Excludable: Race, Policing, and Migration in Cuba and the United States, 1959-1986

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(History)
in the University of Michigan
2025

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Dedication

In memory of Eve, who opened the way

Acknowledgements

Like all dissertations, this one was a collective project. I am deeply grateful to the people who made it possible and eager to express my thanks to all of them. The risk of attempting to write comprehensive acknowledgments for something of this scope is that people, institutions, and communities crucial to its development might inadvertently be omitted. If, in this case, you are one of those people, forgive me; these words were written when I was in need of a good night's sleep.

My co-advisors, Matthew Lassiter and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, are model mentors who have had an immeasurable impact on my development as a thinker and a writer. From the beginning of my time at the University of Michigan, they showed a sustained interest in my research, helped make transparent the opaque dimensions of this profession, and guided me through moments of doubt. I knew we had shared interests when I arrived at Michigan. But I did not appreciate until later just how much our intellectual proclivities overlapped. Nor did I know that our mutual commitments extended beyond academic scholarship to include public-facing and community-engaged research. The opportunity to collaborate directly with Matt and Jesse in such work through the Carceral State Project and the Immigrant Justice Lab was invaluable and created spaces of solidarity within the frequently isolating process of dissertation writing. I am beyond fortunate to have found my way to them.

Rebecca Scott is a force. Her tremendous energy and curiosity are matched only by her generosity. This project is far better than it would have been had she not been involved from the

start, and many of the remaining flaws reflect my inability to fully address her incisive comments and questions on draft chapters. Her seminars and our conversations have decisively shaped not only this dissertation, but also my basic approach to the study of history. Heather Ann Thompson showed sincere interest in my ideas before I even arrived at Michigan. Her insistence on the value of comparative studies of coercive state power and her unique ability to understand and name a project's key stakes are reflected in the core arguments and fundamental structure of this study. Her encouragement at key moments helped me make it happen. When Melissa Burch and I met through the Carceral State Project, I immediately hoped to learn from her. My analysis of the social, political, and legal forces that made certain people into "criminals" is, in some respects, an attempt to emulate what she achieves through her ethnographic research. While my work is not there yet, her questions, counsel, and model will remain vital to its continued development.

At the University of Michigan, I was lucky to find an abundance of friends, colleagues, and teachers. Gerson Rosales, Elena Rosario, Nicole Navarro and ToniAnn Treviño were constant sources of inspiration, support, and friendship during my time in graduate school. Stacey Bishop and David Helps, fellow seafarers aboard the Capn's ship, were subjected to early and halting drafts of many pieces of this dissertation. They offered crucial feedback, genuine comradery, and ample CanCon (Canadian Content). I got the benefit of learning from and sharing time with many kind and smart people at Michigan, including Ana María Silva Campo, Andrew Walker, Nora Krinitsky, Salem Elzway, Lamin Manneh, Kristen Connor, Robert Ramaswamy, Jonathan Quint, Jen Triplett, Miranda García, Aurelis Troncoso, Reuben Riggs-Bookman, Eshe Sherley, Amelia Burke, Eimeel Castillo, Allie Goodman, Martin Lopez-Galicia, and Conor Hodges (whose path took him elsewhere but who remains at Michigan in my mind). I

learned from dedicated teachers, including Brandi Hughes, Bill Lopez, Ruth Behar, Silvia Pedraza, Matthew Countryman, Victoria Langland, Farina Mir, Sueann Caulfield, Howard Brick, Kate Andrias, Bill Novak, Henry Cowles, Kira Thurman, Stephen Berrey, Rita Chin, Geoff Eley, and Joshua Cole. I am indebted to the History Department staff who worked to ensure that us graduate students stayed on track, and especially to kat wiles and Susan Douglas.

Some of my most formative experiences during graduate school occurred away from campus. I am awed by organizers at the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights and attorneys at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center who dedicate themselves to working with mixed-status communities facing the effects of immigration law enforcement. What I learned alongside Bill Lopez has forever changed me and how I think about state projects to forcibly remove people from their homes and families. My experience facilitating writing workshops with the Prison Creative Arts Program had a similarly profound effect on my understanding of criminalization and prisons, largely thanks to those inside who shared their words and time, and to the brilliant students, staff, and faculty who run the program.

This dissertation benefited from the feedback of colleagues and mentors at every stage of its development, including participants in the 2018 American Society for Legal History Student Research Colloquium and its faculty directors, David Tanenhaus and Laurie Wood. Thanks to a fellowship with the Program in Race, Law, and History at the University of Michigan Law School, I traveled to Miami for research and learned from valuable comments offered by Sam Erman and the other participants in the capstone seminar. I am grateful to all the "*cubanistas*" from the Cuban & Cuban Diaspora Studies Interdisciplinary Workshop for companionship and community, and especially to Aurelis Troncoso, Miranda García, Jen Triplett, Kerry White, Michaelanne Thomas, Alana Rodríguez, and Silvia Pedraza, who read and commented on early

drafts. Alejandro de la Fuente, Angela Eva Gutierrez, and the other participants in the 2023 Mark Claster Mamolen Dissertation Workshop provided key feedback on a draft chapter.

A Visiting Fellowship with the History Department at Harvard through the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences provided essential support as I worked to complete the dissertation. Alejandro de la Fuente and Paulina Alberto generously allowed me to join their seminar on Afrodescendant citizenship in Latin America. Their course, and everyone I met at the Afro-Latin American Research Institute, were pivotal to the development of this dissertation and to my understanding of Latin American history. Conversations with Alejandro transformed major elements of this project. Paulina shared piercing insights drawn from her work on Argentina and Brazil. Both made me feel at home.

I am so glad to have met Luis Reyes Escate, Carlos Correa Angulo, and Thiago Mattos-Batista, and to have learned from the participants in the ALARI dissertation working group: Poliana da Silva Ferreira, Angélica Sánchez Barona, Maya Doig-Acuña, Eduarda Araujo, Eliel Sánchez Acevedo, and Marisol Fila. Reuniting with Marisol, and with Nacho Canosa, was an unexpected and very happy development, as was reconnecting with Phil Deloria. Phil left a major mark on this dissertation, and so did conversations with Nate Grau, Mitch Bacci, Ione Barrows, Noah Pinkham, Sonja Grassmugg, Nora Spicer, Clare Anderson, Adriana Zenteno Hopp, and Sudarshana Chanda, who became a close comrade and indispensable source of support. Meeting Daisy Hunter-Haydon was incredibly fortuitous; her energy, insights, and friendship helped me push this dissertation over the line. Joel Suarez showed immense generosity as I navigated the final stretch of the doctorate, as did David Spreen and Bobby Cervantes. Thomas Dichter helped to clarify some of the stakes of this project with his keen

comments on a chapter. I am thankful to Dan Bertwell and many others in the History Department for helping me feel welcome.

I owe much to many other scholars who have shown an interest in my work and offered feedback and encouragement over the years, including Nathan Connolly, Cindy Hahamovitch, Paul Kramer, Ada Ferrer, Sarah McNamara, Kristina Shull, Llana Barber, Yanilda González, Adam Tooze, Max Felker-Kantor, Jana Lipman, Elliott Young, Pedro Regalado, and Yami Rodríguez. Scholars of Cuba and Cuban migration who welcomed me into the fold and offered research advice, comradery, and solidarity when our paths crossed on the island, in Miami, and elsewhere include Reinaldo Román, Anasa Hicks, Mike Bustamante, Jesse Horst, Devyn Spence Benson, Danielle Clealand, Billy Kelly, María Cristina García, Jorge Duany, David Sartorius, Bridget Gunnels, Carolina Caballero, Jimena Codina, and Carlos Velazco Fernández.

Essential support to develop and complete this project came from the Alfredo D. & Luz María P. Gutiérrez Dissertation Award at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and a Rackham Predoctoral Fellowship at the University of Michigan. Funding for research travel and archival work came from the Rackham Graduate School, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, History Department, and Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies at Michigan. I am thankful for the dedication and creativity of Greg Parker, a pillar of our history community. Support for the initial research trips that set me on this trajectory came from the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts and the History Department at the University of Georgia. Last but far from least, a Goizueta Foundation Graduate Fellowship afforded me the opportunity to spend an extended period working at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami.

Historians are rightly grateful to the people who preserve and manage the archives on which our work depends. In my case, this project simply would not have been possible without Gary Leshaw and Sally Sandidge, who granted me access to the papers they collected and produced during the years they spent tirelessly advocating for Mariel Cubans detained indefinitely by the U.S. government. While this dissertation does not reflect it, their central role in key dimensions of this story will become clear in future iterations of my work. Catherine Vandenberg, Maya Cotton, Carita Calloway, Shirley Bailey, and James Meeks all took time from their essential work at the Atlanta Legal Aid Society to facilitate this research and ensure that I could get down to the basement to spend time with these documents. The archivists and other staff at the Cuban Heritage Collection, including Amanda Moreno-Schroeder, Juan Villanueva, Elizabeth Cerejido, and Annie Sansone-Martínez contributed in innumerable ways to this project. I am especially thankful to Gladys Gómez-Rossié, Martin Tsang, and Dainerys Machado Vento for their knowledge, companionship, and willingness to include me on field trips of all sorts. Archivists at the Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta History Center, and University of Miami Department of Special Collections provided important assistance.

In Cuba, the Centro de Estudios Martianos opened its doors and welcomed me into its intellectual community. Librarians at the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba "José Martí" put up with my endless requests for government publications from the 1960s and 1970s. Librarians and archivists at the Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística, Instituto de Historia, Ministerio de Justicia, and Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba offered assistance that will continue to inform the development of this project. I also owe a massive debt to Cuban colleagues – whom I hope one day to be able to thank individually – who shared meals, research materials, and their knowledge of both Havana archives and Cuban history.

A number of people devoted time to sitting with me for interviews and telling me about their lives for this dissertation. While few of these oral histories appear in the pages that follow, they have informed my thinking at every turn, and they will be featured in future projects stemming from this research. Siro del Castillo, Gary Leshaw, Wilfredo Allen, Eduardo Gamarra, Sally Sandidge, Juan Alfonso (as well as Cathy and the rest of the Alfonso family), Gladys Gómez-Rossié, and René Cifuentes: if you are reading this, thank you. Your words will be preserved and shared, and they will continue to shape this work. René, *la conversación sigue.*

I first started to study the stories of Mariel Cubans as a master's student at the University of Georgia. Bethany Moreton, Steve Soper, and, especially, Reinaldo Román played pivotal roles in the early development of this project. Jim Cobb, Jaime Kreiner, Dan Rood, Stephen Mihm, Steve Berry, and Christopher Lawton helped make me into a historian, as did Homer Wilson, Christian Lopez, Ashton Ellett, and Broderick Flanigan. Thanks to Laurie Kane, who has always been in my corner.

My introduction to the history of Cuba came as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill through courses with Louis Pérez and Lars Schoultz. The semester program they helped create in collaboration with the University of Havana fundamentally shaped my subsequent trajectory. I owe much of what I have learned about the past and present in revolutionary Cuba to the people I met through that experience, including Marcos, Mendoza, Alejandro, Rosie, Jesús, Camilo, and Diego. Henry made it possible for me to see Mariel with my own eyes. I was elated to reunite with Marcos Valdespino Díaz in Cambridge, and much of this project reflects what I learned through my friendships with him and Mendo. Eve Carson set me on my path to Havana and to this project in more ways than one. I will be eternally grateful for her friendship, her relentless curiosity, and the people she brought into my life.

My years in North Carolina continue to shape the basic ethic that guides both my work and the ways I try to share it. I am thankful to Charlie Thompson, Timothy Tyson, and John Biewen for the examples they set and the encouragement they offered. I remain indebted to, and inspired by, Della Pollock, Hudson Vaughan, Rob Stephens, Monica Palmeira, Brentton Harrison, Dennis and Roxyette Farrington and everyone at the Marian Cheek Jackson Center and around Northside who took time to show me how history is fundamental to the future. No one has taught me more than Ms. Keith Edwards, a fierce defender of community. From Georgia to North Carolina and beyond, others have made it possible for me to sustain myself and this work through their friendship and care. Lawty and Maggie Stephens, Phil Stice, Lawrence Jones, Jonathan Tarleton, Vince Neal, Martin Suiza, Rees Sweeney-Taylor, Patrick Dowd, and Marcela Reales Visbal kept me sane and spurred me on. Krizia Cedeño Torres has always insisted that this work matters, and she offered boundless support to help me get it done.

Finally, as imperfect as this project is, it would have been so much more so without my family. My brothers have been there to lean on when all else seemed unstable and uncertain. My sister has shown me what it means to be kind and brave and taught me more about the world than she could possibly know. My parents have supported me in ways far too numerous to express here. They ensured that I always had a home to go to, something that many of the people at the center of this dissertation could not count on. My father taught me to see that individual struggles never have individual causes. My mother dedicated her life to helping people find a place for themselves in a world not built for them. If I have managed to present the stories that follow in a just way, it is largely because of them.

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Abstract

"Excludable: Race, Policing, and Migration in Cuba and the United States, 1959-1986" explains the development of coercive state projects to address social problems associated with poor and working-class, disproportionately Afrodescendant urban communities in revolutionary Cuba and the post-1960s United States. It examines the trajectories of Cubans who left for the United States in the 1980 mass migration known as the "Mariel boatlift" and centers the experiences of individuals who were confined in carceral institutions in both countries to reveal fundamental social, political, and legal forces that made people into "criminals" in the Americas. In both Cuba and the United States, residential segregation, economic stagnation, coercive labor regimes, and race and class prejudice formed a common backdrop for projects of policing and confinement intended to transform socially marginal populations into model citizens. When persistent crime and poverty exposed the insufficiency or flaws of such projects, political leaders and law enforcement officials on both sides of the Straits of Florida increasingly prioritized the removal of members of these communities from society. Despite distinct conditions in each country and the two governments' divergent political ideologies and economic systems, state actors in both Cuba and the United States justified these actions as necessary to address certain unlawful or undesirable activities, most of which entailed illicit forms of work.

"Excludable" shows that longstanding theories about urban poverty and Afrodescendant pathology shaped the crime control policies of Cuba and the United States between the 1960s and the 1980s. While the communities most frequently targeted for policing in revolutionary

Cuba were multiracial, they had become identified socially with Blackness through a long history of residential segregation and racial discrimination. Although most of the Cubans who participated in the Mariel boatlift did not identify as people of African descent, they became collectively identified with Blackness, poverty, and crime in the United States during a period of rising austerity, intensifying urban policing, and resurgent nativism. In both countries, carceral projects that targeted these groups fell heaviest on Afrodescendant subjects while also weighing on many poor and working-class people not identified as of African descent.

Finally, "Excludable" reveals that both the Cuban and U.S. governments used banishment as a solution to social problems. While most of the people who participated in the Mariel boatlift had no criminal record, the Cuban government encouraged or compelled tens of thousands of its citizens to leave in 1980 because of their histories of arrest and confinement. In the United States, the Mariel arrivals were treated according to a new refugee policy that consigned them to a provisional legal status and limited their access to public assistance. Amid these constraints, many of the Mariel arrivals had trouble maintaining stable jobs and housing. When ad hoc forms of support proved inadequate, local and federal governments increasingly responded to those who struggled to get by – or broke the law to get ahead – with policing, imprisonment, and, eventually, deportation. Such responses helped to make noncitizens accused of crimes a newly pivotal "problem" in U.S. immigration policy.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Policing, Migration, and Local Dynamics of Transnational Processes

In 1987, three days before Thanksgiving, hundreds of Cubans seized control of the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia. Not long after 10 a.m. on November 23, a small group of the Cubans detained there rushed the offices of the prison textiles factory and informed the civilian staff that they were now their hostages. Then, they set the factory on fire. By the afternoon, smoke was billowing from the prison compound, filling the sky to the south of Downtown Atlanta.[1]

Leaders from among the 1,400 Cubans being held at the Penitentiary maintained control of the institution and ensured the safety of more than one hundred hostages. Eventually, with the help of a trusted attorney from the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, they negotiated a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice. The uprising ended 11 days after it began. One person had died during the initial siege – a Cuban named José Peña-Pérez was shot and killed by a guard from one of the watch towers along the prison walls. Upwards of eight Cubans were hospitalized with gunshot wounds after the chaos of that first day. Yet what was at the time the longest prison takeover in U.S. history came to a peaceful resolution.[2]

Here is where a version of the story of the "Mariel Cuban detainees" could begin: in

[1] Mark Davis, "25 years later, Atlanta prison riots live on in captive's memory," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 22 November 2012, https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional/years-later-atlanta-prison-riots-live-captive-memory/QdNBVQN3jba6o2Mim86pBO/.

[2] Lee May and Ronald J. Ostrow, "Cubans Riot, Seize Dozens in Atlanta," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 1987, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-11-24-mn-24278-story.html; Robert Pear, "Behind the Prison Riots: Precautions Not Taken," *New York Times*, 6 December 1987; Davis, "25 years later, Atlanta prison riots live on in captive's memory."

Atlanta, in 1987, with a group of Cubans held in indefinite detention by the U.S. government who orchestrated a major prison uprising that, until recently, relatively few historians seemed to remember.[3] But that is not the version shared in these pages. The story told here does not start with their confinement in federal prisons by order of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Their status in the United States as "excludable aliens," conferred by Immigration Courts and affirmed by the federal judiciary, had made them legally vulnerable to this specific form of state coercion.[4] Yet the process that rendered this group of people *socially* excludable from their communities and from basic forms of social and political belonging began long before they ever encountered a U.S. immigration official. In fact, it began before they left their home country.

***

"Excludable: Race, Policing, and Migration in Cuba and the United States, 1959-1986," examines the experiences of people who spent time in confinement in both Cuba and the United States – two countries that have at times been portrayed as near-opposites in scholarly and

[3] *Mariel Cuban Detainees: Events Preceding and Following the November 1987 Riots, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives*, 100th Cong., 2nd Session, 4 February 1988 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989).

Criminologist Mark Hamm has published the only scholarly monograph focused solely on the 1987 uprising in Atlanta and a simultaneous prison takeover staged by Mariel Cubans in Oakdale, Louisiana. See Mark S. Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones: The Imprisonment and Uprising of the Mariel Boat People* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995). For recent books by geographers and historians which dedicate significant attention to the Atlanta Penitentiary uprising, see Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Elliott Young, *Forever Prisoners: How the United States Made the World's Largest Immigrant Detention System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Ana Raquel Minian, *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Invisible History of Immigrant Detention in the United States* (New York: Viking, 2024).

[4] In a major set of 1996 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, the U.S. Congress replaced the term "excludable alien" with "inadmissible alien." See Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009-617.

popular accounts of the Cold War world.[5] This project explores why the system of policing in revolutionary Cuba pulled this group into the criminal legal system in the 1960s and 1970s, follows them after they left the island in the mass migration known as the "Mariel boatlift" in 1980, and explains why federal immigration officials and municipal police in the United States detained and arrested many of them again in the years that followed.

This study is about a largely poor and working-class, disproportionately Afrodescendant group of people who spent their early lives in Cuba and much of their adulthoods in the United States. It centers the stories of individuals held in carceral institutions in both countries. Important scholarship on policing and the rise of "mass incarceration" in the United States since the 1960s has framed these developments as products of the relationship between the evolution of global capitalism and transformations in U.S. state capacity and strategies of governance.[6] These studies do much to explain the surveillance, arrest, and confinement of millions of people from poor and working-class U.S. communities during the last third of the twentieth century – practices often deployed selectively to target areas in which most residents were Black, Indigenous, and/or of Latin American origin or descent. But what accounts for similarities between these patterns in the United States and trends in Cuba following an armed revolution

[5] For studies grounded in a keen understanding of the interconnected histories of Cuba and the United States and the persistence of their dynamic relationship throughout the twentieth century, see Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*, 3d ed (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021).

[6] The body of literature focused on these developments in the United States is immense and growing. For touchstone texts from multiple disciplines – with distinct interpretations – that collectively inform this project, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 703–34; Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018).

and the ascendance of a socialist government in the 1960s? What explains the selective policing of people in largely poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant urban communities through campaigns to combat so-called common crime in revolutionary Cuba in the 1970s? Why did the Cuban government coerce thousands of these same individuals to leave the country in 1980? And how did their alleged criminal histories inform and interact with their experiences in the 1980s United States in ways that resulted in their renewed confinement?

"Excludable" reveals that this group of Cubans became subject to similar carceral projects on both sides of the Straits of Florida because of parallels in the underlying structures and policy trajectories of each country. Residential segregation, economic stagnation, coercive labor regimes, and race and class prejudice profoundly shaped the lives of the people at the center of this project in both Cuba and the United States between the 1960s and the 1980s. The restricted spending capacity of the Cuban government – driven by often-insufficient production, limited revenue, and U.S. sanctions – resembled in some respects the austerity imposed by governments in the United States in response to global economic restructuring, oil price shocks, and persistent inflation during this period.[7] One of the clearest parallels between the two

[7] On Cuba, see Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978); Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981); Claes Brundenius, *Revolutionary Cuba, the Challenge of Economic Growth with Equity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984); Ricardo Torres Pérez and Claes Brundenius, "Cuban Socialism at 60: Old Aspirations and New Realities," in *Reflections on Socialism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Claes Brundenius (Cham: Springer, 2020), 167–88.

On the United States and the global economic context, see Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017); Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor, eds., *Beyond the New Deal Order: U.S. Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession* (Philadelphia:

countries emerged in their inadequate programs to address residential segregation and guarantee decent housing and moderate levels of consumption to poor and working-class people.

In both Cuba and the United States, law enforcement officials and political leaders saw so-called common crime as a problem emanating from these populations, and they consistently invested energy and resources in projects to police them. During the 1970s, support for coercive social reform programs meant to transform members of these communities eroded in both countries.[8] In each case, government emphasis shifted from efforts to forcibly "rehabilitate" people from poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant urban neighborhoods to policies intended primarily to deter illicit activity and incapacitate alleged "criminals" through various forms of removal.[9] Tens of thousands of people with criminal records were encouraged or compelled by Cuban law enforcement and political leaders to leave the country in the Mariel boatlift in 1980. Once in the United States, these individuals joined the millions of people being affected by the

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Fritz Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises: The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

[8] For some key texts on policing in 1960s and 1970s Cuba, see Luis Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979); Adèle G. van der Plas, *Revolution and Criminal Justice: The Cuban Experiment, 1959-1983* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1987); Lillian Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba, 1961-1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023). Although the chronology she outlines is distinct, Rachel Hynson tracks a similar trajectory in the shifting approach of the Cuban state to sex workers during the 1960s and 1970s. See Rachel Hynson, *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

On this process in the United States, see, for example, Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jonathan Simon, *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*.

[9] This shift echoed a tendency of states to move between two strategies of governance, both grounded in racialized social hierarchies, which Paul Kramer has characterized as "absolutizing" and "civilizing modes of power and differentiation." See Paul Kramer, "Shades of Sovereignty: Racialized Power, the United States and the World," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 251.

reductions in funding for social programs, increased investments in policing and prisons, and punitive changes to criminal law that produced mass incarceration.[10]

This group of Cubans also found themselves at the leading edge of transformations in U.S. immigration law. They were among the first newcomers to be handled according to a new refugee policy designed to move the United States away from a selectively inclusive Cold War paradigm and towards an ostensibly consistent and basically restrictive framework structured by statutory definitions. Up to that point, Cubans in the United States had counted on refugee status and its attendant legal and material benefits. In 1980, a decision by the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter not to treat people who had arrived from Mariel as "refugees" represented a major change. The limited forms of social provision subsequently available to Mariel Cubans conditioned the struggles that many faced as they sought stable shelter and jobs. The decisions that some of them made amid these considerable constraints resulted in their being pulled into the custody of local police and, eventually, federal immigration authorities. During the 1980s, lawmakers repeatedly invoked the presence of these Mariel arrivals in state and federal prisons to advance legislation that laid important foundations for an increasingly interwoven system of criminal and immigration law enforcement in the United States.[11]

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[10] Heather Ann Thompson and Donna Murch, "Rethinking Urban America through the Lens of the Carceral State," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 5 (2015): 751–55.

[11] Legal scholars sometimes refer to this set of policies and practices as "crimmigration." Some influential studies within this extensive field include Jonathan Simon, "Refugees in a Carceral Age: The Rebirth of Immigration Prisons in the United States," *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998): 577–607; Juliet Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis: Immigrants, Crime, and Sovereign Power," *American University Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2006): 367–420; Dan Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jennifer M. Chacón, "Managing Migration through Crime," *Columbia Law Review Sidebar* 109 (2009): 135–48; César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, "Creating Crimmigration," *Brigham Young University Law Review*, no. 6 (2013): 1457–1515. Scholarship on these developments in other fields includes, Ana Aliverti, "Making People Criminal: The Role of the Criminal Law in Immigration Enforcement," *Theoretical Criminology* 16, no. 4 (2012): 417–34; Julie A. Dowling and Jonathan Xavier Inda, eds., *Governing Immigration through Crime: A Reader* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant*

Ultimately, this is a story about how such individuals and communities went from being seen as symptoms of social problems – and people deserving of care and protection – to being seen as "problems" themselves. It is about how governments treated people from marginal social positions who did not fit the mold of model citizens, especially when officials deemed them unable or unwilling to change. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the goals of state projects in Cuba and the United States often differed considerably, but there was remarkable resonance in the two countries' coercive approaches to people identified as obstacles to achieving those goals.

The people at the heart of this study were outcasts twice over. "Excludable" follows the lives of individuals treated as unwanted in two societies and integrates their stories with an analysis of broader trends to make four scholarly contributions. This project breaks new ground in the study of criminalization by excavating the social, political, and legal foundations of coercive institutions that targeted them in both revolutionary Cuba and the post-1960s United States. It builds on work in Afro-Latin American and Latine studies to show how anti-Black racism fueled transnational forces of social exclusion that fell heaviest on Afrodescendant subjects while also weighing on many poor and working-class people not identified as of African descent. This study engages with sociolegal scholarship on migration to reveal that U.S.

Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Patrisia Macías-Rojas, *From Deportation to Prison: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement in Post/Civil Rights America* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Leisy Abrego et al., "Making Immigrants into Criminals: Legal Processes of Criminalization in the Post-IIRIRA Era," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 3 (2017): 694–715.

Much of the existing work on "crimmigration" dates this process to the late 1980s and emphasizes legislation from the 1990s. For studies that dedicate attention to an earlier moment and the importance of the Mariel boatlift for these later developments, see Teresa A Miller, "Citizenship & Severity: Recent Immigration Reforms and the New Penology," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 17, no. 4 (2003): 611–66; Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*, 127–35; Alexander M. Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal': The Mariel Boatlift, Miami, and U.S. Immigration Policy in the 1980s," *Anthurium* 17, no. 2 (2021): 4; Smita Ghosh and Mary Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States," *Law & Social Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2021): 993–1021; Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 145–72.

responses to this group of Cubans hastened a shift from a Cold War system of selective inclusion to the present-day immigration legal regime, which aims to deter almost all asylum seekers and casts a growing number of migrants as "criminals." Finally, through the stories of Mariel arrivals, this work analyzes mechanisms used to police "the poor," "the criminal," and "the alien," and reveals connections among them across national contexts and scales of governance.

1.1 Revisiting the Mariel Story

In 1980, nearly 125,000 Cubans arrived in the United States on thousands of boats that carried them from the northwestern coast of Cuba to Key West. The sudden, massive migration stemmed from a series of chaotic events that began when six Cubans commandeered a city bus and rammed it through the fence of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana in hopes of being granted asylum. A Cuban embassy guard died while trying to stop the incursion. When the Peruvian government refused to turn over the people who had been on the bus, the Cuban government announced that it could no longer protect the diplomatic site. Nor would it attempt to stop any of its other citizens who wished to leave the country from entering the compound.[12] Within days, more than 10,000 people had crammed themselves into the embassy grounds.[13]

After nearly three tense weeks during which Cuba, Peru, Costa Rica, the United States and several other countries engaged in negotiations to resolve the crisis, the Cuban government announced its own plan: the Port of Mariel, about twenty-five miles west of Havana, would be opened to boats from the United States. Cubans who had sought asylum at the embassy and others who wished to reunite with their relatives already living outside the country would be

[12] "Declaración del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba," *Granma*, 4 April 1980; Guillermo Martínez, "8,000 Seeking Freedom Jam Embassy in Havana," *Miami Herald*, 7 April 1980, 1A, 26A.

[13] Ana Veciana, "How many? Cubans here ask feds what refugee quota will be," *Miami News*, 12 April 1980, 7A.

permitted to board the vessels and depart.[14] The scheme undermined the efforts of the Carter administration to limit the number of Cubans admitted to the United States and tapped into the desire of many in the U.S.-based Cuban population to reunite with their relatives from the island. Soon, over a thousand of these vessels floated in the harbor at Mariel as their captains waited for the opportunity to bring aboard the people whose names were on the lists they carried with them.[15]

In Havana, the government, its media outlets, and members of mass citizen organizations staged demonstrations to condemn the people seeking to leave the country. They portrayed the people at the Peruvian Embassy and everyone else who sought to leave as "*antisociales"* (antisocials), *"delincuentes*" (common criminals), and "*escoria*" (scum).[16] U.S.-based Cubans were unfazed by these claims and undeterred by warnings from the Carter administration that "bringing in illegal aliens is punishable by law."[17] They called the administration's bluff, in effect daring officials to arrest them for going to pick up their loved ones from a place that the U.S. government had routinely depicted as a communist dystopia.

But soon after the first boats arrived in Florida, stories circulated that Cuban authorities were forcing captains to take "criminals" aboard alongside the family members they had been sent to retrieve.[18] Major U.S. newspapers began reporting claims that the Cuban government was

[14] Marlise Simons, "Cuba Approves Refugees' Departure In Florida-Chartered Flotilla of Boats," *Washington Post*, 22 April 1980.

[15] Benedict L. Stabile and Robert L. Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 8, folder 2, series 5, box 1, Mirta Ojito Papers (CHC5281), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter MOP-CHC).

[16] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto conmemorativo del Primero de Mayo," 1 May 1980, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/f010580e.html.

[17] David Hume and Robert Rivas, "First Cubans Reach Keys — By Boat," *Miami Herald* (Broward Edition), 22 April 1980, 12A.

[18] Heather Dewar, "Key West docks jammed; refugees count tops 5,800," *Miami News*, 1 May 1980, 8A.

using the exodus as a way of "emptying" its prisons onto U.S. shores.[19] What the press initially deemed the "Freedom Flotilla" was soon recast by a range of media outlets, law enforcement officials, and politicians as an invasion of hardened criminals sent by Fidel Castro. Several weeks into the boatlift, the White House issued a statement insisting, "We will not permit our country to be used as a dumping ground for criminals who represent a danger to our society."[20] Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré later offered another graphic metaphor for the boatlift: "The Cuban Communist dictator flushed his toilets," he said.[21]

Throughout the 1980s, police, elected officials, and journalists circulated accounts of the alleged role of "Mariel Cubans" in rising crime rates in South Florida that reinforced those initial impressions. Sensational headlines about Mariel "criminals" and periodic stories about the thousands of Mariel Cubans in the Atlanta Penitentiary and other federal institutions further cemented their "criminal" reputation. Some scholars have referred to this as the "Scarface Legacy," a reference to the 1983 film starring Al Pacino as a murderous Cuban drug kingpin who arrived on a boat from Mariel.[22]

Since then, scholars of Cuban migration and community formation in the United States have pushed back consistently against this "criminal" stereotype. They have emphasized correctly that most of the people who arrived in the Mariel boatlift had never been in prison in

[19] Charles R. Babcock and Margot Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1980, A1.

[20] Jimmy Carter, "White House Statement on the Administration Policy Toward the Cuban Refugees," 14 May 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250335.

[21] George Stein and Guillermo Martinez, "Little Havana Struck By Boatlift Criminals," *Miami Herald*, 18 September 1980, 1A.

[22] Benigno E. Aguirre, Rogelio Sáenz, and Brian Sinclair James, "Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy," *Social Science Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 487–507; Ramiro Martinez Jr., Matthew T. Lee, and Amie L. Nielsen, "Revisiting the Scarface Legacy: The Victim/Offender Relationship and Mariel Homicides in Miami," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 23, no. 1 (2001): 37–56.

Cuba, nor did most ever have any trouble with the law in the United States.[23] Many of these scholars also have pointed out that the boatlift was the first time since the 1959 revolution that Cubans of African descent left for the U.S. in large numbers. They have rightly noted that racial prejudice shaped negative perceptions of the new arrivals in 1980, including within the overwhelmingly White established Cuban community in Miami. Some have centered race in analyzing these perceptions and the experiences of the boatlift population.[24] Finally, scholars have diminished the criminal histories of Mariel Cubans by noting that some had committed "political" offenses and many had been arrested for buying or selling in the ubiquitous illicit market in revolutionary Cuba or for transgressions otherwise specific to the Cuban context.[25]

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[23] Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Felix Roberto Masud-Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Guillermo J. Grenier and Lisandro Pérez, *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003); Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); José Manuel García, *Voices from Mariel: Oral Histories of the 1980 Cuban Boatlift* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018); Hideaki Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba During the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Victor Andres Triay, *The Mariel Boatlift: A Cuban-American Journey* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019); Mauricio Castro, *Only a Few Blocks to Cuba* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

[24] Gastón A. Fernández and Eduardo A. Gamarra, "Conflicting Interpretations of the Freedom Flotilla Entrants," *Cuban Studies* 14, no. 1 (1984): 49–51; Emily H. Skop, "Race and Place in the Adaptation of Mariel Exiles," *International Migration Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 449–71; Gastón A. Fernández, *The Mariel Exodus Twenty Years Later: A Study on the Politics of Stigma and a Research Bibliography* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002); Gastón A. Fernández, "Race, Gender, and Class in the Persistence of the Mariel Stigma Twenty Years after the Exodus from Cuba," *International Migration Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 602–22; Antonio M. López, *Unbecoming Blackness: The Diaspora Cultures of Afro-Cuban America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Alan A. Aja, *Miami's Forgotten Cubans: Race, Racialization, and the Miami Afro-Cuban Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Alexander M. Stephens, "'I Hope They Don't Come to Plains': Race and the Detention of Mariel Cubans, 1980-1981" (MA thesis, University of Georgia, 2016); Monika Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division: Interethnic Struggles for Legitimacy in Multicultural Miami* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Devyn Benson and Danielle Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel: Black Cubans, Racial Exclusion, and Building Community in Miami," *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2021): 6.

[25] Juan Clark, Jose I. Lasaga, and Rose S. Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1981), 7.

There is excellent work, for instance, about boatlift arrivals who had been targeted by the police in Cuba because of their sexuality.[26]

While the "criminal" stereotype about Mariel Cubans was steeped in prejudice, the fact is that many people who arrived in the boatlift had at some point been in prison in Cuba. According to one of the more conservative estimates, 19.1 percent of the nearly 125,000 boatlift arrivals had been arrested in Cuba for a "petty" or "political" crime. Another 1.4 percent of the total Mariel Cuban population was classified by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service as having committed "felony" offenses before leaving Cuba.[27] In other words, at least 25,000 people who had at some point spent time in a Cuban carceral institution arrived in the United States in 1980.[28]

Efforts by scholars to explain these numbers generally have been animated by an admirable desire to challenge the dominant and distorted view of Mariel Cubans as uniquely "criminal." However, their approaches often have left intact the basic framework within which

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[26] Julio Capó, Jr., "Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba's Homosexual Exile Community, 1978–1994," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 4 (2010): 78–106; Susana Peña, *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[27] Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect*, 7.

[28] Other estimates suggest that this number may have been significantly larger. According to a report produced by the U.S. Department of State early in the summer of 1980, upwards of 30 percent of Mariel Cubans may have had criminal records. See "CUBA: Sociological Profile of the Refugees," n.d., folder 1, series 5, box 1, MOP-CHC.

Cuban scholars granted access to official records from the National Directorate for Immigration (Dirección Nacional de Inmigración) created a sample of the forms that the agency had produced to keep track of Cubans leaving from Mariel. The resulting analysis, drawn from 5,264 randomly selected individual cases, indicated that approximately 45 percent of the people who left in the boatlift had a criminal record ("*antecedentes delictivos*"). The authors of the study suggested, however, that 40 percent of people in this group had been charged with "offenses or pre-criminal situations" ("*delitos o situaciones predelictivas*") that, in their view, either would not have been penalized or would have been considered very minor in the United States. They noted, as well, that relatively few of the people in the sample had gone directly from a jail or prison to Mariel. "In their immense majority, these people had already completed sentences and found themselves outside prisons," they wrote. See Rafael Hernández and Redi Gomis, "Retrato del Mariel: el ángulo socioeconómico," *Cuadernos de nuestra américa* 3, no. 5 (1986): 125, 138–40.

the dominant narrative developed – some Mariel arrivals were "good," and some were "bad."[29] To the charge that a significant number of Mariel Cubans were "criminals," scholars have responded, "most were not." When scholars have gone further by insisting that, among those with a criminal record, "a high percentage would not be considered criminals under U.S. laws," they have inadvertently reinforced that framework once again. The implication of this argument is that most Mariel Cubans were not "real" criminals. But where does that leave the people who supposedly fit that description?

