

# Cuban Migration and Its Social Crisis: An Overview

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Cuba is currently facing a complex migration crisis, which is part of a broader pattern of significant population movements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. In recent years, this region has experienced increased migration driven by various factors, including economic hardship and poverty, political instability, violence, and natural disasters. While each country faces its own unique challenges, Cuba's migratory trends contribute to this regional phenomenon, with Cuban migrants being motivated by a combination of economic difficulties, political discontent, and the desire for greater opportunities abroad.

Since 2010, no other region has experienced a more substantial increase in international migration than Latin America and the Caribbean. The number of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees from the region nearly doubled from 8.3 million in 2010 to 16.3 million in 2022 (Selee et al., 2023). In 2023, the United States received approximately one-third of all new individual asylum applications globally, totaling around 1.2 million—a 61% increase from the previous year. As in 2022, the majority of these applications came from individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean, with significant numbers from Venezuelans (185,300, an increase of 34%), Colombians (128,100, four times more than in 2022), Cubans (99,400, a 37% increase), Nicaraguans (90,800, three times more than in 2022), and Haitians (75,900, up by 81%) (UNHCR, 2023, 2024).



## ***Key Trends in Cuban Migration***

Cuba's migratory trends have intensified in recent years. In fiscal year 2022, the United States registered 224,607 encounters with Cuban migrants and asylum seekers, compared to 39,303 in 2021, a staggering 471% increase in one year. In FY 2024, the number of encounters with Cuban nationals nationwide reached 208,308 (CBP, 2024). Meanwhile, maritime migration has also seen a sharp rise. In FY 2023, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) interdicted over 6,900 Cuban migrants, surpassing the total number from FY 2022, when 6,182 were interdicted (UNCG News, 2023). The FY 2022 number was more than the previous five years combined (Coast Guard News, 2022).

Alongside these alarming statistics, the U.S. humanitarian parole program has authorized the travel of 111,000 Cubans (CBP, September 2024). Additionally, there is a growing number of Cubans in Europe and Latin America.

Experts estimate that the Cuban population at the end of 2023 was around 8.62 million, representing an 18% reduction in only two years, mainly due to the massive exodus. This type of population loss is generally seen in extreme situations like armed conflict, severe political unrest, or major economic collapse (Albizu-Campos, Jule 2024).

## ***Evolving Demographics of Cuban Migrants***

The profile of Cuban migrants has evolved significantly over recent decades. Earlier waves of migration predominantly involved heads of households, who were often the first to leave Cuba, later followed by their families. Many of these migrants self-identified as white. However, today's exodus is more diverse in terms of economic status, gender, age, and profession. It includes a considerable presence of vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and individuals with medical conditions, making the current migration wave particularly risky (Delgado, 2023). Entire families, couples, and unaccompanied minors are increasingly making the dangerous journey across the Western Hemisphere to reach the U.S.-Mexico border (Idem). For instance, in 2024, Cubans made up 15% of the total transit flow through Honduras. Alarming, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported 1,395 encounters with unaccompanied Cuban minors at the U.S. southern border in FY 2023, a sharp increase from just 35 in 2021.



Consistent with broader migration trends, the number of Cuban women migrating has been steadily increasing, particularly among young people of reproductive age. Cuban migrants today come from various professional backgrounds, including entrepreneurs, athletes, professionals, and activists, many of whom have been forced to leave due to state or social pressures (Delgado, 2023).

### ***Socioeconomic Implications of Migration***

Cuba's marginalized communities are particularly affected by the current migration trends. Emigration from the island reproduces longstanding patterns of inequality. Poorer families often lack the resources needed to cover the high costs of emigration, such as plane tickets to Nicaragua or Guyana, embassy fees, and payments to human traffickers (Delgado, 2024). Often, families are forced to sell off lifelong assets or take on substantial debts, often from loan sharks, to finance their migration attempts.

Indeed, some Cuban residents in the United States have been reported to charge between \$10,000 and \$12,000 to serve as sponsors for those seeking to enter the country under humanitarian parole programs. Meanwhile, irregular migrants must pay high prices for flights to countries like Nicaragua, and from there, they pay human traffickers, or "coyotes," between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per person to reach the U.S.-Mexico border (Idem).

These exorbitant costs perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities, as only wealthier families can afford to emigrate, leaving poorer communities behind and exacerbating existing inequities on the island.

### ***Impact on Cuban Society***

The large-scale migration of young, working-age Cubans has significantly affected the island's economy and society. The departure of young people, particularly women, has worsened Cuba's ongoing care crisis. Women migrants often continue to manage family responsibilities transnationally, while those who remain in Cuba face increased caregiving burdens. As more households shrink and elderly individuals are left alone, the demand for specialized social interventions has risen sharply (Acosta & Espina, 2024).



In addition to its social impact, this mass migration has strained the Cuban labor market and disrupted economic development. With a reduced working-age population, the country faces imbalances in its pension system, leading to a higher dependency ratio and putting additional pressure on social services (Albizu-Campos, June 2024).

The ongoing migration crisis has also heightened gender inequalities in Cuba. Women bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, both as migrants managing transnational care and as those remaining behind with increased duties. The commodification of care services benefits wealthier families, while most families cannot afford these services, perpetuating both gender and economic disparities (Acosta & Espina, 2024).

### ***Conclusion***

Cuban migration has deep roots in the country's longstanding economic and social struggles. As the exodus of young people continues, the impact on Cuba's demographic and economic landscape will become even more pronounced. Addressing the underlying factors driving migration and mitigating its effects on society, especially among the most vulnerable, remains one of the greatest challenges for the Cuban government in the years ahead.



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