is highly celebrated, and maternal figures are deeply respected in Haitian society for their sacrifices. The term *poto mitan*, Haitian Creole for "central pillar," is commonly used to describe strong and responsible mothers.

When Haitians parents migrate, they often leave their children with another family member. In certain instances, parents send their children to orphanages in the hopes of providing them with better quality of life. In the past, some children were sent to urban areas or to wealthier families to work as domestic laborers. In both scenarios, they are frequently subjected to abuse, leading to trauma.³¹

THE LAKOU AS THE ORIGINAL HAITIAN COMMUNITY MODEL



Traditionally, many Haitian families or extended families lived in small communities called *lakous*, which is a Haitian Creole word meaning “courtyard” or “shared courtyard.” In a *lakou*, several houses share one central yard, building a community that often lasts for generations. Children raised in a *lakou* are supervised and disciplined communally by *lakou* elders.

While urbanization has rendered *lakous* less common in cities today, they still hold great significance, representing a heritage of resistance against slavery and the plantation model. The term *lakou* also refers to the group of people living in the shared space and is often used to designate religious spaces where voodoo group members live and gather for rituals (*Lakou Souvnans*, *Lakou Soukri*), preserving the language (Haitian Creole) and religion (Voodoo) developed as a further method of cultural resistance.³²

The concept of *lakou* has evolved to symbolize more than just an organizational structure or a physical space; it can now be used to designate any Haitian platform for shared resources and identity. Beyond the *lakous*, many Haitians remain attached to their hometowns and the neighborhoods they live in, reflecting the enduring significance of community bonds.

RELIGION

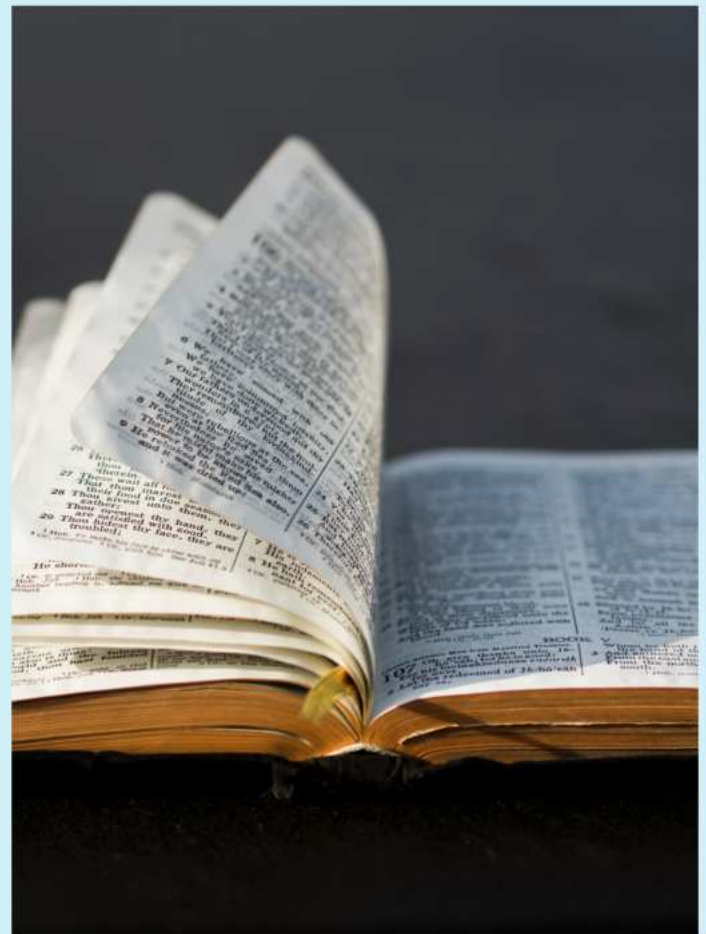


Haitians adhere to various religious beliefs, including Catholicism, Protestantism (including Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Adventist, and Jehovah's Witness denominations), and Voodoo.

Voodoo, the only indigenous religion of Haiti, originated when enslaved Africans found ways to maintain their traditional religious practices from West Africa while being forced by French colonizers to adopt Roman Catholicism. A Voodoo ceremony on the night of August 14, 1791, launched an insurrection by enslaved Haitians that led to national independence.

Not all Haitians practice Voodoo, and not all Haitians who practice Voodoo do so openly. Due to anti-Voodoo discrimination in Haiti, cultural responsiveness is particularly valuable when discussing Voodoo religious practices. Practitioners may prefer to practice their faith discreetly and require privacy and space to have an altar. Some people who practice Voodoo may go into a trance as they are understood to be possessed by the deities during ceremonies or other circumstances. Such religious practices should be responded to respectfully.

In April 2003, Voodoo became an officially recognized religion in Haiti as part of an effort to prevent such discrimination and promote Voodoo's value. This recognition has made Voodoo more popular among younger Haitians, who now feel more comfortable identifying as Voodoo practitioners.