"Excludable" is driven by research questions that stem specifically from the experiences of Mariel Cubans with criminal records: Why had so many been locked up in Cuba in the first place? Why did thousands of the same people end up in prison again in the United States? And how did race, class, policy, and law shape this transnational history? This study does not diminish the criminal histories of the Mariel Cubans at its center. Nor is it an attempt to frame these individuals as "innocent."[30] Its aim is to situate their actions and decisions in context, and to explain the development of the social, political, and legal systems that shaped both their lives and the histories of Cuba and the United States.

1.2 Policing, Citizenship, and Migration in Cuba and the United States

This study explores how systems of law enforcement have restricted access to citizenship and to processes of migration. But it is not about "typical" migrants. At least within the recent

[29] Scholars of migration and racial formation have demonstrated a widespread tendency in the twentieth-century United States for established residents, politicians, media outlets, and even new arrivals themselves to identify some migrants as "good" and others as "bad." Monika Gosin has described how South Floridians articulated prejudices about Mariel Cubans within this framework. Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 51–52. This social phenomenon is far from new, however, nor has it been limited to the United States. On the construction of "good" and "bad" immigrants in Spain and Latin America as far back as the seventeenth century, see Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.

[30] On the problem of demanding "innocence" as a precondition for "empathy" and "recognition in the eyes of the state," see Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 262–63.

history of migration in the Americas, the Mariel boatlift was *highly* idiosyncratic, and the story that follows is focused on people who were distinct even from most of those who made the voyage with them.

Moreover, before people who joined the boatlift became "migrants," they were just "Cubans." Until the people at the heart of this project were in their late teens and twenties, they enjoyed formal citizenship in the country of their birth. Yet their early lives revealed that in Cuba – as in other parts of Latin America shaped by important but nonetheless limited revolutionary or populist reforms – many poor and heavily Afrodescendant communities continued to "live a significant portion of their lives outside the sphere" of full citizenship.[31] This was the context in which some of the people who later left in the Mariel boatlift first became "excludable."

Their social positions at the time they left the island, informed in many cases by a criminal record, influenced their trajectories into the United States.[32] Historians of migration are perhaps most accustomed to analyzing the effects of the stark legal lines often drawn between the subject categories of "citizen" and "noncitizen." Yet the rights, protections, and forms of belonging that constitute the substance of citizenship have tended historically to operate along a gradient through which even people with the formal status of "citizen" could be "rendered foreign."[33] During their time in the United States, the individuals in this study found themselves at the far end of this "spectrum of civic statuses" – outside the boundaries of citizenship of any sort and, often, inside the walls of carceral institutions.[34]

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[31] Brodwyn M. Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights: Citizenship and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 310.

[32] Melissa Burch, "Captive Afterlives in the Age of Mass Conviction," *History and Anthropology* 30, no. 5 (2019): 515–20.

[33] Kunal Madhukar Parker, *Making Foreigners: Immigration and Citizenship Law in America, 1600-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

[34] Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*, 16.

On both sides of the Straits of Florida, the Cubans who participated in the Mariel boatlift navigated systems of surveillance and policing focused on so-called common crime in poor and working-class, heavily Afrodescendant urban communities.[35] Few of the people who acquired criminal records before leaving from Mariel had been arrested on "political" charges. Most had been accused of offenses widely perceived in Cuba as "common" crimes. The distinction between these two categories in the context of revolutionary Cuba was never an entirely clear one. Yet estimates for the total number of Mariel Cubans who had at some point been incarcerated on the island were typically premised on the understanding that only a small portion of them – perhaps up to 2,000 – were "political prisoners."[36] Studies of data collected by both the U.S. and Cuban governments indicated that property crime was the single most common category of charges that had been used to justify the arrest and confinement of people who later left in the boatlift.[37] In the United States, too, there is evidence that theft, robbery, burglary, and

[35] On revolutionary Cuba, see Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Hynson, *Laboring for the State*; Jesse Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas: Shantytown Networks and Social Reform in the Cuban Revolution, 1944–1963," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (2020): 463–92; Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*.

On the post-sixties United States, see Steven Kelly Herbert, *Policing Space: Territoriality and the Los Angeles Police Department* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Donna Murch, "Crack in Los Angeles: Crisis, Militarization, and Black Response to the Late Twentieth-Century War on Drugs," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): 162–73; Angela J. Davis, *Policing the Black Man: Arrest, Prosecution, and Imprisonment.* (New York: Pantheon, 2016); Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*; James Forman, *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[36] Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect*, 7.

[37] Robert Pear, "Plan Aims to Free Refugees in Jails for Crimes in Cuba," *New York Times*, 30

similar offenses made up a plurality of the criminal charges brought against Mariel arrivals who were later detained indefinitely by immigration authorities. Although the 1980s drug trade in Miami and elsewhere in the United States has received far more journalistic and scholarly attention, the records of these migrants suggest that more of their illicit economic activity in the U.S. revolved around stolen goods.[38]

For most of the period during which this group lived in Cuba, political and law enforcement leaders were invested in showing the capacity of the state to make "revolutionary citizens" out of people who had historically lived at the social margins. In the years immediately after the former rebels took power in 1959, the Cuban government had responded to the activism of Black and *mulato* Cubans by desegregating social clubs and public spaces, implementing policies to increase access to jobs and education, enacting rent reductions, and building social housing.[39] Top officials also sought to demonstrate the legitimacy and moral worth of their project of governance not only by reducing "juvenile delinquency" and certain kinds of vice and crime, but also by transforming people and places identified with these activities.[40] They portrayed efforts to address "common crime" as an important element of this overall effort to build a socialist society. Yet, as this study will show, despite measurable improvements in the lives of many poor and working-class Cubans of all colors, one of the chief results of coercive "reeducation" programs and repeated efforts to expand the efficacy and reach of the Revolutionary National Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria) was the arrest and

January 1981," A8; Manuel Echevarria, "Outline of the Most Frequent Crimes Committed by Cuban Detainees, New Cuban Penal Code," folder 28, box 6, Series 1, Cuban Detainees Litigation Papers, Atlanta History Center; Hernández and Gomis, "Retrato del Mariel: el ángulo socioeconómico," 139–40.

[38] For data from a 1986 survey of Mariel Cubans in the Atlanta Penitentiary, see Scott Thurston and Ann Woolner, "Many detainees are eligible for release program," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 1986, 14A.

[39] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 260–79; Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*.

[40] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 10.

institutionalization of many young people from the same overwhelmingly poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant communities that were supposed to be among the primary beneficiaries of the revolution.

Public order policing in Havana produced especially obvious examples of the racial dimensions of this disparity.[41] Many of the people with criminal records who participated in the Mariel boatlift had been arrested in Cuba on vague and highly discretionary charges.[42] These included *vagancia* (idleness or vagrancy) and a longstanding provision of the Cuban criminal code that gave police officers the authority to arrest a person deemed to be in *un estado de peligrosidad* (a state of dangerousness).[43] Often referred to by Cubans simply as "*peligrosidad*," this statutory provision gave the police an immense amount of discretionary authority. Revolutionary National Police officers routinely used the *peligrosidad* provision as a justification to arrest women accused of engaging in sex work.[44] Evidence from later in the revolutionary period indicates that officers also exercised this discretion to arrest young Black and *mulato* men at rates far beyond their proportions of the population. A 1987 study conducted

[41] The same was true in the United States, where police have historically exercised a profound degree of discretion through similar legal provisions, including vagrancy-type charges, such as loitering and trespass, and through practices such as "stop-and-frisk." See, for instance, Neil Smith, "Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s," *Social Text*, no. 57 (1998): 1–20; Katherine Beckett and Steven Kelly Herbert, *Banished: The New Social Control in Urban America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Christopher Lowen Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco: Policing and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Liberal Politics, 1950-1972* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Risa Lauren Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Issa Kohler-Hausmann, *Misdemeanorland: Criminal Courts and Social Control in an Age of Broken Windows Policing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Anna Lvovsky, *Vice Patrol: Cops, Courts, and the Struggle over Urban Gay Life before Stonewall* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[42] According to an academic study based on Cuban emigration records, at least 20 percent of Mariel Cubans with criminal histories had been arrested on such public order charges. See Hernández and Gomis, "Retrato del Mariel: el ángulo socioeconómico," 139.

[43] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 334–49.

[44] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 198–99.

in Havana found that Black Cubans were 7.2 times more likely than White Cubans and 3.4 times more likely than *mulatos* to be arrested for *peligrosidad*.[45]

During the second half of the 1970s, Cuban law enforcement officials often interpreted such statistics not as indicators of the limits of revolutionary change – and certainly not as evidence of discriminatory policing – but as markers of the failures of some Cubans to comply with the government's efforts to transform them.[46] Persistently high rates of property crime, particularly among young men, had been a perennial concern among revolutionary leaders. The officials from the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio del Interior) who ran Cuba's police and carceral agencies had long subjected perceived dissidents, alleged perpetrators of "ideological diversionism" (*diversionismo ideológico*), and direct opponents of the revolutionary government to abusive practices and severe sentences.[47] Yet they had frequently depicted "common criminals" as capable of redemption through coercive reform.

By the end of the 1970s, the people in charge of the Cuban criminal law enforcement system had determined that reeducation was no longer enough. As the Cuban government implemented harsh new laws and increased the size of its police force, many in the group at the center of this study were arrested and incarcerated. Some were still in prison in 1980 when the government announced that it was opening the Port of Mariel to permit Cubans to leave the country. Fidel Castro and influential law enforcement leaders had at times expressed skepticism about the capacity of reeducation programs to address persistent social problems; in Mariel they saw an opportunity to cast the problems out.

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[45] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 314–15.

[46] In key respects, Cuban law enforcement leaders were no different from their counterparts in the United States who subscribed to a "drug-war consensus" during this same period and consistently ignored evidence of "racial discrimination in policing and other aspects of the criminal legal system." Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*, 11.

[47] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, Chapters 2-4.

By the time the first boats from Mariel arrived in Key West, state and municipal governments across the United States had implemented changes to their criminal law enforcement policies that in some ways resembled the recent alterations to the system that Mariel Cubans had left behind. During the 1960s, the "dominant strategy" for combatting so-called common crime in the United States had combined funding for social programs to address the supposed root causes of illicit activity with forms of coercive rehabilitation that included, but were not limited to, periods of confinement in youth reformatories, jails, and prisons. In the 1970s, amid fiscal crises and growing calls for austerity, influential political leaders, including California Governor Ronald Reagan, mounted potent challenges to the established relationship between welfare and crime policy. These elected officials cast the imagined objects of rehabilitation – and particularly poor Black urban communities – as "irredeemable," while advocating for harsh criminal laws and restrictions on public benefits.[48]

In the meantime, the U.S. government was reevaluating the benefits it extended to another group. For decades, the United States had admitted people from countries with socialist governments as "refugees" as part of its Cold War foreign policy. The hundreds of thousands of Cubans who had arrived since the 1959 revolution were among the chief beneficiaries of this system because the federal government created "the most comprehensive refugee program" in U.S. history to help them start their lives in the United States.[49] In the 1970s, this began to change, and in 1978, the Carter administration oversaw the beginning of a "phasedown" of the Cuban Refugee Program, which had administered benefits to new arrivals from the island for nearly two decades. The following year, as hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians continued to arrive in the United States in the aftermath of U.S.-led wars in the region, Congress introduced

[48] Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*, 19, 24.
[49] García, *Havana USA*, 2.

major new legislation meant to limit the discretion of the Executive Branch to admit large numbers of new arrivals as "refugees." In March, the Jimmy Carter signed the bill into law as the Refugee Act of 1980.[50]

The next month, thousands of Cubans started arriving at the docks of Key West. The screening and resettlement process established for Mariel Cubans by the Carter administration fundamentally shaped the trajectories of the newcomers, and especially those who had at some point been in prison before they left Cuba. The demographic profile of the boatlift population informed both these decisions and the rapidly growing perception that many of the Mariel arrivals were "criminals." Compared to the established community of Cubans in the United States, this group was younger and more male. It was also comprised of a far larger proportion of people of African descent. Race represented the most socially significant distinction between Mariel Cubans and the Cubans who had arrived in the two decades before them. At the time, at least 90 percent of the Cubans already living in the United States were classified as "White."[51] By contrast, estimates of the percentage of Afrodescendant Cubans in the Mariel population ranged from 20-to-40 percent.[52] While the exact distribution of racial categorizations among Mariel Cubans is probably impossible to know, federal data indicated that the terms "Black" or "*mulato*" could be applied to at least 30 percent of Mariel arrivals, who either identified themselves using one of these categories or were assigned to one of them by the state agents who

[50] Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), Chapter 7.

[51] Benigno E. Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races: A Review and Interpretation of the Problem," *Latin American Research Review* 11, no. 1 (1976): 104; García, *Havana USA*, 68; Thomas D. Boswell and Manuel Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980" (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, Research Institute for Cuban Studies, 1988), 23.

[52] Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect*, 7.

encountered them when they arrived.[53] For the first time since the Cuban revolution, the people participating in a mass migration from the island somewhat reflected the racial diversity of its population.[54]

This study centers moments during and after the arrival of Mariel Cubans in which policy decisions and the discretionary actions of low-level state actors held the potential to forever alter the course of their lives. Such interactions have been central to the history of immigration and immigration law in the United States. In the case of Chinese migrants to the West Coast in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Erika Lee writes, the "vast majority" of admission decisions were "not decided in the courtrooms but on the decks of arriving steamers, in the detention sheds built especially for Chinese, and later, at the immigration station on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay."[55] In the U.S.-Mexico borderlands throughout much of the twentieth century, Border Patrol officers who had been steeped in a local culture of anti-Mexican racism and violence made discretionary decisions with potentially life-and-death consequences for the migrants they encountered.[56] In the 1950s, bureaucrats with the Public Health Service at U.S. consulates had the power to determine whether a person was "excludable" from entry to the United States for being "homosexual," a condition then defined in immigration law as "psychopathic personality."[57] By centering the importance of such "street-level bureaucrats" in

[53] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980, folder 133, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC.

[54] As this study will show, the experiences of Mariel arrivals reflected an interconnected history of anti-Black racism and migration restriction in the United States. For an analysis of this longer trajectory, see Llana Barber, "Anti-Black Racism and the Nativist State," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 42, no. 4 (2023): 5–59.

[55] Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 25.

[56] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[57] Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 221–22.

both the United States and Cuba,[58] this study contributes to efforts to understand processes of coercive state-building "from the bottom up."[59]

This study examines the experiences of this group of Mariel Cubans in the United States *prior* to their indefinite detention as "excludable aliens." In fact, few of the Mariel Cubans later detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Atlanta and other federal institutions had been held continuously since their arrival. Almost all of the thousands of Cubans in federal custody ended up there only after being arrested and convicted in local criminal courts in the places where they lived.[60] After they arrived in the United States, most of them settled in South Florida. Before that, most of them lived in Havana.[61]

These local encounters were Mariel Cubans' primary entry points into the U.S. detention and deportation pipeline. Understanding the conditions in the places where they lived and the systems of policing that led to their arrest is essential for understanding what came next. As the new arrivals became concentrated in South Florida in the early 1980s, both local administrators and federal officials began to abandon tentative efforts to support them through public assistance and job placement. Instead, policymakers across multiple scales of government increasingly saw police, jails, and prisons as the most viable mechanisms for responding to newcomers who were struggling to find their way in the United States.

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[58] Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Rev. ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).

[59] Canaday, *The Straight State*, 5.

[60] According to figures provided by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, as of 1987 only 210 of the 3,806 Mariel Cubans in federal custody had been held continuously in prisons or detention centers since their arrival. Ronald Smothers, "Cuban Prisoners in Atlanta Take 25 More Hostages," *New York Times*, 25 November 1987, B6.

[61] Silvia Unzueta, "The Mariel Exodus: A Year in Retrospect," 30 August 1981, 13, South Florida Collection, Government Resources and Information Department, Steven and Dorethea Green Library, Florida International University; Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 38; Alejandro Portes, Juan M. Clark, and Robert D. Manning, "After Mariel: A Survey of the Resettlement Experiences of 1980 Cuban Refugees in Miami," *Cuban Studies* 15, no. 2 (1985): 42.

In emphasizing these local dynamics, this project is distinct from much of the existing research about detained Mariel Cubans. Until recently, legal scholars interested in constitutional questions about the authority of the U.S. government to detain noncitizens indefinitely had produced most of this research.[62] Their focus was often the Cubans in the Atlanta Penitentiary. However, starting in 1986 approximately 1,000 Cubans in federal custody were transferred to a new prison in Oakdale, Louisiana, where they orchestrated a prison takeover that began two days before the uprising in Atlanta and unfolded alongside it. Criminologists, journalists, and, more recently, geographers and historians have contributed important studies that examine the experiences of detained Mariel Cubans and examine their place in the development of the larger U.S. immigrant detention system.[63] Until recently, however, most of this vital scholarship has been concentrated on federal law and policy and the confinement of Cubans by immigration

[62] This scholarship is vast. Mariel Cubans are often discussed in studies that examine indefinite detention more broadly. For a small subset of these law review articles focused primarily on Mariel Cubans, see William M. Audet, "Representing the Institutionalized Mariel Cubans -- The Wisconsin Experience," *Wisconsin Law Review*, no. 3 (1987): 455–91; Philip Erickson, "The Saga of Indefinitely Detained Mariel Cubans: Garcia Mir v. Meese," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Journal* 10, no. 1 (1988): 271–98; Mark D. Kemple, "Legal Fictions Mask Human Suffering: The Detention of the Mariel Cubans Constitutional, Statutory, International Law, and Human Considerations," *Southern California Law Review* 62, no. 6 (1989): 1733–1804; William G. Belden, "Paradise Lost: The Continuing Plight of the Excludable Mariel Cubans," *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 5, no. 2 (1995): 181–92; Yvette M. Mastin, "Sentenced to Purgatory: The Indefinite Detention of Mariel Cubans," *Scholar: St. Mary's Law Review on Minority Issues* 2 (2000): 137.

[63] Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones*; Robert S. Kahn, *Other People's Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jana K. Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975-1982," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 57–87; Perla M. Guerrero, *Nuevo South: Latinas/Os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*; Smita Ghosh, "'The Worst Kind of Prison in the World': The Executive Power to Detain and Exclude Non-Citizens, 1950–1996" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2020); Melissa L. Hampton, "Women, Gender, and the Politics of Refugee Resettlement in the Cuban Mariel Migration of 1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2021); Ghosh and Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States"; Young, *Forever Prisoners*; Shull, *Detention Empire*; Leah Burnham, "'Cruel and Unusual Banishment': The Detention of Mariel Cubans and Resistance From Inside and Outside the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia State University, 2022); Minian, *In the Shadow of Liberty*.

authorities in federal institutions.[64] This project significantly advances a crucial new line of inquiry that begins with the local dimensions of this story in South Florida and explains their relationship to developments at the national level.[65]

1.3 Race, Class, Crime, and Space in the Americas

The stories of the people at the center of "Excludable" show the ways in which specific communities came to be marked as "criminal" in both Cuba and the United States starting in the 1960s. This research is premised on the understanding that, as both a subject position and a social category, the "criminal" is always produced within a specific context and constituted by multiple historically contingent factors. One of the goals of this project is to reveal and clarify the "social content" of the category of "criminal" in the two countries where its subjects lived.[66]

The people in this study were arrested on similar charges and confined in similar institutions in both Cuba and the United States. The resonance between their experiences on each side of the Straits of Florida creates a unique opportunity to identify constitutive elements of the processes that made people into "criminals" in two societies with distinct social, economic, and political systems. Comparative histories frequently rely on a "juxtaposition of different outcomes

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[64] A key exception to this trend can be found within a recently published examination of the role of local jails in the long history of migrant detention in the United States. See Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail*.

[65] This approach brings scholarship on the 1980s into conversation with histories of U.S. migration restriction centered on other groups and earlier periods. Such work has demonstrated the persistent role of local, state, and regional dynamics in shaping federal policy. For some influential examples, see Lytle Hernández, *Migra!*; Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[66] Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), vii. My approach is informed by, and in keeping with, the aims of this renowned analysis of "mugging" – a term applied to certain forms of property crime during the 1970s in Britain. The authors argued that "mugging" ought to be understood "not as a fact but as a relation," and they sought to understand that relation "in terms of the social forces and the contradictions accumulating with it," as well as "in terms of the wider historical context" within which it developed. Hall et al., viii.

and a search for the most powerful explanatory variables."[67] This project, by contrast, is oriented around an analysis of *parallel* outcomes and an assessment of the multiple factors – many similar and some distinct – that produced them in each context. This method makes it possible to identify key social structures and mechanisms of "criminalization" that transcended political ideologies, legal regimes, and modes of production.[68]

In both Cuba and the United States between the 1960s and 1980s, state projects to enforce desired norms of behavior and address so-called common crime targeted largely poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant urban communities. Political leaders and law enforcement officials in both countries constructed systems of policing oriented around metropolitan environments shaped by histories of residential segregation and ongoing inequities or insufficiencies in public spending. These state actors targeted members of socially marginal populations for coercive reform programs and, increasingly, for permanent removal. They justified these actions as necessary to prevent or combat certain kinds of unlawful or unwanted activity, most of which entailed illicit forms of work.

While "Excludable" illustrates striking similarities in the trajectories of crime politics in Cuba and the United States, the dynamics that produced these processes in each country were not

[67] Rebecca J Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

[68] "Criminalization" is used by scholars of policing, prisons, and criminal law to describe a wide range of social, economic, cultural, political, and legal processes. I understand criminalization as one of several common responses to the perceived "problems" associated with individuals and communities that occupy marginal social positions as a result of multiple historically contingent and sometimes contradictory structures and forces. Neglect is another typical social and state response to such "problems." Neglect often overlaps with criminalization and frequently precedes it, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains in her trenchant analysis of "organized abandonment" in the post-1960s United States. See Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 178. Yet criminalization and neglect are nonetheless distinct dynamics within a larger process of social marginalization. This study is an attempt to trace in detail how this complex process shaped the trajectories of its subjects as they moved across time and across borders. One of its core aims is to explain how and why criminalization became a primary response to this group in two distinct contexts.

identical. Criminalization, like racial formation, is a relational process.[69] Both draw on established structures and ideas, but the form and content of the processes of making criminals and making race always reflect the specific, contingent conditions of a time and place.

Ascriptions of criminality and uses of criminal law enforcement have tended to intensify amid rapid social change and disruptions to the established determinants of a social hierarchy. Following emancipation in Jamaica, the United States, Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere around the hemisphere, new laws and policing practices facilitated the subordination and labor exploitation of men and women of African descent as systems of racial slavery eroded and disappeared.[70] Throughout the Americas in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, migration to cities from the countryside and from beyond national borders spurred elite demands for the control of poor and working-class newcomers. From Rio de Janeiro to Buenos Aires to Mexico City, from Los Angeles to New York, policing projects expanded or emerged to keep new urban

[69] For a description of the theory and practice of relational approaches to racial formation, see Natalia Molina, Daniel HoSang, and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds., *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019). While multiple scholarly traditions approach race-making as a relational process, some of the works that inform my thinking include Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, & the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Joanne Rappaport, *The Disappearing Mestizo: Configuring Difference in the Colonial New Kingdom of Granada* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Lorgia García-Peña, "Translating Blackness: Dominicans Negotiating Race and Belonging," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 45, no. 2 (2015): 10–20; Guerrero, *Nuevo South*; Yuko Miki, *Frontiers of Citizenship: A Black and Indigenous History of Postcolonial Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela Julie Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Paulina L. Alberto, *Black Legend: The Many Lives of Raúl Grigera and the Power of Racial Storytelling in Argentina* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Cecilia Márquez, *Making the Latino South: A History of Racial Formation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

[70] Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

populations 'in their place' within a desired social order and hierarchy of citizenship.[71] In each instance, distinct groups became "criminals" at specific historical junctures.

In Cuba and the United States, anti-Black racisms and the histories of slavery through which they developed have been central to the processes that made people into "criminals," just as they have shaped the boundaries of citizenship in both places.[72] In early-twentieth-century Cuba, in the immediate aftermath of a decades-long multiracial movement that culminated in the country's independence from Spain, Cubans translated a powerful political project of "raceless" nationalism into certain institutional commitments to racial equality, including universal male suffrage.[73] Against this historical backdrop, Black and *mulato* Cubans identified and created legal, institutional, and cultural spaces in which to exercise degrees of social mobility.[74] The official commitment to building a representative republic indicative of the multiracial nature of Cuban society made purely race-based explanations for crime politically fraught in Cuba.[75] Yet

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[71] Teresa A. Meade, *"Civilizing" Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889-1930* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Lila M. Caimari, *While the City Sleeps: A History of Pistoleros, Policemen, and the Crime Beat in Buenos Aires before Peron*, Violence in Latin American History (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1931* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Matthew Guariglia, *Police and the Empire City: Race and the Origins of Modern Policing in New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023).

[72] For a study of race, law, and citizenship in Cuba and the United States following wars and emancipations, see Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*.

[73] Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 8.

[74] On the country's history in relation to what scholars of the Americas often refer to as "racial democracy," see de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*; Melina Pappademos, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Paulina Alberto and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, "'Racial Democracy' and Racial Inclusion: Hemispheric Histories," in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations*; Takkara K. Brunson, *Black Women, Citizenship, and the Making of Modern Cuba* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2021); Anasa Hicks, *Hierarchies at Home: Domestic Service in Cuba from Abolition to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[75] Alejandro de la Fuente, "Myths of Racial Democracy: Cuba, 1900-1912," *Latin American Research Review* 34, no. 3 (1999): 39–73.

in the early twentieth century, social scientists and social reformers established robust conceptual frameworks and institutional practices that nonetheless linked people of African descent to criminality. In Cuba, proponents of positivist criminology developed influential theories – some centered on biology and others on culture – which held that people of African descent were especially prone to criminal behavior. [76]

In the post-Reconstruction United States, there were fewer political and cultural barriers to public agitation for race-based policies and fewer legal and institutional guarantees for multiracial democracy. U.S. intellectuals and reformers developed ideas similar to those of their Cuban counterparts about the supposedly unique predisposition of Black communities to crime. These theoretical frameworks proved resilient over subsequent decades, even as people of African descent forcefully and repeatedly challenged them, and even as similar conceptual lines linking other groups with crime began to dissipate.[77]

Systems of race-and-class segregation in Cuban and U.S. cities were essential to preserving these connections between crime and Blackness. Residential segregation created spatially identifiable groups and bound them to specific kinds of housing and particular sections of cities. Indeed, across the Americas, links between various groups and criminality depended largely on their concentration in poor and socially marginal spaces, as well as on the selective policing practices deployed within these areas.[78] As a result, allegations of criminality often have

[76] Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[77] For an account of how intellectuals and social reformers increasingly distinguished Southern and Eastern European migrant communities from Black communities in U.S. cities, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[78] Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

been articulated in spatial terms through references to specific neighborhoods or types of housing. In Cuba, it was the "*solar*" and the *"barrio de indigentes*."[79] In the United States, it was "the projects" and "the ghetto."[80]

Blackness was not a universal or inevitable component of processes that made people into "criminals." But Blackness remained closely associated with both marginality and criminality in Cuba and the United States, in part, because persistent structural conditions continued to concentrate Afrodescendant populations in some of the poorest neighborhoods of the two countries' major metropolitan areas.[81] For all the changes wrought by both the Cuban

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2001); Piccato, *City of Suspects*; Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*; Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*; Victor M. Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Murch, "Crack in Los Angeles"; Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*; Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*; Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Jaime Amparo Alves, *The Anti-Black City: Police Terror and Black Urban Life in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Alberto, *Black Legend*; Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*.

[79] Jesse Lewis Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes: Slum Clearance in Havana in an Age of Revolution, 1930-65" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2016).

[80] Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[81] On Cuba, see Roberto Segre, *La vivienda en Cuba en el siglo xx: república y revolución* (México, D.F.: Editorial Concepto, 1980); Jill Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1994); Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, Rev. ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Katheryn Whitfield, eds., *Havana beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes;" William T. Kelly, "Revolución Es Reconstruir: Housing, Everyday Life, and Revolution in Cuba, 1959-1988" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2021); William Kelly, "'The People Live Practically Like Beasts': Informal Housing and Local Government in Santiago de Las Vegas, Cuba, 1959–1965," *Cuban Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 9–27.

The U.S. scholarship on metropolitan segregation and its effects on Black communities is immense. See, for example, Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

revolution and the U.S. "rights revolution" in the 1960s, race and class segregation remained pervasive in the cities of both countries.

"Excludable" shows how continuities in theories about urban poverty and Afrodescendant pathology shaped the politics and practices of crime control on both sides of the Straits of Florida. In Cuba and the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, similar theories about the relationship between poor urban communities and crime prevailed. In the United States, these ideas were encapsulated in a 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, circulated by then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The "Moynihan Report" repeatedly linked crime and juvenile delinquency in U.S. cities to the prevalence of "broken homes" and to pernicious beliefs and practices – described in the document as "the tangle of pathology" – in impoverished Black communities.[82] The report has since been cited by scholars of policing and incarceration as emblematic of the ideas that drove the development of the U.S. carceral state in the postwar period.[83] Yet throughout the twentieth

1985); Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*; Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Connolly, *A World More Concrete*; Llana Barber, *Latino City: Immigration and Urban Crisis in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1945-2000* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Rebeca K. Marchiel, *After Redlining: The Urban Reinvestment Movement in the Era of Financial Deregulation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Kyle T. Mays, *City of Dispossessions: Indigenous Peoples, African Americans, and the Creation of Modern Detroit* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); Leland T. Saito, *Building Downtown Los Angeles: The Politics of Race and Place in Urban America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

[82] *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965), 29, 39-40.

[83] See, for instance, Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 20–21.

century, similar ideas shaped coercive policies and practices far beyond the U.S. context.[84]

Both U.S. liberals and Cuban leftists subscribed to criminological theories which held that juvenile delinquency and many forms of so-called common crime stemmed from negative influences in the homes and neighborhoods of poor and working-class urban populations. Indeed, in 1969 the Cuban government invited Oscar Lewis, the U.S. anthropologist typically credited with developing the concept of the "culture of poverty," to go to Havana and conduct a study of communities that had been relocated through slum clearance programs.[85] Fidel Castro's interest in Lewis's work, which was largely based on ethnographic research conducted in Mexico and Puerto Rico, undoubtedly stemmed in part from his own familiarity with an earlier tradition of Cuban social science and social reform that had been shaped through exchanges with similar projects in the United States.[86] Over time, criminologists and other social scientists in revolutionary Cuba drew increasingly from the theories of their counterparts in the Soviet Union and other parts of the socialist world. But many of the ideas articulated in the official publications of the Ministry of the Interior throughout the first two decades of the revolutionary period would be familiar to anyone who has read the Moynihan Report.

In revolutionary Cuba, as in the post-1960s United States, urban poverty, crime, and Blackness remained intimately linked in the understandings of social scientists, the thinking of

[84] Ricardo Donato Salvatore, Carlos Aguirre, and G.M. Joseph, eds., *Crime and Punishment in Latin America: Law and Society since Late Colonial Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Piccato, *City of Suspects*; Fischer, *A Poverty of Rights*; Lila M. Caimari and Máximo Sozzo, eds., *Historia de la cuestión criminal en América Latina* (Rosario: Prohistoria Editorial, 2017); Rosemblatt, *The Science and Politics of Race in Mexico and the United States, 1910-1950*; Amy C. Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Alberto, *Black Legend*.

[85] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, Chapter 5.

[86] Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*; Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes."

government officials, and the metropolitan "common sense."[87] Nor did the revolution radically change the ideas, institutions, and practices of coercive rehabilitation and policing that had been in place in Cuba before 1959. This study reveals how Cuban understandings of relationships among poverty, Blackness, and criminality continued to underpin selective policing practices that led to the targeting of overwhelmingly poor and working-class, disproportionately Afrodescendant communities long after the revolutionary government declared that it had "ended" racial discrimination in Cuba.[88]

There were, however, some crucial differences between revolutionary Cuba and the post-1960s United States when it came to both public discussions of race and crime *and* the physical spaces most often associated with them. Revolutionary leaders in Cuba, and the writers who worked for state media outlets, rarely made explicit textual references to race when discussing supposedly criminogenic environments. This reflected both the long history of "raceless" nationalism in Cuba and campaigns that the revolutionary government had waged to make overt public expressions of racism taboo. The result was a significantly smaller number of any sort of direct reference to race when compared to publications produced in the United States during the same period.

Moreover, in contrast with many U.S. urban and suburban neighborhoods, the poorest buildings and districts of twentieth-century Havana were typically multiracial spaces. As Alejandro de la Fuente has demonstrated, however, the longstanding concentration of Cubans of African descent within such spaces led to them becoming "socially identified with blackness."[89]

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[87] For two key arguments about crime politics and "common sense," see Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 150–56; Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*, 12–19.

[88] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*; Danielle Pilar Clealand, *The Power of Race in Cuba: Racial Ideology and Black Consciousness during the Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[89] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 114.

The revolutionary government did not fundamentally transform the configuration of the residential landscape in the most densely populated and central districts of Havana, and it did not break this conceptual link. As this project will show, this meant that some Cubans who were targeted by racially discriminatory policing practices informed by anti-Black racism were not themselves Black. In Cuba, of course, this included *mulatos* – individuals who identified as people of African descent, but not as "Black." It also included some of the predominantly poor and working-class White Cubans who lived alongside them. [90]

The spatial element of this social dynamic offers an oblique approach to studying race and policing in revolutionary Cuba despite the paucity of accessible data on crime or arrests from the period – let alone figures disaggregated by race – and despite the rarity of explicit references to race in relevant contemporary texts. As Marisol Lebrón explains in her study of a nearby island, "If dominant discourses of racial mixing and racial harmony serve to bury explicit references to racism and its effects in Puerto Rico, an analysis of spatial inequalities, particularly as they cohere around class position, provides a means of excavation."[91] It is precisely through such a process of excavation that this study identifies ways that race informed policing in Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s and, ultimately, how it shaped the lives of the people at the center of this project. The availability of information about the race and class composition of different

[90] Historians of Latin America have long explored how racial categories drew from and interacted with other determinants of social position. The varied outcomes of this dynamic relationship have revealed the limitations of an analysis focused solely on color or ancestry. See, for example, Brodwyn M Fischer, "Quaese pretos de tao pobres? Race and Social Discrimination in Rio de Janeiro's Twentieth-Century Criminal Courts," *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 1 (2004): 31–59. Such scholarship also has shown, however, the ways in which anti-Black racism became embedded in other forms of social prejudice and discrimination. At times, these forces were directed at individuals or groups not identified or perceived as people of African descent. As Paulina Alberto has explained in an analysis of race and social inequality in early-twentieth-century Argentina, "The stigma of African Blackness was a condition of possibility, and in a sense the very core, of…new forms of thinking about society's lower sectors." At the time, these were "sectors" in which Argentines of European origin or identified as of European descent constituted large majorities. See Alberto, *Black Legend*, 155.

[91] LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death*, 13.

sections of Havana makes it possible to extract social meaning from frequent references in official publications to specific, supposedly crime-prone dwellings and neighborhoods. In addition, while explicit textual references to race were rare after 1959, the images that appeared in government publications revealed persistent associations of Blackness with criminality.

A similar process of "social identification with blackness" contributed directly to U.S. responses to Cubans who left their country during the Mariel boatlift. Even though most Mariel Cubans, and perhaps as many as 70 percent, did not identify as people of African descent, the presence of a significant number of Black and *mulato* Cubans in the boatlift decisively shaped perceptions of them in South Florida. In addition, after their arrival, Cubans who had grown up moving through their social world as "White" often found themselves suddenly perceived by many of the people around them as "Latin" or "Hispanic." By the 1980s, these latter categories had acquired their own, specific associations with crime in the United States.[92]

The gradually increasing tendency to identify these newcomers with Blackness – combined with their relative youth, disproportionate poverty, tenuous immigration status, and "Latin"-ness – reinforced perceptions of their criminality that both motivated and justified selective policing practices. There are many times in the story that follows, however, when the racial categories used by the historical actors at its center are simply not knowable from the sources used to create it. Through a focus on urban space, this study attempts to manage and explain the significance of uncertainties generated by the inherent historical ambiguity of race,

[92] See, for example, Rios, *Punished*; Max Felker-Kantor, "Latinx Criminality," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Edgardo Meléndez, *The "Puerto Rican Problem" in Postwar New York City* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022); ToniAnn Treviño, "Mexican Americans and the War on Narcotics: Racialized Policing Practices and Community Responses in the Postwar Texas Borderlands" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2022); Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*; Jason Ruiz, *Narcomedia: Latinidad, Popular Culture, and America's War on Drugs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023).

especially as people moved across social and national contexts.

