



# THE NORTH-SOUTH AGENDA

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## THE NEW CUBAN IMMIGRATION IN CONTEXT

*Max J. Castro*

The United States is currently in the midst of a new wave of Cuban immigration, underway since the early 1990s. However, contrary to popular perceptions — and notwithstanding the deep economic crisis in Cuba, the Cuban Adjustment Act, and the 1994 U.S.-Cuba immigration agreement — the volume of recent immigration from Cuba has been moderate by historical and comparative standards. Historically, the average number of Cuban immigrants entering the United States from 1960 to 1962 and from 1965 to 1973 was significantly higher than the annual average during the last decade. Comparatively, during the 1990s, the ratio of Dominican, Haitian, and Jamaican immigrants admitted to the United States relative to the population of each country easily exceeded the ratio of Cuban admissions. The major reason for limited Cuban migration is U.S. policy toward Cuban immigrants, which has moved, in fits and starts, from one of nearly unconditional acceptance of all Cubans fleeing the island to a more restrictive approach. The U.S.-Cuba immigration agreement of 1994 has succeeded in substantially normalizing the migration process, but the “wet-feet/dry-feet” policy represents a significant loophole that encourages unsafe, unregulated, and unauthorized migration often carried out by smugglers of human cargo and costly in human life. Nonetheless, political considerations probably rule out a change in this policy in the immediate future. The current wave of immigrants from Cuba on average are younger than those arriving in earlier immigration waves, but they resemble earlier arrivals in some significant ways. A significant proportion of new arrivals is well educated or skilled, suggesting the potential for successful integration into the U.S. labor market.

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IN CONTEXT**

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# THE NEW CUBAN IMMIGRATION IN CONTEXT

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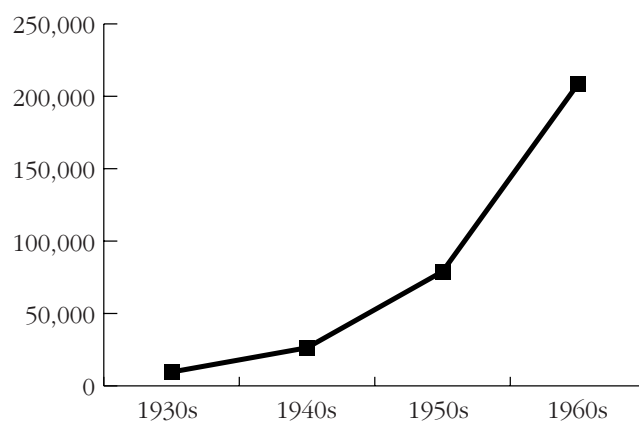
Cuban migration to the United States predates Fidel Castro's revolution by more than a century. As historian Félix Masud-Piloto writes, "The Cuban presence in Florida dates back to the 1830s when Cuban cigar manufacturers, trying to avoid high U.S. tariffs, relocated their operations in Key West."<sup>1</sup> The wars of independence brought a substantial cohort of exiles. In the 1880s, the Cuban community of Key West would spawn a second Cuban immigrant community based on tobacco manufacture: Ybor City in Tampa, Florida. New York City, Philadelphia, and New Orleans also had significant Cuban emigré populations in the late nineteenth century.

From the turn of the century to the 1950s, Cubans fleeing dictatorship or seeking economic opportunities came to the United States in substantial numbers, although not as many as in the late nineteenth century. Yet, it is interesting to note that Cuban immigration to the United States began to increase sharply in the decades preceding the revolution and roughly tripled every decade from the 1930s to the 1960s. The United States admitted the following number of immigrants from Cuba, by decade: 1931-1940: 9,571; 1941-1950: 26,313; 1951-1960: 78,948; and 1961-1970: 208,536 (See Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the 1959 revolution was a watershed in relation to migration, as in almost every other aspect of Cuban life. Since 1959, Cuban immigration to the United States has been characterized by alternating periods of heavy flow and relative lulls. We can identify four waves of varying magnitude and amplitude: 1959-1962: "historical exiles"; 1965-1973: "freedom flights"; 1980: "Mariel"; and 1994 to 2002: "rafters; U.S. Cuba 1994 Immigration Agreement."

The current wave, which began with the rafter exodus of the summer of 1994 and was institutionalized that same year through a formal agreement between the governments of the United States and Cuba, has now been underway for eight years. This latest wave has lasted as long as the freedom flights, until now the longest wave. And there is no end in sight, despite Fidel Castro's warning earlier this year that he might be forced to cancel the immigration agreement if the United States continues to interfere in Cuban affairs.

