

DOCUMENTATION

## *Cuban Refugees in the United States*

by John F. Thomas\*

On October 3, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson stated that "those who seek refuge here in America will find it."<sup>1</sup> President Johnson was replying to an earlier statement by Fidel Castro asserting that any person who wished to leave Cuba was free to do so. The Department of State was directed by the President to seek an agreement with the government of Cuba concerning the establishment of procedures for moving refugees from Cuba to the United States. The position of the United States was that any movement should be orderly, in keeping with our laws, and in order of priority. Once again the United States was demonstrating its traditional policy of open asylum and its consistent concern for the reuniting of families.

President Johnson had stressed the fact that priority should be given to the movement of immediate relatives of Cubans already in the United States. In the "Memorandum of Understanding" worked out between the Swiss Embassy in Havana, which represents the interests of the United States in Cuba, and the Cuban Foreign Ministry it was stipulated that priorities would be defined as follows: parents of unmarried children under the age of 21, spouses, unmarried children under the age of 21 and brothers and sisters under the age of 21. It was further agreed that the first priority would include other close relatives living in Cuba of persons now in the United States who reside in the same household as the immediate relatives, when such inclusion is required for humanitarian considerations. These cases of close relationship were designated as Priority A cases for processing purposes. Cases of more distant family relationship became known as Priority B cases.

These activities were based on the turn of events of earlier years which led the United States to become a country of first asylum for a mass of refugees for the first time in its history.

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1. Remarks of President Lyndon B. Johnson at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, October 3, 1965.

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Fidel Castro assumed control of the government of Cuba in January 1959. During the first two years of his rule over 50,000 Cubans fled to the United States.

This first wave of refugees was mainly those who had some connection with the Batista government and were fleeing for political reasons.<sup>2</sup> This group was small, numbering only a few thousands. With the seizure of private property and enterprises by the government, more and more professional and technicians of all types began to flee the country. By the middle of 1961, small merchants, office employees, and skilled and semi-skilled workers were leaving Cuba in large numbers for the United States, the large majority of these people being in the most productive years of their lives between 20 and 5 years of age. Although the United States had closed its consular offices in Cuba in January 1961, Cuban nationals were permitted to enter the country on the basis of a visa waiver. Under this method an application was filed in the United States by a relative or friend, processed through the Federal agencies concerned and forwarded to the Swiss Embassy in Havana. The Cuban, notified of his clearance to enter the United States, arranged transportation on one of the commercial airlines still operating between Havana and Miami. At the peak of the program in 1962, more than 1,800 refugees were arriving in Miami each week.

By October 1962, when the missile crisis caused President Kennedy to place a quarantine on the island, some 155,000 Cuban refugees had been registered for services at the Cuban Refugee Center in Miami. The Cuban government, in retaliation to President Kennedy's action, cut off all commercial flights to the United States. For the next three years, except for unique exchange of prisoners, no direct commercial air transportation facilities existed between the two countries.

In the early years of the movement from Cuba; local, public, and voluntary agencies had banded together in Miami to assist the refugees.<sup>3</sup> The Cuban government had not imposed heavy restrictions on the departing refugees so that many were able to reach the United States in possession of a good part of their assets.

Towards the end of 1960 the Cuban government began confiscating all real and personal property belonging to the refugees, which meant that the refugees reached the United States in a state of destitution. This, in turn, caused a great financial drain on the resources of the local agencies in Miami. In December 1960, the Federal Government established the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center in Miami with an allocation of \$1 million from the President's Contingency Fund under the Mutual Security Act. One of the first official actions taken by John F. Kennedy as President of the United States was to direct the Secretary of Health, Education, and Wel-

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2. John F. Thomas, "Cuban Refugee Program," *Welfare in Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, September 1963.