That said, there are times in this study when the impact of living in an individual body understood to be "Black" or "*mulato*" becomes very clear. People of all colors who formed part of a community identified socially with Blackness were vulnerable to the effects of policies and practices molded by historical structures of racial discrimination and contemporary racial prejudices. Yet people who moved through the various settings of this study "while Black" experienced particular forms of scrutiny, hostility, and coercion.[93] Whether in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood of Havana, in a "resettlement camp" on a U.S. military base, or in the City of Hialeah in South Florida, navigating these spaces as a person identified as of African descent meant facing heightened suspicion, which directly contributed to the disproportionate presence of Afrodescendant Mariel Cubans behind the chain-link fences and walls of carceral institutions in both Cuba and the United States.[94]

1.4 Transnational and Tran-scalar Methods

"Excludable" centers the stories of seven individuals whose lives intersected with crucial moments in a larger story about race, class, criminalization, and migration in the Americas. The people at the center of this story spent their early lives in Cuba and, in most cases, their twenties and thirties in the United States. Their lives were transnational. So, too, were the sources needed to follow them.

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[93] On "migrating while Black" in the nineteenth-century Greater Caribbean, see Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations*, 7–8. On "traveling Black" in the United States since Reconstruction, see Mia Bay, *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 8. For an exploration of African American mobility in global context, see Tamara J. Walker, *Beyond the Shores* (New York: Crown, 2023).

[94] This was, of course, a gendered experience in addition to a racialized one. In this case, most of the historical actors affected by the processes studied here were boys and men. For a landmark analysis of the specificity of Black women's experiences with various forms of policing, see Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 738–55.

Fortunately, in the very early stages of my research I was granted access to a unique set of records which, at that point, had never been used by a historian.[95] During the 1980s and early 1990s, attorneys and paralegals at the Atlanta Legal Aid Society assisted thousands of Mariel Cubans who were detained indefinitely in the Atlanta Penitentiary and in other prisons and jails around the United States. All the people in this group were facing potential removal from the country, but the fraught diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the United States prevented their repatriation. In 2015, I reached out to Gary Leshaw, the managing attorney in those cases, to conduct an oral history. Soon after, all twenty boxes of their remaining files pertaining to Cuban "detainees" were retrieved from an off-site storage facility and put in the basement of the organization's building in Downtown Atlanta. Over the next several years, I spent months in that basement with those boxes.

These documents ultimately enabled me to follow seven people through moments that were decisive in the trajectories of their lives, and in the history that this study covers. The records include narratives drawn from self-reported information about their criminal histories, copies of municipal criminal records, and written parole decisions made by attorneys from the U.S. Department of Justice who typically had access to the full Immigration and Naturalization Service files produced on Mariel Cubans whose cases they reviewed. As a condition of the agreement that permitted me to access these documents, I have replaced the names of the individuals who appear in those records with pseudonyms. To preserve their anonymity, I have removed box and folder numbers from citations in instances where they might be used to identify them.

Each of the subsequent chapters of this dissertation traces a key period in the life histories

[95] Two journalists and one historian gained access to these materials at approximately the same moment I did in 2015. At least one other historian began working with them shortly thereafter.

of one or two people who grew up in Cuba, participated in the Mariel boatlift, and were eventually detained indefinitely by U.S. immigration authorities. Fernando, who appears in Chapter 2, came from a family that lived in Habana Vieja, the oldest district of the Cuban capital, which featured some of the worst housing conditions in the city. In 1973, at the age of eight, he was sent to a youth reformatory for allegedly stealing cigarettes from a government store.[96] According to documents later produced in the United States, like many of the young people in such institutions in Havana, Fernando was a person of African descent.[97]

Luis seems to have grown up not far from Fernando, in the adjacent district of Centro Habana. Chapter 3 introduces Luis as a young person in the 1970s, when he was charged with multiple offenses, including the theft of a bicycle. Criminal records later produced by U.S. law enforcement authorities suggest that, like many of the people who lived in the area around his mother's home in the neighborhood Cayo Hueso, Luis was a Cuban of African descent.[98] Andrés, who appears alongside Luis in Chapter 3, was also charged with stealing a bicycle.[99] Andrés came from the district of San Miguel del Padrón. In contrast with Cayo Hueso, this section of Havana was not necessarily identified with poverty or with Blackness. And unlike

[96] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," U.S. Department of Justice Repatriation Review Program, September 1989, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[97] "Mental Health Evaluation," December 1989, Series II, ALAS.

[98] U.S. Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," June 1990, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS); "Parole Questionnaire," U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, May 1990, PP-ALAS. A search for Luis's legal name in a digitized database of Miami-Dade County criminal records indicates that he was classified as "Black" by South Florida police. While this is not definitive evidence of the way he described himself, it does suggest that many of the people around him – at least in the United States – saw him as a person of African descent. For the digital records search tool, see "Criminal Justice Online System," Clerk of the Court and Comptroller of Miami-Dade County, https://www2.miamidadeclerk.gov/cjis/CaseSearch.aspx.

[99] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," United States Department of Justice Repatriation Review Program, May 1990, Series II, ALAS.

Luis, Andrés was likely perceived as "White" by other Cubans.[100]

Chapter 4 picks up the story of Andrés after he had been issued a multi-decade prison sentence for robbery.[101] He is joined by Viviana, whose criminal record in Cuba is less clear from the available records. She had spent years in a youth reformatory before being sentenced to serve time in a women's prison. Viviana later said that she had been imprisoned for "political reasons."[102] Yet federal officials in the United States claimed, despite her consistent denials, that she had been arrested for engaging in sex work [103] As with many of the files preserved by the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, I did not find a mention of Viviana's race in the records compiled by her representatives. This is a feature of the documents that echoes the challenges of ascribing racial categories to historical actors in the Americas, especially in the absence of sources that indicate the racial terms they used to identify themselves. What is almost certain, however, is that Andrés and Viviana were encouraged or coerced by their government to leave Cuba in the Mariel boatlift because of their histories of arrest and confinement.

In Chapter 5, Viviana joins another boatlift participant, Rubén, on the other side of the Straits of Florida. Both started their lives in the United States within the confines of the "resettlement camp" established by the Carter administration at Fort Chaffee, a military base in northwestern Arkansas.[104] After months in the camp, Rubén was released to live with his

[100] Letter from legal representative to Mariel Review Program, April 1990, Series II, ALAS; "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," May 1990.

[101] United States Department of Justice Review Panel, Repatriation Case Summary, March 1990, Series II, ALAS.

[102] Attorney General's Review Process (U.S. Department of Justice), "File Review Summary," July 1982, Series II, ALAS.

[103] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986, Series II, ALAS.

[104] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, July 1990, PP-ALAS; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986.

grandmother in South Florida.[105] A report of his criminal history in Florida later described Rubén as a "Black Male." While he may have described himself as "*mulato*" or using some other racial term, this document makes clear that at least some government officials in the Miami area saw him as a person of African descent.[106]

Two new individuals appear in Chapter 6. Unlike the other central figures in this account, Rolando was not from Havana. He came from the city of Ciego de Ávila, in central Cuba, where he seems to have been imprisoned for allegedly refusing to engage in a state-ordered work assignment. He left prison to join the boatlift and, after several months in a resettlement camp, found himself living in a temporary tent shelter under Interstate-95 near Downtown Miami.[107] Omar, who was a teenager when he made the voyage from Mariel with his mother and sister, also struggled to find housing after he arrived in the United States. As a result of his efforts to make ends meet in the illicit economy, he quickly acquired a U.S. rap sheet.[108] In a digitized database of South Florida criminal records, Omar consistently appears under his legal name as "White." Duplicate entries for alleged offenses by Rolando, however, list a person with his name and birthdate as both "White" and "Black." Once again, the uncertainty surrounding race in such records resonates with the historical contingency and ambiguity of racial categories, particularly as individuals moved from one social or national context to another.

Finally, Chapter 7 returns to the story of Rubén and examines his many encounters with police in South Florida during the 1980s. He settled in Hialeah, the Dade County municipality

[105] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990, PP-ALAS.
[106] "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988, Series I, ALAS.
[107] Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, May 1990, Series II, ALAS.
[108] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," United States Justice Department of Justice Parole Review Panel, August 1989, PP-ALAS.

where his grandmother lived, adjacent to the City of Miami.[109] By the time Rubén arrived, Cubans comprised a majority of Hialeah's residents. But very few people who identified as "Black" lived within its borders. Rubén, someone described in criminal records as a "Black Male," seems to have stood out in the place where he lived – including in the eyes of officers from the Hialeah Police Department.[110]

While the seven people whose stories are centered in this project were not "typical" Mariel Cubans, they were in some key respects representative of the tens of thousands of Cubans with criminal records who arrived in the United States after their government encouraged or compelled them to leave the country, as well as those who were later detained indefinitely by U.S. immigration authorities. I focus on these specific individuals because of their relationships to patterns revealed through my readings of both previously compiled data and archival documents. I conducted my own analysis of the records of 225 of the approximately 3,800 people who were in federal detention as of 1987, the year of the uprisings in Atlanta and Oakdale.[111] I translated much of the narrative information from these documents into quantitative data that enabled me to identify patterns in their experiences. Property crimes represented the most common category of offenses that took this group of Cubans into local jails and state prisons. Drug offenses were the second most common. These broad trends are corroborated by a survey of roughly 1,500 Mariel Cubans who were detained in the Atlanta Penitentiary in 1986, which indicated that over 40 percent had been convicted for some sort of property offense, and 25 percent had been convicted on drug charges. It is important to note that this group accounted for 1,855 of the 5,527 Mariel Cubans who were then either in federal custody or on the

[109] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, July 1990.
[110] "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988, Series I, ALAS.
[111] Smothers, "Cuban Prisoners in Atlanta Take 25 More Hostages," B6.

Immigration and Naturalization Service's list of individuals to detain upon release from state and local institutions.[112] Some Mariel arrivals who had been arrested were undoubtedly not yet on this list, and some of those who were still in state prisons at the time may have remained there because they were serving longer sentences for offenses deemed more serious. Even so, such data offer important insight into the kinds of charges that took most Mariel Cubans into local jails, state prisons, and, eventually, federal institutions.

The U.S. government identified 70 percent of the total boatlift population as male and classified 60 to 65 percent of all Mariel Cubans as unmarried. Approximately 67 percent of Mariel arrivals were under the age of 36. Perhaps 30-to-40 percent identified as Black or *mulato*.[113] While race is not frequently mentioned in the Atlanta Legal Aid Society records, evidence from other sources suggests that people of African descent were overrepresented among the Cubans detained in federal prisons.[114] The vast majority of the people held in indefinite detention were men. Of the hundreds of individuals who appear in the Atlanta Legal

[112] For these figures, see Scott Thurston and Ann Woolner, "Many detainees are eligible for release program," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, June 1986, 14A.

[113] The demographic data reported by federal agencies were not always consistent. Slight conflicts in information are sometimes evident even within the same report. The estimates reported here reflect a range of figures presented in multiple documents regarding the 124,779 total Mariel arrivals. Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980, folder 133, box 24, series II, Cuban Refugee Center Records (CHC0218), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter CRC-CHC); Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 30 November 1980, folder 134, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC. Also see Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 33–37. The gender gap may have reflected the number of boatlift arrivals who had been coerced into leaving because of their criminal records and the participation of men who had hoped to leave the island during the Freedom Flights between 1965 and 1973 but had not been permitted to do so because of military service requirements. See Thomas D. Boswell, Manuel Rivero, and Guarione M. Diaz, *Bibliography for the Mariel-Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, 1988), 5.

[114] See, for instance, Siro del Castillo, "Cubans of 1980," an informal presentation at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Washington, D.C., 16 February 1983, 7-9, folder 5, box 1, series 1, MOP-CHC.

Aid Society records, fewer than a dozen were women.[115]

The documents from the Atlanta Legal Aid Society made it possible to do the kind of fine-grained analysis I sought to do by getting down to the ground level in the cities where most Mariel Cubans lived: Havana and Miami. Of course, linking individual stories to larger social, political, and legal structures required research in other archives. This project reflects work in repositories on each side of the Straits of Florida – including in Havana, Miami, and Atlanta – which have enabled me to ground the stories of Mariel Cubans in their transnational context.

Studies oriented around the trajectories of individuals or small groups as they moved across jurisdictions and borders are useful for avoiding one of the common pitfalls of transnational history: an overemphasis on abstract, unimpeded "flows."[116] The approach used here is inspired by, though not identical to, a method that Rebecca Scott and John Hébrard have described as "microhistory set in motion." Versions of this way of studying the past have been deployed to examine the stories of people from the Caribbean on the move in multiple historical moments.[117]

This version of transnational history also facilitates analysis of developments at multiple scales. Histories of both criminal and immigration law enforcement, much like histories of the

[115] These trends are indicative of the long history of what scholars have referred to as a "gendered racial removal program" in U.S. immigration policy. See Tanya Golash-Boza and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Latino Immigrant Men and the Deportation Crisis: A Gendered Racial Removal Program," *Latino Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 271–92.

[116] Augustine Sedgewick, "Against Flows," *History of the Present* 4, no. 2 (2014): 143–70. For explorations of both the challenges and opportunities of writing transnational histories in which migration and the United States play key roles, see Louis A. Pérez, "We Are the World: Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 558–66; Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–91; Paul A. Kramer, "The Geopolitics of Mobility: Immigration Policy and American Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (2018): 393–438.

[117] Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations*.

legal regimes of slavery, have benefitted from examining hyperlocal developments that reveal "multiple dynamic explanations" for larger systems.[118] This is crucial for understanding the development of law and policy, which often have been produced through the synthesis of local demands and national and transnational processes. This is perhaps especially true in the context of a federal system like that of the United States.[119] My aim is not simply to understand what was happening at multiple scales but to show how "federal failures created local problems, and local crises had national and international consequences."[120]

1.5 Chapter Outline

This study excavates a transnational process that rendered a specific group of Cubans socially excludable. This process did not begin with their formal designation as "excludable aliens" under U.S. immigration law, nor was it solely a result of efforts by U.S. police, press outlets, and politicians to mark them as "criminal aliens" in both the public imagination and new legislation during the 1980s. Their exclusion from two societies stemmed from coercive social and political forces that gradually intertwined while conditioning their lives in Cuba, influencing their migration experiences, and structuring their struggles to find a place in the United States.

"Excludable" begins by asking why so many of those who participated in the Mariel boatlift had been incarcerated in Cuba in the first place. Chapters 2 and 3 bring together sources on juvenile delinquency programs and policing from Havana archives with legal documents later produced in the United States to show how the Cuban criminal legal system pulled in tens of thousands of people during the 1960s and 1970s. These chapters explain why and how a

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[118] Rebecca J. Scott, "Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000): 472–79.

[119] Recent scholarship on the U.S. carceral state also demonstrates the importance of such an approach. See Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*; Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*.

[120] Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 10.

revolutionary movement that had been imagined as a way to bring Cubans from the margins of society to the center became institutionalized in a state that continued to arrest and imprison its people along familiar lines of race and class. In the process, these chapters suggest answers to pressing questions in Latin American and Caribbean history about the relationship between populist and revolutionary campaigns for racial justice and enduring racial inequality. Persistent housing segregation reinforced entrenched prejudices about Blackness, poverty, and urban space in Havana, which combined with revolutionary officials' perennial concerns over property crime and labor productivity to yield carceral projects that disproportionately affected poor and working-class people of African descent.

This study then explores how developments on the island catalyzed the Mariel boatlift and influenced responses to it in the United States. Chapter 4 illustrates a major shift in the orientation of Cuban crime policy from an emphasis on rehabilitation to a commitment to harsh sentences as a form of deterrence. It reveals that this transition, and the resulting increase in the Cuban prison population, are crucial to understanding the government's decision to encourage or coerce Cubans with criminal records to leave the country in the Mariel boatlift.

Chapter 5 follows this group across the Straits of Florida in 1980 and examines their early experiences as migrants in the context of rapidly changing U.S. immigration and refugee policies. In contrast with the Cubans who had left for the United States during the preceding two decades, this group was comprised largely of young single men from poor and working-class communities that reflected the large Afrodescendant population of the island. This chapter demonstrates how a combination of ad hoc policy decisions by the federal government and countless discretionary decisions produced significant racial and gender disparities in the screening and resettlement process during the boatlift and, ultimately, left the new arrivals with

limited access to important forms of public assistance.

Chapters 6 and 7 employ documents from archives in Miami and Atlanta to explain why many Mariel Cubans struggled to find stable jobs and housing and became vulnerable to police surveillance and arrest. The effects of the inequitable screening and resettlement process became evident in South Florida almost immediately after the boatlift began. Housing practices, austerity measures, and selective policing combined to construct social, legal, and physical borders for Mariel Cubans throughout metropolitan Miami. These chapters advance efforts to understand overlapping U.S. histories of policing, migration restriction, and the Cold War. During the 1980s, recessions, intensive urban policing, the War on Drugs, and a resurgent nativist movement drove punitive responses to this group that seeded the ground for the entangled system of criminal and immigration law enforcement in use across the United States today. Mariel Cubans were central to these developments, as elected officials, anti-immigration activists, and local and federal agencies increasingly portrayed the "criminal alien" – a term used to denote noncitizens convicted of criminal offenses – as a "central problem in U.S. immigration policy."[121]

1.6 Note on Terms

Throughout this project, I use the terms "Afrodescendant" and "people of African descent" when specific terms adopted by individuals (of African descent) to identify themselves are unclear or when I need to refer to a collective. The racial categories most often ascribed to such individuals in Spanish-language sources produced in Cuba and South Florida during the second half of the twentieth century were "*negro*" and "*mulato*." These remain the two most

[121] For an analysis of how the "illegal alien" came to occupy such a role earlier in the twentieth century, see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

common terms used to identify someone else or oneself as a person of African descent in Cuban communities. I translate "*negro*" to "Black" because the latter, as it has been used in the United States since the 1960s, captures many of the meanings of this Spanish-language term as it has been used in Cuba during the same period. In the case of "*mulato*," I reproduce the original Spanish because the connotations of typical English-language translations – including "Mulatto" – are for many contemporary readers, at best, unclear, and, at worst, offensive.

I use other terms that were common in the period and geographic regions covered in this study to describe other groups, including "Anglos" (a term sometimes used for people in South Florida who identified as "White" but did not have Latin American or Spanish ancestry) and "Latin" (the term most commonly used in media sources to describe Cubans and other people of Latin American origin and descent in the Miami area during the 1980s). To refer to people of African descent from the United States, I tend to add a modifier to make clear that I am not talking about Cubans. This is an imperfect solution. For example, I use the term "Black Miamians" to describe African Americans in Miami, but at times this descriptor undoubtedly ends up ascribing that label to Haitians and other migrants from the Caribbean, including potentially some Cubans. I capitalize English-language terms for race, ethnicity, or nationality to maintain consistency across categories and to avoid giving the impression that categories written in lowercase can be "taken for the norm" or seen as "natural," whereas others ought to be understood as socially constructed. [122] I write Spanish-language terms, such as "*mulato*," using lowercase letters because this is common practice in Spanish, including in the case of demonyms (i.e., *"cubano*").

When it comes to terms used to describe the process of moving from one country to

[122] Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

another, and the people who make such moves, the available language is also fraught. The intent behind my use of the term "migrant" is to have a neutral descriptor of people on the move that enables me to avoid imposing unintended legal or affective meanings. Some people do not intend to stay in the places to which they move, for instance, and so "immigrant" is not always an apt word. I use the words "arrivals" and "newcomers" for the same reason. Whenever possible, I try to be precise, opting for "Cuban," "Mariel Cuban," "Puerto Rican," etc. as opposed to "Latin." I tend not to use the term "Cuban-American," not because I do not appreciate why many use it for themselves, but rather because in the historical documents used for this project it is very hard to know when the individuals who were described with this term used it to describe themselves. Moreover, most of the people I am writing about had been born in Cuba, and in the case of Mariel Cubans, I see little evidence in the documents that many of them adopted the term "Cuban-American" for themselves immediately upon arrival. In cases where it is clear from the sources that individuals identified themselves in this way, I do my best to apply it to them consistently. Terms such as "refugee" and "exile" have legal, emotional, and political meanings that I try to avoid applying with a broad brush to potentially diverse groups unless, as when I am describing people with formal "refugee" status, the legal distinction is necessary. However, I in no way seek to undermine the importance or legitimacy of decisions by individuals or communities to use these terms regardless of how governments have classified them.

Finally, in this project I do not use the term "*marielito.*" Members of the established Cuban community in South Florida began using this pejorative nickname, which translates roughly to "little Mariel arrival," to describe the newcomers in 1980. In 1980s Miami, "*marielito*" often functioned as a slur. Given the social identification of Mariel Cubans with Blackness, it is difficult to imagine that "*marielito*" did not have a racial connotation for some

who used it, especially given the widespread use of the term "*negrito*" by White Cubans as a condescending diminutive for an Afrodescendant person. Some Mariel Cubans subsequently embraced the "*marielito*" moniker, and it no longer has the sting it once did. But the term remains inextricable from the history presented in these pages, and, for some, it retains its original meaning.[123]

[123] "Marielitos (gangs)," Wikipedia, https://w.wiki/D8b2, accessed 19 February 2025.

Chapter 2 Coming of Age: Wayward Youths, Revolutionary Citizens, and Urban Inequality in 1960s Cuba

Fernando's curiosity got the better of him. As he would later explain to his legal representatives, when he was about eight years old, he decided to steal a carton of cigarettes from a government store in Havana. No doubt he had seen adults and teenagers smoking. He may have wanted to try it for himself. Or perhaps he was asked – or told – to take the cigarettes by a friend or relative. Afterwards, when he got caught, he might have been able to imagine that he would spend time in a reformatory. He almost certainly would have known other boys from his neighborhood who had been taken into government custody for similar reasons. What he could not have predicted at that moment in 1973 was that, years later, he would have to tell this story to officials from the U.S. Department of Justice.[1]

Fernando's experience mirrored those of tens of thousands of other Cubans with criminal records who later left their country in the Mariel boatlift. Understanding why so many of these "Mariel Cubans" had at some point spent time in a carceral institution on the island requires examining the systems of coercive reform and policing that developed in Cuba before they left, as well as the positions that people like Fernando occupied within a society adjusting to rapid political and institutional change. Like most Cubans who later participated in the boatlift, Fernando was an *habanero*, a resident of the Cuban capital city. And like a significant minority

[1] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," U.S. Department of Justice Repatriation Review Program, September 1989, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

of Mariel Cubans, Fernando was a person of African descent.[2]

For many of the Cubans who later found themselves detained indefinitely in the U.S., their encounters with coercive state agencies began when they were children, and they were pulled into coercive reform projects for young people classified as "delinquent minors" (*menores delincuentes*).[3] Records later scrawled or typed in the offices of attorneys and bureaucrats in the United States speak to those years, before Fernando ever boarded a boat to leave Cuba, and long before he found himself locked in a U.S. prison. They offer glimpses of a time when he was still a child in Havana.

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This chapter examines the evolution of the Cuban system for addressing juvenile delinquency during the first years of the revolutionary period. After a rebel coalition rose to power in 1959, the new government quickly initiated programs to address conditions in some of Havana's poorest neighborhoods. Alongside these programs, state agencies and organizations of citizen volunteers developed projects intended to change the behaviors of and conditions some of the individuals who lived there. Shantytown residents and sex workers frequently encountered reformers who promised to improve their lives during the years that followed. But no group

[2] In evaluations later completed by mental health professionals in the United States, Fernando was identified as "Black." It is possible that U.S. officials failed to recognize an alternative term that he may have used to describe himself, such as "*mulato*." However, similar documents produced to describe other Mariel Cubans occasionally list such Cuban racial categories, especially when these materials were created by psychologists or government officials with Spanish surnames. Fernando's U.S. records are unambiguous in the use of the term "Black." See Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, September 1989, Series II, ALAS; "Mental Health Evaluation," December 1989, Series II, ALAS.

[3] Cuban officials frequently used this term in the 1960s and 1970s. See, for instance, Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunicado en el acto conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT," 6 June 1971, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1971/esp/f060671e.html. When discussing criminological theories, Cuban state sources also often included references to "juvenile delinquency" (*delincuencia juvenil*). See "Delicioso contraste," *Bohemia* 52, no. 39, 25 September 1960, 39; Julio Suárez, "La edad peligrosa," *Moncada* IV, no. 48, May 1970, 39.

received more consistent attention during the 1960s than "delinquent minors." There was real belief in some quarters of the government that wayward youths could and should be reformed through the application of rigorous methods of "reeducation." Officials and employees at the Ministry of the Interior, the division of the new government established to oversee and manage police, prisons, and most reeducation programs, saw efforts to transform such young people as an important mechanism for demonstrating the legitimacy of the revolutionary project itself.

For children like Fernando who grew up in neighborhoods on the lower rungs of the status hierarchy in Havana, this sort of "coercive inclusion" became a feature of their early lives.[4] The young people most likely to be subjected to reeducation in 1960s Cuba often came from the same poor, disproportionately Black and *mulato* communities that had been targeted by similar projects in the past. The social geography of the Cuban capital demonstrated a strong degree of persistence in the 1960s. Enduring residential segregation and housing inequality in revolutionary Havana facilitated and reinforced continuities in the ways that its residents – including the police and the people who oversaw government juvenile delinquency programs – thought about crime, class, race, and space. As a result, many of the young people conscripted into government "reeducation" programs came from communities that had produced a disproportionate number of the children and teenagers confined in state reformatories in the past.[5] Rather than transforming the social positions of members of these groups, however, these programs often revealed the persistence of key elements of the old system and some of the basic material conditions that it had justified and reproduced.

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[4] Lilian Guerra uses this term to describe similar programs in Cuba during a later period. See Lillian Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba, 1961-1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023), 150.

[5] This chapter will discuss evidence of this continuity produced by the Ministry of the Interior. For a cinematic representation of such persistence, see Sara Gómez, *Una isla para Miguel*, Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, 1968.

Such continuities represented a challenge to the narrative of "change" advanced by revolutionary officials. To speak about "the revolution" in 1960s Cuba was to speak about rupture. In official speeches, legislation, and popular media, the moment when revolutionary forces took control of the Cuban government in 1959 appeared as a definitive break with the immediate past. The leaders of the new government represented their project as the fulfillment of the deferred promise of the nineteenth-century struggle for Cuban independence, and they cast the intervening 60-year period as a diversion from that trajectory, relevant primarily for its supposed contrast with the system and society that they would construct.[6]

Sharp distinctions with the past underpinned the claims to legitimacy made by revolutionary officials, and they often articulated these arguments in moral terms. In January 1959, shortly after arriving in Havana, Fidel Castro spoke at the military headquarters of the regime that his Rebel Army had just overthrown. He told the crowd gathered there that the leaders of the new government would be different: "And the people will never see us acting with any sort of immorality, nor granting a privilege to anyone, nor tolerating an injustice, nor stealing, nor enriching ourselves, nor anything of that sort; because we conceive of power as a sacrifice."[7]

Over the next several years, Castro elaborated on these themes. Already a messianic figure in the minds of many Cubans, he often invoked the religious language of redemption to describe the aims of the new government.[8] The revolution not only meant change; it meant

[6] Louis A Pérez, *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 237–39.

[7] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz a su llegada a La Habana," 8 January 1959, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-su-llegada-la-habana-en-ciudad-libertad.

[8] Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 135–50.

salvation. In describing the people who would be saved, Castro and his colleagues centered the peasants and workers whom they saw as the most deserving beneficiaries of the revolutionary project, and whose participation and support they saw as integral to its success. Over the course of their initial years in power, they increasingly asserted that this was a revolution "of the humble ones, by the humble ones, and for the humble ones."[9]

To maintain the sharp distinctions that Castro and other revolutionary leaders made between the republican past and the revolutionary present, it became necessary to develop explanations for any perceived continuities between these periods. As Alejandro de la Fuente has explained, "Attitudes, spaces, economic activities, and cultural expressions that did not conform to [their] expectations of what La Revolución was supposed to represent and incarnate were conceptualized as leftovers, remnants of a surviving past." Government officials and the many everyday Cubans who supported them deemed any phenomenon seen as "incompatible with the new order" to be vestigial. When social problems persisted or expanded in scope, the prevailing explanations frequently culminated in a simple answer: elements of the Cuba of yesterday "still" lingered; there were places and people on the island that the revolution had not "yet" transformed. Cuban leaders employed this approach to explain even novel developments, such as the growing illicit market, which was "in fact inseparable from the new economic system."[10]

Much did, of course, change in revolutionary Cuba. Yet, despite what government officials claimed, there were significant continuities in how social scientists, youth reformatory

[9] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en las honras fúnebres de las víctimas del bombardeo a distintos puntos de la república," 16 April 1961, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f160461e.html.

[10] See Alejandro de la Fuente, "La Ventolera: Ruptures, Persistence, and the Historiography of the Cuban Revolution," in *Revolution From Within: Cuba 1959-1980*, ed. Michael J. Bustamante and Jennifer L. Lambe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 290.

staff, and political leaders understood and approached juvenile delinquency.[11] Like their counterparts elsewhere in the Americas, for decades Cuban social scientists and jurists had advocated for the importance of maintaining distinct systems to adjudicate the cases of young offenders and manage their rehabilitation.[12] The first juvenile courts in Cuba were established in 1933. Five years later, a new Children's Correctional Center (Centro de Orientación Infantil) was created near Havana, at Finca Torrens. Reformers and educators involved with such projects typically pointed to the home and the family as the origin points and primary drivers of delinquency, and they consistently asserted that approaches grounded in social scientific research could help them understand and address this social problem.[13] As this chapter will show, the Cubans who ran the programs and institutions for "delinquent" youth during the 1960s subscribed to very similar ideas, and they applied them to their work.

The strong imprint of positivist criminology in twentieth-century Cuba, moreover, contributed to abiding beliefs that crime was the result of "environmental and biological

[11] This argument is informed by and contributes to scholarship that eschews a longstanding tendency in the historiography of Cuba to draw a stark line between what came before and after 1959. See, for example, Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Michelle Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Karen Y. Morrison, *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750-2000* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015); Joanna Swanger, *Rebel Lands of Cuba: The Campesino Struggles of Oriente and Escambray, 1934-1974* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Jennifer L. Lambe, *Madhouse: Psychiatry and Politics in Cuban History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Jesse Lewis Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes: Slum Clearance in Havana in an Age of Revolution, 1930-65" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2016); William Kelly, "'The People Live Practically Like Beasts': Informal Housing and Local Government in Santiago de Las Vegas, Cuba, 1959–1965," *Cuban Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 9–27; Kelly Urban, *Radical Prescription: Citizenship and the Politics of Tuberculosis in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

[12] On the origins of the first known juvenile court, which was created in Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century, see David S. Tanenhaus, *Juvenile Justice in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 126–28.

influences." Early European theorists of crime had framed it as the result of "rational decisions" and acts of "free will" that could be deterred by credible threats of punishment. Positivists, by contrast, insisted that certain people were simply predisposed to commit crimes. These criminologists debated whether such a predilection was the result of biological traits, cultural inheritance, social environment, or a mixture of the three. But according to this view, addressing a person's "criminal" condition required a focus on rehabilitative "treatment" rather than punishment.[14] During the first half of the twentieth century, Cuban jurists and social scientists in the positivist tradition, including the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, posited that inherited African culture was a key contributor to crime in Cuba. Others, including the criminologist and prison official Israel Castellanos, advocated a forensic approach and attempted to identify phenotypical traits that were predictive of criminal behavior. For Castellanos, this meant an obsession with the supposed effects of racial "mixing." Whether they emphasized biology or culture or environment, however, positivists in Cuba generally concluded that African ancestry and criminality were intimately connected.[15] A government campaign against overt, public forms of racism marginalized some of these ideas in the revolutionary period. Yet the influence of these beliefs persisted because social scientists had woven them into theories about the relationship between crime and urban space that remained widely accepted in 1960s Cuba.

In treating certain neighborhoods and dwellings as physical evidence of social pathology, both Ministry of the Interior employees and ordinary residents of Havana drew on established prejudices about urban poverty and African ancestry. Poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant communities in the capital were not suddenly ascribed a higher social position or status simply

[14] Luis Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), 120–21.
[15] Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 47–53, 62–64, 124–34.

because a new government had come into power. This social reality belied the rhetoric of state leaders who extolled the virtues of poor and working-class Cubans and sought to eliminate public expressions of racist ideas. Yet the impact of efforts to suppress public expressions of racist sentiments *was* evident in relatively muted mentions of race in contemporary written sources.

References to space – specifically, to the social environment in and around a person's home – were common proxies for explicit references to race. In twentieth-century Cuba, as in much of the Americas, the identification of criminality with alleged pathologies in poor families and neighborhoods had been inextricable from ideas that linked crime to Blackness.[16] In contrast with the more thoroughly segregated metropolitan communities of the twentieth-century United States, however, the poorest sections and dwellings of Havana were frequently home to Cubans "of all colors." While Afrodescendant Cubans were overrepresented in many of these neighborhoods, shantytowns, and tenements, many White Cubans lived alongside or near them. Nonetheless, the large presence of Black and *mulato* residents in these communities was sufficient to render them into "black spaces" in the minds of many *habaneros*. In the process, historian Alejandro de la Fuente writes, the multiracial residents of these spaces became "socially identified with blackness."[17]

Negative assessments of poor neighborhoods and other low-status spaces remained a way for *habaneros* to encode prejudices into language that was publicly acceptable within the revolutionary context. Decoding their meaning is, in turn, a way to trace the fault lines of revolutionary society in Havana.[18] It is also essential for understanding the social world that

[16] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*; Lambe, *Madhouse*.
[17] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 114.
[18] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London:

Fernando navigated every day, and the evolving system of social control that would eventually pull him in.

A close reading of Ministry of the Interior sources reveals how the institution in charge of Cuban police, prisons, and coercive rehabilitation programs in the 1960s articulated and reproduced longstanding race-and-class prejudices through arguments about the pernicious influence of such homes and neighborhoods. In the context of juvenile reformatories, this continuity intertwined with persistent ideas about the causes of crime and how to address them. Despite their frequent claims to be doing something new, Ministry employees brought many old ideas into their work to address juvenile delinquency. The way such state agents dealt with actual young people was not radically different from the way their predecessors had approached their work before the revolutionary armed struggle even began. As a result, institutions for reeducation both revealed the perpetuation of key social fault lines around Havana's neighborhoods and contributed to their reproduction.

2.1 Boys to New Men

During the 1960s, the leaders of the new government frequently expressed a desire to reform and reintegrate members of the "humble" classes whose behaviors, desires, and economic activities deviated from the norms of "revolutionary citizenship."[19] The elements of this idealized subject were described clearly by Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, the Argentine doctor who became a top official in the revolutionary government after serving as one of Fidel Castro's most

Routledge, 1993), 507–17. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has described similar ways in which proxies have been used to express racist ideas. See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th ed (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

[19] Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz a su llegada a La Habana." For the term "revolutionary citizenship" and its relationship to gender, labor, and "economic utility," see Rachel Hynson, *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 10, 17.

trusted lieutenants in the armed struggle of the 1950s. Guevara is generally credited with having articulated the concept of the *"hombre nuevo*" (new man), a new Cuban citizen who works to achieve a "change in consciousness" whereby consumption and material prosperity cease to be primary motivators and a desire to advance the common good is enough to justify considerable "sacrifice" and, especially, productive labor.[20]

Public officials advanced projects to mold individuals and entire communities in this image as part of their promise to serve Cubans who had been left out and left behind by previous governments. During the early 1960s, state agencies oversaw intensive campaigns to relocate shantytown residents to new formal housing developments and to retrain women sex workers to become factory employees.[21] While inevitably coercive – and frequently resisted by the very people deemed in need of redemption – these programs reflected an investment in some of the country's poorest populations. Such efforts also underscored a key strategy of the people at the helm of the new state: proving the legitimacy and value of their project by transforming people broadly recognized as symbols of social problems.

The most sustained reform efforts during the first decade of the revolutionary period were those directed at "delinquent minors." Cubans ascribed this category to a range of children and teenagers, but in most cases it was used to describe those who had been accused of illicit activity. As was the case with Fernando, a significant number had been charged with theft and other property crimes. Others had been caught begging in the street, skipping school, or engaging in activities that were not necessarily illegal, but which state agents interpreted as evidence of

[20] Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, "Man and Socialism (1965)," in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela María Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 373.

[21] Jesse Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas: Shantytown Networks and Social Reform in the Cuban Revolution, 1944–1963," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (2020): 480–90; Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, Chapter 3.

inadequate parental oversight.

While a range of Cuban leaders had shown interest in addressing juvenile delinquency before 1959, the new government and the priorities of its top officials fostered a sense of urgency around the state of the country's young people. Like women allegedly engaged in sex work, wayward youths were a priority for the former rebels, in part, because correcting the paths of young people would enable them to demonstrate their ability to resolve longstanding social ills. Children and teens were a special concern because, both symbolically and practically, they represented the future of the revolutionary project. Its success demanded that young people become revolutionary citizens – subjects who embodied and attested to the new government's moral worth and who would develop the skills and work ethic necessary to ensure the country's material prosperity.[22]

From the start, the leaders of the new government positioned it as a parental figure in the lives of Cuban youths. A commitment to patriarchal responsibility underpinned early policies that affected young people who had been neglected or were living outside traditional family structures and those who were committing crimes or otherwise deviating from desired norms of behavior. The leaders of the new government directed one of their first interventions in the lives of children and teenagers at individuals who whose parents and other relatives were failing to live up to the standards of care set by the state.