DIET



Breakfast is a significant meal for many Haitians, and it often consists of hearty foods such as spaghetti, boiled plantains, and meat sauce. Some individuals may choose to prepare their own meals if they can. Lunch is akin to dinner, and for most people, dinner is a lighter meal. Lunch is considered the main meal of the day. Additionally, some Haitians, especially those who are Adventist, avoid consuming pork and they may want to shop for Halal products. For more detailed information on Haitian dishes, see [this blog post](#).





ECONOMY

Economy of Haiti

ECONOMY

Haiti's economy has historically relied on agriculture, though this has become less prominent due to the compounded effects of natural disasters, rural migration, deforestation, erosion, lack of modern techniques, and a decrease in cultivable land. The manufacturing sector has struggled to thrive due to instability, lack of investments, and other operational constraints, as well as low labor costs and competition from other regions like Asia. Despite these challenges, Haiti is a significant producer of vetiver oil, which is used in the beauty industry, and exports coffee, mangoes, sugarcane, rice, corn, and wood. However, limited local production leads to heavy reliance on imported goods. More than half of Haiti's population lives on less than \$3.65 a day, and around 30% of Haitian people live in extreme poverty on less than \$2.15 a day.³³

Due to the trade deficit and reliance on imported goods, the country is dependent on foreign currencies, leading to fluctuating exchange rates that significantly impact the economy. As a result, U.S. dollars are widely accepted in addition to the official currency, the gourde. Since Haiti exports less than it imports, the inflow also helps with the trade deficit. Haiti depends heavily on remittances from Haitians abroad, which make up about 20% of the gross domestic product (GDP) annually.³⁴ Remittances, which are important for both individuals and the state, are higher than both foreign direct investment and aid to Haiti. They represent one of the largest sources of currency. Haiti collects taxes on both the importation and sale of food.

Remittances to Haiti have seen consistent growth, increasing from 578 million USD in 2020 to 4,247 million in 2023.³⁵ These are expected to continue trending upward, as projections for the Latin America and Caribbean region do not forecast negative changes in trends in remittances. Haiti ranks tenth among the top remittance recipients in Latin America and the Caribbean.³⁶

Challenges such as natural disasters, political instability, past embargoes, corruption, lack of innovation and competition, violence, and a history of colonization, slavery, occupation, and exploitation have hindered Haiti's economy. The country is one of the poorest in the Americas, and recent socio-political crises have caused further economic decline, hindered job creation and opportunities, and prompted many Haitians to migrate in search of better livelihoods. The high unemployment rate and soaring inflation have exacerbated issues surrounding cost of living and income devaluation. Additionally, inequality is substantial, with a wide gap between the wealthiest individuals and the rest of the population. Despite its beautiful beaches, long shoreline, and numerous tourist attractions, Haiti has not been able to develop its tourist sector like other Caribbean countries, including the neighboring Dominican Republic.





DISPLACEMENT

Historical, Political, and Social Conditions Driving Displacements in Haiti

HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN HAITI DRIVING DISPLACEMENTS



Haiti has a rich history. Historian Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall describes the history of Haiti as providing an “ideal window for understanding multiple processes in world history, from European colonization of the Americas to globalization and the complex relationships between humans and nature.”³⁷ The history of Haiti’s political, economic, social, and environmental context is key to understanding many Haitians’ displacement. Internal factors have driven Haitians to seek refuge, stability, and a better life elsewhere.³⁸ Major periods of political instability, natural disasters, and social tensions have led to significant waves of migration. This section discusses key historical moments that have shaped the history of Haiti and Haitian migration.

PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL PERIODS IN HAITI

Before the French colonization, the island of present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic was called Quisqueya or Bohio by the indigenous population. The Taíno and Arawak peoples arrived in 800 C.E., replacing other inhabitants who occupied the lands for more than several thousand years B.C.E.^{39 40 41} In the 1660s, France began to colonize the land and import enslaved Africans. The French held power for over 100 years until the Haitian Revolution.⁴² In 1803, during the Battle of Vertières, the indigenous army of Saint Domingue defeated the French army led by Napoleon Bonaparte despite its historic military prowess.

1804–1914

INSTABILITY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

The new independent Black republic, led by General Jean-Jacques Dessalines (who declared himself emperor soon after the country gained independence), faced numerous challenges and did not have a regional model to follow.⁴³ Several countries, including the United States, did not recognize Haiti's independence until 1862.⁴⁴ The war for independence and French colonizers' predatory exploitation of natural resources had left the nation in ruins. Years of embargo, abuse, exploitation, racism, and division continued to impede Haiti's development.

Political unrest led to the assassination of the nation's founder less than three years after independence, leading to a split between the north and south. The north supported leadership by Black Haitians, while the south supported leadership by multiracial Haitians known as "mulattos"—a term that was used to denote social class and remains in use in Haitian politics, though sometimes as a pejorative. In 1818, Jean-Pierre Boyer (a "mulatto") took power in the south, and then took over the entire country in 1820, followed by the whole island from 1822 to 1843, including the occupation of the Dominican Republic.