**Figure 1.**  
**Cuban Immigrants Admitted to the United States by Decade (1930-1970)**



This North-South Agenda Paper looks at Cuban immigration to the United States since 1990. This period corresponds with the post-Soviet era and with a deep and prolonged economic crisis on the island. The paper examines trends in immigration from Cuba, compares the magnitude of recent

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Cuban immigration with that from other countries in the Caribbean, describes some social and demographic characteristics of the new Cuban immigrants, discusses current U.S. immigration policy toward Cuba, and closes with a delineation of policy alternatives.

## The New Wave

Data on immigrants from Cuba admitted to the United States show a gradual increase during the first half of the 1990s, an upward spike at mid-decade, and a moderation of the flow toward the end of the period (Table 1).

All data on immigrants admitted are from the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) *Statistical Yearbooks* (various editions, including 2000 Internet edition) and are by fiscal year. The INS records an immigrant as "admitted" in the year that he or she attains legal residency, not in the year of physical arrival.

**Table 1.**  
**Cuban Immigrants Admitted to the United States, 1990-2000**

1990	10,645
1991	10,349
1992	11,791
1993	13,666
1994	14,727
1995	17,937
1996	26,466
1997	33,587
1998	17,864
1999	14,132
2000	20,381

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1999*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. For 2000, see INS web page: [www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics](http://www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics).

When immigrants arrive by irregular means, there is a lag between the time the individual arrives and the date on which adjustment to legal residency is obtained. That makes interpretation of annual trends difficult. However, this source of error is somewhat alleviated in the case of Cubans because the Cuban Adjustment Act allows Cubans to attain status relatively easily and quickly.

With these caveats, the data on immigrants admitted from Cuba in the 1990s might be interpreted as follows. The gradual increase in the 1990s tracks, with some lag, the deepening crisis in Cuba. The numbers are relatively small, nevertheless, because the U.S. government was issuing few immigration visas to Cubans during this period, and the Cuban government was prosecuting unauthorized departures. The mid-1990s' spike reflects the delayed effect of the 1994 rafter crisis, as the Cubans who managed to make it into the United States before the policy was changed — from welcome to detention — and those allowed to enter after being detained in Guantánamo, Cuba, for several months managed to adjust their status. The figures for 1998-2000 reflect a new era of quasi-normal immigration, regulated by the 1994 immigration agreement, whereby the United States issues 20,000 immigration visas per year to Cubans. While these latter numbers are substantially higher than those of the early 1990s, they are also significantly lower than mid-1990s' levels, which reflect the effects of the rafter exodus.

## Cuban Immigration in the 1990s in Comparative Perspective

While Cuban immigration since the mid-1990s represents a new wave, compared to the post-Mariel trough that extended to the early 1990s, the dimensions of this phenomenon are more limited than conditions would imply. A comparative look at Cuban immigration to the United States yields a counter-intuitive result. One might have expected the 1990s to be a decade of peak migration from Cuba to the United States. Historically, an economic crisis has proved to be a powerful migration "push factor," with the Irish potato famine of the 1840s perhaps the classic example. Following the Soviet collapse of 1989, Cuba suffered one of the worst economic crises of its history. In the early 1990s, Cuba experienced a decrease in gross domestic product (GDP) without parallel in the region, with GDP falling more than 40 percent between 1989 and 1993.<sup>3</sup>

Add to the equation strong "pull factors," including the Cuban Adjustment Act, which allows Cubans overstaying visitor visas or landing by boat after unauthorized journeys to apply for legal residence one year after arrival in the United States. This is a unique immigration benefit available only to Cubans. In addition, among immigrants from the region, Cubans have developed, to a greater extent

than any other immigrant group, the kind of economic enclave and the level of political clout capable of easing new arrivals' integration into U.S. society.

It comes as a surprise, then, that among the four largest Caribbean nations, Cuba had the fewest number of immigrants admitted to the United States between 1990 and 2000 (Table 2).

One thing that can be concluded from these data is that, contrary to expectations, recent immigration from Cuba does not enjoy a privileged position relative to other large Caribbean nations, at least quantitatively, notwithstanding any privileges accrued as a result of policy, law, ideology, and racial prejudice.

**Table 2.**  
**Immigrants Admitted to the United States (1990-2000) by Country of Birth**

Cuba	191,506
Dominican Republic	383,134
Haiti	202,089
Jamaica	198,552

Source: Computed from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1999*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. For 2000, see INS web page: [www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics](http://www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics).