Just a few months after rebel leaders declared victory, the new provisional legislative body, the Council of Ministers, enacted Law 459 to "suppress the begging of neglected minors."

[22] On the history of children and teenagers in revolutionary Cuba, see Denise F Blum, *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Anita Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution Is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959-1962*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Anne Luke, *Youth and the Cuban Revolution: Youth Culture and Politics in 1960s Cuba*, Lexington Studies on Cuba (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018); Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*.

The statute included language about the importance of productive labor that would become a feature of subsequent criminal legal reforms. In later years, such laws featured the jargon employed by many of the socialist governments of the era. In 1959, though, the statute's authors simply wrote that begging "offends the citizenry" because it showed that some people were "getting by in an unsavory manner" and "without dedicating themselves to work." They deemed this practice especially serious when it involved youths because of its "negative effect…on their developing personality."[23]

At least two other aspects of the 1959 law against begging foreshadowed practices and ideas that would become central to the revolutionary approach to crime. First, the statute required anyone who saw minors begging in public to report their observations to the Ministry of Social Welfare (Ministerio de Bienestar Social) so that the police could transfer them to "centers designated by the State for the care of abandoned minors."[24] From its early days, then, the new government sought to enlist the Cuban population in its policing efforts. In the years that followed, new organizations designed to channel the energy of masses of citizen volunteers would dedicate ever-more attention to state projects for addressing crime and juvenile delinquency.[25] Second, the text of the anti-begging statute minimized the culpability of children and youths and framed them as victims of the corruption, abuse, or negligence of the adults in their lives. The first line of the law's text asserted, "One of the greatest concerns of the

[23] Ley Num. 459, 14 July 1959, *Leyes del Gobierno Provisional de la Revolución* X (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1959), 180-181, https://dloc.com/AA00063775/00010/images, Latin American Collections, University of Florida, Digital Library of the Caribbean (hereafter LAC-UF).

[24] Ley Num. 459 (1959), 182.

[25] The "total attack" on juvenile delinquency launched by the Kennedy administration in the United States in 1961 similarly relied on volunteers, which "eased the transition to the punitive federal programs that fully emerged" several years later with the "War on Crime." See Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 48–49.

Revolutionary Government is the problem of the protection of children, especially that of the materially or morally abandoned, by the fault or the negligence of their parents or guardians."[26] This claim, which positioned the state as a corrective surrogate for ill-equipped parents, would become a basic tenet of future programs for young people who were charged with crimes or otherwise deemed at-risk of straying from the path of the productive citizen and the committed revolutionary.[27]

When officials determined that children had fallen out of the orbit of the school system, the formal labor market, and their parents' authority, "reeducation" was the remedy. In the 1960s, reeducation typically entailed lessons in literacy and remedial coursework, vocational training, obligatory manual labor, and instruction in a state-sanctioned set of socialist concepts. Cuban leaders considered all these practices indispensable to the formation of revolutionary citizens and insisted on incorporating them into the school system.[28] It was consistent, then, with the revolutionary approach to education to ensure that they formed key elements of *re*education, as well.

Revolutionary leaders portrayed wayward children as powerful symbols of the legitimacy and morality of a political and economic system,[29] and they viewed juvenile reformatories as one

[26] Ley Num. 459 (1959), 180.

[27] The idea that the state must step in for unfit parents was also the premise for juvenile courts and delinquency programs in the United States. See, for example, Tanenhaus, *Juvenile Justice in the Making*\; Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Naama Maor, "Delinquent Parents: Punitive Welfare and the Creation of Juvenile Justice, 1899-1927" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2020); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[28] Nelson P. Valdés, "The Radical Transformation of Cuban Education," in *Cuba in Revolution*, ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972); Rainer Schultz, "The Liberal Moment of the Revolution: Cuba's Early Educational Reforms, 1959–1961," *Cuban Studies* 49, no. 1 (2020): 229–31.

[29] On the "strategic deployment" of the idea of "the children" to assert legitimacy by both proponents and opponents of the revolutionary government, see Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution Is for the Children*, 1–2.

of many areas in which they could strike a contrast with the previous regime. Improving these institutions and changing the trajectories of the young people who passed through them was a way to demonstration the capacity of the revolution to improve the lives of Cubans in general. The existence of reformatories was evidence of the social ills engendered by the old regime, and their redemption would serve as evidence of both the moral superiority and practical efficacy of the new government.

As part of their broader campaign to distinguish the revolutionary government from its predecessor, officials highlighted projects meant to improve conditions at reformatories for children and teenagers while simultaneously emphasizing that the broader social transformations underway would eventually render these institutions obsolete. The revolutionary leadership and its allies in the media used a large juvenile reformatory near Havana as a central reference point in campaigns to tout the impact of early reeducation policies. Known simply as "Torrens," the Institute for the Reeducation of Male Minors (Instituto de Reeducación de Menores Varones) at Finca Torrens became an important demonstration project for the new government.

The use of Torrens for political ends was not new. In 1942, the government of then-duly elected president Fulgencio Batista had touted its reforms to the same institution as evidence of how it was improving the lives of Cubans who had suffered under prior administrations.[30] Nearly 17 years later, with the people who led the rebellion against Batista now in power, the popular magazine *Bohemia* decried the abuse and neglect that had taken place at Torrens under the previous regime. The magazine reported that 318 youths fled Torrens, just a thirty-minute drive from Havana, on the day that the Batista government fell in 1959.[31] In the months that followed,

[30] Arturo Ramírez, "¡Torrens: Nuevo para los menores!," *Carteles*, 22 November 1942, 220-23.

[31] Vicente Cubillas Jr., "TORRENS, antesala del espanto," *Bohemia* 51, no. 7, 15 February 1959, 10-12.

the Council of Ministers enacted multiple pieces of legislation related to the country's juvenile reformatories. In the process, Torrens got a new name – the Center for the Rehabilitation of Male Minors (Centro de Rehabilitación de Menores Varones).[32]

The government granted clemency to young people who had fled the institution at the moment when the Cuban state changed hands, arguing that punishing them for leaving would be "unjust and inhumane if one takes into account that the escape of the minors was the result of the state of confusion reigning at the time and the state of neglect in which they were left."[33] Another *Bohemia* report included the claim that the new director of Torrens had abolished "repressive methods of corporal punishment" and "reestablished discipline on a foundation of respect for human dignity."[34] By the summer of 1960, a headline boldly proclaimed, "Torrens is no longer the entryway to terror."[35]

A new government-backed institution, the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, ICAIC), also celebrated this supposed transformation. *TORRENS*, an ICAIC documentary completed at the end of 1960, was essentially a promotional film for the work going on at the reformatory. The film opens with shots of a multiracial group of clean and tidy boys, going to class, eating, and happily talking in a brightly lit barracks. The narrator declares, "Two years of social revolution have turned Torrens into a different institution," as images appear of a newly renovated building and grounds. The staff are employing scientific methods to discipline and educate their young wards. Then, the narrator presents viewers with what is meant to be a pre-revolutionary hellscape. The film cuts to

[32] Ley Num. 546, 15 September 1959, *Leyes del Gobierno Provisional de la Revolución* XII (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1959), 23-27, https://dloc.com/AA00063775/00012/images, LAC-UF.

[33] Ley Num. 547, 15 September 1959, *Leyes del Gobierno Provisional de la Revolución* XII, 27-30.

[34] "En Cuba," *Bohemia* 51, no. 13, 29 March 1959, 83.

[35] Vicente Cubillas Jr, "Torrens no es ya la antesala del espanto," *Bohemia* 52, no. 31, 31 July 1960, 4-9, 109-110.

scenes of a tenement building in Havana intended to strike a sharp contrast with the salubrious state facility. "In a corrupt social environment where the law…was the rule of the strongest, the weak and the poor not only lacked the opportunity to get ahead, but they could barely survive," the narrator explains. Images appear of shops and shiny cars in Centro Habana as the camera pans across the *malecón* – the famous road along the city's seawall – to show a group of boys jumping into the water below. Once again, the supposed contrast is the point: "While rare privileges permitted a few to have the greatest advantages, the poor were pushed to the margins of society, drowned by misery."[36]

Next, in what appears to have been a staged scene in Habana Vieja, a group of children are accosted by a police officer as they run down the street. The narrator's assured voice returns to describe "children…abandoned and caught up in a struggle that adults barely withstood." Eventually, he says, it is no wonder that "they turn to crime, which that same society punished with Torrens." But this new Torrens is different. "Today," viewers learn, "Torrens leaves behind the whip to offer to the child inmate ways of excelling. Torrens has ceased to be a prison in order to become a home for future citizens."[37]

Education and labor formed the foundation of this vision of revolutionary citizenship. Thanks to the revolution, the narrator explains, "children can rely on numerous and efficient public schools" and learn a trade that will enable them to "follow a path on which benefitting the public is the only way to benefit oneself." In a scene at the remodeled Torrens, a White woman, presumably a teacher, stands outside a building and beckons to a young Black child who is sitting outside. He promptly responds, jumping up and eagerly running toward her. In the

[36] Fausto Canel, *TORRENS*, Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, 1960, https://rialta.org/aiovg_videos/torrens https://rialta.org/aiovg_videos/torrens/.
[37] Canel, *TORRENS*.

sequence that follows, groups of mostly Black and *mulato* children are depicted playing traditional Cuban music, learning to make pottery, and fabricating plaster busts of independence-era hero José Martí. Other shots show multiracial cohorts of youths working at a blacksmith forge, welding, and making shoes. At the new Torrens, the narrator says, the curriculum includes "personal education, physical development, and, above all, work." Schooling enables the boys there to "stop being delinquents," and work permits them to "meet their own needs."[38]

In its final minute, the film turns to scenes of muscular and industrious Black, *mulato*, and White men at work. A mechanic tinkers with a car, a carpenter planes wood, construction workers wield jackhammers. These are the images of a revolutionary Cuban male citizenry – a collective of men of all colors who have learned useful skills and now work not for themselves, but for the common good. [39]

The confidence of officials that education and job training could eliminate juvenile delinquency stemmed from the belief – advanced not only by socialist theorists but also by liberals in the United States and elsewhere – that crime was a product of the social conditions and the family and neighborhood environments in which a child lived. As in the U.S. during the same period, the theory that the most effective way to reduce crime was to address its "root causes" drove reform efforts.[40] The Cuban government treated the education system as its main vehicle for teaching trades and technical skills. Over time, schools also became important for ideological training to correct the unwanted habits and patterns of thinking ostensibly acquired in the home or the neighborhood. In the eyes of officials who oversaw youth reformatories, these institutions played a vital pedagogical role because they removed minors from pernicious

[38] Canel, *TORRENS*.
[39] Canel, *TORRENS*.
[40] Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 32–33. Cubans were aware of these U.S. projects. See "La generación perdida," *Bohemia* 55, no. 9, 1 March 1963, 92-93.

influences in and around their homes. This orientation to education reflected an overarching conceptual framework that would eventually position schools as key sites for molding Cuban children into representatives of the *hombre nuevo*, the ideal revolutionary subject who selflessly merged diligent study with productive work for the cultural and economic development of the country.[41]

Although changes at Torrens were meant to make it a viable mechanism for correcting the trajectories of wayward kids, the 1960 documentary about the institution made clear that ultimately it was Cuban society that required transformation. In the film, that work is well underway, and the message to potential "delinquents" is clear – if you follow the examples of the men at work in the film, "there will arise a Cuba in which institutions like Torrens do not exist. Because they will not be necessary." At least according to their rhetoric, both the filmmakers and state leaders saw the new and improved reformatory as merely a waypoint. It was but a temporary stop on the road to a society in which "delinquent minors" themselves would "not exist."[42]

That road proved longer than some might have hoped, and changes to the structures of the new government suggested that its leaders were prepared to continue managing delinquency for some time to come. Although press outlets aligned with the government periodically declared an end to juvenile delinquency in Cuba, the people in charge of overseeing youth detention centers and reformatories seem to have known that they were unlikely to be out of a job any time

[41] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 235–36. On the Literacy Campaign as a similar force for political education, see Chapter 1.

[42] Canel, *TORRENS*; Luis Salas notes that some Cuban criminologists bristled at what they regarded as the misperception of outside observers who suggested that they thought socialism would "eliminate" crime. Rather, they insisted, socialism would *reduce* crime as the country moved along the path to communism. Only then, at the future moment when a communist society was established, would crime – and the need for law itself – cease to exist. Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 128–29.

soon.[43] Oversight for these institutions shifted during a period of administrative restructuring in the early 1960s. In June of 1961, the Council of Ministers established the Ministry of the Interior to consolidate the country's intelligence and police agencies under a single entity. By the end of that summer, the Ministry of Social Welfare had been dissolved.[44] Some of its programs were shut down, and some moved to the Ministry of Labor (Ministerio de Trabajo). Other functions transferred to the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, MINED), including those related to juvenile delinquency. This move was consistent with previous pronouncements that former police stations and military barracks would be converted into educational facilities.[45]

Yet the following year, oversight for juvenile programs shifted again. From 1962 onward, the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) would be in charge. By then, the Ministry – which had been created in 1961 to consolidate all Cuban police, prison, and intelligence agencies within one administrative division – had already begun to acquire a reputation as an especially repressive force in revolutionary society, particularly for its counterintelligence operations directed at Cuban citizens suspected of opposing the new government.[46] Despite claims that Torrens and other reformatories were more akin to schools than prisons, top officials decided to place

[43] One such report declared, "In Cuba, there's an institution, Torrens, that faces a grave problem: Juvenile Delinquency has disappeared." See "Microreportaje: Delincuencia, educación, y narcóticos," *Bohemia* 52, no. 37, 11 September 1960, 46, 69. These accounts frequently sought to contrast alleged improvements in Cuba with rising rates of juvenile crime in the United States and elsewhere. Grim stories of youth gang activity in "developed countries," including the U.S., Germany, England, and even the Soviet Union, appeared in Cuban publications. See Emma Pérez, "La delincuencia juvenil crece alarmante en los países desarrollados," *Bohemia* 51, no. 40, 4 October 1959, 46-48, 121-123; John Bishop, "Los pecados de la Ciudad de Nueva York," *Bohemia* 52, no. 3, 17 January 1960, 4-7, 103-105, 124. According to *Bohemia*, in 1960 Cuba was "the only Western country where statistics of juvenile criminality are going in the opposite direction." See "Delicioso contraste," 39.

[44] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 260; Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas," 488.

[45] Fidel Castro gave a series of speeches in the winter and spring of 1960 announcing decisions to turn over several police and military buildings, including the famous Moncada Barracks, to the Ministry of Education. For example, see Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto de entrega del Cuartel Moncada," 28 January 1960, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-el-acto-de-entrega-del-cuartel-moncada.

[46] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 104–18.

children like Fernando under the authority of the same entity tasked with overseeing the country's carceral institutions.[47]

Many of the young people held in MININT reeducation facilities were, in fact, *very* much like Fernando. In 1964, the Ministry circulated a report on roughly 200 young people held in a Reeducation Center for Minors (Centro de Reeducación de Menores) in Havana over the course of about three years. The MININT report suggests that this was a new facility, not an older one like Torrens, though it is possible that the Ministry simply renamed an existing institution. The report featured detailed data about the young people held at the institution. Its findings suggest that when Fernando later found himself in a juvenile reformatory for the alleged crime of stealing cigarettes, his circumstances fit with a pattern. Most of the youths at the institution arrived there between the ages of 11 and 15, but one or two entered at the age of 17 and at least one came into custody as an 8-year-old, the same age Fernando said he was when he was arrested for theft. Like Fernando, over 40 percent of the youths held at the center were there because they had been charged with property crimes. Another 30 percent of them had been picked up because they were found "wandering the streets," and more than 20 percent of the Reeducation Center residents had been put there because of their "economic situation"—probably because officials had concluded that their parents did not have the means to adequately care for them.[48]

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[47] Noslén Ramos Medina, "La protección jurídica a los menores en Cuba," CD de monografías (Universidad de Matanzas "Camilo Cienfuegos," 2009), 9, http://monografias.umcc.cu/monos/2009/CIENSOC/m09cs24.pdf.

[48] Ministerio del Interior de Cuba (MININT), "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," June 1964, Reservas, Sala General, Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba, 3, 5-6. According to the report, 40.05 percent of the boys were there for "*robo*" (robbery), "*hurto*" (theft), or "*estafa*" (swindling); 30.9 percent for being "*deambulantes por las calles*" (wanderers in the streets), and 22.2 percent for their "*situación económica*" (economic situation). These groups accounted for over 93 percent of the group covered in the report. Another 4.9 percent were brought to the center as "*rebeldes en el hogar*" (rebels in the home). The

The report also revealed that, as had been the case prior to 1959, some young *habaneros* were more likely than others to be taken into state custody. Most of the young people at the institution came there from the poorest parts of the city. MININT staff determined that 75 percent of the youths were from *"barrios de indigentes*" – a term commonly used to refer to shantytowns – including Las Yaguas, Pulguero, and an informal settlement located under a bridge on the way to the district, or "*municipio*," of La Lisa. Another significant group of the young people at the Reeducation Center were living in tenement-style buildings before they arrived. The vast majority came from households with an income under 100 pesos.[49] Finally, in a clear illustration of persistent relationships among space, race, and poverty in Havana, almost 75 percent of the residents of the center were classified by MININT as "Black."[50] Given that the portion of the Cuban population identified in official records as people of African descent was somewhere in the range of 30 percent, these figures reveal that Afrodescendant boys were heavily overrepresented in the reformatory.[51]

The demographic portrait painted by the MININT report also suggests that when Fernando eventually found himself in a Havana reformatory, his skin color and his class position were similar to those of many of the boys confined with him. Like Fernando, many of his

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remaining dispositions included "*escándalos públicos*" (public scandals, often sexual in nature) 1.1 percent; "*violación*" (rape) 0.2 percent; and "*homicidio*" (homicide) 0.2 percent.

[49] This was the lowest income category established by the Cuban government for some of its poverty programs, including a major rent reduction law in 1959. See Jill Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1994), 48–49.

[50] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 4-6. The term used in the report is "*negro*." The authors did not identify any children using the colloquial racial category of *"mulato*" or its alternative, *"mestizo*," which has been used by the revolutionary government in its official demographic data and identity documents.

[51] The 1953 Cuban census reported a combined Black and *mulato* population of 27 percent. In 1981, the first time the revolutionary government published census data on race, people identified with one of these categories accounted for 34 percent of the Cuban population. For these numbers and a reflection on the challenges of interpreting data on race in the Cuban census, see de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 303, 307–9.

neighbors who lived in the cramped quarters of dilapidated structures in Habana Vieja were people of African descent.[52] Records produced later in his life indicate that his family lived at the southern end of the oldest district of the city, Habana Vieja.[53] There, residents crowded into small rooms in an area with narrow streets that was prone to flooding, close to industrial zones, and overwhelmed by the "factory smoke and the stench of rotting garbage" that the trade winds carried south across the bay.[54] Although Fernando does not appear to have grown up in a shantytown, and his building may or may not have been a tenement, his family home was in a location that would have positioned them near the bottom rungs of the urban social ladder. Coming from a poor Habana Vieja neighborhood did not have the same implications for social status as coming from Las Yaguas, but it nonetheless would have marked him as someone at the lower end of the social hierarchy in Havana.[55]

[52] de la Fuente, 312–14.

[53] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, September 1989.

[54] Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, Rev. ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 98. As in other cities, the physical environment of Havana played a role in shaping the geographic distribution of its population. For instance, historian George Chauncey has explained that gay men in early-twentieth-century New York City, like "other marginalized groups seeking a public presence," found spaces to connect in "socially less desirable" areas, such as "avenues darkened by elevated trains thundering overhead." See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 189.

[55] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 97–101.

Five years after the establishment of the revolutionary government, the 1964 MININT report seemed to reflect more continuity than transformation. It raised questions about the extent to which life in Cuba had changed under the new government. Prior to 1959, poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant boys from similar neighborhoods had been targeted by forms of surveillance, policing, and coercive rehabilitation that shaped the trajectories of Cuban youths who landed in these state institutions.[56] If the revolution meant "change," why did the same factors appear to remain so profoundly relevant to the lives of children like Fernando after the government changed hands?

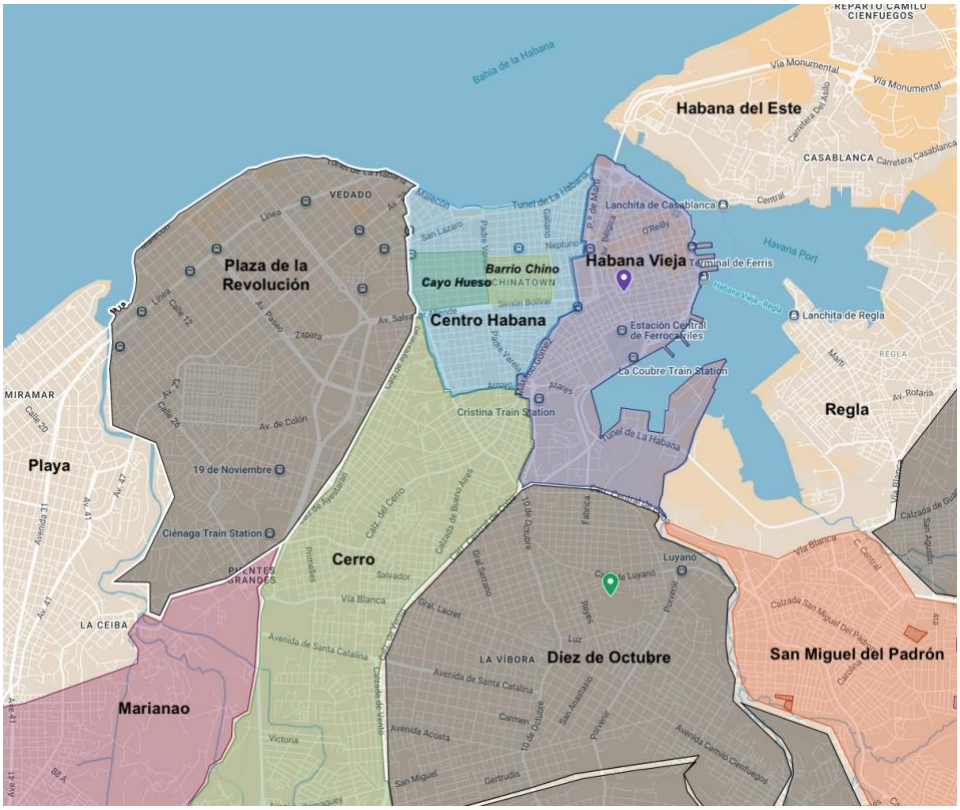


Figure 2.1 **City of Havana with select *municipios* and neighborhoods**. The purple marker represents the approximate location of the address Fernando later listed for the location of his mother, brother, and sisters. The green marker reflects the location of Las Yaguas (prior to its demolition in 1963). *Created with Google My Maps.*

[56] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 18.

2.2 Structural Change, Persistent Structures

The apparent continuities were not lost on the MININT employees who wrote the 1964 report. In fact, they drew a direct connection between Havana's historically poor areas and substandard living structures and the young people who ended up at the Reeducation Center. They linked the disproportionate number of "Black" youths at the Center to the historical concentration of Havana's Afrodescendant population in these neighborhoods and dwellings. Yet they framed the human geography of Havana as solely a product of the past, a time before the revolution, when unemployment was a "major, generalized ill throughout the country" and "the black race was discriminated against" and "lacked educational and work opportunities."[57]

By the time the report was published, the Cuban government had declared that the revolution had "eradicated discrimination because of race or sex."[58] MININT personnel could not link disparities they observed to contemporary policies and practices without contradicting this official line.[59] Rather than a reason to reflect on the limits of what the new government had achieved, the authors presented the overrepresentation of poor and Afrodescendant boys in the Reeducation Center as an indictment of the system that the revolutionaries had overthrown. Like other Cubans engaged in the work of the new state, they interpreted the data as evidence of conditions that had not "yet" been fully transformed by the inexorable force of the revolutionary process.[60]

Of course, the policies implemented by the new government *had* produced some remarkable changes. When Fidel Castro arrived in Havana in 1959 as part of the Rebel Army's

[57] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 4.
[58] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All,* 279.
[59] On government intolerance for critics of its policies on race and racism, see Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba,* esp. Chapters 1 and 2.
[60] This became a means of justifying all sorts of persistent social concerns after the revolution. de la Fuente, "La Ventolera: Ruptures, Persistence, and the Historiography of the Cuban Revolution," 290–92.

victory procession across the island, the metropolitan region of the capital had a population of over 1.3 million people. Roughly one-fifth of all Cubans called the area home at the time.[61] The new government almost immediately implemented a series of policies to stop evictions and reduce rents for many households. The Urban Reform Law, enacted the following year, eventually led to the elimination of rent for people living in *cuarterías* and other tenement-style buildings.[62] Government housing agencies oversaw campaigns to demolish Havana shantytowns that had survived Batista-era slum clearance initiatives and, later, attempted to carry out at least one urban renewal initiative in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood in the *municipio* of Centro Habana.[63]

The revolutionary government also oversaw major public projects to improve access to education throughout the country. The most famous and most successful was the Literacy Campaign, in which students and teachers volunteered to participate in a massive education project that took them to the poorest and most remote parts of the island. As a result, the national literacy rate grew from about 76 percent to over 96 percent in just three years. The gains were especially pronounced in predominantly rural provinces, including Oriente, Pinar del Río, and Camagüey, which had long had significantly lower rates of literacy. Projects to build new schools coincided with a dramatic increase in attendance. The number of children enrolled in school doubled during the 1960s, which attested to leaders' commitment to expand access to education on the island.[64]

Government initiatives eventually contributed to considerable, measurable advancements

[61] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 96, 120.
[62] Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 46–54, 98–104.
[63] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 135, 142. Revolutionary slum clearance initiatives were, in many respects, a continuation of similar programs overseen by previous governments. See Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas," 464.
[64] Valdés, "The Radical Transformation of Cuban Education," 429, 433.

in access to healthcare, education, and professional careers for poor and working-class Cubans of all colors. Because Black and *mulato* Cubans were overrepresented within this group, they accounted for a significant portion of those who benefitted.[65] These changes during the revolutionary period helped to reshape some of the contours of longstanding social hierarchies in Cuba.

Determinations of a person's social position in twentieth-century Cuba had always hinged on assessments of an array of qualities based on a shared "common sense." Some of these traits adhered to people at birth, including skin color and family wealth or reputation. Other factors integral to social position accrued over the course of a lifetime, including the neighborhoods in which people grew up or came to reside, the levels of formal education they achieved, the jobs they worked, the incomes they made, and the wealth they acquired. All these factors informed appraisals of a person's "*nivel de cultura*" (level of culture), a common shorthand that Cubans used to refer to a person's social position.[66] During the first half of the century, the history of Afrodescendant military leadership and the consistently "cross-racial labor movement" underpinned efforts to protect important forms of multiracial democracy in Cuba.[67] A powerful group of activists of African descent on the Cuban left, many of whom gained influence through their roles as leaders of labor unions, exerted growing influence in the

[65] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 309–12.

[66] Similar concepts of *cultura* shaped determinations of social status elsewhere in the Caribbean. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof writes that *cultura* in the Dominican Republic functioned not only as a marker of social status but also as a signifier of national and racial belonging, particularly in opposition to the "black republic" of Haiti. Yet the status associated with a high level of *cultura* was still not available to all Dominicans. Hoffnung-Garskof writes, "Quite simply, cultura is a virtue that some people have and others do not." See Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 12. Studies of contemporary Cuba suggest that a person's perceived *nivel de cultura* remains an important component of social status. See Hanna Garth, *Food in Cuba: The Pursuit of a Decent Meal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 21–22, 35.

[67] Rebecca J Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 259–61.

country's politics following the campaign to depose the increasingly authoritarian President Gerardo Machado in 1933.[68] A small group of highly educated Black and *mulato* Cuban professionals and elected officials, moreover, formed a socially recognizable "*clase de color*" (class of color) widely perceived as possessing an elevated *nivel de cultura*. Yet regardless of their *cultura*, at the moment when the revolutionary government took power in 1959, members of Afrodescendant communities had rarely occupied positions in the upper echelons of businesses or educational institutions and had been routinely excluded from elite White social spaces.[69]

Popular concepts of virtue and morality also had long informed how Cubans understood each other's position within social hierarchies. The colloquial term "*decencia*" (decency) was often used to convey judgments of moral and social worth. Normative performances of gender and sexuality were key components of *decencia*.[70] Women risked being held in low esteem for participating in extramarital sex.[71] Cubans with gender identities, sexual orientations, or behaviors perceived as deviant were also subject to the charge that they were not "decent."[72] Appraisals of *decencia* had been inflected by color and class. Many women of African descent had confronted the presumption that they were sexually promiscuous. *Mulatas*, women whose skin color and other physical features were perceived as reflections of mixed European and

[68] Melina Pappademos, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Chapter 6.

[69] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 14, 138–39, 161–71.

[70] Yeidy M. Rivero, *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[71] Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[72] Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

African ancestry, faced some of the most extreme expressions of this stereotype.[73] Interracial sex and other forms of social "promiscuity between blacks and whites" had themselves been markers of poor or working-class status during much of the twentieth century.[74] While such relationships were never confined to a single class, elites had maintained a degree of residential segregation and created racially exclusive social spaces to cultivate a perception of thorough separation.[75]

Changes in the dominant political culture and material conditions during the revolutionary period altered some aspects of these traditional indices of social position. Revolutionary leaders challenged the historical preeminence of urban elites and idealized poor and working-class Cubans – especially rural peasants – as model revolutionary citizens. The new government initially treated members of the middle and professional classes as important constituencies. Soon, though, the resistance of many in these groups to the explicitly socialist and increasingly authoritarian trajectory of the revolutionary government led to escalating attacks on what top officials described as "bourgeois" culture, values, and politics.[76] Moreover, the scarcity of consumer goods and the virtue that revolutionary leaders ascribed to asceticism and sacrifice meant that some traditional material markers of middle class or elite status were both difficult to attain *and* potential triggers of scrutiny from neighbors and the Ministry of the

[73] Inés María Martiatu Terry, "*El Negrito* and the *Mulata* in the Vortex of Nationality," in *Afrocubanas: History, Thought, and Cultural Practices*, ed. Devyn Spence Benson, Daisy Rubiera Castillo, and Inés María Martiatu Terry, trans. Karina Alma (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 254–56. The idea that *mulatas* were inordinately sexual shaped the approaches of clinicians at reformatories established by the revolutionary government for women alleged to be sex workers. See Rachel Hynson, "'Count, Capture, and Reeducate': The Campaign to Rehabilitate Cuba's Female Sex Workers, 1959–1966," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 1 (2015): 147–48.

[74] This phrase is from Cuban criminologist Israel Castellanos, quoted in de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 157. Alejandra Bronfman has shown that Castellanos drew from widespread perceptions of multiracial poor and working-class spaces as "low" and "criminal" to claim that "miscegenation" was, in fact, a *cause* of crime. He saw the mixing of groups defined by racial difference as "the most important factor in the creation of the contemporary underworld." See Bronfman, *Measures of Equality*, 130.

[75] Nelson Amaro and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "Inequality and Classes," in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, ed. Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 348.

[76] Guerra, *Visions of Power*, esp. Chapters 1-3.

Interior.[77] New emphases on technical education and the virtues of manual labor expanded some of the traditional boundaries of *cultura*. The campaign against racial segregation and discrimination in education and employment helped to make public expressions of color prejudice, already potentially controversial, practically unacceptable.[78] Over time, a person's status also began to depend to a significant extent on their perceived "integration" with the revolutionary system.[79] When officials referred to a "new revolutionary and socialist morality," they were ostensibly speaking about some of these developments.[80] These shifts created room for some historically marginalized populations to move into more respectable circles.

But many elements of the old social hierarchy remained in place. These included some established norms and prejudices regarding gender and sexuality.[81] Traditional dimensions of *cultura* and *decencia* that had been markers of "middle-class status" – including color, formal educational achievement, stable income, modest displays of consumption and self-expression, sexual propriety, and nuclear family formation – also continued to be salient during the revolutionary period.[82] Finally, as the 1959 law against begging, the 1960 ICAIC documentary about the Torrens reformatory, and countless other state-produced texts revealed, old and widely

[77] Alexis Baldacci, "Consumer Culture and Everyday Life in Revolutionary Cuba, 1971-1986" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 2018).

[78] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 266–68.

[79] Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969); Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978).

[80] Ley Num. 1098, 26 March 1963, *Leyes del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba* 47 (La Habana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963), 20, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00063776/00017, LAC-UF.

[81] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 199; Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 163–67. Also see Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*; Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*; Nadine T. Fernandez, *Revolutionizing Romance: Interracial Couples in Contemporary Cuba* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[82] While a high level of "education and 'culture'" could render Cubans "eligible for middle-class status" prior to the revolution, their social position was also mediated by their "skin color, social origin, and financial situation." See de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 153.

held beliefs linking productive labor to civic standing remained central to the concept of revolutionary citizenship.[83]

Racial inequality also persisted. Government campaigns did not have the capacity to eliminate racism unilaterally or overturn the centuries-long relationship between race and social position in Cuba.[84] And while there were of course important continuities in racial attitudes and in the "realm of consciousness," some of the fundamental structures that had perpetuated racial inequality also endured.[85]

Perhaps most importantly for Fernando and many other Cubans in Havana, the revolution did not manage to fundamentally alter two key building blocks of urban inequality: the living conditions and demographic composition of many of its neighborhoods. Fernando grew up observing this race-and-class geography from a crucial vantage point.[86] His family lived in a Habana Vieja neighborhood that was a short walk from the southwestern corner of the bay that had long made Havana a key logistics hub for the Spanish Empire. Yet the urban landscape that Fernando navigated had been reconfigured dramatically in the 60 years since Cuba established

[83] For an indispensable analysis of how gender and labor shaped understandings of citizenship in revolutionary Cuba, see Hynson, *Laboring for the State*.

[84] This is thoroughly documented in the extensive scholarship on race in revolutionary Cuba. See, for example, de la Fuente, *A Nation for All;* Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*; Mark Q. Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Karen Y. Morrison, *Cuba's Racial Crucible: The Sexual Economy of Social Identities, 1750-2000* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015); Jalane D. Schmidt, *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Marc D. Perry, *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Danielle Pilar Clealand, *The Power of Race in Cuba: Racial Ideology and Black Consciousness during the Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[85] Isaac Saney, *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 105.

[86] It is possible that the address Fernando listed for his family many years later, as part of a petition for his release from indefinite detention in the United States, was not his childhood home. However, he listed his mother, brother, and two sisters at a single address. Given the challenges of moving an entire family from one home to another within the system of housing that developed in revolutionary Havana, it is plausible to imagine that this was the place where Fernando grew up.

its independence. The wealthiest *habaneros* expanded the metropolitan footprint by funding the construction of new, automobile-friendly suburbs several miles to the west. There, breezes from the Straits of Florida cooled spacious homes in neighborhoods connected to the city center by multilane thoroughfares. People with more modest incomes established enclaves just to the south and west of the original urban core. As these groups moved out, and as the Great Depression drew poor Cubans from the countryside to the city in search of work, the conditions of housing in Habana Vieja and sections of the nearby *municipios* of Centro Habana and Cerro began to deteriorate.[87]

By the 1950s, many of the people living in these central districts of Havana were renting rooms in densely populated apartment buildings, which included a growing number of improvised dwellings created by subdividing older homes.[88] Upwards of 185,000 Havana residents lived in *cuarterías* and other tenement-style structures known as "*casas de vecindad*," "*ciudadelas*," and "*solares*."[89] For people with the fewest resources, even these substandard options were sometimes out of reach. As many as 50,000 *habaneros* were consigned to the shantytowns that dotted the metropolitan area, often because they had recently moved to the capital from other parts of the island or because they had not been able to secure stable jobs in the formal economy.[90]

Race fundamentally shaped the class disparities of Havana on the eve of the revolution. Pushed by especially high rates of land dispossession and drawn by opportunities for work and education, many Afrodescendant Cubans made their way from rural regions to the capital city

[87] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 46–50, 75–76, 99–101.

[88] In 1953, three-quarters of all Havana residents were renters. Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 21.

[89] Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 105.