In 1825, President Boyer, facing threats from France, contracted a loan to pay off Haiti's independence debt.⁴⁵ France demanded an indemnity of 150 million francs to be given to former enslavers as recompense for the income they lost when slavery ended. In exchange, France offered diplomatic recognition of Haiti. The forced payment to former enslavers by the formerly enslaved has led many to characterize this debt as a ransom to the French colonizers. Lack of funds forced Haitians to take out a loan from French banks, which led the payment to be known as the "double debt." France threatened to reinvade if Haiti refused to pay.

This double debt, equivalent to about 560 million in today's dollars, deprived the young nation of critical revenue and resources necessary for its economic development, with an impact that still lasts today.⁴⁶ It took Haiti until 1947, or 122 years, to repay the double debt.⁴⁷ The New York Times estimates that this money would have added \$21 billion to Haiti's economy over time.⁴⁸



1915–1954

U.S. OCCUPATION AND NATURAL DISASTERS

After Boyer's rule, Haiti experienced a prolonged period of instability and violence. Multiple leaders briefly seized power, and seven presidents were either assassinated or overthrown.⁴⁹ The ongoing power struggles and escalating violence and chaos weakened the nation, ultimately leading to a U.S. invasion in 1915. This turmoil culminated in the assassination of President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, an event often viewed as the immediate cause of the U.S. occupation.⁵⁰ The first large Haitian migratory flow of the 20th century (still one of the largest flows of Haitian migration to date) happened under the occupation. Haitian migrants in this era relocated primarily to Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

After President Sam's assassination, the United States took control of Haiti under the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, asserting its dominance in the Americas and seizing economic opportunities the country could offer. It established the Western Hemisphere as a region of interest for the United States and asserted that it should remain free from European control.⁵¹ In return, the United States pledged not to interfere with European affairs, including the existing European colonies in the Americas.⁵²

Foreign occupations, intervention, and interference have been constant in Haitian history. The United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and maintained fiscal control over the country until 1947.

In 1937, Dominicans killed around 30,000 Haitians near the border in what is referred to as the Parsley Massacre, straining the relationship between the two countries.⁵³ ⁵⁴ U.S. diplomatic cables called the massacre "a systematic campaign of extermination."⁵⁵ Haitian migrants were made a scapegoat for an economic downturn. The pronunciation of the word "parsley" in Spanish was used as a test to confirm their Haitian identity; those unable to pronounce the word were massacred.⁵⁶



Marine base at Cap-Haïtien. By Unknown, 1920s - eBay.com, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=59016415>

1955–2006

FROM DICTATORSHIP TO HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY

President François Duvalier was elected in 1957 and later declared himself President for Life in 1964. Duvalier led a death squad known as the *Tonton Macoute*, which terrorized, imprisoned, and killed between 30,000 and 60,000 people, many of whom were Duvalier's political opponents or their friends and relatives.⁵⁷

In 1971, François Duvalier designated his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude, as president. Jean-Claude's term saw a large wave of migration and exodus, one of the largest in the country's history. Jean-Claude Duvalier fled Haiti in 1986, after years of demonstrations by the people, who decried poor living conditions and lack of opportunities, freedom, and employment. This period also saw devastation from hurricanes Flora (1963), Cleo (1964), Ines (1966), and David (1979), which caused significant damage and loss of life.

In 1987, Haitians voted for a new constitution and marked the beginning of a new chapter as a democracy. In 1990, Haiti held what is considered its first free election after almost three decades of dictatorship.⁵⁸ Newly elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide wanted to lead several reforms but was ousted in a 1991 coup. An embargo and further large waves of migration were followed by deportations and forced return to Haiti of those captured at sea as they were trying to reach the United States.⁵⁹

In 1994, Aristide returned to power with the intervention of U.S. troops, introducing free-market reforms that strained the local economy and national production. The first peaceful transfer of power in Haiti's history occurred in 1995 between Aristide and René Préval, supported by a UN peacekeeping mission. President Préval's term brought relative stability. He later organized elections that transferred power back to Aristide, who was forced into exile again in 2004. This event and the ensuing instability led to another UN peacekeeping mission.⁶⁰ A transitional government ruled the country between 2004 and 2006. Additionally, hurricanes Ivan and Jeanne in 2004 and Hurricane Dennis in 2005 caused significant damage and loss of life.⁶¹ The crisis that forced President Aristide into exile and the hurricanes led to another large wave of migration.