The Cuban immigration disadvantage is more dramatic if the differences in size of the populations of the four countries are taken into account. Using as the base the population for each of the four countries at the mid-point of the period (1995), the number of immigrants admitted to the United States during 1990-2000 per 100,000 in the population of the respective country is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
**Immigrants Admitted to the United States (1990-2000) per 100,000 in the Population of the Sending Country (1995)**

Cuba	1,757
Dominican Republic	4,937
Haiti	3,146
Jamaica	7,729

Source: Computed from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1999*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. For 2000, see INS web page: [www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics](http://www.ins.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics). The source of population figures for the four countries is the U.S. Census Bureau, International Statistics.

The current wave of immigration from Cuba is also significantly less intense, measured by the number of arrivals per year, than the three earlier waves. The migration wave of the early sixties and that of the late sixties/early seventies averaged more than 50,000 arrivals per year. Over 125,000 people reached the United States in a single year in the Mariel boatlift of 1980. From 1996 to 2000 inclusive, the number of Cuban immigrants admitted to the United States annually averaged about 22,000.

### **U.S. Immigration Policy Regarding Cuba**

What accounts for the relatively modest levels of recent Cuban immigration by comparative and historical standards, given the strong push, pull, and facilitating factors? The most important variable explaining this surprising finding is a change in U.S. thinking regarding Cuban immigration that arguably began as early as the 1970s. Looking at recent immigration data, the Mariel boatlift stands as a watershed more starkly than ever. From 1959 to 1980, the U.S. government allowed, encouraged, assisted, and/or sponsored mass immigration from Cuba. A de facto immigration policy of "open arms" was driven by the Cold War, active U.S. opposition to Fidel Castro's rule, and humanitarian concerns. Under this de facto policy, the United States instituted a massive visa waiver for Cubans in the early 1960s and paid for and organized an orderly departure program for more than 250,000 people, known as the "freedom flights," in place from 1965 to 1973. U.S. policy made possible the mass migrations of 1959-1962 and 1965-1973.

By the mid-1970s, the Cuban government had consolidated, the United States had abandoned efforts to overthrow Castro, and the Cold War was beginning to give way to détente. These factors, coupled with the high cost of the program and squabbles between the Cuban and U.S. governments, led to the end of the "freedom flights." In the second half of the 1970s, the number of Cubans entering the United States dropped sharply.

Yet, how ingrained the de facto open arms policy had become was exemplified by the events of 1980. In March 1980, the Refugee Act, intended to provide a systematic procedure for the admission of all refugees based on international (nonideological) standards, was enacted into law. These standards required individuals to prove a

well-founded fear of persecution to be considered refugees. In April 1980, after 10,000 Cubans occupied the grounds of the Peruvian embassy, Castro opened the port of Mariel to Cubans in the United States wishing to pick up relatives who wanted to emigrate. President Jimmy Carter, following in the Cold War footsteps of his predecessors, declared that the United States would “provide an open heart and open arms for the tens of thousands of refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination.” The Mariel boatlift was on.

But Mariel was different. In the 1960s, if the United States showed that it could use immigration in an effort to discredit the Cuban government politically, drain it economically, and build up an exile opposition to fight it militarily, in 1980, Fidel Castro returned the favor.

Castro did it by orchestrating a mass emigration that created major problems for the United States. The speed and social make-up of the Mariel boatlift of 1980 caused economic, social, and political strains in this country. The rapid, uncontrolled nature of the influx of 125,000 people, a disproportionate number of them younger males, created severe problems for U.S. authorities and receiving communities. Although the majority of Mariel immigrants have become integrated into U.S. society and the number of hardened criminals was grossly exaggerated, the Cuban government did allow and/or encourage the emigration of a significant number of people who had backgrounds as petty criminals and many who had adjustment problems in Cuba. The Cuban government had previously used immigration as a political and economic escape valve; in 1980, it used it as a weapon as well.

The trauma of Mariel appears to have caused a fundamental shift in U.S. government attitudes and policies on the immigration of Cubans, one that had begun in the early 1970s, a shift that may provide part of the explanation for the current moderate levels of Cuban immigration. There was no official change in policy, and the de facto open arms approach continued for Cubans arriving by sea or by other irregular means. Nonetheless, a significant change can be inferred from a number of observations. After Mariel, the number of legal immigrants from Cuba dropped to post-1959 lows and stayed at those levels for over a decade. Although the vast majority of the 125,000 Cubans who came through Mariel in 1980 were recorded as having been admitted in the mid- to late 1980s, there were only 144,578 Cubans admitted in the entire period of 1981-1990, the lowest decade from the revolution

to the present time. This occurred despite a 1984 bilateral immigration agreement (suspended in 1985 and reinstated in 1987) that stated the United States would issue Cuban applicants “up to” 20,000 immigration visas per year. The United States stayed within the letter of the agreement, while the Interest Section in Havana issued a total of only 11,222 immigrant visas from 1985 to 1994.