3. U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee Hearings, 1st Session, 87th Congress, December 6, 7, 13, 1961, presents a good picture of the problems confronted by local agencies in the early period of the Cuban influx.

fare to undertake a Cuban Refugee Program.<sup>4</sup> To carry the program through the end of the fiscal year (June 30, 1961), a \$4 million allocation was made from the Contingency Fund under the Mutual Security Act to supplement the original allocation of \$1 million. With the continuing flow of Cuban refugees and the unexpected stability of the Cuban government, it became apparent that a more extensive refugee program would be needed. Therefore, on June 28, 1962, Public Law 87-510, the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962, was enacted and funds for the program were appropriated by Congress under this Act.<sup>5</sup>

Many persons familiar with refugee concentrations in European countries, particularly those occurring after World War II, think in terms of refugee camps but, in the Cuban refugee situation, the United States Government ruled early against the establishment of refugee camps. This decision was due partly to the traditional dislike of Americans for camp setups, (those who were connected with the Hungarian refugee experience at Camp Kilmer were foremost in speaking against the establishment of refugee camps for Cubans). It was also due to the manner in which the Cuban refugee movement grew, for at first the Cubans did not look upon themselves as refugees but rather as temporary exiles from a homeland only 90 miles from the Florida coast. Latin American revolutions have the reputation of being temporary and the takeover by Fidel Castro was looked upon as being of this mold. Thus the Cuban refugees were permitted to be, in the term used in Western Europe, "free-livers" i.e., no restrictions as to movement, residence, or employment. As a result, the majority of Cubans decided to remain in Miami. The reasons?, they were close to home, the climate was similar to that of Havana, Spanish language was prevalent, and the politically active groups electrified the atmosphere by keeping alive the hopes of an early return to Cuba. Miami, in turn, began to take on an air of "Little Havana."

The Cuban Refugee Program is unique in that it was developed through the utilization of the services of existing agencies to as great an extent as possible, though the overall responsibility rested with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. A small staff was detailed to the participating units in the Department at the Washington level while a staff of about 100 persons employed by the Federal Government was assigned to the Cuban Refugee Center in Miami.

Within HEW the Bureau of Family Services was assigned the responsibility for administering the financial assistance program for needy refugees. This was accomplished through the Florida State Department of Public Welfare being given the immediate responsibility for maintaining the welfare services for the Cuban refugees in Miami. The Children's Bureau assumed the responsibility for administering to the needs of over 8,600 unaccompanied children who were sent out of Cuba by their parents during

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4. Appendix A, "Definition of a Cuban Refugee," Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Cuban Refugee Program.

5. Table I, "Financing of the Cuban Refugee Program."

Table I  
 Financing of the Cuban Refugee Program  
 (In Thousands of Dollars)

Activity	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967 Estimates
1. Direction and coordination of program including reception, registration, and classification of refugees	\$ 220	\$ 937	\$ 960	\$ 987	\$ 944	\$ 2,011	\$ 2,264
2. Welfare Assistance and Services	2,254	28,065	40,807	32,011	19,719,630	17,652	23,650
3. Resettlement and Employment Opportunities	518	3,780	3,677	2,153	1,289,819	4,525	6,996
4. Education	1,011	5,463	9,463	9,682	9,588,440	10,392	11,995
5. Health Services	86	456	1,131	1,178	989,119	1,245	1,595
ANNUAL TOTAL .....	\$4,089	\$38,502	\$56,028	\$46,011	\$32,531,008	\$35,825	\$46,500
Assistance to Refugees in the United States							
GRAND TOTAL OBLIGATIONS .....							\$259,486,008

Source: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Administration—Cuban Refugee Program.

the early days of the exodus. These parents were cut off by the cancellation of direct flights from Cuba following the missile crisis of October 1962. Four voluntary agencies were contracted or the primary responsibility for the foster care program for unaccompanied Cuban children: the Catholic Welfare Bureau, the Children's Service Bureau, the Jewish Family and Children's Service, and the United HIAS Service.<sup>6</sup> Also within HEW, the Public Health Service provides overall guidance of medical and dental services for needy refugees through contractual arrangements with the Dade County Public Health Service and the Office of Education supervises the loan program for Cuban students and the refresher courses for Cuban professional people. In addition the Office of Education, through the facilities of the Dade County Public School system, supervises programs in Miami related to the education of refugee children as well as English and vocational courses for adults.