2006–2024

MULTIFACETED CRISIS AND SPIKE IN MIGRATION

Between 2006 and 2024, Haiti faced significant challenges. In 2008, the country experienced severe riots due to high inflation and rising living costs. Though not as big as previous migrations waves, the number of migrants doubled from previous years, and the number of Haitian migrants intercepted at sea doubled that year.^{62 63} In 2010, a devastating earthquake killed over 200,000 people. Despite significant funding, reconstruction efforts failed to help the country recover.⁶⁴ In the same year, a cholera outbreak led to more than 820,000 cases and nearly 10,000 deaths.⁶⁵ Hurricane Sandy caused further devastation in 2012.

Attempts at rebuilding were stymied by high-level corruption. Following this, a transitional government took power between 2011 and 2016. Jovenel Moïse was elected president in 2017. His term was marked by protests that began in 2018 against increased oil prices, causing riots and a national shutdown and prompting many to leave the country. In November 2018, the ongoing unrest and government crackdown culminated in the Lasaline massacre, where pro-government gangs killed 71 civilians in the Lasaline neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, which was known for high government disapproval.⁶⁶ Other government attacks were perpetrated against civilians in targeted neighborhoods, including the Bel-Air attack in 2019 and the Cité Soleil attack in 2020.⁶⁷

In July 2021, Moïse's assassination prompted further migration. In 2024, a new Transitional Presidential Council was appointed and a transitional government established to fill vacancies following the 2021 assassination. Many Haitians are hopeful that this will help bring stability and a return to normalcy.

Since 2019, the country has experienced continuous deterioration in its security situation, marked by kidnapping and murder, gang violence, and gang wars. Gangs control large parts of the territory, including most of the Ouest Department (the most populated region of the country where the capital is located) and part of the Artibonite Department (the second most populated region of the country).⁶⁸ This violence leads to continued migration out of the country. The death toll caused by gang violence reached nearly 5,000 in 2023.⁶⁹

In 2024, an UN-backed Multinational Security Support Mission was deployed to help restore peace and security.^{70 71} Between 2022 and 2024, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) doubled to reach 578,074 people, including 310,000 women and 180,000 children.⁷² UN experts have declared women and girls the most affected by the crisis.⁷³





MIGRATION

Migration Patterns and Displacement Challenges

MIGRATION PATTERNS AND DISPLACEMENT CHALLENGES

Haitian migration is heavily influenced by the political and economic factors within Haiti.⁷⁴ Forced displacement is common, as more than half the country requires humanitarian assistance. Many Haitians flee persecution, as the country continues to struggle with political and gang violence. Compounding crises have left nearly 580,000 people internally displaced across Haiti as of June 2024.⁷⁵ Below is a breakdown of the main Haitian migration waves.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE MAIN HAITIAN MIGRATION OUTFLOW WAVES



MIGRATION WAVES DURING THE U.S. OCCUPATION



During the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, many left the country. Farmers were targeted due to their affiliation with a resistance movement, the “Cacos,” and as a result lost their land and fled the country seeking safety and better opportunities.⁷⁶ Further Haitian emigration was spurred by the U.S. integration of the Caribbean in its economy; the United States leveraged people from Haiti to provide cheap labor.⁷⁷ Around 400,000 Haitians migrated to Cuba and 200,000 to the Dominican Republic to work on sugar cane plantations as well as in construction, as street vendors, and in housekeeping. This period is considered the “first large-scale Haitian migration wave to neighboring countries.”⁷⁸

About 500 upper-class urban families moved to the United States in the 1920s.⁷⁹ At this time, Haitians’ prime destination was New York, and some of them joined movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Back to Africa Movement led by Marcus Garvey. Among them was Jacques Roumain, a famous Haitian writer and Communist activist who lived in Harlem in the 1930s.



MIGRATION DURING THE DICTATORSHIP OF 1957–1986 AND IN THE EARLY 1990S



PHOTO: Keith Graham/Miami Herald via AP

During the rule of the Duvaliers, political violence and repression was high, and the economy deteriorated. On September 15, 1963, 12 people successfully made the journey from Haiti to West Palm Beach in Florida via the Bahamas. This marked the beginning of the “boat people” phenomenon, as Haitians began making dangerous sea journeys to reach the United States, often stopping at neighboring islands first. From 1972–1981, more than 50,000 Haitians undertook this journey to America, with the population of Haitians in New York growing to 300,000 by the end of the 1970s.^{80 81}

The United States increased surveillance to restrict these journeys, intercepting boats before they reached the coast, detaining the people, and deporting them. This policy was criticized by human rights organizations and prominent figures in the United States and Haiti.^{82 83} Between 1972 and 1986, around 108,000 Haitians migrated to the United States through legal pathways.⁸⁴ In 1991, following a military coup, President Jean Bertrand Aristide lost power, and the country entered a chaotic period marked by severe repression until he returned to power in 1994.⁸⁵ Many people, mostly partisans of the Lavalas movement that brought the former president to power, left the country during this period of political instability, security crisis, and economic turmoil.