The bilateral negotiations and the ultimate resolution of the rafter crisis of 1994 also support the thesis of a fundamental shift. As the economic crisis in Cuba deepened, the number of rafters gradually increased, and the U.S. government, in line with existing policy, accepted them. Then in the summer of 1994, after those involved in a series of high-profile hijackings of Cuban vessels were welcomed to the United States under the extant de facto open arms policy, the Cuban government announced it would cease to enforce the law regarding illegal departures. The number of rafters sharply increased. In response, the United States once again applied its open arms policy. But as the influx grew and the prospects of another Mariel, with its political, social, and economic ramifications loomed, U.S. political leaders, notably Florida Governor Lawton Chiles, raised an outcry.

The result was a major policy reversal. The United States announced that Cubans attempting to reach the United States by sea would no longer be allowed in; instead, they would be intercepted and detained indefinitely at the U.S. military base in Guantánamo. This unilateral policy change slowed but did not stop the flow; however, it did create an increasingly untenable situation in Guantánamo.

The United States then entered into negotiations with Cuba in September 1994, and the countries signed an immigration agreement that effectively ended the crisis. The stated purpose of the agreement was to “direct Cuban migration into safe, legal and orderly channels.” To that end, the Cuban government agreed to use “mostly persuasive means” to dissuade “irregular migration,” in effect, to clamp down on rafting using nonviolent means. The United States agreed to close the door to rafters, detain them in Guantánamo, and increase legal immigration by issuing a minimum of 20,000 immigration visas per year.

It is telling that Cuban government negotiators initially floated the figure of 100,000 visas per year, later reducing their demand to 50,000, and finally settling for 20,000. Thus, in the negotiations the U.S. government sought to minimize the number of

visas it would agree to issue, which supports the notion of a fundamental change in attitude regarding Cuban immigration. The very fact that the United States would enter into an immigration agreement with a hostile government, offering it a unique immigration privilege in the form of a guarantee of 20,000 visas, suggests the depth of concern over prospects for a much larger and uncontrolled influx.

How the problem of 21,000 Cubans still detained in Guantánamo was resolved provides further evidence of U.S. concern. The United States could not simply allow these individuals into the country, as that would violate the immigration agreement with Cuba and create an incentive for further irregular migration, opening the way for another flood of rafters. But keeping the Cubans in Guantánamo created myriad problems. The solution came in 1995 in the form of an addition to the 1994 agreement. It provided that the United States would thereafter return rafters to Cuba (except those who could show a credible fear of persecution), Cuba would agree not to prosecute returnees, and Cubans detained in Guantánamo would be allowed to enter the United States.

In sum, in order to preclude a flood of Cuban migrants in the context of a profound economic crisis on the island, the U.S. government reversed course and entered into some unusual agreements with the Cuban government. It entered into a unique immigration agreement with a government against which it was conducting an economic embargo and with which it had no diplomatic relations. It agreed to return people fleeing from a country the United States regularly condemns as a human rights violator. And, at the same time, the United States sought to minimize the volume of normal immigration it would have to allow in order to prevent an uncontrolled torrent.

Since the agreement, while the United States has complied with issuing at least 20,000 visas, it has kept fairly close to that minimum, except for the first year, when a backlog of cases was cleared as part of the agreement. Meanwhile, the United States sought to minimize immigration by visa overstayers by denying the vast majority of requests for visitor visas. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana denied 74 percent of nonimmigrant visa applications in 1998 and 1999, for instance. However, for reasons that are not clear but evidently reflecting a policy change, in 2000, the refusal rates for nonimmigrants went down sharply to 37 percent before bouncing back somewhat to 49 per-

cent in 2001.<sup>4</sup> The more liberal approach may have come in response to humanitarian concerns and/or to the argument that allowing people to visit relatives in the United States decreases pressure for permanent emigration through irregular and dangerous means.

Finally, the decision by the George W. Bush administration to maintain in force the immigration agreement with Cuba and to continue the policy of return, despite opposition among hard-line Cuban exiles close to the administration, confirms the robustness of the fundamental shift in U.S. government attitudes to Cuban immigration.