[90] These numbers reflect estimates from 1950. Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 54, 173; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race*, 114.

and other urban centers. Although wealthy White *habaneros* maintained a relatively sharp color line, poor, working-class, and middle-class neighborhoods in Havana often housed a mix of Black, White, and *mulato* residents. Even in multiracial areas, however, racial segregation often prevailed at the street level or within individual buildings. The poorest neighborhoods and tenements in the rapidly growing city housed people of all colors, but they tended to feature the highest concentrations of people of African descent.[91]

These conditions had emerged over time through the interplay of prejudice, discriminatory systems of education and employment, and a housing market that privileged the White and wealthy. The weight of these mutually reinforcing structures fell heavily on Black and *mulato* Cubans. Outside a limited group of professionals and other upwardly mobile members of the *clase de color*, prior to the revolution members of poor and working-class Afrodescendant communities had limited opportunities to continue their formal educations beyond primary school. The bulk of these Cubans earned wages through some form of manual labor, and in Havana they often lived in rental units in poorly maintained buildings located in areas seen by many of the city's residents as undesirable.[92]

After 1959, conditions improved for some of Havana's poorest residents as revolutionary leaders made addressing urban poverty one of their initial priorities.[93] Yet many residential

[91] Amaro and Mesa-Lago, "Inequality and Classes," 348; Domínguez, *Cuba*, 225; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 112–15, 156–60; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 129–30. It was not unusual for White Cubans from a range of class positions to endorse certain rights for their Black and *mulato* compatriots while rejecting the sort of "social" equality that threatened to blur the color line in intimate spaces, including the home and the dance floor. See de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 264–65.

[92] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 14. For an analysis of these class and race dynamics, see Chapters 3 and 4.

[93] Fidel Castro had developed an awareness of inequality in Havana while he was a politically active student in the city in the 1940s. As an attorney in the early-1950s, he represented residents of Havana shantytowns to prevent their eviction and highlighted the need for improved housing conditions for poor and working-class city dwellers during the trial that followed his assault on the Moncada barracks in 1953. Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 21–23, 77–78.

patterns remained intact when Fernando was born in the early 1960s. Long after the establishment of the revolutionary government, historian Alejandro de la Fuente explains, a "traditional geography of race and poverty had not been dismantled."[94]

Revolutionary housing policy throughout much of Fernando's childhood was focused on building new units in undeveloped areas rather than improving the structures in which most poor and working-class *habaneros* already resided. The government dedicated a large portion of its limited resources to much needed housing construction projects in rural areas. It also oversaw programs to relocate the residents of some of the country's largest shantytowns, which had an impact in Havana. Yet the general emphasis on rural Cuba, as well as the costs and logistical challenges of renovating old multifamily buildings and providing temporary shelter for the many *habaneros* who lived in such dwellings, meant that residents of the central districts of the capital often continued to live in the substandard and rapidly deteriorating homes that they had occupied prior to the revolution. While some residents got opportunities to move into new houses, the pace of construction did not keep up with rapid population growth or the rate at which the existing housing stock was falling into disrepair.[95]

The continuities were perhaps especially pronounced for people whose living conditions were just above the lowest standards in the city. The residents of several of Havana's shantytowns experienced dramatic changes in their living conditions when the new government relocated whole communities and razed their old homes. These residents played an outsized role in popular conceptions of poverty in the capital. They were highly visible symbols of urban

[94] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 313.

[95] Hamberg, "The Dynamics of Cuban Housing Policy," 18–19, 29, 34, 65–68, 154–60, 344–52; Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 134–37, 142. On the persistent concentration of Afrodescendant Cubans in the "worst housing" on the island, see Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 174.

inequality because of the severity of their living conditions and because – much like its predecessor – the revolutionary government touted slum clearance initiatives as evidence of a commitment to improving the lives of the humble classes. The visibility of shantytown residents increased further when they challenged state plans for demolishing their communities. Most of Havana's poor did not live in shantytowns, however. In the decade before the government changed hands, an estimated 5 percent of *habaneros* lived in these informal settlements. According to the U.S. State Department, three times as many people – upwards of 15 percent of the city's population – lived in tenement-style buildings dotted throughout the city.[96] By the mid 1960s, policies to reduce or eliminate rent had redistributed wealth from landlords to some of these tenants, but the persistent scarcity of alternatives for people living in this kind of substandard housing reinforced a strong degree of inertia in much of Havana when it came to who lived where.

The authors of the 1964 MININT report on the Reeducation Center in Havana were not wrong when they wrote that some of what they were seeing reflected the weight of the past on revolutionary Cuba. It would have been unrealistic to imagine that the new government could eliminate all vestiges of hundreds of years of entrenched structural inequality in half a decade. Yet the report's authors were unable to see, or unwilling to admit, that the new government was not effectively addressing some of the effects of the old system when it came to urban housing. [97] Nor had the government addressed some of the basic causes of urban inequality. As a result, the

[96] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 54, 173.

[97] While the limited resources of the revolutionary state clearly inhibited its ability to facilitate the provision of adequate housing for many poor and working-class Cubans, historian William Kelly suggests that decisions to centralize control over housing policy in the 1960s constrained the independence of local governments and communities, which might otherwise have helped to resolve particular housing challenges. See William T. Kelly, "Revolución Es Reconstruir: Housing, Everyday Life, and Revolution in Cuba, 1959-1988" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 2021), 18–20.

race and class configuration of Havana persisted in crucial ways.

2.3 Race, Class, Crime, and Space

The continuities in the social landscape of the city contributed to durable perceptions of certain spaces as hubs of crime and vice. Before the revolution, the Cuban press often had served as a platform for these ideas. In one such account, a reporter referred to the Barrio Chino neighborhood in Centro Habana as a "devious environment" (*ambiente tortuoso)* populated by "thieves, pickpockets, murderers, prostitutes, etc."[98] In another Batista-era story, a journalist penned a similarly unfavorable description of San Isidro – a Habana Vieja neighborhood bordering the one that Fernando later listed as the site of his family's home. San Isidro was a place where "everyone" was aware, the author claimed, that the police were always busy due to the "many unsavory characters who live[d] and operate[d] in that area."[99]

After 1959, many officers of the newly established Revolutionary National Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, PNR) continued to hold the view that certain communities were home to large numbers of people with criminal inclinations and low moral worth. Early PNR actions illustrated the contempt that some Cubans still had for such groups, especially those who lived in Havana's shantytowns. Just over a month after the former rebels took power, police conducted a raid in Las Yaguas, which historian Jesse Horst has described as "Havana's most iconic slum." PNR officers seized marijuana, other contraband, and radios and televisions that they claimed had been stolen. The officers arrested hundreds of people and loaded them onto trucks. When the trucks arrived at a park next to a local police station, "a near riot ensued." Things boiled over after a member of the PNR proclaimed, "[N]o one who is honorable and

[98] Felipe Elosegui, "El asesinato de 'Fosforito,'" *Bohemia* 47, no. 5, 30 January 1955, 68.
[99] Luis Rolando Cabrera, "El crimen de los tres Ignacios," *Bohemia* 48, No. 10, 4 March 1956, 79.

decent lives in Las Yaguas." Horst notes that media accounts of the incident suggested that a resident had fired on police first, but the only people struck by bullets appear to have been three residents of Las Yaguas.[100]

Conflicts between the new police force and people from shantytowns – broadly recognizable emblems of urban poverty – threatened to undermine the position of the revolutionary government. While previous Cuban political leaders had highlighted their efforts to address the needs of this population, the new government claimed to derive its legitimacy *primarily* from the neglected poor and exploited working classes of the country. When word of the Las Yaguas situation reached then-PNR Chief Efigenio Ameijeiras, he personally went to speak to the outraged crowd. Ameijeiras attempted to appease Las Yaguas residents by touting the new government's plans for social programs and announcing plans to create of a commission of the community's residents to help improve their relationship with the police. State-affiliated journalists who covered these developments used them as an opportunity to claim the shantytown as another territory won for the revolution.[101] In one account of the raid, the official newspaper of the 26th of July Movement – which had brought Fidel Castro and his comrades to power – reported that the prudent intervention of Ameijeiras had converted a place long known as a "center for criminals" into a community "favorable to revolutionary changes."[102]

Residents of poor Havana neighborhoods had in the past demanded state intervention to protect them from certain kinds of crime.[103] But the raids that constituted some of the first major

[100] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 482.
[101] Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas," 464, 470, 481–83.
[102] J. Hernández Artigas, "La revolución transforma 'Las Yaguas,'" *Revolución*, 18 February 1959, n.p., quoted in Horst, 483.
[103] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 176.

PNR actions did not represent the help that most of them had in mind.[104] It certainly was not what people from Las Yaguas wanted, and they felt empowered to make that known in a direct confrontation with the police.[105]

Police and press perceptions of poor communities as "criminal" extended beyond shantytowns. Dotted throughout the city were tenement-style buildings that functioned as acute points of stigma and scrutiny. Even as the new government sought to support *habaneros* who lived in these structures by abolishing their rent and implementing other reforms, other residents of the city continued to identify them with violence and illicit activity. This was especially apparent when it came to buildings known as "*solares*," widely perceived by Cubans as dens of crime and vice. Even more than other forms of substandard shelter, the *solar* was "strongly associated with blackness" and functioned as a "moral label as much as a physical description of a type of housing."[106]

Media representations in the early revolutionary period both drew on and reinforced existing beliefs about *solares*. A magazine article featured details about a fight in "El Batey," an infamous *solar* in Cerro, which reportedly began after a resident tried to frame one of his neighbors as a marijuana dealer. The altercation left one person dead and multiple others with stab wounds. A photograph accompanying the brief article presented readers with the image of a young Black man lying face-first on the ground with a gash in his back.[107] The following year, a

[104] Poor and working-class Black communities in U.S. cities had similar experiences of being "both overpatrolled and underprotected" and managing "interconnected fears of abuse and struggles with neglect." See Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 242.

[105] The residents of Las Yaguas had a long history of organizing to challenge state incursions. Its continued existence was, in fact, a testament to the success of their efforts to stymie the slum clearance plans of the Batista government. In confronting abuse by the new regime's police force, leaders from the shantytown asserted their interests once again. Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas," 482.

[106] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 172.

[107] "Sangre en 'El Batey,'" *Bohemia* 51, no. 43, 25 October 1959, 50.

reporter described an act of violence in a another *solar*. The inciting incidents in the story foregrounded how popular thinking about gender and sexuality contributed to perceptions of these spaces as indecent. The narrative begins with a dispute between two young men, Humberto and César, who both want to dance with Gladys, "a 'chick' with sensational curves." After exchanging pranks meant to embarrass each other in front of Gladys, the two men come to blows. Humberto has come prepared to fight with more than his fists, however, and ends up stabbing César in the stomach. The story concludes with a scene in a police station, where an unrepentant Humberto exclaims, "That César is a *sala gente* and the joke has cost him!" (*¡Ese César es un sala gente y la broma le ha salido cara!"*)[108] The continued circulation of these sorts of accounts perpetuated negative stereotypes about *solares* and other tenements, places where many of Havana's poorest residents continued to live. Such reputations stuck to these dwellings and to the urban neighborhoods where they were concentrated throughout the 1960s and beyond.

Even when physical spaces *did* change, or when people physically moved from one place to another, entrenched prejudices about poor, disproportionately Afrodescendant communities endured. After the revolutionary government demolished Las Yaguas and relocated its residents to new housing projects in 1963, other *habaneros* held on to old stereotypes. An elderly man living in one of these developments later told researchers that he wanted to move out because it had "a reputation far and wide." Although he attributed this to the actions of a "bad element" of a small group of residents, traditional beliefs about such communities probably had more to do with the view that his new neighborhood was nothing more than "Las Yaguas with cement houses."[109]

[108] "[ ] en el solar," Bohemia 52, no. 29, 17 July 1960, 45.

[109] Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 29.

Indeed, the authors of the 1964 MININT report saw the presence of wayward youths in the Reeducation Center as the predictable result of their origins in communities such as Las Yaguas and in "broken homes" that lacked "paternal authority." The authors claimed, "It is easy to imagine the background of the minors admitted to this Center." Most of the youths at the Havana institution, they wrote, came from "homes with low moral conditions where the only upbringing they received was that of vice and corruption." In keeping with a simultaneous campaign by the revolutionary government to reinforce an image of the ideal home as a two-parent household headed by a married man and woman, the MININT authors linked such adverse conditions to family structures that deviated from this normative vision. In addition to claiming that three-quarters of the "minors" had at some point lived in shantytowns, the report asserted that half of the young residents at the Reeducation Center had parents who were divorced or separated, and that nearly one-fifth of the boys were "orphans." As for those parents who *were* involved in their children's lives, most were "illiterate" and "demonstrated a significant lack of culture."[110] Old ideas about *cultura* had evolved in the revolutionary period, but they certainly had not died.[111]

While the authors of the MININT report did not draw a straight line between the supposed moral deficiencies of these families and African ancestry, the demographic information presented on the very same page of the report meant that it would not have required much zigging or zagging for a reader to make this connection.[112] As part of the revolutionary government's campaign against racial segregation and explicit public expressions of racism, officials sought to discredit and marginalize the biological explanations that had long been a

[110] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 4.

[111] On official visions and policies for creating and enforcing normative family structures in revolutionary Cuba, see Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, Chapter 2.

[112] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 4.

feature of positivist criminology on the island. As they had in the past, Afrodescendant intellectuals and activists mobilized to combat depictions of Black and *mulato* Cubans as uniquely "criminal" after the revolutionary government took power.[113] The new government's subsequent attacks on overt forms of racial discrimination helped to make public displays of color prejudice taboo. This had a palpable impact within government agencies responsible for addressing crime. Old claims about a biological basis for criminal tendencies became anathema. Not only were these ideas bound up with the legacy of scientific racism, they contradicted the criminological theories that prevailed in the socialist world, which held that crime was induced solely by adverse social and political conditions.[114]

Cuban social scientists and MININT officials made deliberate efforts to debunk any suggestion that criminal inclinations could be attributed directly to race. One pamphlet for police officers and social workers, for instance, cautioned state agents against "racist and psychologistic theories [of crime] and the corresponding popular prejudices."[115] Employees at the Ministry of the Interior who continued to subscribe to such ideas would have understood that whatever their personal views, attempting to explain criminal activity by explicitly invoking race was no longer acceptable.

Of course, none of this meant that ingrained ideas about the criminality of Cubans of African descent ceased to be relevant.[116] In contrast with its efforts to suppress overt and direct

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[113] In a speech delivered at the University of Havana in April of 1959, Afrodescendant writer Manuel Cuéllar Vizcaíno lamented "an old journalistic tendency to exaggerate information about the black criminal, as well as to obscure the values of people with dark skin." See "Discriminación: el informe Cuéllar," *Nuevos Rumbos*, 25 April 1959, 6.

[114] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 127–28.

[115] David K. Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts in the Social Transformation of Cuba" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Surrey, 1973), 149, footnote 95.

[116] Analyses of the criminal legal system, police, and prisons in revolutionary Cuba have not always dedicated sufficient attention to continuities from the republican period. One important exception to this

expressions of racism, the revolutionary government did little to discourage Cubans from continuing to articulate prejudices about "criminals" using spatial reference points. Officials at the Ministry of the Interior fully embraced prevailing ideas about the environmental and cultural causes of crime that were intimately connected to the very set of theories and practices that had produced the biological explanations. In fact, the authors of the same pamphlet intended to discredit racial explanations for crime emphasized that understanding the potential criminality of individuals and communities required considering the material and social conditions of their environment.[117] In the process, the document reproduced and legitimated beliefs about the pernicious effects of environments widely identified with both poor and Afrodescendant communities. In one of the clearest expressions of this pattern, the revolutionary government frequently justified discriminatory policies and policing practices using longstanding social scientific theories that tied Afro-Cuban religious practices to criminal behavior.[118] The race and class implications of such claims about ostensibly criminogenic spaces and traditions did not need to be spoken to be understood.[119]

2.4 Social Prevention

The people who wrote the 1964 report about the Reeducation Center in Havana did not

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pattern is the work of criminologist Luis Salas. In his 1979 book he wrote, "Cuban criminological and penological sciences owe a great debt to prerevolutionary thinkers and scholars, from whose ideas they have borrowed freely. Any discussion of present ideas without reference to their historical precursors would mislead the reader and do an injustice to the topic." Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 119.

[117] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 149, footnote 95.

[118] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 294–96; Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 258–64; Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*, 46–49.

[119] In the United States, there was a similar trajectory from positivist theories of crime grounded in biological arguments about race, ethnicity, and poverty to frameworks that focused on "culture" or "environment." Important aspects of this transition took place earlier in the twentieth century, and others coincided with the first decade of the revolutionary period in Cuba. See Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

interpret the institution's disproportionately large group of poor, Afrodescendant children from communities like Las Yaguas as evidence of the limits of revolutionary change in Cuba. Nor did they see what went on there as punitive in nature. In fact, the most committed MININT "reeducators" (*reeducadores*) would have viewed it as a dereliction of revolutionary duty *not* to intervene in the lives of these youths. The residents of the Center represented some of the communities that revolutionary leaders claimed to be most invested in supporting.[120] For some Ministry employees, the social positions of the children and teens in reeducation programs may even have served to affirm the critical importance of their work.

The authors of the MININT report expressed little doubt that the state had both the right and the responsibility to take in wayward youths. Some of the boys at the Reeducation Center may have been abused or neglected at home. Some staff members undoubtedly believed in what they were doing and saw it as an important form of social provision. They instructed young people in arts and music classes, coached them in sports, and took them on field trips to tourist sites.[121]

Yet the report itself points to the fundamentally coercive nature of their work. Employees at the institution implemented military discipline and meted out physical punishments, which appears to have been at odds with earlier pronouncements that the practice had been abolished.[122] The document also refers to frequent efforts by families to reclaim their children from the institution by encouraging them to escape.[123] Even in instances in which there were very real hardships for these young people at home, the fact remained that the government was taking

[120] For examples of how such claims came into conflict with the actual demands of these communities, see Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*, 46–48.
[121] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 11-13.
[122] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 8, 14-16; "En Cuba," 83.
[123] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 4.

children like Fernando from their families and confining them in a state institution whether they or their parents wanted them to be there or not.

The government justified these actions on the grounds that the purpose of reeducation was to ensure that young people at risk of going permanently astray would instead contribute positively to the construction of Cuban socialism. The title of the MININT report, "From Socially Maladapted to Men Useful to the Homeland," was telling. "If we are laying the foundations for a society that involves all individuals in a program of equality and justice," the authors wrote, "we could not allow ourselves the luxury of looking upon these facts with indifference, because within a few years, once socialism has progressed in our Homeland, it would produce alarming statistics in the realm of crime." The authors of the MININT report cited internal data highlighting the scholastic advancement of youths held at the Reeducation Center, and the valuable job training that they received while producing $13,288 worthy of soap and beauty supplies at a former Avon factory.[124] As the film about the Torrens reformatory had emphasized, a "love of work and a desire to work" were essential qualities if the country was going to reach its goals for economic production and a rising standard of living.[125]

On the other hand, if reeducation efforts failed, young Cubans might not become the revolutionary citizens that the nation desperately needed. Even worse, they might become parasites on the state, draining it of collective resources produced by their hard-working compatriots. The rehabilitation of wayward youths under the guidance of capable state employees would ensure that they would "no longer be a problem nor a burden for society."[126] These children and teens were not just individuals living under difficult circumstances – they

[124] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 3, 6, 10-11, 15.
[125] Canel, *TORRENS*.
[126] Canel, *TORRENS*.

were the inheritors of the revolution. In the absence of adequate intervention, they were also potential criminals.

These ideas underpinned the work of reeducation and formed key elements of a broader philosophy of crime prevention that was known in Cuba as "*prevención social*" (social prevention).[127] It stemmed from positivist criminological theory and the belief that people who broke laws and norms of conduct did so because their environmental and social conditions generated such supposedly deviant behavior. *Prevención social* also rested on the conviction that it was possible to develop programs to head off such behaviors before they became intractable in ways that might threaten the stability of society as a whole. So, when Fernando later found himself in a juvenile reformatory, the authorities who put him there did not conceive of their actions as punishment. For them, it was a matter of *prevención*.

Although reformatories played an early and frequent role in the new government's approach to addressing juvenile delinquency, officials tended to see these institutions as the last line of social defense in the broader scheme of *prevención social.* The school system was the foundation of the strategy of *prevención,* and teachers, not cops or corrections officers, formed the vanguard. Both behavior and ideology could be taught and, when necessary, corrected. The MININT officials who designed and oversaw reform programs for young people operated on the assumption that, as sociologist David Booth has explained, "bad habits, like good ones, were

[127] The theory and model of *prevención social* had its roots in the republican period. See, for instance, Antonio García Ruiz, *Prevención social: policía, delitos, delincuentes* (La Habana: [publisher not identified], 1939); Enrique C. Henríquez, *Orientación infantil y prevención social en Cuba; ideas generales para un plan de reorganización* (La Habana, 1944); Leonor Saavedra y Gómez, *La delincuencia infantil en Cuba: sus causas* (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1945). By 1962, the concept had gained significant traction within the revolutionary bureaucracy. A division of the Ministry of the Interior known as the Department of Social Prevention and Security (Departamento de Prevención y Seguridad Social) was established in March of that year. See Resolución Num. 1001, 27 March 1962, *Leyes del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba* XLII (La Habana: Finanzas al Día, 1963), 174-175, https://dloc.com/AA00063776/00012/images, LAC-UF.

socially learnt and therefore in principle capable of being unlearnt." As the socialist system eroded the exploitative conditions and inequality of the capitalist past, the theory went, it would eliminate the "objective justification" for most illegal activity, including property crimes. Once environmental and material conditions were no longer conducive to that sort of behavior, all remaining criminal activity would reflect "a problem of ideology."[128]

In the late 1960s, government leaders continued to express optimism about delivering a future in which juvenile delinquency and other forms of crime would all but cease to exist. Then-Prime Minister and First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party Fidel Castro subscribed to the view that "common crime" would all but disappear in a fully educated society. Notwithstanding the "isolated behavior of a few men," he had "no doubt that the problem of crime [would] diminish extraordinarily in proportion to the spread of education."[129] Like other top officials, Castro publicly proclaimed that eventually Cubans would not have to deal with these problems.

Until then, reeducation would be necessary for the young people who had suffered the effects of the old system. For all the hopeful talk about change, however, reeducation and *prevención social* continued to draw on old ideas. The Ministry of the Interior cited statistics indicating that 88 percent of young people charged with crimes lived in "unstable homes." Law enforcement leaders and the state press outlets consistently traced the origins of delinquency and crime to the families, homes, and neighborhood – to the deleterious influence of "the specific milieu in which such persons develop" and harmful "micro-environments."[130]

The ideas, institutions, and practices of *prevención social* in the 1960s demonstrated

[128] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 128.
[129] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en la concentración efectuada en La Escalinata de la Universidad de La Habana como culminación de los actos organizados para honrar los mártires del 13 de marzo de 1957," 13 March 1969, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1969/esp/f130369e.html.
[130] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 126–27, 149 fn 92.

considerable continuity with similar projects from the previous era. In revolutionary Cuba some of the language used to discuss juvenile delinquency evolved, but the basic infrastructure and approach of reeducation remained largely consistent with those of social reform efforts that went back decades.[131] Like their predecessors who rose to prominence during the republican period, researchers and staff involved with MININT reeducation programs frequently identified the home and the family as key factors in the production of delinquency and touted the importance of studying the dynamics of these spaces to remediate the resulting problems. Ministry officials committed to improving the organization, training, and specialization of personnel working in the field of reeducation. In 1966, a new Center for Youth Evaluation, Analysis, and Orientation (Centro de Evaluación, Análsis y Orientación) was established as a collaborative endeavor involving MININT, the Ministry of Education, and the Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC) – the institutional home for social work in revolutionary Cuba.[132]

What, then, set the revolutionary approach to reeducation apart from those of earlier social reformers? More and more during the revolutionary period, the people overseeing such projects adopted the idea that problems at home were *symptoms* of more fundamental structural conditions. A growing number of the people involved in running Cuban welfare and reform agencies saw the root cause of crime and vice as the entire pre-revolutionary social system itself. Although revolutionary agencies adopted language and approaches that sometimes resembled those of their predecessors, there was a significant shift in how influential reformers tended to think about social problems.[133] The official line of the revolutionary agency in charge of housing reform, for example, differed in key ways from that of its predecessor. In the past, reformers

[131] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes."
[132] Ramos Medina, "La protección jurídica a los menores en Cuba," 9.
[133] Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 116–18, 146–50.

often had seen shantytowns and other poor urban communities as manifestations of individual failings, expressions of social ills more "moral than economic."[134] The new Ministry of Social Welfare (Ministerio de Bienestar Social) began to insist that the opposite was true: the real problems were inequality and exploitation. Fix them, and the challenges that such neighborhoods faced – poverty, access to jobs, education, and healthcare, and crime – would begin to take care of themselves.

In theory, this distinction mattered. There was a difference between structural explanations for juvenile delinquency and those that centered the supposed pathologies of individuals, families, and neighborhoods. Most importantly, the former emphasized the need for laws, policies, and social programs capable of producing structural change. Yet when it came to the implementation of programs for *prevención social* during the 1960s, and when it came to the lives of young people like Fernando, this may have been a distinction without much of a difference. In practice, children from many of the same communities that had produced many of the "delinquent minors" of previous generations continued to fill the reformatories of the new regime. The ideas and institutions meant to address this social problem had remained largely unchanged, and so had the spaces of the city where the problem was thought to exist.

2.5 Conclusion

The origins of the young people who appeared in the data collected for the 1964 MININT report reflected a persistent social geography in Havana, persistent ways of thinking about social position and urban space, and persistent approaches to addressing juvenile delinquency. While their work was not radically different from the work of previous generations of social reformers

[134] Enrique Pizzi de Porras, "'Quiero que todos los cubanos vivan la vida digna a que tiene derecho,'" *Bohemia*, 27 April 1952, sup. 12, quoted in Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas," 475.

in Cuba, some of the people who ran the reeducation programs at the Ministry of the Interior during the 1960s appear to have believed sincerely that they were rehabilitating young people and, crucially, that young people like Fernando were capable of being rehabilitated. The key, in their eyes, was timely state intervention.[135]

This had been a consistent line from the first months of the revolutionary period. Reeducation was coercive. The institutions that implemented its agenda were at times, inevitably, abusive. But punishment, per se, was not the point. As of the late 1960s, there remained a great deal of optimism about the possibilities for transforming both the lives of young "delinquents" and Cuban society as a whole. While revolutionary officials may not have believed all the utopian claims they made about the power of reeducation, some of them were nonetheless committed to the general principles that they espoused.[136]

Over time, though, it was becoming more difficult to attribute persistent social problems such as juvenile delinquency and crime solely to the old regime. In the second half of the decade, persistent concerns with young people and their involvement in the commission of property offenses showed officials that such social ills remained a feature of the revolutionary present. Top officials also became increasingly invested in enforcing norms of revolutionary citizenship, and they targeted additional groups of Cubans for coercive reform projects. At the same time, the Ministry of the Interior was building a far more robust apparatus of surveillance and policing, which would have major consequences for Fernando and many other young people in Havana.

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[135] MININT, "De inadaptados sociales a hombres útiles a la patria," 2-4.

[136] Carlos Amat, who later served as Cuban Minister of Justice, recalled that "one of the basic principles" driving the government's approach to delinquency and crime during the early revolutionary period was that eliminating "exploitation and oppression" would lead to the elimination of "crime and criminals." Reflecting on this belief man years later, he described it as the *"bobo*" – the foolishness – "at the beginning." Quoted in Debra Evenson, *Revolution in the Balance: Law and Society in Contemporary Cuba* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 150.

Chapter 3 Institutionalization: Criminal Subjects, Police Capacity, and Selective Enforcement in Havana

Years later, as he faced indefinite confinement in a U.S. prison, Andrés recalled the day he stole the clothes, the radio, and the bicycle. He explained to his legal representatives that in 1975, when he was 15 years old, he had entered a house in his home city of Havana and taken those items.[1] Like many consumer goods, they were things that had become luxuries for Cubans during the 1970s. Their scarcity would have made them especially enticing to a teenager like Andrés, who may have planned to sell them in the booming illicit market. The cost of replacing them would have made their theft a major concern for the person who owned them.[2]

In all likelihood, allegations regarding what Andrés had done first reached a member of a local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDR), often referred to simply as a "Comité." The CDR had been created for Cuban citizens to maintain "vigilance" over each other at a moment marked by direct, violent threats to the new revolutionary state. Over time, however, the responsibilities of the organization expanded to include not only the surveillance of suspected "counterrevolutionary" activities but also projects to prevent and intervene in what was often referred to as "common crime."[3] By the time of

[1] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," United States Department of Justice Repatriation Review Program, May 1990, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[2] David K. Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts in the Social Transformation of Cuba" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Surrey, 1973), 122–23.

[3] Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969); Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts"; Jorge I. Domínguez,

Andrés's offense, every district in the Cuban capital had a cluster of block-level Comités led by neighbors. Whether the house he burglarized was located in his neighborhood in the *municipio* of San Miguel del Padrón or elsewhere in the city, any police investigation into the stolen goods would have involved collaboration with members of the local Comité. It did not take long for news of the burglary and information about a suspect to be relayed to the authorities. Soon, Andrés was arrested.

Across the Port of Havana, in the heart of the city, Luis also came into police custody. Like Andrés, at some point Luis was charged with the theft of a bicycle. Unlike Andrés, Luis lived in Cayo Hueso, a neighborhood in the *municipio* of Centro Habana.[4] Many residents of the capital saw Cayo Hueso as a poor and largely "Black" space.[5] These perceptions were coupled with the reality that neighborhoods like Luis's were home to a disproportionate number of Black and *mulato* residents, and some of the worst housing conditions in the city. [6] Like many of his neighbors, Luis was a person of African descent.[7]

While the Comité in his neighborhood may have played a role in the arrest of Luis, living in Cayo Hueso also increased the odds that he would at some point cross paths with a uniformed

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Cuba: Order and Revolution (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978); Luis Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979); Adèle G. van der Plas, *Revolution and Criminal Justice: The Cuban Experiment, 1959-1983* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1987).

[4] U.S. Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," June 1990, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS); "Parole Questionnaire," U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, May 1990, PP-ALAS.

[5] Juan Carlos Fernández, "La última palabra del conde," *Moncada* VI, no. 2, July 1971, 65; Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, Rev. ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 141–43.

[6] Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 313.

[7] A search for Luis under his legal name in a digitized database of Miami-Dade County criminal records reveals that he was classified as "Black" by South Florida police. This is not definitive evidence of how he saw himself nor of how others perceived him. He may have identified as "*mulato*" or using some other racial term. Even so, these records strongly suggest that the people around him would have seen him as Afrodescendant. "Criminal Justice Online System," Clerk of the Court and Comptroller of Miami-Dade County, https://www2.miamidadeclerk.gov/cjis/CaseSearch.aspx.

officer of the Revolutionary National Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, PNR). In the early 1970s, the PNR implemented a new operational structure for policing in Havana organized around the position of the *jefe de sector* (sector chief). This approach doubled down on longstanding ideas about the kinds of places that required the most police attention. The PNR used the *jefes de sectores* to further integrate civilians into its daily operations. The police called on the members of block-level Comités to assist uniformed officers assigned to one of the sectors within each region of the city.[8] During this period, the PNR also increasingly made use of *auxiliares*, members of the police Auxiliary Forces (Fuerzas Auxiliares), a civilian organization adapted from a model first deployed during the revolutionary government's early-sixties rural counterinsurgency campaigns. In Havana and in other cities, *auxiliares* began to expand the reach of the police by taking up posts overseeing individual urban blocks.[9] The places where the PNR first rolled out this new system of operations reflected longstanding police perceptions of specific districts and neighborhoods as hubs of crime – including Cayo Hueso.

The stories of Andrés and Luis would have been familiar to authorities in Havana at the time. A young person stealing clothes and a radio was something of a rhetorical trope in the 1970s. In an article about the "causes of crime" in Cuba, the President of the nation's highest court named clothes and radios, specifically, on a list of items that minors often stole and put up for sale.[10] The theft of a bicycle, too, reflected patterns observed by the leaders of Cuba's law enforcement agencies. In fact, the former Minister of the Interior had once noted that "perpetrators go in pairs or ride on bicycles which permit them to act with more efficiency and

[8] Juan Carlos Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," *Moncada* V, no. 2, July 1970, 26-31.

[9] "Para seguir siendo policías: conversando con los fundadores de la PNR" (Part VII of VIII), *Moncada* XIII, no. 11, October 1978, 8.

[10] Nicasio Hernández de Armas, "Las causas del delito," *Revista del Hospital Psiquiátrico de La Habana* 18, April-June 1977, 301-302, cited in Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 16.

speed as well as allowing them to escape more quickly."[11] But it seems that the bicycles were of limited help to Andrés and Luis.

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For Luis, Andrés, and many other Cubans who eventually found themselves indefinitely detained by the U.S. government after having left Cuba in the Mariel boatlift, their initial experiences with jails and prisons had come long before they ever set foot in the United States. Their first encounters with a criminal legal system instead took place in their home country. The existing scholarship on revolutionary Cuba can explain the experiences of some of the people in this group. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, government leaders hardened their approach to people, ideas, and behaviors that deviated from a strict concept of what it meant to be an upstanding citizen in revolutionary Cuba. Young and middle-aged Cubans whose intellectual or economic activities, sexualities, political views, cultural tastes, and faith practices veered too far from an officially sanctioned course risked possible arrest and confinement. Literary critic Ambrosio Fornet famously described the five years from 1971-1975 as the "*quinquenio gris*," a "gray" half-decade marked by heightened government censorship and growing self-censorship among writers and artists who feared reprisals for work that strayed from the official line.[12] As a whole, this period has been depicted by scholars and critics of the Cuban government as an

[11] Ramiro Valdés, "Aniquilemos a los ladrones," *Bohemia* 59, 14 April 1967, 79. The use of the verb "*aniquilar*" (to annihilate) in this article reflects the intensely punitive language deployed by Valdés, then the Minister of the Interior, and some of his colleagues. While in charge of Cuba's police agencies, Valdés occupied some of the most extreme positions on crime and alleged lawbreakers. As the next chapter will show, the tension between views like those of Valdés and those of Ministry officials who were more invested in projects to reintegrate wayward young people eventually shifted in favor of this more exclusionary, even eliminationist, impulse.

[12] Ambrosio Fornet, "El Quinquenio Gris: Revisitando el término," in *La política cultural del período revolucionario: memoria y reflexión*, ed. Eduardo Heras León and Desiderio Navarro (La Habana: Centro Teórico-Cultural, 2007), 25–46.

especially repressive one.[13]

New laws, administrative structures, and operational practices expanded the government's capacity to intervene in the lives of Cubans during those years. Officials frequently described their work at the time as part of a process of "institutionalization." Scholars who have adopted this term have defined it in various ways. Some have framed institutionalization as a pragmatic move made by Cuban leaders who embraced the Soviet Union's model for state-building after a period of uncertainty about how Cuba would position itself relative to other socialist states.[14] This process entailed efforts to expand the membership and influence of the Cuban Communist Party throughout each branch of government; projects to increase the capacity and efficiency of administrative agencies; a closer alignment with the USSR and adoption of Soviet-style economic reforms; and the codification and formalization of law enforcement practices that had been implemented in an ad hoc fashion up to that point.[15] A law against *vagancia* (idleness), for instance, was enacted to punish people deemed to be a drain on collective resources because they did not work or engaged in economic activities not sanctioned by the state.[16]

The revolutionary government also took advantage of a vague 1930s law rooted in the

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[13] For one of the more recent and archivally rich accounts of this process, see Lillian Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba, 1961-1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).

[14] Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

[15] Ever since Cuban officials began discussing "institutionalization" its significance has been the subject of scholarly debate, with some critics of the revolutionary government dubbing it "Sovietization" and describing it as little more than an adoption of Soviet models in the context of a broader alignment between Cuba and the USSR. Antoni Kapcia, "Raúl's Decade? Or the First Swing of the Pendulum?," in *Cuba's Forgotten Decade: How the 1970s Shaped the Revolution*, ed. Emily J. Kirk, Anna Clayfield, and Isabel Story (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 8, 14. The description I offer is drawn from one of the more thoughtful U.S.-based analysts of "institutionalization" in the 1970s and 1980s. See Max Azicri, "Crime and Law Under Socialism: The 1979 Cuban Penal Code," *Review of Socialist Law* 6, no. 1 (1980): 5.

[16] Ian McColl Kennedy, "Cuba's Ley Contra La Vagancia - The Law on Loafing," *UCLA Law Review* 20 (1972): 1177–1268.

criminological theory that it was possible to identify who was or was not predisposed to future criminal behavior. Cuban police officers in the revolutionary period made wide use of this provision on the grounds that they had to protect society from individuals who exhibited *"peligrosidad"* (dangerousness). When someone refused to comply with a police request to see identification documents or was perceived by government authorities as disrespectful or resistant, a charge of *peligrosidad* might follow. Police invoked the immense discretion afforded to them under the statute to arrest individuals whose style of dress, sexual orientation, and ways of expressing themselves signaled a refusal to conform to revolutionary norms.[17] The theory behind the law – that certain types of people effectively lived in an "*estado de peligrosidad*" (state of dangerousness) – reinforced a circular logic that rendered individuals with criminal records vulnerable to arrest for *peligrosidad* simply because they had been arrested in the past.