21ST CENTURY WAVES

In 2002, violent protests erupted in Port-au-Prince against the government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide.⁸⁶ During the first seven months of that fiscal year, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted more Haitians at sea than in any full fiscal year since 1994.⁸⁷ After the 2010 earthquake, which killed over 200,000 people, Haitians migrated to seek medical care, increased safety, or better opportunities. In 2018, riots across the capital led to a nationwide lockdown. This prompted many people to flee, especially those who were unable to leave, had medical emergencies during the lockdown, or were afraid of what might happen next. Since 2018, the situation has continued to deteriorate, with record internal displacements and a continuous exodus of people fleeing the country. This has now reached a level that is unprecedented in the history of Haiti.



TRENDS

Trends and Socio-Demographic Profiles of
Haitian Migrants

TRENDS AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF HAITIAN MIGRANTS



Photo taken by Andrés Brenner for the International Rescue Committee.

Several factors determine how Haitian migrants choose their destinations. Sometimes the choice can be random, especially for refugees who are relocated by resettlement agencies. Many destinations initially intended as transit stops become permanent settlements for Haitian migrants, particularly when strict immigration policies or dangerous journeys prevent them from reaching their intended destination.⁸⁸ In the 2010s, South America became a prominent destination, expanding usual areas of Haitian migration beyond the Caribbean, North America, and Western Europe.



HAITIAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES



Despite being the main destination for Haitian migrants, the United States has a documented history of discriminatory migration policies toward Haitian refugees and violation of international obligations. The United States has been criticized for violating the proscription against *refoulement*, or the practice of sending people back to a country where they would face torture; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and other irreparable harm. Such violence occurred during the refugee crisis at Del Rio, Texas, in 2021 when border patrollers used fatal force against Haitian refugees.^{89 90}

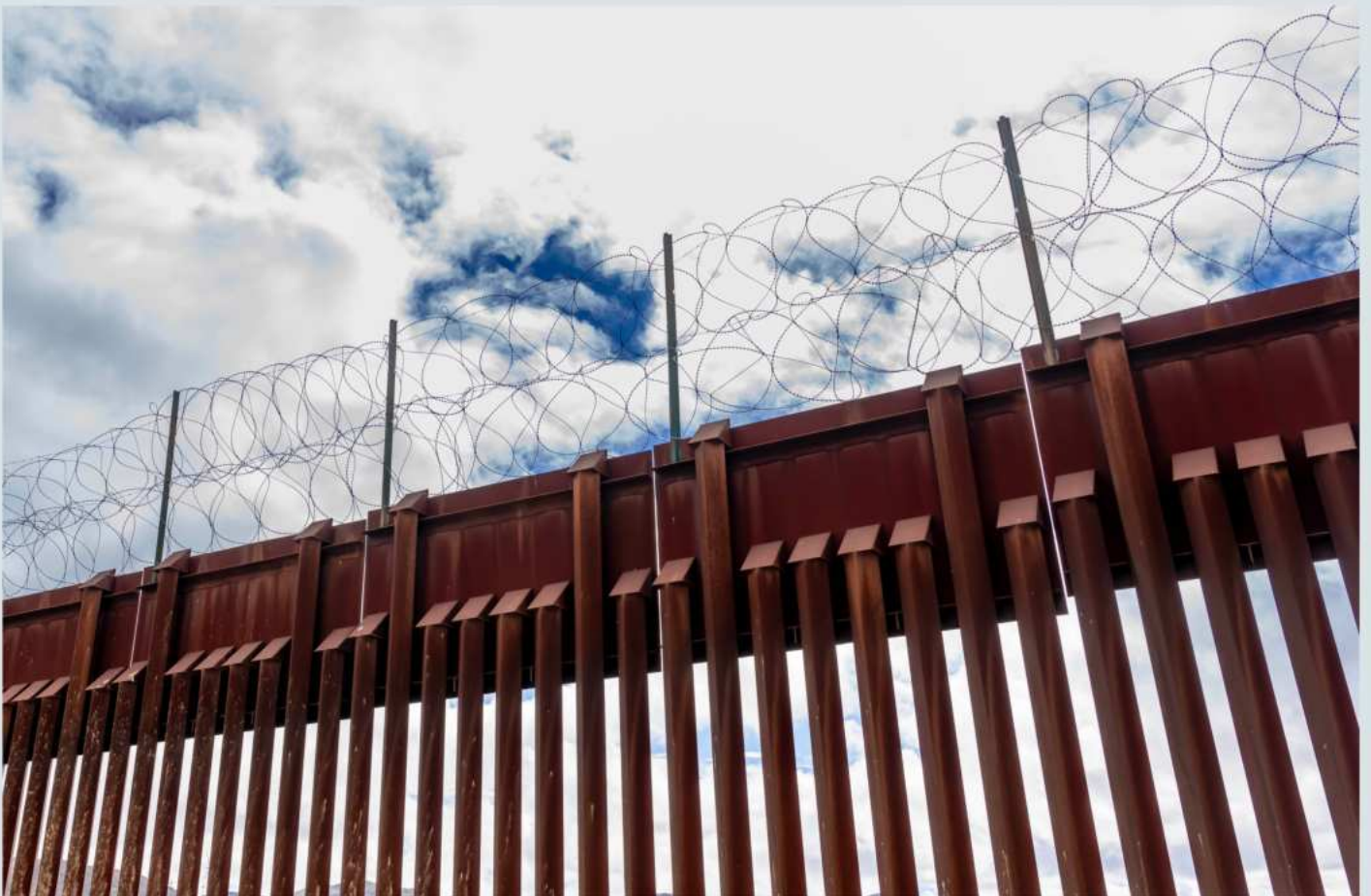
Between the 1950s and the 1970s, many educated and economically stable Haitians migrated to New York and Boston due to the oppressive rule of Duvalier. In the 1980s and 1990s, abuse and repression against Haitian migrants in the Bahamas became rampant following an increase in their numbers.⁹¹ Seeking an alternative, Haitian migrants made Florida a primary destination due to its affordability and proximity to Haiti.⁹² Cuba also served as a transit point for Haitian asylum seekers attempting to reach Florida. The first documented boat of Haitian asylum seekers to arrive in Miami during this period was the *Saint-Sauveur*, which traveled through Cuba.⁹³