In the wake of the 1959 revolution, the United States facilitated a mass migration from Cuba to this country through a visa waiver program, Operation Pedro Pan, and the freedom flights. By the mid-1970s, many of the assumptions and conditions underpinning the open arms policy were no longer valid. For the last quarter century, the United States has not promoted mass migration from Cuba as a matter of policy. However, from time to time, in a reactive mode and with increasing ambivalence, the United States allowed mass migrations to take place in 1980 and 1994.

In order to end the latest such episodes, to prevent future mass migrations, and to “direct Cuban migration into safe, legal and orderly channels,” the United States entered into an immigration agreement with Cuba in 1994 (modified in 1995). The agreement’s consequences, effectiveness, and problems are discussed below.

## **Evaluating U.S. Cuba Immigration Policy**

There can be little doubt that the 1994 immigration agreement has been successful in directing a larger number of Cubans toward normal migration. The number of immigration visas issued in Cuba by the U.S. Interests Section increased dramatically after the agreement, which took force in fiscal year 1995.

The data indicate that the United States has fulfilled the main plan of the agreement, the issuance of 20,000 immigration visas each year, despite the fact that only around 15,000 visas per year were issued during 1996-1998. From 1996 through 1998 inclusive, as part of the 1995 modification of the agreement, the United States was credited with 5,000 visas per year, reflecting Cuban refugees formerly detained in Guantánamo who were allowed



**Table 4.**  
**Immigration Visas Issued by the**  
**U.S. Interests Section in Cuba 1990-2001**

Year	Visas
1990	1,098
1991	1,376
1992	910
1993	964
1994	544
1995	26,453
1996	15,700
1997	15,899
1998	15,787
1999	24,149
2000	21,228
2001	20,133

Source: For 1990-1994, Masud-Piloto, 1996, 135. For 1995-2001, data was provided by the U.S. Interests Section, Havana.

into the United States. Except for 1995, when the backlog was cleared according to the agreement, and 1999, the number of visas issued was close to the ceiling of 20,000.

The United States was successful in greatly increasing the channel for safe, legal immigration. Yet, how successful is the agreement in relation to unsafe, illegal, irregular migration? Have increased opportunities for legal migration, coupled with interdiction and return on the U.S. side and discouragement from the Cuban side, worked? Table 5 gives the number of Cubans picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard and the number of Cubans eluding the Coast Guard to arrive on shore.

The data show that the number of Cubans picked up at sea began to increase rapidly from the very low levels of the early and mid-1980s as the post-Soviet crisis, which began in 1989, deepened. Then the number exploded in 1994, when Cuba ceased enforcement of exit control. The effect of the crisis on exits by sea is clear, but the removal of enforcement from the Cuban side had a more dramatic effect.

During 1995 and especially 1996 and 1997, the numbers are way down. At this point, it looks as if the increased legal migration opportunities and the prospect of repatriation for irregular migrants have dramatically reduced irregular migration. But then, irregular migration triples in 1998 and doubles again in 1999. What happened?

**Table 5.**  
**Cubans Attempting to Enter the**  
**United States By Sea, 1982-2002**

Year	Interdicted	Landed	Total Attempts	% Success
1982	0			*
1983	44			
1984	7			
1985	51			
1986	28			
1987	46			
1988	60			
1989	257			
1990	443			
1991	1,722			
1992	2,066			
1993	2,882			
1994	38,560	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1995	525	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1996	411	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1997	421	125	546	22.9
1998	903	615	1,518	40.5
1999	1,619	2,254	3,873	58.1
2000	1,000	1,820	2,820	64.5
2001	777	2,406	3,183	75.6
2002	568	667	1,235	54.0

Source: U.S. Coast Guard for interdictions; U.S. Border Patrol for arrivals.

\*Note: From 1982 to the summer of 1994, all Cubans who arrived in the United States were allowed to stay.