It soon became evident that the Miami/Dade County area, magnificent as its people had been in welcoming the Cubans, could not support such a heavy increase in population. Therefore, the main thrust of the Federal program was directed to the resettlement of Cuban refugees away from Miami. To undertake this important task, the government turned to four national voluntary agencies, each having long experience in the resettlement of refugees. These agencies were: the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the Church World Service, the International Rescue Committee, and the United HIAS Service.<sup>7</sup>

When the October 1962 missile crisis halted the steady flow of Cuban refugees the Federal Government and the cooperating agencies were given time to take stock of the refugee population. With nearly 70,000 refugees requiring financial assistance at the Miami area (approximately 58% of the refugees residing in that area in late 1962), the Federal Government sought means of strengthening its resettlement program. Resettlement is a complex operation. It requires the bringing together of a sponsor and a refugee who are complete strangers to one another. Normally the sponsor sends information to the Resettlement agency on the housing available, the size of the family requested, and the type of employment available in his area and other pertinent information. The agency generally will send dossiers to the sponsor on several refugees so that the sponsors may make a choice. In many instances, however, there is little time or necessity for a sophisticated exchange of information. Many sponsors, once they agree to accept a refugee family, are quite prepared to take anyone in the need of help. The four voluntary agencies concerned with resettlement joined the Federal staffs in reviewing the refugee group residing in Miami in late 1962. The Federal Government introduced data processing equipment to record the characteristics of the refugees who were receiving financial assistance. Cases were coded according to age, family composition, medical

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6. Kathryn Close, "Cuban Children Away from Home," *Children*, Jan.-Feb. 1963.

7. For a picture of the work of one of these agencies see, Frances Stanley, "The New World Refugee . . . The Cuban Exodus," Church World Service.

problems, skills, English languageability, and other characteristics important to the resettlement approach.<sup>8</sup> Once a case was determined to be resettleable (and this decision came as the result of a combination of interviews by both the Federal Government staff members and representatives of the voluntary agency concerned) the Federal Government implemented a policy of denying financial assistance should a reasonable resettlement offer be refused. The policy proved to be therapeutic as well as effective. The majority of Cubans were not at all pleased to have to accept financial assistance. The \$100 per month paid a family or the \$60 per month paid to a single person on assistance was not large enough to deter the recipient from leaving for resettlement. The important obstacles to resettlement continued to be the climate of Miami, the close proximity of Florida to Cuba, the hope of a quick return, and the political activity amongst the 400 or more Cuban exile organizations. The main task lay in convincing the refugee that he must not lose his self-dignity, that he must maintain his skills, and that he must become a contributing member, rather than a parasite, to his country of asylum. He had to be persuaded that resettlement was his main hope for a new life.

The response of the refugees was so gratifying that within a period of less than two years of concentrated effort, the financial caseload in Miami was reduced to less than 12,000 persons (mainly the over 65 years of age group). Cubans had been moved to nearly 3,000 communities in every state. (Table II)

Table II  
December 1, 1965–December 30, 1966

	<i>Arrivals</i>	<i>Registrations</i>	<i>Resettlements</i>
Airlift	48,127	40,618	33,141
Others	4,691	4,691	6,896
TOTALS	52,818	45,309	40,037

(1) Percentage of total resettlements to total arrivals since December 1, 1965: 76%.

(2) Cumulative totals since January 1961:

Registrations — 228,805  
Resettlements — 134,945

*Source:* Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Administration—Cuban Refugee Program.