The United States' longstanding failure to recognize Haitian refugees led to the U.S. government facing legal action from Haitian immigrants in the 1970s and early 1980s that alleged racial prejudice and unfair treatment.⁹⁴ A subsequent case, *Haitian Refugee Center v. Civiletti*, proved the existence of discrimination, leading to the passage of legislation designating certain Haitians as Haitian Entrants for the purpose of eligibility for refugee benefits, and subsequently adjustment of status for those Haitian Entrants who arrived in the United States before January 1, 1982.⁹⁵

In 1981, Proclamation 4865 was issued to intercept Haitian nationals arriving in the United States by sea.⁹⁶ Unlike Cubans, Haitians were often seen as economic migrants and did not receive refugee status, resulting in limited access to formal employment and lower wages.^{97 98} In 1983, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) listed Haitians as a high-risk group for AIDS, leading to widespread discrimination.⁹⁹

The 1991–1994 Haitian refugee crisis started after the 1991 coup against Jean Bertrand Aristide and political repression that followed. Despite the persecution faced by many Haitians, only 10,747, less than a third of the 38,000 Haitians intercepted at sea, were ultimately permitted to seek asylum in the United States.¹⁰⁰ In 1992, Executive Order 12807 mandated additional actions for intercepting and returning Haitian nationals.¹⁰¹ Those intercepted at sea were sent to Guantanamo Bay for asylum claim assessments.¹⁰² Some were allowed into the United States, while others were returned to Haiti. Around 230 Haitians who tested positive for HIV were kept at Guantanamo.^{103, 104} Conditions in Guantanamo were poor and, in some cases, HIV-positive women at Guantanamo were sterilized without their consent.¹⁰⁵

Since 2015, the number of Haitians arriving in the United States via the Southern Border with Mexico has drastically increased.¹⁰⁶ Haitians continue to arrive in record numbers at the U.S.–Mexico border, where they often face racial discrimination and language barriers.¹⁰⁷ During the first 10 months of fiscal year (FY) 2024, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Enforcement Statistics report almost 74,000 Haitian encounters at the Southern Border.¹⁰⁸



HAITIAN MIGRATION TO LATIN AMERICA

In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, Brazil emerged as a key destination for Haitian migrants, as Brazil's economy was thriving while opportunities in Haiti were scarce.^{109 110} Initially, the migration predominantly consisted of male workers, but eventually women and families joined, reuniting many Haitian families. Over the years, many Haitians living in Brazil have opted to obtain Brazilian citizenship.

Since 2015, Haitians in Brazil have been undertaking what they refer to as "the route," a journey from Brazil to the United States across Latin America and the Darien Jungle. The Darién Gap, a dense jungle separating Colombia and Panama, presents formidable challenges for asylum seekers, including treacherous terrain and the threat of violence. Despite these dangers, thousands attempt the journey each year.¹¹¹

Some migrants who undertake "the route" leave Brazil and stay in Chile, while others reside in Chile for a few years before attempting to reach the United States. More recently, some have opted to fly to Panama or other countries closer to the United States to shorten the journey. Mexico has also become a significant entry point for Haitians to the United States as they embark on their journey in Latin America and the Caribbean, prompting many to settle in Mexico for extended periods while waiting for opportunities to cross the border.

By the 2020s, Chile had surpassed Brazil as a migration destination due to decreased demand for temporary workers in Brazil and the emergence of more opportunities in Chile. Other countries where entry visas were not mandatory, such as Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, and Argentina, also serve as transit points for Haitians on their way to or from Brazil.¹¹² Although these countries are less popular as final destinations, small communities of Haitian workers and students reside and work there.