There likely are several factors that explain the pattern. The immigration agreement of 1994 raised the hopes of hundreds of thousands of Cubans who were not eligible to immigrate into the United States under the normal criteria for immigrants or refugees: that the agreement would provide a safe and legal avenue into the United States. The route was a special Cuban immigration lottery, for which any Cuban with two out of three of the following requirements can qualify: three years of work experience, graduation from high school or technical school, and relatives in the United States. The problem, which Cubans came to realize over time, is that the number of lottery applicants exceeded the number of available visas by a huge factor. For instance, 7,490 visas were given out to lottery winners and their families in 1996. The number of ap-

plicants for the Cuban immigration lottery in 1996 was 436,277. Thus, the chances of winning the Cuban immigration lottery in any one year were less than 2 in 100, leaving more than 98 percent of the applicants frustrated and possibly looking for other routes into the United States. The number of lottery visas doubled by 1999, but that was far from enough to satisfy the demand. Cuban social scientists have estimated that demand as between 490,000 and 733,000.<sup>5</sup>

Frustrated would-be lottery winners, plus an unknown number of others who do not qualify for the lottery program for various reasons, constitute a market for smugglers of human cargo. Before the policy of repatriation was instituted in 1995, Cubans had used available slow-moving boats and rafts to enter the United States. At that time, Cubans picked up by U.S. authorities were transported into the United States and allowed to stay. After 1995 and the new policy of repatriation, Cubans continued to use mainly the available craft. But, as the figures for 1997 in Table 5 show, the U.S. Coast Guard was successful in interdicting over three-fourths of the would-be immigrants.

U.S.-based smugglers of human cargo equipped with fast boats stepped into the breach created by the failure of the lottery program to put a significant dent in the number of Cubans who want to migrate into the United States but lack the means to do so legally.

By 2001, the number of Cubans attempting to reach the United States by sea had increased almost six fold to over 3,000, and the success rate had more than tripled to over 75 percent. Contributing to this trend was a policy decision by the INS that interpreted the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act as applying to Cubans who make landfall in the United States but not those caught at sea, who are returned to Cuba. According to the “wet feet/dry feet” policy, Cubans who land in the United States can obtain residency after one year and, in accordance with an INS policy instituted in 1999, acquire work permits almost immediately.

In part, the migration by fast boat of the late 1990s and early 2000s is an echo of the migration of the first half of the decade. By the latter date, many early 1990s immigrants who had left close family behind had acquired the resources to pay smugglers who charge \$8,000 or more per migrant.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, all the numbers drop off sharply in 2002. Even so, the number of attempts remained at more than twice

the level of 1997. The effects of the September 11 attacks, in regard to increased security by both the United States and Cuba, probably account for a portion of the reduction.

Enforcement no doubt accounts for part of the reduction as well. Smuggling humans traditionally carries lesser penalties than smuggling drugs and, especially in the case of smugglers of Cubans into South Florida, a lesser chance of successful prosecution. Recently, however, U.S. authorities have apprehended a significant number of smugglers of humans and seized their boats. Prosecutors have pursued cases aggressively and have obtained several convictions. The crackdown by Cuba, where smugglers are unlikely to be acquitted and face hard time, is probably an even bigger deterrent. Cuba has arrested dozens of immigrant smugglers, confiscated their boats, and imprisoned them.

The combination of the lottery and tougher U.S. and Cuban enforcement has managed to keep irregular migration by sea relatively under control in terms of numbers, but the wet feet/dry feet policy represents a major and troublesome loophole. The number of Cubans entering the United States by sea is less than one-tenth the number receiving visas; the goal of making legal, safe, and regular migration the norm has been accomplished. But the wet feet/dry feet policy continues to have major costs, especially in terms of human lives. About one of every 20 Cubans being smuggled to the United States dies in the attempt, a total of at least 55 in a recent 11-month period.<sup>6</sup> The policy promotes dangerous trips and human smuggling and tends to create confrontations between the U.S. Coast Guard and Cubans desperate to reach shore. When Cubans apprehended after landing are allowed to stay and Haitians and others are deported under the wet feet/dry feet policy, it fuels charges of double standards and exacerbates ethnic tensions.

### Current Policy Options

- Continue basically with the current policy, perhaps increasing enforcement against human smuggling to increase deterrence.
- End the wet feet/dry feet policy and replace it with a single standard applicable at the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba, at sea, or upon landing, based on fear of persecution.
- Increase the number of immigration visas issued by the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba in or-

der to channel a greater number of Cubans toward legal, safe, and orderly migration.

- Soften or end the U.S. embargo, which exacerbates the economic crisis in Cuba that is driving migration.

The costs of continuing the current policy have been described above. More effective enforcement may reduce but will not eliminate the death toll. Despite the heavy loss of human life, the current policy has a low domestic political cost and is potentially less controversial than the alternatives. Deporting Cubans who land in the United States is likely to provoke resistance in Miami and may help create, for the first time, a Cuban undocumented immigrant underclass. Increasing the number of visas would meet with domestic opposition from immigration control groups and offer the Cuban government a wider escape valve and more remittances. Powerful hard-line Cuban Americans and members of Congress oppose ending the embargo, which they see as throwing a lifeline to the Cuban government.