In revolutionary Cuba, *peligrosidad* sometimes resulted in prison sentences of up to three or four years. The charge was used to arrest people when their actions were not necessarily easily classifiable as illicit under a specific statute but still fell under a broad category of "antisocial behavior." This included perceived insubordination to the police and, especially in the case of women, alleged prostitution. The highly discretionary nature of this charge made its application especially susceptible to bias. Moreover, evidence from later in the revolutionary period suggests

[17] Rachel Hynson, *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 208–16; Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 170–82.

Similar forms of discretionary policing aimed at enforcing desired norms of conduct and configurations of metropolitan space abounded in the United States during this period. See, for example, Christopher Lowen Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco: Policing and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Liberal Politics, 1950-1972* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Risa Lauren Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Anna Lvovsky, *Vice Patrol: Cops, Courts, and the Struggle over Urban Gay Life before Stonewall* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

that it was deployed in a highly selective manner with dramatically disproportionate results because the police were using the *peligrosidad* provision specifically to justify the arrest of young Black and *mulato* Cuban men.[18]

The life paths of Andrés and Luis bore traces of all these important developments. Yet the existing scholarship cannot fully account for the fact that they – and many of the other Cubans who later left in the boatlift – had been arrested for offenses typically understood as common crimes. Studies of data collected by both the U.S. and Cuban governments consistently showed that, among those "Mariel Cubans" who had spent time in jail or prison before leaving the island, the single most common reason for their incarceration was an alleged property offense.[19] Many of these Cubans who later indicated that they had been arrested for *peligrosidad* also described a prior arrest for some other offense. A granular analysis of their legal records reveals that in many cases those other charges were for theft, robbery, or some other violation of personal or state property.[20]

This chapter advances a new explanation for these patterns by following Andrés and Luis from the late 1960s into the "often ignored yet crucial" period of the 1970s in Cuba.[21] It centers

[18] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race,* 314–15.

[19] Robert Pear, "Plan Aims to Free Refugees in Jails for Crimes in Cuba," *New York Times,* 30 January 1981," A8; Manuel Echevarria, "Outline of the Most Frequent Crimes Committed by Cuban Detainees, New Cuban Penal Code," folder 28, box 6, Series 1, Cuban Detainees Litigation Papers, Atlanta History Center; Rafael Hernández and Redi Gomis, "Retrato del Mariel: el ángulo socioeconómico," *Cuadernos de nuestra américa* 3, no. 5 (1986): 139–40.

[20] This reflects my review of individual legal records produced by the Atlanta Legal Aid Society for several hundred Mariel Cubans detained indefinitely in U.S. prisons. Most of the information on their experiences in Cuba was self-reported and took the form of brief narratives in legal briefs submitted by their representatives or written parole decisions made by panels of attorneys from the Department of Justice. The latter typically had access to the full immigration file (known as an "A-File") of the individual in question. In rare cases, this information is drawn from copies of records produced by the Cuban Ministry of the Interior. I have converted much of this narrative data into spreadsheets that enable me to identify quantitative patterns in their experiences.

[21] Emily J. Kirk, Anna Clayfield, and Isabel Story, eds., *Cuba's Forgotten Decade: How the 1970s Shaped the Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 2.

key manifestations of the process of institutionalization within the branch of government responsible for policing and prisons: the Ministry of the Interior.[22] In the process, Chapter 2 explores what was perhaps the most significant development in what many Cubans experienced at the hands of the state during this period – a set of mundane institutional changes that reinforced the efforts of police and their civilian collaborators to address so-called common crime. A close examination of an underutilized source – *Moncada*, the official magazine of the Ministry of the Interior – reveals how the scope and efficacy of policing projects grew across the board starting in the second half of the 1960s and accelerated in the early 1970s. This increased the likelihood of arrest and punishment for many people in Havana, the place that most Mariel Cubans called home before they left the country. The PNR did not deploy this increased coercive capacity evenly across the city, however. Their efforts were concentrated in certain spaces, and they had a disproportionate impact on the same poor, heavily Afrodescendant communities that had been primary targets of policing in the past.

An analysis of the legal records of Andrés, Luis, and hundreds of other Cubans who were later indefinitely detained in the United States suggests that many of them came from places that the police in Havana viewed as centers of criminal activity. My review of briefs and questionnaires submitted by over 200 Mariel Cubans held in U.S. prisons shows that at least half were either born in Havana or had close relatives in the city. While not as heavily weighted toward the Cuban capital as the overall boatlift population, this group nonetheless reflected the disproportionate presence of former Havana residents among those who left the island via Mariel.[23] The questionnaires that they submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice included a

[22] Domínguez, *Cuba*.

[23] A survey of Mariel Cubans held in "resettlement camps" after they arrived in the United States found that two-thirds came from either the City of Havana or the surrounding province. A systematic

field for the addresses of family members who resided in Cuba. In some cases, only the city was listed. In other instances, a *municipio* was named without a street address. The addresses were typically recorded by an English-speaking paralegal during a conversation with a client or written by a Cuban who was trying to remember streets, cross-streets, and spellings after years in the United States. As a result, the addresses were not always accurate or complete. The following map includes the locations that could be extracted or deciphered from these documents thus far. It indicates the rough location of the Cuba-based family members listed for nearly 50 of the 225 individuals in the sample. While the markers may not indicate the places where these individuals lived in every instance, the persistence of housing scarcity in revolutionary Havana, and practical and regulatory limits on moving from one dwelling to another, suggest that many of the locations they listed were for the homes in which they grew up.[24] That most of the listed addresses were for parents and other close family members also suggests that these were areas where these individuals spent significant time, even in cases in which they lived elsewhere. For most addresses, the markers have been positioned on the street recorded on the questionnaire and between the two cross-streets listed. In several instances, the location is approximate because only one cross-street could be identified.

survey of Mariel Cubans who settled in South Florida suggested that over 70 percent came from these locations. Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 38; Alejandro Portes, Juan M. Clark, and Robert D. Manning, "After Mariel: A Survey of the Resettlement Experiences of 1980 Cuban Refugees in Miami," *Cuban Studies* 15, no. 2 (1985): 42.

[24] Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *The Economy of Socialist Cuba: A Two-Decade Appraisal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 172–74.

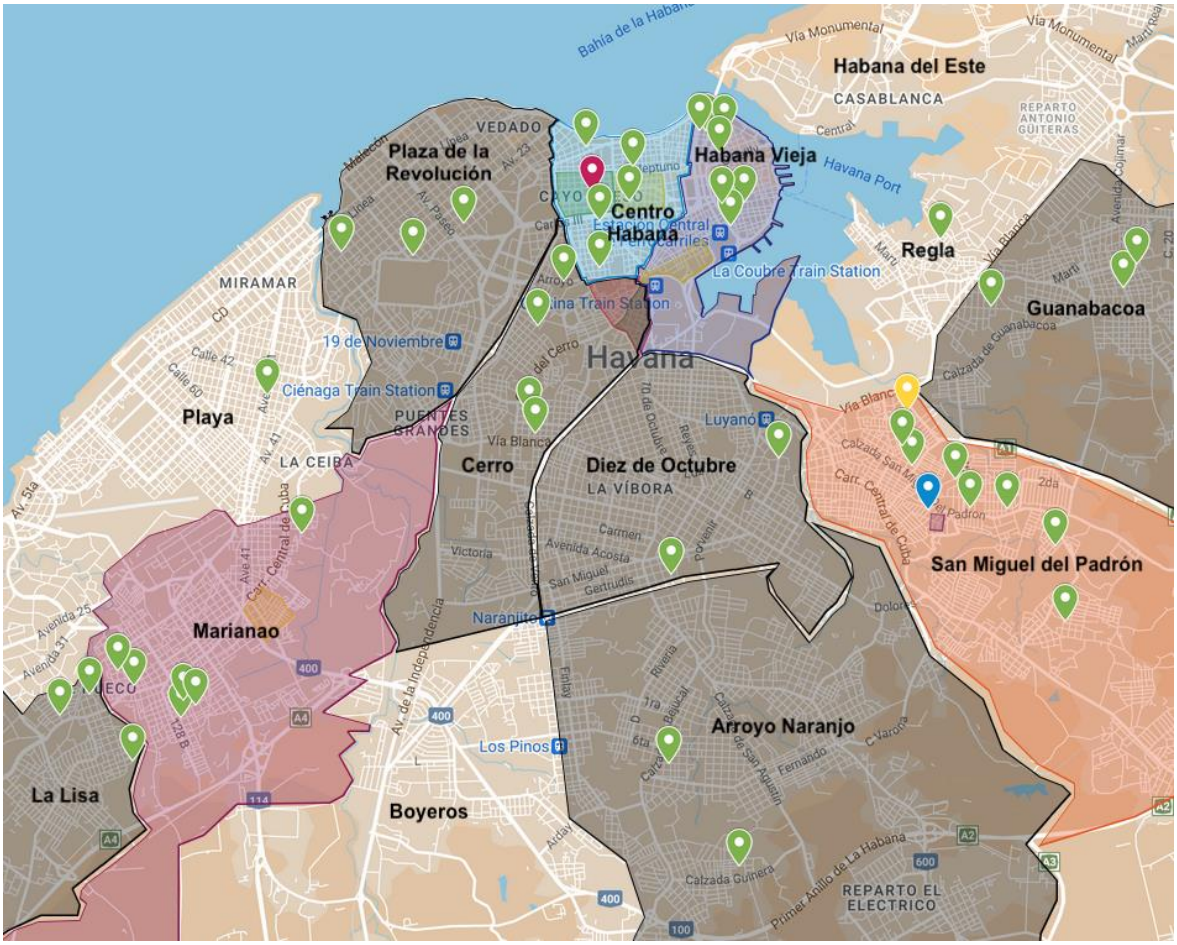


Figure 3.1 **City of Havana with addresses later listed by indefinitely detained Mariel Cubans.** The green markers represent the residences of close family members later listed by detained Mariel Cubans at the time of their legal proceedings in the United States. The red marker shows the address that Luis listed for his mother in Havana. The blue marker indicates the location where Andrés last lived before leaving Cuba, and the yellow marker shows the address he listed for his mother. *Created with Google My Maps.*

The map shows that this group of Mariel Cubans was distributed throughout the city. Yet it also reveals areas where the addresses were concentrated. To the southwest of the city center, there is a cluster in a region spanning the border between the *municipios of* Marianao and La Lisa. To the southeast, there is another group—including two addresses listed for Andrés—which forms a narrow band through the *municipio* of San Miguel del Padr**ó**n. In the middle of the map, there are additional sets of markers in the *municipios* of Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, where Luis's mother lived. While this sample is not yet large enough to be considered representative, the distribution of the markers is striking because the regions with clusters of

addresses correspond to sections of the city that the police saw as centers of poverty, crime, and vice.

A focus on efforts to police people like Luis and Andrés in the specific places where they lived enables a deeper understanding how revolutionary Cuba made certain people into "criminal" subjects. It also opens new avenues for explaining why such people were so heavily represented among the Cubans later detained indefinitely in the United States. As this chapter will show, this iterative process of criminalization began long before the people at the center of this story boarded a boat at the Port of Mariel. It began in Cuba, in the neighborhoods where they grew up. Through an analysis of legal records later produced in the United States and a review of Ministry of the Interior publications and police data, this chapter goes to those neighborhoods during the period of "institutionalization" to understand the conditions under which a growing number of Cubans were themselves institutionalized.

3.1 Suspect Subjects

When Luis and Andrés were still young children in Havana, a series of administrative changes expanded the capacity of the Cuban government to intervene in the lives of its citizens. In the second half of the 1960s, moreover, revolutionary leaders escalated their attacks on a growing group of Cubans whose compatibility with the revolutionary project they deemed suspect. As a result, few aspects of social and economic life were exempt from scrutiny, and more and more Cubans learned that to stray from the increasingly narrow path of revolutionary citizenship meant risking arrest and confinement.

The mid 1960s was a key inflection point in the history of policing in revolutionary

Cuba.[25] Military and police agencies had spent the first half of the decade spread thin and preoccupied with threats posed by groups that sought to overthrow the new government. The most spectacular embodiment of those dangers was the U.S.-backed landing and failed invasion of exiles and expatriates at Playa Girón in 1961 (known in the United States for the name of the adjacent body of water, the Bay of Pigs). Yet acts of sabotage and counterrevolutionary political violence were regular occurrences in Cuba at the time, and an armed anti-government insurgency persisted in rural areas for several years.[26] By the middle of the decade, however, the military had succeeded in collaborating with local militias to suppress the insurgency. In the meantime, the Cuban counterintelligence agency had become increasingly effective at neutralizing organized opposition to the government in collaboration with civilian allies in the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), or Comités. As such threats subsided, revolutionary leaders began to devote additional energy to more mundane matters of public safety.[27]

In the second half of the 1960s, the National Revolutionary Police (PNR) implemented a new administrative structure and records system.[28] A reorganization of the Comités forged tighter links between their members, known as *cederistas,* and uniformed police officers. By mid-decade *cederistas* engaged in "vigilance" work were routinely assisting the regular police

[25] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts"; Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*; van der Plas, *Revolution and Criminal Justice*.

[26] On the counterrevolutionary insurgency in the Escambray, see Joanna Swanger, *Rebel Lands of Cuba: The Campesino Struggles of Oriente and Escambray, 1934-1974* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 215–44. For more on the composition of the insurgency, see Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10, 125; Michael J. Bustamante, *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 118.

[27] Fidel Castro later described this transition in a speech to members of the Ministry of the Interior. See Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunicado en el acto conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT," 6 June 1971, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1971/esp/f060671e.html.

[28] For veteran police reflections on early PNR professionalization campaigns, see Alfredo Proenza, "Un frente de lucha para combatir la delincuencia," *Moncada* V, no. 12, May 1971, 45-51.

from the PNR Department of Public Order.[29] This collaboration deepened considerably in the late 1960s. Under a new National Coordinator, the CDR implemented a revised structure in to accommodate its continued growth and facilitate efforts to cover densely populated urban neighborhoods.[30] The Ministry began offering training to the Comités on a range of topics, including common forms of property crime and strategies for preventing them.[31]

One of the most important facets of the evolving relationship between the CDR and the Ministry of the Interior during these years was the increased police participation in "*guardias*," the nightly guard shifts and mobile patrols that had long been central to the work of the Comités. Officers who joined *guardia* shifts provided expertise and technical assistance. They trained *cederistas* to organize patrols, establish fixed points of surveillance, and plan operations.[32] Buoyed by this civilian support, law enforcement leaders could focus more of their attention on professionalizing the police force and making the most effective use of limited uniformed personnel.

During this period, the government also developed a more rigid approach to Cubans who deviated from an array of desired norms of behavior. The resulting policies were "partly the product of racism, cultural chauvinism, homophobia, and class bias already prevalent in Cuban society" but, as historian Lillian Guerra has explained, they "also grew out of the new forms that such systems of prejudice had taken as a direct result of mostly male, white, and ex-bourgeois officials' promotion of certain revolutionary ideals."[33] Officials who had helped to craft the

[29] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 96, fn 77.
[30] Booth, 40–44.
[31] Regla Zulueta, "Ojos sobre la ciudad," *Moncada* V, no. 4, September 1970, 28.
[32] Zulueta, "Ojos sobre la ciudad," 28, 30. There may have been other perceived benefits to this integration of the CDR with MINNT in the eyes of some revolutionary leaders. As Luis Salas has noted, "By bringing the CDRs under the titular control of the Ministry, its power was enhanced and a potential adversary was incorporated into its ranks." Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 260–61.
[33] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 171.

image of the *hombre nuevo* ("new man") – a masculine, ascetic, and selfless figure – as the embodiment of those ideals, increasingly chastised Cubans who failed to live up to them.

Popular tropes for expressing such disdain were adopted widely enough that Fidel Castro could use them as punchlines in his speeches. He often spoke about "*vagos,"* or bums, and "*lumpen*," a term adapted from the Marxian concept of the "*lumpenproletariat*" to describe Cubans who "did not study or work" and whose affects and attitudes leaders saw as antithetical to those of good revolutionaries.[34] In an oft-cited speech, Castro dedicated multiple sections to discussing *vagos* and *lumpen* before turning to the subject of "fashionable young bums" who wore "pants that were too tight," played the guitar while moving like Elvis Presley (*con una guitarrita en actitudes 'elvispreslianas'"*), and "took their libertinage to extremes" by staging "effeminate shows" for public audiences. While Castro did not make explicit claims about the sexuality of these figures, his descriptions would have evoked strong associations among Cubans between femininity and queer men. Moreover, the official transcript of the speech indicates that his portrait of such young people came in response to someone in the crowd shouting, "[T]he homosexuals!" Castro claimed that many of these suspect subjects were close "relatives," including "*el lumpencito, el vago, el elvispresliano, el 'pitusa,'"* perhaps suggesting that there was overlap among the groups to which he ascribed these terms. The last item on this list was a slang term for blue jeans. Along with the Beatles and long hair, jeans were treated by revolutionary leaders as a symbol of bourgeois taste, capitalist decadence, and cultural imperialism. In this instance, however, Castro used "*pitusa"* to refer not to the denim pants but

[34] In adapting the concept of the "*lumpenproletariat*[1]" for 1960s Cuba, Castro occasionally referred to people with social positions quite different from those of the people Marx had in mind in his original use of the term in the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than impoverished urban residents who made a living from unsavory or illicit work, Castro sometimes described "lumpen" as "hijos de burgueses" who were unwilling to perform the sort of manual labor that the revolutionary government prioritized.

to the people who wore them. According to the transcript, that got a real laugh from the crowd.[35]

The range of Cubans subject to such derisive language and abusive treatment significantly expanded in the second half of the 1960s. Young people who identified as Marxists or socialists but dissented from the official line of the newly established Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC), were ostracized and ejected from cultural institutions. Some men and teens perceived as gay were denounced by their neighbors and peers and purged from workplaces and universities.[36] Prominent Afrodescendant artists and intellectuals with long track records of support for the revolution were censured by top officials and blacklisted by state publishers for raising concerns about persistent racial discrimination.[37] Catholic priests and Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and other religious believers also came under intense scrutiny.[38] Revolutionary leaders began to describe many of these transgressions using the catch-all term "ideological diversionism" ("*diversionismo ideológico*"). Officials decried other offenses as the work of "*antisociales*" (antisocial persons), a vague pejorative often used to refer to so-called common criminals but increasingly deployed to describe a broader range of supposedly deviant groups.[39]

The social positions of many practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions made them especially vulnerable to such allegations. The revolutionary government had celebrated artistic and literary

[35] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso en la clausura del acto conmemorativo del VI aniversario del asalto al Palacio Presidencial," 13 March 1963, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/f130363e.html. For more on "pitusa" and the political significance of fashion in Cuba during this period, see María A. Cabrera Arús, "Thinking Politics and Fashion in 1960s Cuba: How Not to Judge a Book by Its Cover," *Theory and Society* 46 (2017): 411–28.

[36] Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 230–39, 247–54.

[37] Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 112–20.

[38] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 170–82.

[39] Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 228–29.

expressions of Afrodescendant culture and created institutions that helped to position African ancestry as central to the identity of the Cuban nation itself.[40] Yet this "unprecedented" support was predicated on the belief among officials that "keeping alive the historic memory of these cultural expressions" was valuable, in part, because "they were about to die in the new Cuba." By the mid 1960s, with many believers still clearly committed to practicing their faiths, the government escalated its criticism of Afro-Cuban religions as part of an "assault on religions in general." In contrast with their attacks on the Catholic Church, though, denunciations of religions with African origins recycled old prejudices about their "primitive" nature. Officials presented these faiths "not only as a remnant of the past from which ignorant practitioners had to be freed but also as a cultural form antagonistic to the new society and the new citizen under construction."[41] Moreover, law enforcement authorities in the revolutionary government routinely tied Afro-Cuban religions to crime. The police linked membership in Abakuá, "a secret all-male fraternal society of African origin," to "a high level of social dangerousness and a predisposition to commit crimes."[42] Officials found multiple grounds, then, on which to construct the predominantly Black and *mulato* practitioners of such traditions as *antisociales*.

In the first years of the revolutionary period, the government had enforced norms and disciplined labor largely through public condemnation, intermittent raids and arrests, and ad hoc legislation. By 1965, its approach was becoming more systematic. That year saw the establishment of what would become an infamous project to coerce Cubans into adopting the qualities of revolutionary citizens: the Military Units to Aid Production (Unidades Militares de

[40] Robin D. Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[41] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 287, 290–92.

[42] "Los ñáñigos o abakuá," *P.N.R.* (January-March 1972): 2-16, quoted in de la Fuente, 292.

Ayuda a la Producción, UMAP).[43] The UMAP were a series of detention and labor camps described in the state press as places in which to "forge citizens useful to society."[44]

Most UMAP internees were young men allegedly not attending school or participating in state-sanctioned work. Yet anyone who deviated from the norms of revolutionary citizenship could end up in an UMAP camp, whether because of their sexuality, their intellectual pursuits, their supposedly bourgeois affectations, or their taste in music and clothing. Camp administrators subjected specific groups, including gay men and Jehovah's witnesses, to especially harsh treatment. There is evidence that UMAP staff subjected young men they presumed to be gay to a form of "aversive conditioning" – showing them images of naked men while sending painful currents of electricity through their bodies.[45] There is also evidence that the government used at least one of these camps to confine "women presumed to be lesbians or sex workers" and thought to be engaged in "labor that did not benefit or advance the Revolution."[46] The focus of the UMAP – coercing labor from groups that the government deemed both undesirable and unproductive – suggests that they were intended as extensions or intensifications of earlier reeducation programs. The public outcry in Cuba and internationally over reports of abuse in the camps, and the decision by the government to shut them down three years after they began, suggests that in this instance revolutionary leaders realized that their schemes to reform the

[43] Abel Sierra Madero, "'El trabajo os hará hombres': Masculinización nacional, trabajo forzado y control social en Cuba durante los años sesenta," *Cuban Studies* 44, no. 1 (2016): 309–49.

[44] Gerardo Rodríguez, "UMAP: Forja de ciudadanos útiles a la sociedad", *El Mundo* (La Habana), 14 April1966, 4, quoted in Sierra Madero, "'El trabajo os hará hombres,'" 316.

[45] Sierra Madero, "'El trabajo os hará hombres,'" 316, 336, 338. The former official tasked with dismantling the UMAP in 1968 – after reports of abuses in the camp became a scandal for the government – claimed in an interview with Sierra Madero that gay men accounted for about 850 people sent to the camps (out of a total number that some scholars estimate to have been upwards of 30,000). See Sierra Madero, "'El trabajo os hará hombres,'" 335.

[46] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 151–52.

Cuban population had crossed a line.[47]

The emphasis of the UMAP on compelling Cubans to engage in state-sanctioned labor – that is, to "Aid Production" – reflected the extent to which state coercion during this period centered on work. Increased output in agriculture and other key sectors was essential to government development goals, and productive work became a fundamental component of the reconfigured geometry of citizenship that crystallized in the second half of the 1960s. Engagement in manual labor was a staple of both the revolutionary education system and reeducation programs for "delinquent minors," just as it formed the core of efforts to reform shantytown residents, sex workers, and "common criminals."[48] But economic conditions in the mid 1960s combined with changes in policy to leave many thousands of Cubans working outside the bounds of the formal labor market. Between 1965 and 1967, the government laid off tens of thousands of public employees to reduce costs and eliminate supposed redundancies. Then, during a 1968 campaign they dubbed the "Revolutionary Offensive" (Ofensiva Revolucionaria), officials forcibly shuttered the many small businesses that continued to operate on the island, as part of a push to consolidate state control over all remaining private economic activity.[49] These circumstances combined to produce tens of thousands of out-of-work men who were subject to a growing corpus of coercive policies.

Such provisions were designed to push Cubans into jobs aligned with government

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[47] Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 391. For more on the UMAP, see Ian Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Bustamante, *Cuban Memory Wars*.

[48] Hynson describes a consistently "close relationship between physical labor and citizenship" during this period. Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 255. Also see Sierra Madero, "El trabajo os hará hombres."

[49] Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s*; Guerra, *Visions of Power*; Hynson, *Laboring for the State*.

production goals.[50] This formed part of a process that historian Rachel Hynson has described as "a shift in the state's expectations surrounding work" that "narrowed the definition of acceptable employment and broadened the category of deviance to include more types of unconventional labor practices."[51] Yet the lack of material incentives for work meant that many Cubans who signed up for government jobs saw little reason to do more than the bare minimum. "Absenteeism" became a major concern for revolutionary leaders, especially as they laid the groundwork for an ambitious project to produce a 10-million-ton sugar crop in 1970. The Minister of Labor had begun advocating for additional legislation to address work attendance in the build-up to the harvest, a campaign that culminated three years later in the Law Against Idleness (Ley Contra la Vagancia).[52] Prior to that, the government had relied on the discretionary authority granted by portions of the existing criminal code. Among those statutes were provisions for the arrest of individuals who exhibited "precriminal" (*predelictivo*) traits or behaviors, which were delimited in the code as factors that could justify a legal determination that an individual occupied an *estado de peligrosidad*. And included on the list of "precriminal" risk factors was the inability to show evidence of full-time, formal work. The Law Against Idleness bolstered this established legal framework for the practice of arresting unemployed and "unconventionally employed men."[53]

In the aftermath of mass layoffs and the Revolutionary Offensive, many Cuban men were unemployed, underemployed, or involved in activities on a ballooning list of criminalized economic endeavors. That list featured traditional outlaw practices, such as robbery and

[50] Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 228.
[51] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 11.
[52] The Law of Labor Justice (Ley 1166) had been enacted in October 1964 to address some of these issues, but administrative leaders wanted more legal tools. Hynson, 247; Kennedy, "Cuba's Ley Contra La Vagancia - The Law on Loafing," fn 3-4.
[53] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 208.

gambling, alongside more recent additions, including virtually all forms of private commerce. In other words, state policies created this group of mostly male, working-age Cubans without state-sanctioned jobs, and then officials "found ways to prosecute them for it."[54]

Accounts of this period of intensive policing and coercion in Cuba have tended to center the UMAP and lump together the various groups pulled into these relatively short-lived institutions. This is understandable, given the widespread reports of abuse in the camps and the fact that a diverse cohort of Cubans was confined together physically in these carceral spaces. Scholars have rightly pointed out that the camps "reflected a broadening of the type of *antisociales* systematically targeted for detention and the legal apparatus used to intern them."[55] Yet important efforts to track this shift in the late 1960s have at times inadvertently obscured parallel developments in systems for addressing so-called common crimes, which had changed in scope and operational structure but demonstrated striking continuities when it came to the imagined objects of policing.

[54] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 154.
[55] Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 249.



Figure 3.2 **"Mosquito: Un viejo delincuente de 9 años,"** *Moncada* IV, no. 47, April 1970, 52. Illustration by "Jan."

After all, the revolutionary government had treated certain Cubans as suspect all along. Images such as this full-page illustration from the official magazine of the Ministry of the Interior revealed how old scripts continued to guide the way authorities thought about crime and juvenile delinquency. Although nothing in the accompanying article mentions the race of "Mosquito," the "delinquent" figure at its center, the artist chose to represent him as a Black or *mulato* child with wild, menacing eyes. The Ministry of the Interior rarely published crime or arrest statistics broken down by race. Its publications sometimes featured references to suspects' race in accounts of law enforcement activity but often omitted such information. These patterns no doubt reflected a combination of the officially anti-racist position of the revolutionary

government and the effects of older projects to construct a "raceless" Cuban nationalism.[56] But the images that accompanied such stories often filled racial silences in the text.

The article about Mosquito reflected tropes about youth crime grounded in longstanding race and class stereotypes that persisted in the revolutionary period. The author interspersed a series of narrative segments about Mosquito and the parents who never "cared for him" – an "epileptic, disorderly, shameful" ("*epiléptica, desordenada, escandalosa*") mother who "taught him" to smoke cigarettes, and an alcoholic father who physically abused Mosquito's mother – with fragments from psychological evaluations describing his "limited attention span" and habit of lying. Mosquito was 15 when the article appeared in print, but his criminal record began six years earlier. As a nine-year-old child he had been charged with "robbery with force." This was the first in a string of property crimes on his lengthy rap sheet. Mosquito left school in second grade "after being expelled from all those in which he enrolled." In addition to smoking, he regularly drank, and additional illustrations portrayed him indulging in each of those vices. He shunned other young people but admired the "older criminals" who would "use him" to commit robberies. They were men who went by names like "Seboruco," a Cuban term for someone seen as stupid. Mosquito supposedly earned his own nickname because his small stature enabled him to "get into houses and steal more easily." He had already escaped from multiple Reeducation Centers for Minors and, at the time of publication, was once again on the lam.[57]

This narrative produced an almost archetypal image of the "delinquent minor" in revolutionary Cuba. It was a portrait that adhered so closely to official thinking about delinquency that there is reason to wonder whether "Mosquito" was a real child, a composite

[56] Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7–10.

[57] Julio Suárez, "Mosquito: Un viejo delincuente de 9 años," *Moncada* IV, no. 47, April 1970, 52-55.

figure consisting of details drawn from the lives of multiple individuals, or a fictional character. Regardless, its publication and circulation strongly suggest that people in positions of influence at the Ministry of the Interior saw it as a valid and useful way of representing a significant portion of Cuba's wayward youth.

The story of Mosquito embodied some of the consistent preoccupations of Cuban law enforcement leaders in the 1960s. During the second half of the decade, the UMAP represented an expansion in the groups of Cubans targeted for confinement and coercive reform. Yet young people charged with property crimes and other criminal offenses during this period did not necessarily end up in one of the UMAP.[58] As in the past, the legal system continued to filter this group into jails, youth reformatories, and prisons during that program's short lifespan from 1965 to 1968. Perhaps more than the developments that had produced the UMAP, then, their experiences were indicative of the campaign to integrate the operations of the police with those of their civilian collaborators and to improve their collective ability to combat so-called common crime. After a decade of revolutionary governance, the structure of the revolutionary system of policing was starting to resemble the one that would soon ensnare Luis and Andrés.

3.2 Defining "La Lucha"

By the end of the 1960s, a robust infrastructure for policing so-called common crime had been built, and officials were claiming several victories in the realm of crime control. The Ministry of the Interior asserted that the new government had virtually eliminated panhandling and sex work, dramatically reduced gambling, drug use, and drug trafficking, and nearly

[58] Of course, some of the people held in the UMAP may well have first come to the attention of authorities when they were charged with petty crimes like those to which Andrés and Luis later admitted. It is easy to imagine that prosecutors or judges diverted some young men to the UMAP as an alternative to a reformatory or prison.

eradicated major cases of embezzlement.[59] While there were reasons to question the accuracy of some of these claims, officials did not suggest that all forms of crime were on the wane. They admitted that certain kinds of illicit activity remained major concerns, and they sought to focus Cubans' attention on it by calling for their participation in a new collective project: "*la lucha contra la delincuencia,"* or the "fight against crime."[60]

Addressing property crime was the top priority. The Ministry reported that after an initial decline in "Offenses against Property," which brought the annual total down to just 10,000 cases, the rate had begun to rise. In 1968, the number of recorded theft and robbery incidents had amounted to an "alarming" 28,000 cases.[61] Government data suggested that minors were responsible for nearly 40 percent of those convicted for such offenses. The next year, the recently installed Minister of the Interior, Sergio del Valle, reported that the number of youths involved in "serious offences like robbery with violence had shown a 'marked increase in recent years.'"[62] For Andrés and Luis, who would soon be counted in such figures, this meant that law enforcement agencies were concerned with property crimes committed by young people well before either one of them stole anything.

The increase in this kind of illicit activity undermined a basic tenet of socialist criminology – that crime was rooted in the inequalities and social alienation produced by capitalist exploitation. The prominence of young people in the crime statistics was particularly worrying to revolutionary leaders because it threatened a fundamental argument about the ways

[59] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 118–21.

[60] Officials also referred to this as the "*lucha contra el delito*," which has approximately the same meaning.

[61] Pedro Pupo Pérez et al, "Report on Internal Order," *Granma Weekly Review*, 11 May 1969, 7. Cited in Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 122.

[62] Sergio del Valle, "Speech at the closing session of the First National Forum of the Deputy Ministry of Internal Order," *Granma Weekly Review*, 6 April 1969, 4, quoted in Booth, 125.

that their governance would transform Cuba. If the people coming of age under the revolution were contributing to such an increase in crime, what did that say about the society under construction?[63] The alleged level of youth involvement in property crimes made solutions seem especially urgent for a government seeking to rally the youngest generations around a shared ideology while training and mobilizing them to meet ambitious economic development goals.

Addressing the security of Cubans' personal property was also a priority for officials at the Ministry of the Interior because they were tasked with proving the ability of the revolutionary government to maintain a collective sense of public safety. But their interest in the matter also seems to have been driven, at least in part, by the worries of ordinary Cubans.[64] There were multiple reasons for Cubans to be concerned about property crime and to buy into the project to control it in the 1960s and early 1970s. Beyond the simple fact that stolen consumer goods were extremely difficult for most Cubans to replace, some ordinary citizens joined government officials in articulating resentment towards those who stole or ventured into the illicit market rather than confining their economic activity to state-sanctioned forms of labor. Some residents of Havana also appear to have embraced the idea that certain items, such as public telephones, were important forms of collective property. As a result, there were everyday Cubans with a sincere investment in holding individuals accountable for certain categories of property offenses.[65]

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[63] Lillian Guerra has made a similar point. She writes, "The visibility of the problem [of juvenile delinquency] necessarily invited public discussion of the credibility of the state for the simple reason that leaders had hinged so much of socialism's success on the unique role of Cuba's youth." See Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 258.

[64] Such a development would not have been unique to revolutionary Cuba. On ways in which the demands of Black communities for protection from the effects of crime and illicit drugs contributed – in the absence of alternatives perceived as politically viable – to the broader push for intensive urban policing and harsh sentences in the United States, see James Forman, *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

[65] Zulueta, "Ojos sobre la ciudad," 26-31.

In January of 1969, the Ministry of the Interior initiated a set of regional forums for Cubans to talk about their concerns with everyday forms of illicit activity.[66] Those discussions culminated in the National Forum on Interior Order (Fórum Nacional del Orden Interior) at the end of March.[67] According to an editorial in the state-run newspaper *Granma,* Cubans had expressed frustration with rising crime, especially robbery and theft, in the local assemblies that preceded the National Forum.[68] Much of the discussion at the event revolved around a recent government study containing data that purported to show a rise in property offenses during the preceding years. The information was later publicized in the state press and broadcast on television.[69]

There were many possible reasons for the ostensible increase in property crime and the high level of youth involvement. First, young people around the world have long been overrepresented consistently in crime data, and there is evidence that people tend to "age out" of the sorts of activities that lead to criminal charges.[70] Second, the Cuban economy frequently fell short of government productivity and development aims. A series of failures to achieve output goals had led political and administrative leaders to shift their emphasis from maintaining a modest level of universal consumption to increasing production in strategic sectors in recent

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[66] "Lucha a muerte contra la delincuencia", *Granma*, 21 April 1969, 2; Pedro Pupo Pérez et al., "Report on Internal Order", *Granma Weekly Review*, 11 May 1969, 7; Sergio del Valle, "Speech at the closing session of the First National Forum of the Deputy Ministry of Internal Order", *Granma Weekly Review*, 6 April 1969, 4.

[67] "Lucha a muerte contra la delincuencia", 2 "Carta al militante," *Moncada* IV, no. 45, February 1970, 12. The culminating event was March 24-29, 1969.

[68] "Lucha a muerte contra la delincuencia," 2. While it can be difficult to distinguish between what the Cuban state press *claimed* was a popular concern and what was in fact a widespread grievance, it would hardly have been in government leaders' interest to invent a problem with property crime.

[69] "Fórum Nacional del Orden Interior," *Bohemia* 61, no. 8, 21 February 1969, 69-71.

[70] Jeffery T. Ulmer and Darrell Steffensmeier, "The Age and Crime Relationship: Social Variation, Social Explanations," in *The Nurture Versus Biosocial Debate in Criminology: On the Origins of Criminal Behavior and Criminality*, ed. Kevin M. Beaver, J. C. Barnes, and Brian B. Boutwell (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 377–96.

years.[71] During the same period, the leadership of the newly established Cuban Communist Party began to move away from offering material bonuses for exceptional work. Instead, the government offered moral incentives, including certificates, medals, and the public recognition of "vanguard workers." Despite these economic challenges, however, the provision of many foodstuffs and other basic goods by the state meant that some Cubans were left with extra cash and nothing to spend it on.[72] The combination of scarcity in the consumer goods market and excess currency contributed to the development of a robust informal economy by the late 1960s. While not all Cubans had the disposable income to afford them, items such as bicycles, blue jeans, and radios fetched high prices on the illicit market and created strong incentives for people like Andrés and Luis to steal them and put them up for sale.[73]

Yet the meaning of crime statistics is rarely self-evident. Even when such numbers reflect significant changes in behavior, they bear the mark of selective policing along the lines of age, race, gender, neighborhood, income, wealth, and other determinants of social status.[74] In the specific case of Cuba, a mid-sixties increase in instances of *malversación* (misappropriation) likely reflected a simple shift in categories. Theft from businesses or institutions that had once been private was reclassified as *malversación* after those entities came under state control.[75] It is possible, moreover, that instead of merely a "juvenile crime wave"[76] the putative increase in

[71] Carmelo Mesa-Lago writes that this moment the government doubled down on efforts to increase production in sugar, beef, dairy, and fishing and to expand national output of electricity, nickel, and cement. See Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "Economic Policies and Growth," in *Revolutionary Change in Cuba*, ed. Carmelo Mesa-Lago (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 298.