Much has been written concerning the assimilation of migrants and refugees in new communities. The remarkable feature of the Cuban adjustment cycle is that before the mass exodus there existed no large Cuban

8. For the results of a study of unaccompanied Cuban refugee women in Miami see, John Mayer, "Women Without Men: Selected Attitudes of Some Cuban Refugees," Master's Thesis, University of Miami, June 1966.

communities in any area other than Florida. As the result of the resettlement program, there are sizeable Cuban communities now flourishing in New York City; Elizabeth, Union City, West New York, and other New Jersey cities; Chicago; New Orleans; and Los Angeles. (Table III)

Table III  
Geographical Distribution of Resettled Cuban Refugees

<i>States</i>	<i>Number of Refugees</i>	<i>States</i>	<i>Number of Refugees</i>
Alabama	286	Montana	144
Alaska	1	Nebraska	363
Arizona	150	Nevada	7003
Arkansas	64	New Hampshire	93
California	14,194	New Jersey	19,953
Colorado	1,032	New Mexico	312
Connecticut	1,627	New York	37,345
Delaware	220	North Carolina	352
District of Columbia	1,546	North Dakota	45
Florida	3,529	Ohio	1,583
Georgia	1,150	Oklahoma	457
Hawaii	26	Oregon	559
Idaho	4	Pennsylvania	2,356
Illinois	8,662	Rhode Island	286
Indiana	9938	South Carolina	199
Iowa	418	South Dakota	48
Kansas	680	Tennessee	400
Kentucky	253	Texas	3,243
Louisiana	2,727	Utah	13
Maine	22	Vermont	41
Maryland	764	Virginia	1,341
Massachusetts	4,394	Washington	306
Michigan	1,339	West Virginia	141
Minnesota	371	Wisconsin	500
Mississippi	94	Wyoming	15
Missouri	860		

Puerto Rico: 13,323; Virgin Islands: 39; Foreign Countries (26): 908

Total persons resettled from June 1961 to December 30, 1966: 130,599

Source: Cuban Refugee Center, Miami, Florida, Statistical Unit

It is with this background that the current airlift was initiated on December 1, 1965. Basically a family reunion scheme, the operation brings in about 200 refugees per day each workday or about 4,000 per month. HEW Secretary John W. Gardner was able to report to the President on the first anniversary of the airlift:

"The new refugees have rapidly become self-supporting. The airlift has not resulted in an undue burden on the Miami area. Seventy-six percent of all newly arrived refugees have been resettled from Miami to other parts of the country since last December 1. The continuing success of the refugee program is a tribute both to the valor and resourcefulness of the Cubans themselves and to the hospitality and generosity of the thousands of American citizens who have helped the refugees build new lives in the United States."<sup>9</sup>

Table IV  
Breakdown of Airlift Arrivals of Age and Skills\*

<i>Age Groups</i>	
0-17 .....	31.7%
18-45 .....	36.8
46-64 .....	24.3
65/over .....	7.2
<i>Skills</i>	
Professional, Semi-Professional and Managerial....	7.6%
Clerical and Sales .....	11.2
Skilled .....	7.7
Semi-skilled and unskilled .....	4.1
Services .....	3.3
Agriculture and Fishery .....	1.7
Students, Children and Housewives .....	64.4

\* December 1, 1965-December 30, 1966

Source: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Administration—Cuban Refugee Program.

The "Memorandum of Understanding" between the United States and Cuba calls for an exchange of lists—nominal rolls. The American lists, called U.S. Master Lists, name those persons in Cuba claimed by relatives here who the United States considers eligible for entry within the terms of the Memorandum. The Cuban lists, called Cuban Master Lists, are compiled by the Cuban government and name those persons considered eligible for exit permits by that government. Those names which appear on both lists form the basis for what are called Joint Consolidated Lists, lists of persons both governments consider eligible for movement under the terms of the agreement.

Forms submitted to the Cuban Refugee Center by persons in the United States wishing to bring relatives here from Cuba serve, in part, as the basis for compilation of our lists. This is a simple one-page form which gives

9. White House Press Release, December 1, 1966.



the name and address of the U.S. claimant, and the name, date and place of birth, address, and relationship of the persons in Cuba being claimed. These forms are separated as to Priority A and Priority B, according to the relationship. All of this information is placed on data-processing cards and is used by this and other Federal agencies, not only for compiling our lists but for other internal processing requirements.