### **Characteristics of the New Cuban Immigration**

Like all earlier waves of Cubans entering the United States since 1959, the new arrivals concentrate in a single metropolis to a greater degree than other immigrants. In 1999, for instance, 63 percent of Cubans admitted to the United States intended to make greater Miami their home.<sup>7</sup> This compares with 46 percent for Dominicans in New York City, 40 percent for Jamaicans in New York City, and 13 percent for Mexicans in Los Angeles. The Cuban-origin population of the United States is concentrated in a single metropolitan area to a greater degree than other immigrant or Hispanic populations, and the latest Cuban immigrant cohorts are reproducing this pattern.

The new immigrants differ from earlier waves and from the resident Cuban-origin population of the United States with respect to distribution by age. The new arrivals, both legal immigrants and (especially) rafters, tend to be younger, with a median age around 30 for legal immigrants and late 20s for rafters. Males also predominate, particularly among rafters. The one exception is that of people who arrive as visitors, overstay their visas, and adjust to resident status after one year through the Cuban Adjustment Act. These are mostly older women. This finding is not surprising, as the U.S.

Interests Section in Havana grants very few tourist visas to Cubans of working age for fear they will overstay.

The motivation most commonly cited both by legal and by undocumented recent immigrants from Cuba is economic. In a study conducted by researchers at the University of Havana, 85 percent of aspiring legal immigrants cited economic reasons. This finding does not connote the absence of political motivations because some respondents may have been reluctant to express them, given the Cuban political context. Moreover, two-thirds of the sample linked their desire to seek personal opportunities abroad with skepticism regarding Cuba's ability to overcome its economic problems.<sup>8</sup>

Another study of failed rafters, conducted by the same group of Cuban researchers, found that family played a role in the decision to emigrate. Almost 74 percent of these aspiring immigrants had relatives living abroad, and 68 percent had regular communications with them. The values of those in this group centered around individual aspirations, mainly material ones, but also professional and personal self-realization goals, and to a lesser extent aspirations for personal freedom and family goals.

An interesting finding regards the involvement of failed immigrants in Cuban political institutions prior to the attempt to emigrate. The number of failed rafters were almost equally divided among those who had a high degree (32 percent), a medium level (32 percent), and a low level (38) of integration into Cuba's Communist Party-led political institutions. This finding has many alternative readings: One reading would downplay political disaffection as a factor in current emigration from Cuba; another reading would highlight the role of "simulated support" in Cuban political culture today.

The occupational distribution of recent Cuban immigrants appears to be bi-modal. Among Cubans admitted in 1999 (the last year for which occupational data is available) with declared occupations, there is a significant percentage of professional, technical, and managerial workers (34 percent) and also a slightly larger percentage of manual workers (38 percent are classified as operators, fabricators, or laborers). For comparison, Table 6 presents the percentage of professionals and managers among the 1999 immigrants to the United States from Latin American/Caribbean countries with 5,000 or more immigrants admitted that year.

**Table 6.**  
**Immigrants Admitted to the**  
**United States, 1999**  
**Percent Professionals and Managers**  
**by Country Among those with**  
**Declared Occupations**

Colombia	29
Cuba	34
Dominican Republic	24
Ecuador	21
El Salvador	8
Guatemala	16
Nicaragua	7
Jamaica	19
Haiti	20
Mexico	3
Peru	29

Source: Computed from U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1999*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 78-79.

The data indicate that professionals and managers made up a higher percentage of workers among 1999 immigrants from Cuba than from any of the other principal immigration countries in the region. It is clear that, as with earlier waves from Cuba, the current wave contains a significant sector of highly educated and skilled persons. Unlike earlier arrivals, however, these professionals have been trained under the revolution, from the first grade to post-graduate education. Economically, their emigration represents a brain drain to the country. Politically, the flight of young educated Cubans connotes, if not the kind of profound disaffection felt by the historical exiles, at a minimum a loss of faith in the capacity of the system to provide opportunities for the fulfillment of personal aspirations. At the same time, the high levels of education and/or skill among a substantial percentage of the new arrivals suggest that the pattern of relatively successful integration into the U.S. labor market, established by earlier arriving cohorts of Cubans, may continue into the future.