[72] Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s*.

[73] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 122–23.

[74] For a sustained critique of crime statistics in the United States and their racial valences and consequences, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[75] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 121.

[76] Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 258.

property offenses also reflected changes in policing and reporting practices. Veteran police officers later described reforms that had led to administrative improvements and an increase in the average educational level of officers in the PNR unit responsible for all criminal investigations and the maintenance of police records. One veteran detective later recalled that, in the early years of the revolutionary period, the only documentation they would append to an order of arrest was a brief note indicating which officer had knowledge of the case. This record-keeping practice meant that if that officer was "run over by a bus one day, the investigation of the case could not continue because the person who knew about it had died." A subsequent police professionalization campaign had ushered in a new administrative system to ensure that information about a case never resided solely in the head of a single officer.[77]

These reforms almost certainly resulted in a more systematic process for keeping track of arrests, charges, and prosecutions. The timing of the rise in property crimes cited by officials at the National Forum immediately followed the implementation of reforms to professionalize the uniformed police force, as well as the mobilization of volunteers from the CDR as key partners in projects to address so-called common crime. This striking coincidence suggests that data presented to the public in 1969 may not have been solely an indication of increases in property offenses. As was the case in the wake of similar professionalization campaigns elsewhere in the hemisphere, the increase may have reflected the success of earlier efforts to create a more comprehensive and effective system of surveillance, enforcement, and records management.[78]

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[77] "Un frente de lucha para combatir la delincuencia," 45, 47-48. This unit was known as the Departamento Técnico de Investigación (DTI).

[78] Such a link between professionalization and increasing crime rates would not have been unique to Cuba. Historian Elizabeth Hinton explains that in the United States during this same period crime rates "rose as federal policymakers invested in state and local law enforcement programs that aimed to modernize police departments." In cities such as New York, "rising crime rates…correlated directly to rising crime reporting, a fact that skewed perceptions of violence." See Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the*

With few exceptions, government officials treated crime data as an authentic representation of reality. Whatever the flaws in the statistics themselves, moreover, the way state agents *interpreted* such figures matters for understanding the evolution of policing in Cuba. Sometimes officials suggested that insufficient punishments or lax enforcement were to blame for the elevated figures. Indeed, most revolutionary leaders professed a belief in the deterrent effects of criminal sanctions.[79] If the potential sanctions had been adequate, their thinking went, then Andrés and Luis might have thought twice before taking items that did not belong to them.

More often, though, the Ministry brass explained the apparent increase in certain categories of crime by falling back on familiar talking points about "bad environments" and "old habits."[80] Cuban law enforcement representatives repeated the refrain that the socialist project was slowly destroying the material basis for most kinds of illegal activity. At the same time, they emphasized that eliminating crime required changing the attitudes and mentalities of Cubans

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War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 6.

[79] Vice Minister for Internal Order, Pedro Pupo Pérez and Minister of the Interior Sergio del Valle suggested that a combination of lenient courts and shifts in the tactics of people who committed robberies to explain the increase in property crimes. See Pupo Pérez, "Report"; del Valle, "Speech at the First National Forum," 4. Also see "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Secretario del Partido Unido de la Revolución Socialista de Cuba y Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario, en el IV Aniversario de la Fundación del Ministerio del Interior, celebrado en el Teatro 'Chaplin,'" 16 June 1965, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1965/esp/f160665e.html.

[80] The origins of these ideas and their persistence between the republican and revolutionary periods in Cuba is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. A rare example of more specific explanations for crime statistics appeared in the monthly editorial published by the MININT Political Directorate in *Moncada* in July of 1971. Although the piece included an obligatory reference to how the socialist project in Cuba had "mortally wounded the fundamental cause of crime," it also listed some of the particular factors that may have contributed to property crime on the island. The authors cited some of the standard explanations – "individual desire for wealth," insufficient "consciousness" in "certain sectors of the youth," and "the problems of disordered families and unstable households" – but also noted "the vicious prison-criminal cycle, relative scarcity, the surplus [cash that was in] circulation, the black market, the deficient level of organization within administrative agencies, and the new and constant tensions and demands of the revolutionary process." While it was not uncommon for MININT leaders to admit the need to improve the "efficiency" of its police agencies in publications such as *Moncada*, public references to problems specific to the revolutionary context, such as excess currency, were relatively rare. See "Ante nosotros: el fenómeno de la delincuencia," *Moncada* VI, no. 2, July 1971, 3-5.

themselves. As Sergio del Valle explained on the eve of the National Forum, in both the material and ideological dimensions of crime control, "the struggle" was "against the leftovers, against the dead weight that we have inherited from the past."[81]

According to the new Minister of the Interior and other law enforcement leaders, the chief manifestations of this undesirable inheritance were two-fold: the survival of unsavory, criminogenic spaces and the (often-related) inability of some citizens to adapt their mindsets to the new revolutionary context. At the National Forum, del Valle highlighted both explanations. "Such a criminal mentality, which permits some people to steal whilst others work," he said, "is due to the specific milieu in which such persons develop, and to the influence exerted upon them by others who have not adapted to the system and who persist in living in the present with the ideology of the past."[82]

While not unique to post-1959 Cuba, such distinctions between those who "steal" and those who "work" underscored that productive labor was intrinsic to the concept of revolutionary citizenship. A *Granma* editorial published shortly after the Forum reiterated these themes, affirming that property crime in a "socialist society" was "explained by the survival of a dead weight of loafers, *lumpens*, apathetics and youngsters influenced by micro-environments which still survive and exercise their deformatory influence."[83] Education officials and MININT

[81] "Fórum Nacional del Orden Interior," *Bohemia* 61, no. 8, 21 February 1969, 70. This was a routine claim about the persistence of crime, and a pervasive iteration of what Alejandro de la Fuente has identified as a widespread tendency among supporters of the revolutionary government to frame any practice or pattern deemed "incompatible with the new order" as a holdover from the period before 1959. See Alejandro de la Fuente, "La Ventolera: Ruptures, Persistence, and the Historiography of the Cuban Revolution," in *Revolution From Within: Cuba 1959-1980*, ed. Michael J. Bustamante and Jennifer L. Lambe (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 290.

[82] Sergio del Valle, "Speech at the closing session of the First National Forum of the Deputy Ministry of Internal Order," *Granma Weekly Review*, 6 April 1969, 4, quoted in Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 126.

[83] "Lucha a muerte contra la delincuencia," *Granma*, 21 April 1969, 2, quoted in Booth, 127.

employees from youth reeducation programs often talked about the deleterious effects of individual family and home settings in which adults either failed to exert sufficient authority or actively taught young people values antithetical to revolutionary norms. While a detrimental home environment might be found anywhere, officials tended to locate them in certain neighborhoods. The persistence of such problem areas was presented by government leaders as a primarily urban phenomenon and, above all, as a Havana problem. Fidel Castro later told MININT employees that "the crime rate in the capital accounts for nearly 50 percent of the national total." He referred to "certain areas of the capital where the rate is, for some offenses, five times, six times higher than in other parts of the country." As a result, Castro claimed, the "fight against crime" in the capital was "more difficult, tougher, more intense."[84]

The question was, what was to be done? Three basic strategies to enhance policing in Havana emerged in the wake of the National Forum.[85] First, the Ministry of the Interior would continue to invest resources in improving the surveillance capacity and technical proficiency of the PNR, the uniformed police force. Second, the PNR would reinforce its spatial approach to policing the city through new operational structures. Third, the Ministry would work closely with the national leadership of the CDR to grow its vigilance network and further integrate the operations of police with civilian allies from the Comités and related groups.[86]

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[84] Castro, "Discurso Pronunciado en el Acto Conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT."

[85] The National Forum also produced some important proposals for changes to Cuban criminal statutes, including recommendations for harsher sanctions for property crimes and a law that would "lower the age of majority for penal purposes from 18 to 16 years." These developments will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. See Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 125.

[86] The need for each of these strategies was reiterated by CDR leaders, by police officers, and by Fidel Castro himself during the National Forum in 1969 and in the years that followed. On the role of the CDR, see "El Fórum del MININT: Fructífera experiencia revolucionaria," *Bohemia* 61, no. 11, 14 March 1969, 80-81. On the importance of improving training, efficiency, and technology for the police force, see "Ante nosotros: el fenómeno de la delincuencia," 4. For commentary on all three topics, including the problems associated with particular urban spaces in Havana, see Castro, "Discurso Pronunciado en el Acto Conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT."

Neither the concern with so-called common crime nor these proposed approaches to addressing it were entirely new in 1969. Traces of each of the strategies of policing that emerged after the National Forum had been visible earlier in the decade. The event was important, nonetheless. It helped to define as a national "problem" precisely the sort of activity that would later lead Andrés and Luis to prison. The Forum also created opportunities for individual police units and local branches of mass organizations from all over the country to share experiences in local and regional assemblies. This enabled leaders to develop a sense of pressing needs and consider best practices that might be systematized and implemented at the national level.[87] Finally, state press accounts of the National Forum promoted it as a deeply "democratic" process with no global precedent, one in which the police listened intently to the concerns and proposals of citizens.[88] Hyperbole aside, the high-profile discussions created a platform for mobilizing a large swath of the Cuban population to join *la lucha*.

3.3 Policing Institutionalized

The evolution of policing after the National Forum had a profound impact on the life trajectories of Luis and Andrés. But the people in charge of the Ministry of the Interior who oversaw these developments in the first years of the 1970s did not imagine what they were doing as some sort of crackdown.[89] They saw the "fight against crime" primarily as a bureaucratic and institutional reform project. In fact, the timing of the National Forum and its attendant public

[87] For example, the national head of the CDR, Luis González Marturelos, suggested that the process would enable the organization to "generalize" the most effective "methods of vigilance operations" employed by various local Comités. "El Fórum del MININT," 81.

[88] "En Cuba," *Bohemia* 61, no. 12, 21 March 1969, 65-66.

[89] On this point, my interpretation differs from that of Lillian Guerra, who focuses primarily on punitive policies that surfaced during this period in her important study of 1960s Cuba. Some of these measures were implemented and some were not. Some were pushed by government officials but not necessarily by del Valle himself. Other coercive policies she discusses emerged from administrative divisions of the revolutionary state that were not part of the Ministry of the Interior. See Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 258–61.

relations campaign indicate that it may have been conceived to address citizen concerns about repressive state institutions in the wake a scandal stemming from the UMAP program. Revelations of widespread mistreatment in the forced labor camps had led the government to begin shutting down the program just 6 months before the National Forum.[90]

The installation of Sergio del Valle as the new Minister of the Interior came just after the government reportedly began investigating reports of UMAP abuses. Del Valle took the place of Ramiro Valdés, who had led the agency since its founding, and who was also intimately associated with its ruthless reputation.[91] The new Minister's conciliatory tone in his public messages suggested that he was partly there to reform MININT – or at least to improve its image.

If this was the goal, the other leaders of the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba) and Council of Ministers may have seen del Valle's biography as an asset. He was born in 1927 in Pogolotti, a neighborhood in the *municipio* of Marianao.[92] It got its name from the Italian-born real estate developer who had built the first dwellings there as part of an early attempt to establish social housing in Cuba in the 1910s. However, the community quickly gained a reputation as a slum because of insufficient funding, shoddy construction, and poor drainage.[93] By the time del Valle was entering his teenage years, conditions in the neighborhood remained poor. In 1941, prominent Cuban housing reformer Luís Bay Sevilla described Pogolotti

[90] Abel Sierra Madero has suggested that the camps were closed after an undercover investigation into the abuses that had been approved by the head of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, Raúl Castro. See Sierra Madero, "'El trabajo os hará hombres'": 343–44.

[91] Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays*, 75, 90.

[92] "Sergio del Valle," EcuRed, https://www.ecured.cu/Sergio_del_Valle, accessed 18 February 2025.

[93] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 58.

as "a disaster."[94] That del Valle came from such a community may have lent him a degree of credibility if the aim was to promote him as a law enforcement reformer genuinely interested in the well-being of poor and working-class *habaneros*.

Another element of del Valle's social position may have further reinforced such a perception of the new Minister of the Interior. According to Lourdes Casal, a prominent Afrodescendant Cuban scholar and activist who left for the United States after the revolution, Sergio del Valle was "black."[95] Whether he identified as "Black" or "*mulato*" or neither, Casal's claim suggests that he was recognized by at least some Cubans as a person of African descent.

In a speech to Ministry employees shortly after the National Forum, del Valle stressed that Cuban police agencies had to adapt to the fact that they were no longer policing the class enemies of the revolution. A "simple analysis of this situation…forces us to see clearly that we must revise our concepts and our methods," he explained. "As a general rule, it is no longer about an enemy exploiter; they have been eliminated. [That enemy] is basically out of the country; [policing now] is about workers and peasants, about laborers, and ten years of Revolution have passed." Harsh methods were fine for the remnants of the Cuban bourgeoisie, but that was no way to deal with people who had spent the previous decade helping build a socialist Cuba. "In general we have been more repressive than strategic," del Valle admitted, "and in this new period from 1970 to 1980 within our Ministry we should be more strategic than repressive" (*más políticos que represivos*).[96] The Political Directorate, the primary organ of

[94] Luís Bay Sevilla, "Por qué la barriada obrera de Pogolotti fue un fracaso," *Arquitectura*, January 1941, 30, cited in Jesse Lewis Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes: Slum Clearance in Havana in an Age of Revolution, 1930-65" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2016), 181.

[95] Casal wrote, "The 1975 Political Bureau consists of 13 members, of which three (23 percent) are Black: Juan Almeida, Blas Roca, and Sergio del Valle." Lourdes Casal, "Revolution and Race: Blacks in Contemporary Cuba" (Washington: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1979), 17.

[96] "Carta al Militante," *Moncada* IV, no. 44, January 1970, 16-18

Communist Party within MININT, likewise emphasized the responsibility of police and prison workers to carry out their duties "within the strict framework of respect for citizens' rights, socialist legality, and the dignity of man," with the overarching goal of increasing "efficiency" and generating "less resentment" for the revolutionary government.[97]

The Ministry was undoubtedly seeking to expand its capacity to control young people like Andrés and Luis, and the police continued to associate young men from poor and disproportionately Afrodescendant neighborhoods with crime. Yet revolutionary leaders also counted this group among the wayward Cubans most capable of reform and reintegration. Although officials, including del Valle, shared the widespread perception that these communities were hubs of crime, they often differentiated between Cubans who ostensibly broke laws or deviated from norms of revolutionary citizenship because they did not know any better and those who supposedly did so out of willful resistance.

Age was a crucial factor in this distinction. The enduring criminological conceit that parents were largely to blame for juvenile delinquency, combined with the official commitment to transforming Cuba through its youth, compelled many law enforcement authorities to profess a persistent faith in projects to rehabilitate young offenders. The account of the stereotypical "delinquent" named Mosquito, which appeared in the official MININT magazine, included multiple references to the culpability of his parents. A passage from one of his psychological evaluations read, "Everything seems to indicate that the permissive and indolent attitude of the parents has encouraged the behavioral disorders of this minor." The article's author also purported have insight into the boy's ideological leanings and noted that, unlike his parents who engaged in "vulgar statements against the Revolution," Mosquito "consider[ed] himself a

[97] "Carta al Militante," January 1970, 18.

revolutionary."[98]

Mosquito stood in for a class of young people that had been seen as predisposed to criminality throughout the twentieth century in Cuba. Unlike the alleged "sons of bourgeois" Cubans who had faced growing scrutiny from the revolutionary state during the second half of the 1960s, however, the largely poor and working-class and disproportionately Afrodescendant youths with stories like Mosquito represented a constituency that revolutionary leaders still saw as fundamental to the success of their project.[99] If they were going to show that the revolution really was for the Cubans who had been left behind under the previous system, they needed to show that there was a place for the children of "workers and peasants" in the society under construction. When those children committed crimes, they had to be held accountable. But during the early 1970s, the MININT leadership saw this as a job for a scalpel, not a hammer.

In the early 1970s, criminal law began to catch up to the social categories of crime and deviance that had expanded gradually over the previous decade. Much of the scholarship on "institutionalization" has focused on changes in the Cuban economy and the centralization of government functions during this period.[100] Scholars who have written about the impact of institutionalization on Cuban law enforcement have tended to focus on reforms to laws and courts. For instance, new statutes increased the discretion afforded to both police and prosecutors and rendered a growing number of Cubans potentially "criminal," which made it easier for state

[98] Suárez, "Mosquito," 53-54.

[99] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso en la clausura del acto conmemorativo del VI aniversario del asalto al Palacio Presidencial." For more on how MININT officials were thinking about juvenile delinquency in the early 1970s, see Victoria Quintana, "Delincuencia juvenil," *Moncada* VI, no. 2, July 1971, 51-55

[100] For early influential studies in this vein, see Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s*; Domínguez, *Cuba*. On the goals of the Cuban Communist Party during "institutionalization," see William M. LeoGrande, "Party Development in Revolutionary Cuba," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 21, no. 4 (1979): 457–80. For a more recent account that traces a similar trajectory, see Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course and Legacy*, 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

agents to make arrests and produce convictions.[101]

The effect of institutionalization on policing itself – and especially on street-level efforts to address so-called common crime – has received comparatively little attention.[102] Prior efforts to improve police and prison agencies had not always been implemented effectively, but those that followed the National Forum came amid the broader commitment to building a revolutionary administrative state. Policing property crime, in particular, became a major preoccupation of both the Cuban government and ordinary citizens during this period. As was the case elsewhere in the Americas, policing and coercive practices were integral to the larger process of state-building in revolutionary Cuba.[103] In fact, MININT efforts to build robust policing agencies preceded similar processes in other administrative units during the period of institutionalization. The police, in other words, may have been a model for some of those later projects.[104]

The broader push to embed ideas and ad hoc reforms in durable programs and institutions reinforced the police professionalization projects that MININT had initiated during the previous decade. In the early 1970s, MININT created new training institutes for police and elaborated on

[101] Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts"; Azicri, "Crime and Law Under Socialism: The 1979 Cuban Penal Code"; Domínguez, *Cuba*; van der Plas, *Revolution and Criminal Justice*; Marjorie Sue Zatz, *Producing Legality: Law and Socialism in Cuba* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Erik Luna, "Cuban Criminal Justice and the Ideal of Good Governance," *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems* 14 (2004): 529–654.

[102] Important exceptions to this trend include Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*. Lillian Guerra discuss changes within MININT but is focused on counterintelligence agencies, not ordinary police. See Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*.

[103] On the role of police agencies in the construction of a central state in the U.S., see Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

[104] Golnar Nikpour has shown the role of coercive institutions in state-building after another twentieth-century revolution, ruing the early years of the Islamic Republic of Iran. See Golnar Nikpour, *The Incarcerated Modern: Prisons and Public Life in Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

earlier efforts to improve the technical proficiency of officers by holding regular seminars at the provincial and national levels for each division of the PNR, including detectives, forensic specialists, and records administrators.[105] In 1972, following calls from the Minister of the Interior to combine practical field experience with "scientific knowledge" and the "application of the most advanced technologies," the Ministry established a permanent national police academy. There, police and other personnel from across MININT received remedial and political education courses, as well as specialized training in forensics, firearms, psychology, and criminology among other subjects.[106] MININT employees from various agencies began to increase their participation in international collaborations with colleagues from other socialist states, as well.[107] Significantly for Luis and Andrés, the Ministry also launched new initiatives aimed at addressing both property crimes and juvenile delinquency during this period.

The police could also begin to count on improved information technology in the early seventies.[108] In June 1971, the Council of Ministers enacted a law calling for the creation of a national Register of Addresses as part of a larger plan implement a new official identification card, the "Carnet de Identidad." Adults would soon be required to carry this card, which Cubans referred to simply as the "*carné*." Minors would get a similar ID with a permanent number, known as a "Tarjeta de Menor."[109] A subsequent law established a range of fines for anyone who

[105] For example, the PNR organized annual national trainings specifically for homicide detectives. See "Para que no haya crimen impune," *Moncada* VIII, no. 4, August 1973.

[106] Arístides Sotonavarro, "Una escuela para policías," *Moncada* VIII, no. 4, August 1973, 37-39.

[107] "Un frente de lucha para combatir la delincuencia"; "Noticiero MININT," *Moncada* IX, no. 3, July 1974; "Encuentro entre especialistas"; "X Simposio Internacional de Criminalística," *Moncada* IX, no. 8, March 1975.

[108] An important precedent for *carné* was the *expediente laboral* (labor dossier). The investment in such surveillance and enforcement technology originally stemmed from a push to enforce labor discipline and increase productivity. See Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 252.

[109] Consejo de Ministros, Ley No. 1234, *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba* LXIX, Edición Ordinaria, no. 5, 15 June 1971, 21-22.

illegally modified an ID card, refused to comply with the new requirement to carry it, or failed to present a *carné* or a Tarjeta de Menor when asked at a workplace or school. Repeat offenders could face prison terms of 30-to-90 days.[110]

When Andrés was arrested for stealing a bicycle, the police would have confirmed his identity by asking for (or taking) his Tarjeta de Menor.[111] If PNR officers did not start by asking Luis for identification when they first confronted him with an allegation of bicycle theft, they almost certainly began with that in a separate encounter with Luis in which they charged him with *peligrosidad*.[112] Although similar information had been collected from Cubans in the past, the *carn*é and the Tarjeta de Menor would soon become the only officially accepted forms of identification. The drive to create the national database was more comprehensive than previous efforts, thanks largely to the mass mobilization of CDR volunteers who went door-to-door to collect information about their neighbors.[113] While information collected through this initiative was important for economic planning and redistributive programs of the Cuban, it also facilitated the work of the police.[114] Even before the first Tarjetas de Menores and *carnés* were distributed in 1974 and 1975,[115] the Register of Addresses provided police with up-to-date information about the home addresses of suspects. Such data would have been especially important for the police in densely populated urban areas where anonymity was perhaps easier to achieve, including the parts of Havana where Andrés and Luis lived.

All the energy devoted to increasing the capacity of policing did not, however, translate

[110] Consejo de Ministros, Ley No. 1278, *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba* LXXII, Edición Ordinaria, no. 25, 11 September 1974, 193-195.
[111] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," May 1990.
[112] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," June 1990.
[113] Juan Carlos Fernández, "Identifíquese, por favor," *Moncada* IX, no. 4, August 1974, 5, 7.
[114] Doris Hernández, "Identifíquese, por favor," *Moncada* VI, no. 4, September 1971, 53.
[115] Estela Guerra, "¿Cómo se identificará usted?," *Moncada* X, no. 6, October 1975, 12-14.

into an expansion in the number of uniformed officers on the streets. Although MININT did not regularly release data about the total size of its police agencies, top officials expressed frequent reservations about increasing the number of people on their payroll. Portions of annual review meetings quoted in Ministry publications offer some indication of personnel trends. On at least one occasion in the early 1970s, for instance, the Ministry of the Interior reduced the total number of employees in the Province of Havana.[116]

Leaders at the Ministry of the Interior understood that the capacity of the state to police its citizens depended heavily on their willingness and ability to police each other. They acknowledged that this was, in part, a necessary response to resource limitations. In January of 1970, the Ministry's Political Directorate explained in its monthly open letter to MININT employees, "We cannot elevate our effectiveness by increasing the number of our men, growing our basic structures, creating more and more positions to cover other areas that do not apply to our social role, and enlarging our burden on the national economy. We have to achieve greater efficacy without our organization growing beyond its current size."[117]

The Ministry strategy sought to expand its reach through the volunteer labor of citizens

[116] "Balance anual en la Provincia de La Habana," *Moncada* VII, no. 5, January 1973, 53. This marked a major distinction with trends in the United States during the same period, as police departments across the country took advantage of growing federal funds for law enforcement and expanding the ranks of full-time professional officers. In its use of citizen volunteers, the Cuban model may have more closely resembled the system of policing in East Germany. See Juan Carlos Fernández, "X Simposio Internacional de Criminalística," *Moncada* IX, no. 8, March 1975, 9-12. On the other hand, as scholars of the U.S. carceral state have shown, public welfare agencies and private non-profit organizations long have held important roles in the deployment of coercive dimensions of state power. In that sense, the MININT strategy of relying on partnerships with citizen organizations was not wholly distinct from that of law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and elsewhere. See, for example, Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California's Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*; Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[117] "Carta al militante," January 1970, 17-18.

rather than by increasing the size of the organization itself.[118] In another monthly open letter to employees, the Political Directorate focused on the theme of "coordination," urging employees to work together across various police agencies and with the general public. "We aspire to become a technical assistance organization for the people," the authors explained.[119] In a speech to MININT employees the following year, then-Prime Minister Fidel Castro conceded that the country did not have the "material economic base" to "equip our police and all of our organs of public order with all the most modern technical methods." He assured them that the government would continue working to provide them with resources and improve their technical proficiency in detecting crimes and identifying the root causes of delinquency. Yet Castro also stressed that policing was not just a task for paid state agents. He repeatedly cited the importance of the CDR – the Comités – and drew an explicit parallel between "the battle against the counterrevolution," a conflict that had taken precedence during most of the sixties, and the increasingly important "fight against crime." He insisted that the latter, like the former, required the participation of everyone. It was necessarily a "*batalla de todo el pueblo*," a battle of the people as a whole.[120] As in countless government campaigns during the previous decade, he called for a mass mobilization to solve a social problem.

The network of Comités remained by far the most important collaborator in this state project. By the early seventies, the surveillance functions of the CDR had expanded

[118] While it is difficult to ascertain the exact size of the Revolutionary National Police at any given moment, it is clear that MININT leaders did not imagine its size to be sufficient to achieve public order. For them, one of the advantages of the reorganization and continued growth of the CDR starting in the mid 1960s was that it meant fewer police officers were required to watch over key locations. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons del Valle pushed for the participation of police in voluntary patrols. If they could help raise the level of proficiency among *cederistas*, it would limit the need for paid personnel. See Zulueta, "Ojos sobre la ciudad," 30.

[119] "Carta al militante," February 1970, 12-13.

[120] Castro, "Discurso en el Acto Conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT."

considerably, both because of the sheer number of people in the organization and because of earlier efforts to train *cederistas* and increase their collaboration with the uniformed police. After a major recruitment campaign following the National Forum, the CDR claimed to have a membership comprising most of the adult population. In 1972, the organization reported a national membership of over 4.25 million people, or about 70 percent of all Cubans over the age of 15.[121] By 1973, more than 85 percent of *cederistas* participated in some form of "revolutionary" surveillance.[122] At time, moreover, the organization was pressing the importance of using its vigilance operations to address the threat posed by "common crime." The CDR even published a booklet devoted to outlining the role of its members in the specific campaign to address property offenses, much like those that Andrés and Luis later admitted committing.[123]

The growth and reconfiguration of the CDR facilitated the introduction of a crucial new position within the PNR organizational structure: the *jefe de sector* (sector chief). Each *jefe de sector* was assigned to a set of city blocks and tasked with establishing a regular presence, cultivating networks of civilian volunteers and informants, and helping organize CDR patrols. Law enforcement leaders drew a sharp distinction between the *jefe de sector* and the "beat cop" of old—the officer who walked a fixed route through a neighborhood with no objective but to "*instill fear*" in the populace.[124] In substantive ways, though, the new position was indicative of a

[121] These official figures merit some skepticism, and such large numbers raise questions about what constituted "membership" in the eyes of CDR directors. By comparison, the trade unions had 2 million members, the Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC) had 1.6 million members, and the National Association of Small Farmers (Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños, ANAP) had 225,000 members countrywide. Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 13–14, 41.

[122] Juan C. Fernandez and Ana Valdés Portillo, "Vigilancia sin secreto," *Moncada* VII, no. 4, August 1973, 13.

[123] Alexis Baldacci, "Consumer Culture and Everyday Life in Revolutionary Cuba, 1971-1986" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 2018).

[124] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 28. Emphasis in original.

return to that older model. At least one high-ranking Ministry official in Havana admitted as much, acknowledging the strategic advantages of a pre-revolutionary system in which police had been assigned to small areas could "get to know all the criminal elements of that area and detect all the irregularities and violations of the Public Order." The problem, he claimed, was not the position itself but the corruption of the agents of the old regime who occupied it. The PNR sought to "extract the positive elements of the prior structure and combine it with the experience acquired in these years of Revolution."[125] The *jefe de sector* was, in their words, a "new take on an old profession."[126]



Figure 3.3 **Central districts of Havana with select *municipios* and neighborhoods.** The red marker shows the location of the address listed for the mother of Luis. *Created with Google My Maps.*

[125] Arístides Sotonavarro and Juan Carlos Fernández, "Con respeto y energía," *Moncada* V, no. 8, January 1971, 41.

[126] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 26.

Perhaps what was most "new" about this position, however, was the relationship between the *jefes de sector* and the *cederistas* and *auxiliaries*—civilian volunteers from the Comités and the police Auxiliary Forces. The program began in the first months of 1970 with a pilot project in the neighborhood of Jesús María in the *municipio* of Habana Vieja. The officer selected for this trial run was Carlos de Castillo Tuero. He was a decorated eight-year veteran from the First Precinct, a densely populated jurisdiction of more than a half million residents that encompassed both Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, the *municipio* where Luis lived. Like the other new "sectors," the one that de Castillo Tuero oversaw in Jesús María was comprised of two-to-three CDR "Zones." The PNR leadership aimed to create initial sectors that encompassed 10,000 residents or fewer, with the hope that they could appoint more *jefes* and reduce the density in each sector after additional recruits graduated from a specialized training program.[127]

After de Castillo Tuero took up his post in Jesús María, he immediately began to recruit residents to establish what amounted to a small volunteer police unit. When he first arrived, there had been thirty-five *auxiliares* in his sector. He quickly brought that number up to 90 and subdivided his recruits into "fronts" focused on distinct categories of illicit activity.[128] It seems that other *jefes de sectores* in the First Precinct replicated his success—the number of *auxiliares* in Habana Vieja and Centro Habana grew by 70 percent between 1971 and 1972. These *auxiliares* worked closely with local *cederistas* in nighttime patrol units. They also gave trainings about how to respond to suspected illicit activity, including the preservation of material evidence at crime scenes.[129] Law enforcement leaders hoped that, as more neighborhood

[127] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 30-31.
[128] Fernández, 28, 30.
[129] Ana Valdés, "¿Por qué son vanguardias?," *Moncada* VII, no. 8, April 1973, 11-13; Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 27.

residents became *auxiliares*, it would reduce the responsibilities of PNR officers.[130]

The implementation of the *jefes de sector* system paralleled an important change in the structure of the Comités. In the early 1970s, the CDR began establishing *centros operativos* (operations centers) to coordinate the patrols and stationary surveillance posts that had previously been organized at the block level, one step lower in the organizational pyramid.[131] The *centros operatives* served as crucial links between neighborhood volunteers, who kept watch over the spaces surrounding their homes, and the paid regional and national staff of the CDR, who issued directives in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior. The stated goals of these changes were to prevent unnecessary overlap between volunteers and the PNR and to reduce the number of patrols in areas that lacked strategic value or failed to produce crime statistics that suggested the need for significant vigilance. The new structure also centralized authority within the CDR and curtailed the autonomy previously afforded to block-level Comités. These changes in the early 1970s contributed to a shift in authority from neighborhood volunteers, who had organized many CDR surveillance activities in the past, to staff at the organization. These operational reforms also streamlined the increasingly collaborative labors of neighborhood volunteers and the uniformed police.[132]

According to the Revolutionary National Police, the new system worked.[133] Even if officials inflated the numbers to appear more effective, it is difficult to imagine that the intensive focus on particular spaces combined with the increased use of volunteers had no effect. The types of illicit activities that the police described in accounts of their efficacy, moreover,

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[130] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 30.

[131] Regla Zulueta, "Los CDR y el MININT," *Moncada* VIII, no. 10, February 1974, 44-45; Fernandez and Valdés Portillo, "Vigilancia sin secreto," 12.

[132] Regla Zulueta, "Una guardia más efectiva," *Moncada* IX, no. 8, March 1975, 21-22; Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts"; Domínguez, *Cuba*.

[133] Regla Zulueta, "Jefes de sectores en Marianao," *Moncada* VII, no. 4, December 1972, 18.

demonstrated considerable overlap with the stories of many of the Cubans with criminal records who later left in the Mariel boatlift. After just a month in Jesús María, the original *jefe de sector* Carlos de Castillo Tuero reported that he and his civilian collaborators had caught 37 alleged fugitives, solved two cases of theft, one case of "corruption of minors," and one homicide. They made additional arrests related to an instance of "robbery by force." They also located two missing persons and carried out thirty-seven investigations and sixty-five arrest warrants. They issued tenty-seven general citations and ten traffic violations. The group uncovered the operations of seven illicit private businesses and one case of illegal gambling and inspected three places suspected of storing explosive materials. De Castillo Tuero and his crew of volunteers also turned in two people with alleged mental illness to the police station for the First Precinct, intervened in two disputes among residents, and took 9 "habitual bums" (*vagos habituales*) – presumably individuals thought to have skipped school or refused to work – into government custody.[134] In the *municipio* of Marianao, one of the primary goals of the *jefes de sector* and their civilian collaborators was to eliminate the routes that suspects used to evade detection by moving clandestinely from neighborhood to another. The police claimed that this effort paid off, reporting that the proportion of cases where someone managed to flee after alleged involvement in a crime dropped from 65 percent to 15 percent in less than a year.[135] Assuming a similar system was put in place in Centro Habana and San Miguel del Padrón at some point over the next several years, it might help to explain why – despite the bicycles – Luis and Andrés were unable to evade arrest.

[134] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 30.
[135] Zulueta, "Jefes de sectores en Marianao," 16-18.

3.4 "Distinct Human Types"

The energy and resources devoted to Cuban policing during the late 1960s and early 1970s dramatically expanded the surveillance and law enforcement capabilities of the revolutionary state. The growth of this system helps to explain why so many young Cubans were arrested at some point in the 1970s. But the overall expansion of policing capacity cannot account for certain patterns in the backstories and social positions of Cubans who acquired criminal records in Havana in the years before they joined the boatlift. Explaining those trends—and accounting for places where the stories of Luis and Andrés diverge—requires an examination of the uneven deployment of the new policing capacity. It demands understanding how the police focused their attention on particular individuals in particular places.

Indeed, the PNR rolled out the first *jefes de sectores* in neighborhoods that Cuban police had long associated with crime. At its core, then, the new system doubled down on one of the oldest tactics deployed by police in cities around the world: classifying and controlling space. The decision to put the first *jefe de sector* in Jesús María was directly related to its reputation among police as "a rather difficult area."[136] Likewise, when the police introduced the *jefes de sectores* in the *municipio* of Marianao, they started in Pogolotti, the neighborhood where Minister of the Interior Sergio del Valle had grown up. In 1972, the police saw Pogolotti as "one of the most problematic neighborhoods because of its high potential for crime." They claimed it was the site of routine cattle and hog theft, frequent "assaults on women," and stills for producing a rotgut cane liquor known as "*walfarina*" (a probable reference to warfarin, a drug initially sold as a rat poison and later discovered to be an effective anticoagulant in humans).[137]

[136] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 30.

[137] Gregory B. Lim, "Warfarin: From Rat Poison to Clinical Use," *Nature Reviews Cardiology,* 2017, https://www.nature.com/articles/nrcardio.2017.172.

Prior to the arrival of the *jefes de sectores*, Pogolotti and other places had few *auxiliares* to assist the police. From the perspective of the Ministry of the Interior, this left those areas "practically at the mercy of antisocial elements."[138] The introduction of the new police positions was meant to change that.

The CDR likewise identified priority "problem areas" and marked others as secondary or tertiary concerns. The national head of Vigilance for the CDR asserted that it was "important to pinpoint the areas where illegal acts occur most often" to be able to limit the number of volunteers required on a daily basis and spare working people the burden of taking on unnecessary patrol shifts. He and his colleagues also emphasized the importance of close cooperation with the uniformed police.[139]

Accounts of policing in the neighborhood where Luis grew up in Centro Habana frequently appeared in official reports. The police in the First Precinct earned a "vanguard" award in 1972 in recognition of their efforts to police a large territory with a number of "troublesome neighborhoods" and areas "tending toward crime from time immemorial." The officers received praise for increasing the number of *auxiliares* in the neighborhoods under their jurisdiction and for solving 55 percent of "crimes against property, bodily integrity, good conduct, morality and the economy, as well as embezzlement or fraud and drug trafficking."[140] Police from the same precinct conducted a sweep in "Cuchillo de Zanja," in the heart of Havana's Barrio Chino. The "clean-up operation" came in response to complaints from neighborhood residents about an alleged increase in the presence of "[h]abitual bums, drug

[138] Other neighborhoods mentioned included Finlay, Santa Felicia, and the spaces around the quarries in Marianao. See Zulueta, "Jefes de sectores en Marianao," 16.

