

Marie L. Mallet. Cuban American. In Linwood H. Cousins (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Services and Diversity*. Sage Publications, 2014.

Cuban-American as culturally different clients

Cuban-Americans represent a heterogeneous group, whose migration patterns and socioeconomic characteristics vary from other Hispanic groups in the United States. In spite of the diversity among Cuban communities, Cuban-Americans display cultural specificities which call for a different treatment of the group.

The specificities of the Cuban-American group stems largely from their immigration history. Prior to 1958, the number of Cubans in the United States was limited in spite of the close links between Cuba and the United States. It is estimated that at this time there were approximately 221,505 Cubans residing in the United States. However, following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, large numbers of Cubans left the country and immigrated to the United States. As of 2011, 1,889,000 Cubans were living in the United States. This significant immigration towards the United States consisted of multiple waves of immigration, and each wave has contributed to the diversity of the cultural identity and needs of Cuban-Americans.

The Cultural Cohesion of the Exile Generation

Cuban immigration can be delineated across several distinct waves, which were characterized by their great demographic diversity. The first waves, which arrived immediately following the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and continued until the 1970s, brought the Cuban elites and Batista sympathizers fleeing from the Communist regime put in place by Fidel Castro. These Cubans for the most part were educated and had either lost or were at risk of losing their assets to the nationalization programs carried out shortly after the Revolution. Accordingly, they were admitted to the country as refugees, thus conferring them privileges from which other Latinos did not benefit. The Cuban Refugee Program of 1962 and the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 respectively provided them financial aid and regularized their status, thus integrating these newly arrived immigrants into society from the onset. An estimated 215,000 Cubans made their way to the United States during the first three years following the Revolution. The failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the subsequent reinforcement of Castro's hold on power, further prompted approximately 74,000 Cubans to leave the island and take refuge in the United States. The next wave began in December 1965 and ended in April 1973. During this period, the two countries agreed to permit two daily flights to bring approximately 340,000 Cubans to Miami. However, the Cuban government abrogated the agreement in May 1973, which led to a fourth wave of Cuban migration, which, this time, was clandestine. From when this wave started to when it ended, in 1980, less than 3,000 refugees are estimated to have entered the United States illegally.

From Refugees to Economic Migrants

A fifth wave of immigration, known as the Mariel Boatlift, marked the beginning of a shift to economic migrations. Economic difficulties and internal tensions in Cuba led a group of Cubans to seek refuge in the Peruvian Embassy. Shortly after, the Cuban government announced that it would permit emigration from the island. An impromptu exodus then occurred between the Cuban port of Mariel and the United States. While there were still some political dissidents among the Cuban migrants arriving in the United States there was also a large proportion of

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economic migrants as well as convicts and psychiatric patients, who had been released by the Cuban government for that purpose. The negative political repercussions from the arrival of these migrants led President Jimmy Carter to halt the exodus, which by this time had nevertheless allowed a total of 124,769 Cubans to depart the island for the United States. A final wave began following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the economic and commercial hardship which ensued on the island. A marked policy change occurred – indeed, the favored treatment by the United States from which Cuban immigrants benefited was tightened with legislation such as the Cuban Migration Agreements of 1994 and 1995, which sought to end the ‘open-door policy’ to Cuban immigration. This is partly due to the differential nature of current Cuban immigrants as economic rather than political migrants.

The Current State of the Cuban-American Population

Although they belong to the same ethnic category, there are major differences between Cuban-Americans and other Latinos. Compared to other Hispanic groups, the Cubans are the most geographically concentrated, with 70% of the population residing in Florida. Prior to the 1959 Revolution, Cuban migration patterns were mainly contingent on work opportunities, and as a consequence Cuban migrants scattered all around the United States, particularly in the Northeast and Southeast, in states such as New Jersey, New York and Florida. After the Revolution, Cuban settlements became more concentrated as the majority of Cubans established themselves in Florida, and formed enclaves, particularly in Miami, thus providing support and opportunities for fellow Cubans immigrants.

As a whole, Cuban-Americans are socio-economically distinct from other Latino groups or the U.S. population: their median age is 40, compared to 27 for Hispanics generally; they are slightly older than the U.S. population whose median age is 37. Educational attainments of Cuban-Americans is similar to that of the U.S. population, although slightly lower, but much higher than that of other Hispanic group. They present lower rates of poverty and perceive a higher median family income than other Latinos, but still lag behind the general U.S. population. Cubans also display a deep attachment to their homeland, particularly the political exile generations of migrants and usually retain the culture of their homeland as well as the use of Spanish, especially in the Miami enclave. A higher proportion of Cubans are foreign born (58%), than other Latinos (36%); however, more than half (55%) are U.S. citizens, thereby facilitating their conventional participation in U.S. politics as well as their access to social programs.

Cuban-Americans also exhibit great diversity within the group. From the Cuban Revolution until the end of the 1970s, Cuban political migrants were mostly white, older, educated migrants from upper classes. However, the subsequent economic waves of immigration brought principally darker (‘mulattos’), migrants from the working classes. This racial divide based on skin color is associated to a certain extent with the divide between the different classes, and somewhat hampers attempts at unifying the Cuban community. Indeed, these newcomers no longer share the exile identity which unified the first Cuban migrants. Additionally, the rise of 2nd and subsequent generations of Cubans who assimilate quickly into the host society is further eroding the unity of the Cuban community.

Conclusion

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The varied waves of immigration led to Cuban-Americans constituting a socially diverse group whose immigration patterns and socioeconomic characteristics differ from that of most Latino groups in the United States. Given the heterogeneity of the Cuban-Americans as a group and the socio-economic and cultural distinctions between Cuban-Americans and other Latino groups, it becomes necessary to consider Cubans as diverse clients when taking into account their social needs.

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See also: Caribbean Immigrants; Diaspora; Ethnicity and clients; Hispanic Immigrants; Latin Americans

Further Readings

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