PATHWAYS

Pathways and Protection in the United States

PATHWAYS AND PROTECTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Very few Haitian nationals have gained access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), despite the UN Refugee Agency highlighting the international protection needs of Haitians. However, over the years, many have arrived through humanitarian parole, including specialized parole programs. Recent years have also seen a dramatic increase in the number of Haitians who have traveled up to the U.S. Southern Border to seek protection. Once in the United States, Haitians may be eligible for other forms of temporary or permanent protection.

This section discusses some of the more common pathways available to Haitians seeking to enter and/or remain in the United States for humanitarian reasons or to reunite with family. This list is not exhaustive, and the information provided here should not be considered legal advice. Resettlement agencies serving new arrivals who are seeking information on their legal options should refer those newcomers to consult with a licensed immigration attorney or Department of Justice (DOJ)-accredited representative.



Photo taken by Natosha Via for the International Rescue Committee.

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. Humanitarian parole does not provide a pathway to permanent status, however, and individuals wishing to remain in the United States lawfully beyond the authorized parole period must identify another pathway to maintain status under U.S. immigration law. Following the deadly earthquake in Haiti in 2010, many Haitians were granted humanitarian parole, allowing them to enter and/or remain in the United States and work until they could safely return to Haiti. Since that time, thousands more Haitians have arrived in the United States under special humanitarian parole programs described below.

HAITIAN FAMILY REUNIFICATION PAROLE (HFRP) PROGRAM



In 2014, the United States established the Haitian Family Reunification Parole (HFRP) program, which was modeled on a similar program for Cuban nationals. The HFRP program allows for faster reunification for family members of certain U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents by allowing the U.S.-based relative to request parole for their family members in Haiti, if the family member based in Haiti has an approved immigrant visa petition filed on their behalf. 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, HFRP program beneficiaries may apply for work authorization while they wait to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status.

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

In October 2022, the Biden Administration announced a special parole process for nationals of Haiti. Since January 2023, thousands of Haitians 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](#).

TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS (TPS)

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) may be granted to individuals in the United States who cannot return to their home country due to extraordinary temporary conditions such as a natural disaster or an ongoing armed conflict. While an individual has valid TPS status, they are protected from removal and may be granted work authorization.

Following the devastating earthquake in 2010, Haiti was designated for TPS for a period of 18 months.¹¹³ Note that like parole, TPS does not provide a pathway to LPR status. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has since extended and redesignated TPS for Haiti multiple times, most recently in June 2024. These extensions have allowed more than 300,000 additional Haitian nationals to file initial applications for TPS. Many Haitians who applied for and received TPS had initially entered the United States with parole, as it is possible to have both parole and TPS concurrently.

To qualify for TPS, Haitians in the United States must have resided in and been continuously physically present in the United States since the dates specified in a notice published in the Federal Register announcing the TPS designation. Applicants must not be barred for criminal or security reasons. TPS is not automatically granted; eligible individuals must register during the designated period and pay the required fees.



ASYLUM

Under U.S. law, individuals in the United States or who are arriving in the United States (e.g., at the Southern Border) may 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, they can remain in the United States, may work, and may qualify for LPR status after one year of physical presence. Asylum seekers can include their spouse and unmarried children under 21 in their protection claim, or they may wait until after they have been granted asylum to apply for their family members. Applications for asylum must be filed within one year of arrival in the United States, but exceptions to the one-year filing deadline may be granted if the applicant can show that failure to file was due to extraordinary circumstances. Individuals may apply for asylum “affirmatively” with USCIS, meaning they apply proactively while they are not in removal proceedings. If they are in removal proceedings, they may apply “defensively” for asylum in immigration court as a defense from removal. For more information about the [asylum process](#), refer to [USCIS](#).

U.S. BORDER ENTRY

Haitians are 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 DHS after entering the United States between ports of entry. However, if they are not eligible for humanitarian parole, Haitians 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, Haitian newcomers may be released on conditional parole or released on recognizance (RoR).

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 Haitian Nationals

CUBAN AND HAITIAN ENTRANTS (CHES)

Cuban and Haitian Entrant (CHE) is not an immigration status. Rather, it designates certain Cubans and Haitians for public benefits eligibility. Cuban and Haitian nationals may meet the definition of Cuban and Haitian Entrant and be eligible for Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) benefits and services when:

1. They entered the United States with humanitarian parole;
2. They have conditional parole (also known as release on recognizance), as long as they have not acquired any other immigration status under the INA and do not have a final order of removal pending against them;
3. They have a pending asylum application and do not have a final order of removal pending against them; or
4. They are in removal proceedings and do not have a final order of removal pending against them.