In marking the first anniversary of the current airlift, Eric Sevareid televised the following:

"The exodus continues: the airlift goes on, two hundred people a day still landing in Miami. The end is not even in sight. The surest way for a Cuban to get here is to have relatives here." Earlier in his broadcast, Mr. Sevareid had noted: "To a great extent these people represent the professional and business class of Cuba; the able, the educated, the successful. The struggle in most Latin American countries is to build a stable middle class; that of Cuba has been gutted. This exodus is the biggest brain drain the Western Hemisphere has known."<sup>10</sup>

"Brain drain," as in all immigration and refugee movements, the receiving countries gain with respect to useable manpower. Over 1,700 Cuban refugee doctors have taken the refresher course offered at the University of Miami Medical School. The completion of this course generally leads to the successful passing of the Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates examination. Once he has passed the ECFMG test, the Cuban doctor can practice in hospitals, clinics, and other institutions under the supervision of an American doctor. It is purported that the cost to the taxpayer for the training of an American doctor from kindergarten to internship is over \$40,000. HEW has placed nearly 1,700 Cuban doctors into public service at the cost of \$300 per doctor, this represents quite a sizeable return on our investment! Thousands of school teachers have escaped from Cuba, and HEW has sponsored more than 15 training projects at universities in various parts of the country leading to the employment of Spanish-language teachers in hundreds of communities previously not able to locate teachers of that skill. Cuban lawyers have become teachers, insurance adjusters, abstract readers, librarians, and social workers as the result of retraining. Veterinarians, optometrists, dentists, pharmacists, accountants, and many, many other professional and skilled persons are among the refugees who are now contributing to the American economy.<sup>11</sup> "Brain drain?", one will have to admit that Eric Sevareid is right in his statement for Cuba has lost some of its best "brains" and the American economy has benefited as a result.

It is estimated that about 90,000 of the nearly 300,000 Cubans who have sought asylum in the United States since the Castro takeover reside in Miami. The Cuban refugees have contributed substantially to the economy

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10. Eric Sevareid, CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite, December 1, 1966.

11. Supplement to *Resettlement Re-Cap*, April 1965. A periodic report from the Cuban Refugee Center, Miami, Florida.

of the city whose people welcomed them so generously, for over 3,000 business establishments have been licensed for operation under Cuban management.<sup>12</sup> Several sugar refineries and tobacco factories have been founded by Cubans and housing, much of which was in a state of deterioration, has been taken over and refurbished by the Cuban occupants. Miami, the "Gateway to Latin America" has become a bilingual community.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most fascinating episodes in the Cuban Refugee Program activities is that concerning the unaccompanied Cuban refugee children. In 1961, following the nationalization of the Cuban schools, many parents became dismayed over the communist indoctrination to which their children would be exposed. There were incidents of Cuban children being sent to countries behind the Iron Curtain adding to the concern of parents. As a result, over 13,000 Cuban children were sent to the United States, unaccompanied by their parents. Many of these children went to relatives who were in position to care for them, but nearly 9,000 had to receive aid from the Federal Government's program. When the direct flights stopped in October 1962, over 4,000 unaccompanied children remained in either foster or group homes in 41 states. The number has been reduced to under 400 due to the current airlift bringing in many parents.