According to the most recent census, there were 1.3 million people of Cuban origin in the United States (see Appendix) in 2000. They made up 0.46 percent of the U.S. population of 281.4 million and 3.9 percent of the Hispanic population of 33.3 million. On various measures of socioeconomic status, Cubans averaged significantly higher

than the Hispanic median and substantially lower than the U.S. and the white non-Hispanic averages. Thus, in relation to U.S. society, Cubans occupy a middle ground. Cubans as a whole are not a severely underprivileged group, such as many African Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. But neither are they a population that has pulled itself to the average level of the U.S. mainstream, nor has it become an economic or educational elite. In relation to other large Hispanic groups in the United States, however, Cubans do appear to be a privileged group (See Appendix).

## Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the profound and prolonged economic crisis in Cuba and the endurance of the Cuban Adjustment Act, Cuban migration to the United States in the 1990s was relatively moderate in size by historical and comparative standards. Relative to the size of the sending country, there was a greater number of immigrants admitted to the United States in the 1990s from each of the other three large Caribbean nations — the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica — than from Cuba.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the U.S. government promoted or facilitated a massive migration from Cuba to the United States. Since the mid-1970s, U.S. government policy seemingly has been more ambivalent. While the United States has not promoted massive Cuban immigration in the last 25 years, until 1994 it allowed virtually unrestricted irregular migration by sea to occur. The reasons include the Cold War, precedent, inertia, U.S. reluctance to return refugees to a communist government, and the power of Cuban Americans. These factors helped maintain a de facto open arms policy toward irregular migration that lasted for 35 years, notwithstanding an underlying trend toward a more restrictive policy dating from the 1970s.

However, under these conditions, the Cuban government essentially controlled the irregular flow by deciding to enforce its ban on undocumented migration or to withhold enforcement. On three occasions — Camarioca, 1965; Mariel, 1980; and the rafter crisis, 1994 — the Cuban government chose to suspend enforcement, leading to mass migration, an escape valve for pressures in Cuba, and a reactive policy response by the United States. Moreover, irregular migration by sea meant unscreened immigration, perilous voyages, and many deaths.

The 1994 bilateral immigration agreement serves important purposes for both governments. For the United States, it is a guarantee against a sudden, uncontrolled, massive flow unleashed unilaterally by the Cuban government. For the Cuban government, it provides a substantial, although limited, escape valve and source of remittances. It also diminishes the propaganda value of migration and the economically disruptive and potentially destabilizing consequences of episodes of massive chaotic emigration in the context of efforts to attract tourists and foreign investment.

Recent Cuban immigration reflects continuities as well as differences in relation to earlier waves. Unlike earlier immigrants, recent Cuban arrivals tend to be young. Similar to earlier cohorts, many 1990s Cuban immigrants are relatively skilled, suggesting that they also may be able to integrate relatively smoothly into the U.S. labor market and American society.

The 1994 immigration agreement provides the Cuban people a wider avenue for safe and legal migration than had been available since the mid-1970s, while discouraging unsafe and undocumented migration. However, the demand for immigration visas far exceeds the available visas. This — along with the wet feet/dry feet policy of allowing Cubans who make it to shore to stay — has led to a substantial flow of irregular migration conducted by smugglers of humans. These trips represent a kind of Cuban roulette that too often ends in death, but any proposed changes in policy to address this problem consistently meet with strong political resistance and are unlikely to be implemented in the near future.

## NOTES

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3. Ana Julia Jatar-Hausmann, 1999, *The Cuban Way: Capitalism, Communism, and Confrontation* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press), 46.
4. Data provided by the U.S. Interests Section, Havana.
5. Antonio Aja Díaz, 2000, "Cuban Emigration in the 1990s." *Cuban Studies* 30, 1-25.
6. Nancy San Martin, 2002, "Smuggling of Cubans Is Often Deadly," *The Miami Herald*, September 3, 1A.
7. U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1999* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 71-72.
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## APPENDIX

### CUBANS IN THE UNITED STATES IN CONTEXT

	Cuban	U.S.	Hispanic
Population in millions	1.3	281.4	33.3
% College degree or higher	23.0	25.6	10.6
% Professional or managerial occupations	23.5	30.1	14.0
% 50K or above household income	32.4	40.9	27.2

	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
% Full-time year-round workers with annual earnings of \$35,000 or more	49.3	23.3	20.6	29.6	34.4
% Below poverty line	7.7	22.8	24.1	25.8	17.3
% With at least high school education	88.4	57.0	51.0	64.3	73.0

Source: Melissa Therrien and Roberto R. Ramirez, 2000, *Current Population Reports*, P20-535, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.