The U.S. 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 Refugee Resettlement Program benefits and services are available to refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian Entrants, certain Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees, certain Afghan Humanitarian Parolees, Amerasians, Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders, and Certified Victims of Human Trafficking. ORR programming includes:

- Health or medical assistance
- Employment/economic development programs such as cash assistance, employment preparation, job placement, English language training
- Integration such as mentoring, capacity development, support to families learning to navigate the U.S. education system, etc.
- Other core services such as case management services

ORR provides [a directory of benefits-granting agencies by state](#). Newcomers 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).¹⁴

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 to 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:

- **Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)** is available for those not eligible for SSI or TANF. Eligible recipients 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 new arrivals who do not receive TANF or RCA, offers limited enrollment slots by location and provides cash assistance, intensive case management, and employment services to help newcomers 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.
- More information on ORR programs may be found [here](#).



CULTURAL

Cultural Considerations

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Life in Haiti is not as fast-paced as in the United States, and many Haitians are not used to dealing with various administrative procedures due to the limited services provided by the state. Therefore, some Haitian adults may lack essential documentation and experience with tasks such as filling out forms and mailing documents.

Individuals with lower levels of education and those from rural areas may face challenges with certain aspects of life in the United States, such as using public transportation. Do not assume that they are familiar with typical aspects or systems of daily life in the United States. Providing information on how things work in a new apartment may be helpful for some, especially if they have never used certain appliances before. Most Haitians do not know how to dress for cold weather because it is warm all year long in Haiti. Convey this information in a friendly and helpful manner to avoid coming across as condescending.

Newly-arrived Haitians may not be aware that certain things are illegal in the United States and could unwittingly get into trouble. Some common civil violations that may seem acceptable—as the laws are not strictly enforced in their home country—include driving without a license, underage drinking, underage smoking, jaywalking, walking on highways, public intoxication, littering, trespassing, and noise violations.



EMPLOYMENT



Photo taken by Andrés Brenner for the International Rescue Committee.

Haitian newcomers may benefit from a job orientation, as they may not be familiar with the available options and may not understand how the U.S. job market works. Understanding how to evaluate their qualifications can help identify their strengths and transferable skills, as well as weaknesses and barriers to employment. Haitian newcomers may also need an introduction to the U.S. education system.

Inform Haitian newcomers that they may require an Employment Authorization Document, which has an expiration date. Additionally, they are likely not familiar with the Social Security system and need to understand what a Social Security number is, how to use it, and what to avoid. Help new arrivals understand their immigration status and eligibility for work and other benefits. Prioritize sharing referrals for trusted immigration legal service providers in your area.

FINANCIAL LITERACY

Many Haitians are not familiar with the credit system and would benefit from assistance. Offer instructions on how to avoid scams and fraud.

HOUSING

Many Haitians have never rented lodgings or gone through a formal application process to secure housing. They may not be familiar with income requirements for housing, broker fees, first and last month's rent, or renter's insurance. Offer early instruction to promote clearer expectations and planning.



HEALTH CARE AND MEDICAL SYSTEMS

The U.S. medical system is difficult to navigate and can be even more challenging for less educated Haitians. Many Haitians have never had access to health insurance and may need guidance on the basic pros and cons of insurance options. Offer help with understanding the cost of health insurance in the United States.

Many Haitians rely on traditional medicine and may need to inform their doctors if they are following alternative treatments that may interfere with any prescribed medication. It is common for Haitians to believe that there are supernatural causes for their illnesses, such as jealous neighbors or family members who wish them harm and engage in mystical practices to attack them from a distance. Respect their beliefs while encouraging them to seek any needed medical assistance.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Although Haiti has two official languages, it is more helpful to have a staff member or outside interpreter who speaks Haitian Creole than French. Not every Haitian is literate. Seek general adult literacy support as well as English-language learning support.

TRAUMA

Haitians have experienced the loss of loved ones, rape, and various other forms of abuse or trauma in their journeys to the United States. Be mindful of these experiences and provide them with space to heal. Introduce psychological and behavioral services but recognize common stigmas and misconceptions around mental health. When possible, demystify mental health care.

COMMUNITY

Community is important for Haitians. Facilitate connections with churches, local markets, and businesses where they can engage with other Haitians.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Emmanuela Douyon is a social impact consultant committed to social justice and gender equity. She founded POLICITÉ, a Haiti-based consulting firm that doubles as an emerging think-tank specializing in development policy. Emmanuela has engaged in roles that encompass strategic leadership, project evaluation, communication, and research for organizations in Haiti and the United States. Known for her evidence-backed insights, Emmanuela's voice resonates across local and international media, including CNN, Al Jazeera, and BBC appearances. She has also provided policy recommendations to high-profile organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, and U.S. Congress. Known for engaging in social discourse, Emmanuela is an op-ed writer and a speaker who utilizes social media for impactful dialogue and awareness. She holds a master's degree in Development Studies from Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne. Her multilingual abilities span Haitian Creole, French, English, and Mandarin. Emmanuela enjoys reading, art, gastronomy, and volunteering in her leisure time.



The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. For fiscal year 2024, funding came from Grants #90RB0052 and #90RB0053. Fiscal year 2025 is supported by Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

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