Students of the United States policies on immigration may be interested in the background to Public Law 89-732 recently passed by Congress and signed into law by President Johnson. P. L. 89-732 permits Cuban refugees to adjust their immigration status from parolee to that of lawful permanent residents of the United States. In January 1961 the American government closed its consular offices in Cuba, however, a system was established through which persons in the United States could sponsor persons in Cuba for immigration to this country. A procedure was instituted for the waiving of visas and the authorizing of the paroling of the refugees into the United States under provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act.<sup>14</sup> As time went on it became obvious to those concerned with the assimilation of the Cuban refugees that the lack of permanent resident status was a handicap to many. Professional people found many avenues to licensing or certification closed due to this factor. Skilled persons encountered difficulties in meeting requirements in many states because of lack of permanent resident status. To meet this problem Congress passed the necessary legislation last session which enables many Cuban refugees to better their economic position.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, the Cuban Refugee Program has been a people-to-people program in every sense. The generosity of the American people has been combined with the resilience and resourcefulness of the Cuban refugees to

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12. Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, "Cubans in Miami," *America*, February 26, 1966 pp. 286-289.

13. Miami *Herald* Supplement, Sunday, June 26, 1966.

14. Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 212(d)(5).

15. U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee Hearings, 1st session, 89th Congress.

make this experience of human suffering as painless as possible. The tying of an American local agency in with each Cuban family being resettled, before the resettlement plans are made and after they are implemented, has aided immeasurably in making the program the success that it is. It cannot be emphasized too strongly the need to make language, vocational, and professional training available to the head of the refugee family as early as it is feasible. But the key of successful relocation rests squarely on the ability of the program staff to counsel the *entire family* and to win its confidence by producing stable and solid ways to meet immediate needs.

An athlete always has a substantial obstacle to overcome on the day of the big game race. He must remain, in the parlance of the sports world, "loose." He must resist rigidity; he must keep himself flexible. The Cuban Refugee Program has attempted to stay "loose." The policies and the services of the program are geared to the needs of the individual with the objective of making him self-sufficient as quickly as possible. Perhaps this is a lesson to be learned by traditional social welfare where policy is generally sacrosanct and services are not fully mobilized to move the disadvantaged family from welfare towards economic independence. In the Cuban Refugee Program this lesson has been learned very well and practised with deep conviction.

## APPENDIX

### DEFINITION OF CUBAN REFUGEE<sup>1</sup>

I. The Cuban Refugee Program has been established as a temporary measure to cope with the problems created by the influx of individuals who are refugees from oppression in their Cuban homeland. Within the limitation of funds which may be available, benefits will be provided to individuals to alleviate their hardship until such time as circumstances permit them to return voluntarily to their homes. The nature and extent of the benefits provided will be determined from time to time under authority delegated by the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and the conditions under which individuals may participate will vary according to the type of benefit. No right is created for any individual to obtain a benefit or to continue to receive a benefit once given.

II. Subject to disqualification under item IV below, and subject to the special provisions regarding unaccompanied children in III below, an individual may be considered to be a Cuban refugee for the purposes of the Cuban Refugee Program if he is registered at the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center at Miami, Florida, as meeting the following criteria:

A. He is a national of Cuba (or a non-national who resided in Cuba for 5 years immediately preceding the time he left Cuba, if he is approved for registration by the Director of the Cuban Refugee

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1. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Administration—Cuban Refugee Program.

Emergency Center) presently living in the Miami area (or in another area of the United States as a result of resettlement or placement under the unaccompanied children program); and

- B. He left Cuba on or after January 1, 1959, or the Director of the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center finds that the withholding of benefits would tend to defeat the purposes of the program; and
- C. He bears proper identification from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and is:
  - (1) A parolee under section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act; or
  - (2) An alien granted indefinite voluntary departure; or
  - (3) An alien who is a permanent resident of the United States; or
  - (4) A student.

III. An unaccompanied child is a national of Cuba under the age of 19, in the Miami area at the time service is initiated, who meets the criteria specified in II B. & C. above, whose parent or other relative cannot provide care and supervision for him and who is in need of foster care. Registration for any unaccompanied child may be accomplished by the filing of completed Form CW-CRS 1 with the State Department of Public Welfare.

IV. A refugee within the foregoing criteria may be denied assistance if the Director of the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center determines that the provision of such assistance is inimical to the interests of the United States. In such case, the individual shall be denied registration at the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center or, if already registered, such registration shall be deleted.