[139] Zulueta, "Una guardia más efectiva," 22.

[140] Valdés, "¿Por qué son vanguardias?," 11, 14. That this was the highest clearance rate of any unit in the city during the period in question suggests that most illicit activity in Havana was still going unpunished despite the reforms to the policing structure.

addicts, thieves and pickpockets." The author wrote that shortly after they took power in 1959 revolutionary officials had targeted the area—notorious for its illicit economy for much of the twentieth century—as part of police "sanitation work." The new government had "closed almost all the shops and put an end to the illegal businesses that had hidden behind them." However, officials claimed that "antisocial elements" once again "took over the area as a center of operations."[141] That section of Centro Habana – just a few blocks from the home of Luis's mother – thus became a center of renewed police attention.

Andrés lived in a part of the city that made fewer appearances in MININT publications, but it may have been of particular interest to the police, as well. The last address at which Andrés lived in Havana was in the *municipio* of San Miguel del Padrón, near the area known as Alturas de Luyanó. The neighborhood was likely on the radar of the Revolutionary National Police when Andrés was growing up. It certainly was in the years after he left home. The police included Alturas de Luyanó on a late-1980s list of places in need of their closest attention. The list was divided between areas that the police classified as "*focos delictivos*" and "*barrios insalubres.*" The *focos delictivos* were zones that the authorities considered hubs of criminal activity. *Barrios insalubres* were areas that the police highlighted for their poverty and poor housing conditions.[142] Regardless of category, many of the places on the list had long been seen by the police – and ordinary Havana residents – as prone to crime. La Ceiba in the *municipio* of Playa, El Fanguito in Plaza de la Revolución, Atarés in Habana Vieja, La Hata in Guanabacoa, Rosario in Arroyo Naranjo, Coco Solo in Marianao – each of these neighborhoods was eventually

[141] Jorge Perera, "El otro filo del Cuchillo," *Moncada* V, no. 8, January 1971, 36.

[142] Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, "Características Educacionales," 30 March 1988. List in author's possession. The author thanks Alejandro de la Fuente for providing access to these materials.

The term "*barrio insalubre*" was commonly used in the revolutionary period to refer to shantytowns and other informal settlements, but the PNR appear to have applied it to areas with a somewhat broader range of conditions.

classified as a *foco delictivo* or a *barrio insalubre* by the PNR. And all were spaces intimately associated with marginality, poverty, and criminality in earlier decades.[143] This persistence reflects the continuities in the built environment of Havana discussed in Chapter 1. It also strongly suggests that many of the other neighborhoods on the list, including Alturas de Luyanó, were areas that the police viewed as requiring special scrutiny throughout the lives of Luis and Andrés.[144]

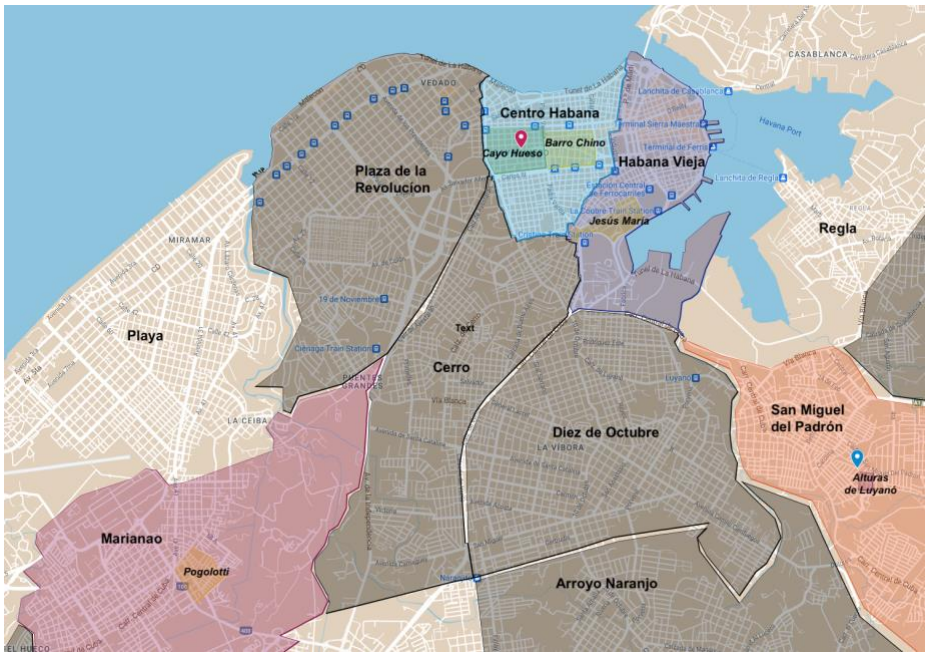


Figure 3.4 **City of Havana with select *municipios,* neighborhoods, and *focos delictivos***. The red marker shows the location of the address listed for the mother of Luis. The blue marker shows the last address listed for Andrés in Havana. *Created with Google My Maps.*

[143] For each of these neighborhoods from the PNR list produced in 1988, I have found additional references to their housing conditions and reputation for poverty and/or crime at an earlier moment. For La Ceiba, see Cabrera, "La crónica roja en 1959," *Bohemia* 51, no. 52, Tomo 2o, 27 December 1959, 41. For El Fanguito, see Jesse Horst, "Erasing Las Yaguas: Shantytown Networks and Social Reform in the Cuban Revolution, 1944–1963," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (2020): 476. For Atarés, see Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 112, 135–36. For La Hata, see Horst, "Sleeping on the Ashes," 29. For Rosario, see Cabrera, "'¡Sálvenme la vida…tengo que cuidar a mis hijitos!,'" *Bohemia* 48, no. 35, 26 August 1956, 76-77, 80. For Coco Solo, see Sánchez Lalebret, "Construyen veinte repartos para erradicar los barrios insalubres," *Bohemia* 53, no. 47, 19 November 1961, 35.

[144] It is possible that Alturas de Luyanó changed in ways that brought it to police attention *after* Andrés had already left. Unlike the *municipio* where Luis's neighborhood was located, the *municipio* of San Miguel del Padrón where Andrés grew up was not generally associated with crime or with an especially large population of African descent. However, the PNR list form 1988 demonstrates that there were a significant number of pockets of San Miguel that the police identified as in need of special scrutiny.

Neighborhoods classified as *focos delictivos* by the police were supposed to be spaces that contributed disproportionately to crime in the city. But the link between these areas and crime statistics – much less crime itself – was hardly transparent. In a study conducted through the Office of the Attorney General in 1987, Alejandro de la Fuente found that the *focos delictivos* were concentrated in specific areas of Havana. Over 30 percent of them were located in three *municipios* that housed just 20 percent of the city's population. These areas will by now be familiar: Centro Habana, Habana Vieja, and Marianao. Yet the concentration of *focos delictivos* in particular regions did not reflect their disproportionate contributions to crime data. De la Fuente determined that more than 70 percent of neighborhoods deemed to be *focos delictivos* had crime rates at or below the city average. Some areas with higher recorded rates of criminal activity were not included on the list at all.[145]

There were, however, some features shared by Centro Habana, Habana Vieja, and Marianao that distinguished these *municipios* from others. They had some of the worst living conditions in the city. They also had the highest concentrations of Black and *mulato* residents. As de la Fuente concluded, it was not empirical crime data but "police perceptions that turned these heavily black, low-income areas into *focos delictivos*."[146] In their frequent discussions of the "troublesome" parts of the city, in their explanations why certain sites were selected for the *jefe de sector* system, Ministry representatives rarely made explicit references to the racial composition of these spaces. Yet when Cubans in Havana spoke or heard about these places, they would have had little trouble conjuring images of the people who occupied them.

If perceptions were the most important factor shaping where the police dedicated their

[145] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 313–14.

[146] de la Fuente, 313–14. De la Fuente bases his analysis on the 1981 Census, which was the first since the revolutionary government took power to release racial data. The 1970 Census included questions about race, but the government did not publish this information.

resources and energy, then sources that reveal something about those perceptions are crucial for understanding how policing in Havana functioned. Luis and many of his neighbors in Cayo Hueso were people of African descent. They lived in a place long perceived as having "dire problems." Decades after the revolutionary government took power, many of its dwellings were still "substandard and overcrowded."[147]As Luis was entering his adolescence in the early 1970s, his neighborhood appeared in a series of true crime stories published in *Moncada*, the official print organ of the Ministry of the Interior. The series chronicled the exploits of a police investigator who went by the alias "El Conde" and spent 7 years undercover on a mission to break up the Cuban marijuana trade. In one installment, readers were invited to follow the trajectory of an alleged drug trafficker as he made his way through Havana to finalize the sale of 30 pounds of marijuana. The detailed description of his route consistently placed him in largely poor and heavily Black and *mulato* sections of the city—including Cayo Hueso.[148] Much like police elsewhere in the Americas, Cuban law enforcement representatives often fancied themselves experts of the urban "underworld."[149] As the self-styled ethnographer who wrote the chronicle of El Conde made plain, the place where Luis's family lived was a suspect space.

These tours of the Havana underworld were a popular feature of true crime accounts in MININT publications. While such "reports" undoubtedly entailed a degree of embellishment—and perhaps elements of outright fiction—they offer important glimpses of how the police saw the city. They are filled with references to places in Havana closely associated with illicit

[147] Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 162.

[148] Fernández, "La última palabra del conde," 65. The illicit errands of marijuana trafficker also took him to parts of Marianao and the Jesús María neighborhood in Habana Vieja, where the *jefe de sector* program was first implemented.

[149] See, for example, Lila M. Caimari, *While the City Sleeps: A History of Pistoleros, Policemen, and the Crime Beat in Buenos Aires before Peron*, Violence in Latin American History (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

activity. El Conde, for instance, spent most of his time in Marianao. When he managed to infiltrate a network of marijuana traffickers there, he discovered that much of their activity was concentrated in the neighborhoods of Coco-Solo and Los Pocitos.[150] This would have confirmed what many police and Ministry officials already felt they knew about these spaces, both of which later appeared on the PNR list of *focos delictivos* and *barrios insalubres*.[151]

Police perceptions of these neighborhoods had implications for everyone who lived in them, regardless of color and other determinants of social position.[152] Andrés, for example, did not conform to the typical profile of a "delinquent minor." His mother was a physician who had received training in the Soviet Union. The man he knew as his father worked for the government as a customs inspector. Before he was arrested at age 15, he attended school with enough regularity to complete the ninth grade. All of this worked in his favor when it came to the social hierarchy of revolutionary Cuba. Andrés may have had light brown skin, but the available records suggest that in Cuba he would have been perceived as "White" or, perhaps, as "*trigueño*" – a term used in parts of Latin America to refer to individuals who might have had brown skin or presumed African ancestry but who were nonetheless identified closely with Whiteness. There is no evidence to suggest that the Cuban police would have perceived him as "*negro*" (Black).[153]

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[150] "Rey del Mundo de las drogas," *Moncada* V, no. 12, May 1971, 62-63. The author may have miswritten "Los Pocitos" as just "Pocito," which suggests that the knowledge of some of the people at the Ministry was probably not what they claimed it to be. The main distributor that El Conde buys from in Marianao is Ramón Canto Torres who lived on Calle 84 at the corner with Ave 41.

[151] Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, "Características Educacionales."

[152] In this respect, ideas rooted in anti-Black racism shaped the geographic and social hierarchy of Havana even though its marginal spaces had long been multiracial. Paulina Alberto has described a related process in the context of Argentina, where "the stigma of African Blackness" was at the center of "forms of thinking about society's lower sectors," even when most of the people grouped according to that system of thought were not imagined to be of African descent. See Paulina L. Alberto, *Black Legend: The Many Lives of Raúl Grigera and the Power of Racial Storytelling in Argentina* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 155.

[153] Letter from legal representative to Mariel Review Program, April 1990, Series II, ALAS; "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," May 1990. In an interview with the FBI, a

All of this meant that Andrés differed in key ways from Luis, and from most of the people they would each eventually encounter in Cuban reformatories and prisons.

Even so, Andrés got caught. At an earlier moment in the revolutionary period, he might have slipped through the many cracks in the criminal law enforcement system. However, the changes to policing and surveillance practices implemented over the course of his lifetime extended the scope and efficacy of that system. Police attention on Alturas de Luyanó may or may not have extended into the immediately adjacent area of San Miguel del Padrón where Andrés lived. But focused police scrutiny and the targeted mobilizations of *cederistas* and *auxiliares* meant that everyone faced greater scrutiny in spaces that were "socially identified" with criminality.[154]

Yet even within such areas, police clearly saw certain types of residents as more 'suspect' than others. Color and other key facets of social status mattered, even if government officials claimed otherwise. Ministry representatives described the ability "to distinguish the distinct human types as one of the most prized attributes of the police."[155] MININT officials deemed this important, in part, because it meant that officers would not unnecessarily harass decent, hardworking citizens.[156] The police in Cuba, as elsewhere in the Americas, claimed that this knowledge was integral to their profession.[157] Texts produced during the revolutionary period in Cuba do not typically include the kinds of references to racial difference that enable drawing

staff member at the Atlanta Penitentiary later described Andrés as a "white Cuban." However, in psychological evaluations and other U.S. Bureau of Prisons records, Andrés was described as both "Mulatto" and "*trigueño.*"

[154] Here I am extending the insight of Alejandro de la Fuente that certain spaces in midcentury Havana became "socially identified with blackness." de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 114.

[155] Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," 27.

[156] Regla Zulueta, "Opiniones en un carnaval," Moncada VI, no. 2, July 1971, 14.

[157] Yanilda María González, "'What Citizens Can See of the State': Police and the Construction of Democratic Citizenship in Latin America," *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 4 (November 2017): 504.

straight lines between race and the distinctions among "human types" that shaped policing practices.[158] Yet Ministry publications contained plenty of evidence that entrenched ideas about race continued to inform the decisions that police made about the people they encountered on the street. Criminalizing images of Black and *mulato* youth routinely appeared in *Moncada* during the early seventies. Although Cubans of African descent were not the only subjects featured in MININT photographs, their prevalence in this official visual registry of criminality is striking.



Figure 3.5 **"Un frente de lucha para combatir la delincuencia,"** *Moncada* V, no. 12, May 1971, 50.



Figure 3.6 **"Opiniones en un carnaval,"** *Moncada* VI, no. 2, July 1971, 14.

A feature marking the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Ministry of the Interior included a shot of an Afrodescendant man with his hands above his head pressed against the side of a building as a police officer stands behind him and searches his pockets.[159] In another

[158] In a story about the string of robberies, for example, the author noted that four suspects were all young men and "*mulatos*." The chronicle also refers to a police registry of "known" criminals, which included information about their perceived race. This registry was not made available to the public, nor has it been accessible to historians. See Juan Carlos Fernández, "El caso tren," *Moncada* V, no. 4, September 1970, 22.

[159] "Un frente de lucha para combatir la delincuencia," 50.

photograph, which accompanied a 1971 article about the recently reestablished Carnaval in Havana, a group stands before one of the People's Courts (Tribunales Populares) established to adjudicate cases that emerged during the festivities. The panel of judges, who would have been elected by peers from their section of the city, consisted of two men and a woman. All appear to have been White. Of the five young men facing judgment, four of them were Black or *mulato* .[160]

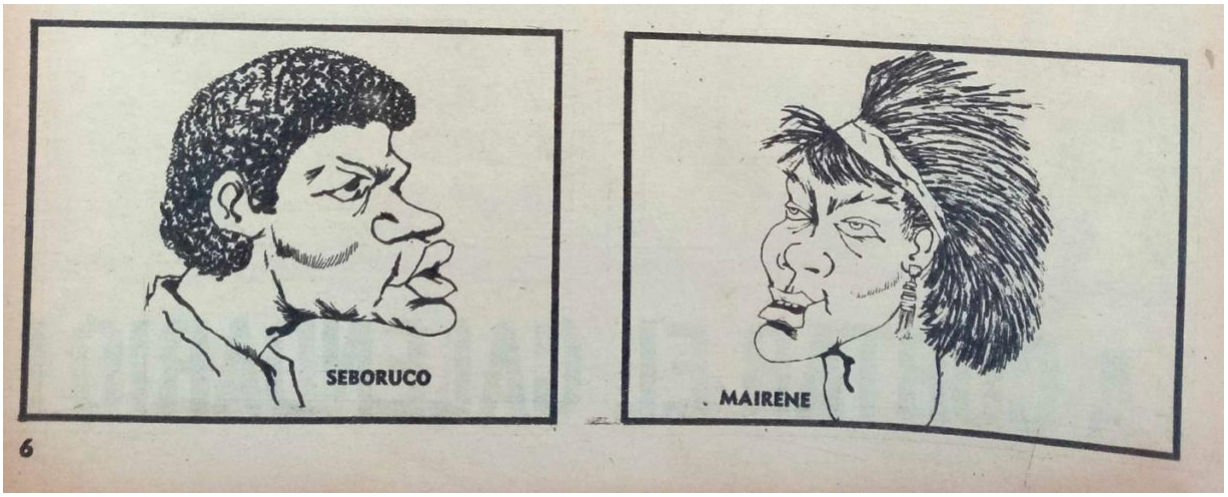


Figure 3.7 **"Saavedra: 'Un tipo duro en La Habana',"** *Moncada* IV, no. 45, Feburary 1970, 6.

Illustrations published alongside true crime stories in *Moncada* also frequently linked Blackness to criminality. In one series, an undercover cop with the alias "Felo" infiltrates a band of thieves based in Regla, a part of Havana closely associated with both Afrodescendant communities and Afro-Cuban religious practices.[161] Throughout the series, Felo demonstrates his mettle and his masculine honor in encounters with people from the *"hampa,*" the seedy underworld of the city. Many of the criminal figures he encounters are Black or *mulato*. The physical appearance of "Seboruco," the leading criminal figure, is never described in the text. Yet the illustrator who drew him represented him in the stereotypical style of a Black Cuban

[160] Zulueta, "Opiniones en un carnaval," 14

[161] Jalane D. Schmidt, *Cachita's Streets: The Virgin of Charity, Race, and Revolution in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 290–96.

caricature with exaggerated facial features. "Mairene," a woman who makes a pass at Felo the instant she meets him, is described as a "*mulatica"*—a woman of African descent with a light complexion—"a little fat, with a big face, big breasts and big hips, too."[162] With this description, the author tapped into longstanding tropes of "the *mulata*" in Cuba, and he linked Mairene's supposed hypersexuality directly to Havana's criminal subculture.[163]

When they penned these highly stylized chronicles, *Moncada* writers were far more likely to make such explicit references to race and gender than when they wrote straightforward reports of PNR actions. They sought to present readers with authentic street characters. Empowered by artistic license, they often determined that the best way to achieve that authenticity was to represent them as Cubans of African descent.[164]

There is evidence that the Havana police held similar ideas about which people could be cast most credibly as criminals. In a later study of police records, Alejandro de la Fuente and Alejandro Vásquez found that PNR officers were most likely to bring broad and highly discretionary charge of *peligrosidad* against people living in specific sections of the city. Examining all cases of *peligrosidad* recorded during the second half of that year, de la Fuente and Vásquez also found that young Black and *mulato* young men were far more likely than any other group to be charged with *peligrosidad*. Men and boys accounted for more than 92 percent of all cases in the study, and nearly 70 percent of those charged were between the ages of 16 and 25. Some 75 percent of the men and boys already had at least one offense on their record at the

[162] Juan Carlos Fernández, "Saavedra: 'Un tipo duro en La Habana'," *Moncada* IV, no. 45, February 1970, 6, 9.

[163] Alison Fraunhar, *Mulata Nation: Visualizing Race and Gender in Cuba* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

[164] "Seboruco" was also supposedly the street name of one of the adults in the orbit of "Mosquito," the young person discussed above who was featured in *Moncada* in April of the same year. This suggests that the magazine's writers pulled material to represent criminality in Havana from a limited number of sources featuring some of the same characters, fictional or otherwise.

time of their arrest for *peligrosidad*.[165] The most startling finding, however, was that Black residents of Havana were over 7 times more likely to be charged with *peligrosidad* than White residents. *Mulatos* were 2.2 times more likely to be charged under the statute than their White neighbors.[166] In all likelihood, then, Luis was unsurprised when the police took him and accused him of occupying a "state of dangerousness." He probably had friends who had experienced the same thing. Male, young, with a criminal history, and Afrodescendant – Luis almost perfectly fit the imagined profile of those most likely to be arrested and imprisoned for *peligrosidad*. Police perceptions of certain spaces as marginal rendered many people suspect, but they clearly found some more suspicious than others.

3.5 Conclusion

The development of a consolidated infrastructure for policing in Havana during the early 1970s had a profound impact on the lives of Luis, Andrés, and many other young Cubans. The officials who ran the Ministry of the Interior during the period of "institutionalization" did not see the reforms they implemented simply as crackdown measures. The changes implemented were intended to professionalize the police force, improve its administrative practices and technological resources, and, above all, to further consolidate its operations with those of its civilian allies in the Comités and the Auxiliary Forces. Yet regardless of the intentions, the impact was clear — residents of the capital lived amid an expanding surveillance network and a growing and increasingly well-organized body of law enforcement agents and civilian deputies. Some Cubans likely welcomed these changes. Property crime, in particular, appears to have been a widespread concern among Cubans that animated some of the structural innovations developed

[165] Alejandro de la Fuente and Alejandro Vásquez, "La peligrosidad en Ciudad de La Habana," Fiscalía General de la República de Cuba, 1987, 6, 9, 11. Report in author's possession.

[166] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All,* 315.

by MININT. But Cubans in certain parts of the city bore more of the weight of heightened police attention and organizational improvements, which were concentrated in spaces that had long been perceived as prone to criminality. Those perceptions were themselves inextricable from longstanding ideas about poverty and Blackness that continued to influence which types of people the police identified as potentially suspect.

While MININT leaders such as Sergio del Valle were invested in holding people like Andrés and Luis accountable, they remained committed to doing so through a process of "reeducation" that would ultimately enable their return to society as productive workers and upstanding citizens (discussed in Chapter 1). Almost from the moment the former rebels took control of the government, however, a tension had been evident between their desire to bring wayward citizens into the revolutionary fold and their conviction that some people were beyond help. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the range of Cubans constructed as undesirable and potentially irredeemable expanded as the government escalated its attacks on people, ideas, tastes, and practices that did not fit a specific, culturally narrow concept of revolutionary citizenship. At the same time, top officials continued to insist on the importance of rehabilitating and reintegrating those Cubans whom they represented as the primary beneficiaries of the revolution—the young, the poor, the Afrodescendant, the peasants and workers. But as the effects of improvements to the system of policing took hold in the mid 1970s, and as it became clear that some of these same people *still* 'refused to adapt,' revolutionary leaders increasingly entertained the possibility that they, too, would have to be left – or forced – out.

Chapter 4 Cast Out: A Cuban War on Crime and the Paths to Mariel

On April 1, 1980, as he had each day for five years, Andrés woke up in a prison cell. By nightfall, he may have heard the news that a group of Cubans had forced their way into a Latin American embassy in Havana in an attempt to claim asylum and gain safe passage out of the country. He probably did not think much of it. Similar incidents had occurred at least nine times over the preceding year.[1] He could not possibly have known that what happened that day would trigger a series of events that would culminate in his forced departure from the country.

Andrés might have sensed on some level, however, that his presence in the infamous Combinado del Este prison on the outskirts of Havana was indicative of a shift in the way the Cuban government was approaching people accused of burglary, robbery, and other so-called common crimes. Perhaps he noticed more young men coming into the institution after being handed long sentences for offenses that had been treated with a degree of leniency in the past. Indeed, he may have paid special attention to such cases, given that they resonated with his own.[2]

In 1976, not long after his sixteenth birthday, Andrés had been sentenced to 29 years in prison for stealing a handful of consumer goods.[3] At almost precisely the same moment, the

[1] Guillermo Martinez, "8,000 Seeking Freedom Jam Embassy in Havana," *Miami Herald*, 7 April 1980, 20A.

[2] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," United States Department of Justice Repatriation Review Panel, May 1990, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[3] United States Department of Justice Review Panel, Repatriation Case Summary, March 1990, Series II, ALAS.

Ministry of the Interior was escalating a new campaign against property crimes. Officials from the Ministry later claimed that it had stepped up its enforcement efforts during this period, which led to significant growth in the population of Cubans living inside the island's prisons over the next few years.[4] Some of the people in this group had almost certainly been sentenced under a new law — enacted by decree early in 1978 — which prescribed penalties of "ten to thirty years" in prison and even "death" for certain kinds of property crimes.[5] Indeed, Andrés's sentence may have been a leading indicator of the harsh criminal policies that influential members of the Cuban government pushed during the final years of the 1970s.

Viviana was also swept up in the early days of this crackdown. She would later tell U.S. immigration officials that she had never committed a crime in Cuba, and that she had been jailed for "political reasons."[6] Another one of those officials, however, would eventually enter the following line on a list meant to serve as a summary of her life: "Never employed in Cuba. (Prostitute)."[7] According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, she at one point admitted to having been arrested for prostitution in Cuba.[8] Additional U.S. government documents contain allegations that Viviana had at some point engaged in sex work, but in later years Viviana consistently denied these claims.

Whatever her supposed offenses, notes from interviews between Viviana and U.S. authorities suggest that she had been institutionalized for much of her life in Cuba. She told

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[4] Luis Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), 283.

[5] Decreto-Ley Número 13, *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba* LXXVI, no. 4 (Edición Ordinaria), 8 February 1978, 26.

[6] Attorney General's Review Process (U.S. Department of Justice), "File Review Summary," July 1982, Series II, ALAS.

[7] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986, Series II, ALAS.

[8] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "INS Parole Denial," December 1989, Series II, ALAS.

officials on more than one occasion that she had been put in a "reform school" at age 11. A report from one of those conversations suggested that she had picked a fight with a police officer with the intention of getting arrested to "obtain housing after she was kicked out of her house" as a child.[9] Several accounts indicate that she lived in the juvenile reformatory until she turned 16, then the age of adult criminal responsibility in Cuba. According to the birthdate listed on Viviana's documents, this would have occurred at the end of 1974 or some time in 1975 – the same year Andrés was initially arrested for stealing a bicycle, a radio, and some clothes from someone else's house.

Records from multiple encounters between Viviana and U.S. officials indicate that she was sentenced to prison near the end of 1976 under the "Dangerous Persons Act."[10] While there was no law by such a name in Cuba, this was very likely a reference to a provision of Cuban criminal law typically referred to on the island as "*peligrosidad"* (dangerousness). This highly discretionary charge may well have been used by the Revolutionary National Police (PNR) to justify Viviana's arrest for almost anything, including actions that the government classified as dissident or "counterrevolutionary." *Peligrosidad* was also commonly invoked by police officers to arrest individuals accused of prostitution. This practice was facilitated by an established legal consensus in Cuba, which held that sex workers occupied "*un estado de peligrosidad*" (a state of dangerousness).[11] Multiple references to the 1976 arrest in Viviana's record suggest that she had been sentenced to four years in confinement for *peligrosidad*. These documents also indicate that, like Andrés, she was still in prison in April of 1980, when the group of Cubans crashed a

[9] Attorney General's Review Process (U.S. Department of Justice), "Interview Summary," July 1983, Series II, ALAS.

[10] Attorney General's Review Process, "File Review Summary," July 1982.

[11] Rachel Hynson, *Laboring for the State: Women, Family, and Work in Revolutionary Cuba, 1959-1971* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 199.

bus through the fence of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana.[12] Also like Andrés, the following month, Viviana would find herself in the small port city of Mariel, waiting to board a boat bound for the United States.

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Having expanded systems of surveillance and policing in the early 1970s, Fidel Castro and his allies in the Ministry of the Interior pushed a crackdown to address the persistence of certain kinds of property crime during the second half of the decade. The Cuban government publicly announced these efforts in the fall of 1977, when Castro proclaimed at the first National Congress of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution that a renewed focus on preventing and punishing so-called common crime represented "¡*Malas noticias para los delincuentes!*" (Bad news for criminals!). His speech signaled the ascendance of a "get tough" crime policy that had gained momentum as Ministry officials increasingly interpreted property crime statistics as evidence of the failures of its approach in recent years.[13] According to proponents of this approach, the early 1970s focus on greater technical proficiency and improved coordination between the uniformed police and the Comités had not been enough. Powerful members of the Cuban Communist Party, including Blas Roca, declared that the time had come

[12] "Discussion at Interview," attached supplement to Attorney General's Review Process, "Interview Summary," July 1982, Series II, ALAS; Attorney General's Review Process, "Interview Summary," July 1983.

[13] I draw this phrase from the U.S. context at almost precisely the same moment, and from scholarship on the history of policing and mass incarceration in the United States. See, for example, Gilmore, *Golden Gulag;* Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime;* Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016); James Forman, *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough;* Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023). For those familiar with this work, aspects of the trajectory of Cuban criminal policy described in this chapter will be striking for their familiarity.

for a "*mano firme*" (firm hand).[14] Robbery and theft remained a concern for everyday Cubans, and in the eyes of Ministry officials with growing influence, addressing this problem would require going beyond the measures that the government had taken in the past. It was necessary to continue adding civilian deputies to the surveillance networks of the Comités and to implement new surveillance technologies, but in their view it was also time to increase the size of the Revolutionary National Police itself.

The announcement of "bad news" for alleged criminals also reflected an ongoing erosion of the revolution's longstanding stated commitment to incarceration as a form of rehabilitation. By 1979, this process had culminated in the promulgation of a new Código Penal (Criminal Code) with harsher sanctions.[15] Not only did police arrest more Cubans in the era of *mano firme*, but when courts issued their rulings, they relied on laws that prescribed longer sentences.[16] The growth in the prison population may have stemmed, then, from both heightened policing and the

[14] Blas Roca, "Combatiremos el delito con mano firme, consecuente y constante," *Legalidad Socialista*, no. 4, 1978, 3. This was perhaps an effort to advocate a tougher stance while still drawing a distinction with the term "*mano dura*," which had been used by right-wing governments in Latin America to signal the use of a "heavy hand" or even an "iron first" in the sphere of crime control.

[15] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 135–36.

[16] The stated principles of the new Criminal Code included a commitment to punishments that were "reeducational" instead of "repressive," but the severity of some of its measures was clear. Max Azicri, "Crime and Law Under Socialism: The 1979 Cuban Penal Code," *Review of Socialist Law* 6, no. 1 (1980): 12, 20. Indeed, severity was part of the point. In a reflection on the history of revolutionary criminal law published in 1991, a senior legal advisor in the Cuban Ministry of Justice wrote that the 1979 Código Penal stemmed from a consensus among "specialists and politicians" that "some harshness was required." He noted that the new criminal code included multiple sections providing for "higher levels of punishment" and described it as "a resume of the measures employed in the preceding years against the continual assaults suffered by the revolutionary people." While he refuted claims that the code was evidence that the revolutionary government was "especially repressive and cruel," he also acknowledged that the enactment of a new Código Penal just eight years later, in 1987, reflected "a reconsideration of the whole state response to criminality" that resulted in "the conclusion that instead of harsh punishment what was needed were other legal mechanisms to preserve social order by effectively reeducating those who had engaged in serious antisocial behavior." If accurate, these observations would suggest that in the mid 1980s the balance of power shifted again between the advocates of coercive rehabilitation and those who favored a strictly punitive approach to so-called common crime. See Raúl Gómez Treto, "Thirty Years of Cuban Revolutionary Penal Law," *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (1991): 117–18.

fact that some of the Cubans who were being arrested were ultimately getting locked up for longer periods of time.

The mid-1970s developments in criminal policy that intensified policing practices and increased the number of Cubans in carceral institutions reflected a shift in a longstanding tension among the leaders who oversaw the country's criminal legal system. Few had ever advocated for the worthiness of outright opponents of the revolutionary state. But the dominant view within the Ministry of the Interior had been that poor and working-class Cubans charged with most kinds of "common crime" could – and should – be reformed and reintegrated. In the years leading up to 1980, that position was contested by law enforcement leaders who saw many of these same Cubans as irredeemable and implemented policies and practices designed primarily to punish and exclude them.

The increase in the number of Cubans behind bars immediately preceded the participation of tens of thousands of formerly incarcerated Cubans in the Mariel boatlift. Yet this connection has been largely overlooked in studies of Cuban migration. To explain why so many Cubans left the country in 1980, scholars have pointed to a late-1970s housing crisis in Havana;[17] frustrations with scarcity and limited access to consumer goods, in particular;[18] and disillusionment with the authoritarian practices of the Cuban state.[19] The boatlift also may have functioned as a kind of "safety valve" that the government used to release pressure that had been building from Cubans

[17] Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 280.

[18] María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 52–54; Michael J. Bustamante, *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 201–2; Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 410–11.

[19] Lillian Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba, 1961-1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023), 377–78.

who wished to leave the country but had no legal way to do so.[20] All these factors were important to the overarching story of the boatlift, but none of them account for one of its most distinctive features – the participation of at least 25,000 people who had some point been in prison in Cuba.[21]

The decision to open the Port of Mariel for mass emigration created a specific opportunity for a government that was wavering on its stated commitment to reintegrating Cubans who failed to live up to the ideals of revolutionary citizenship. The incoming Minister of the Interior and his allies who oversaw Cuban criminal policy at the end of the 1970s had long been open to the idea that some people were beyond repair and simply had to be excluded from society. In the boatlift, these leaders saw a chance to rid themselves of this supposed "*escoria*" (scum), reduce the burden of the country's large prison population, and challenge the legal and moral authority of the United States. The revolutionary government did not, however, simply 'open the door' for anyone who wanted to leave, as the familiar journalistic phrase would have it. Cuban police and migration officials oversaw a process of screening and selection to ensure that some of the people leaving were those it wanted gone. It was through this process that Andrés and Viviana made their way to Mariel.

4.1 Waging War

In 1976, when the new Código Penal was still being drafted and debated, Andrés and Viviana entered prison. Their arrest came on the cusp of a major transition in the revolutionary

[20] Juan Clark, Jose I. Lasaga, and Rose S. Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1981), 1.This group included men who had not been permitted to leave the country even during the "Freedom Flights" from 1965 to 1973 because of the Law of Obligatory Military Service. See Thomas D. Boswell, Manuel Rivero, and Guarione M. Diaz, *Bibliography for the Mariel-Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, 1988), 5.

[21] Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus*, 7.

criminal law enforcement system. The following year, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the leaders of the Ministry of the Interior, and other top government officials began touting yet another campaign to address persistent forms of illicit activity. And once again, property crimes were at the top of their list of concerns. At the closing of the first National Congress of the CDR in September of 1977, Fidel Castro recited what had become a common refrain about the alleged trajectory of revolutionary crime control projects. "Well, at the beginning the main effort was aimed at fighting in opposition to the counterrevolutionaries, in opposition to counterrevolutionary crime; nobody paid much attention to common crime," he said. Then Castro explained that, while nowhere near the problem it had been before the revolution, "common crime still lingers." After running through a standard list of claims about the law enforcement successes of the "revolutionary process" – the effort to reduce gambling, the supposed elimination of prostitution, the disruption of drug trafficking networks – he turned to one of the more challenging "manifestations" of the "bourgeois residue" of the republican era: "crime against property." The problem, he asserted, was that in Cuba this was no longer an offense against the "property of the bourgeois person, nor the landowner, nor the exploiter, but rather against the property of the worker, the property of the people at the center of a socialist system." In casting property offenses as crimes against "the people," Castro advanced a definition of these transgressions that made their meaning almost indistinguishable from that of offenses that he and other leaders deemed "counterrevolutionary." He also claimed that now the Comités must devote themselves to fighting "common crime" with the same fervor that had characterized their efforts to defeat "counterrevolutionary crime" in the 1960s. According to Castro, the implications of this development were clear: "*¡Malas noticias para los delincuentes!*"

("Bad news for criminals!").[22]

For over a decade, law enforcement leaders and other top government officials had made similar claims about the need for the Comités to continue their work to combat direct threats to the revolutionary state while increasing their role in policing "common crime." Property crimes had been a persistent focal point within this rhetorical framework, and at times the words were backed up by significant actions. In the aftermath of the 1969 National Forum on Interior Order, a similar push to increase the involvement of the Comités had accompanied improvements in the surveillance capabilities, technical acumen, and operational structure of the Revolutionary National Police. These changes had a significant impact in many of the neighborhoods of Havana. As had been the case with this previous escalation in the "fight against crime," the government's announcement of a renewed commitment to addressing so-called common crime in the late 1970s likely lagged behind changes that had been set in motion already.[23] That is, some of the approaches and policies discussed at the National Congress of the CDR in 1977 may have been in effect when Andrés and Viviana were sentenced to prison the year before.

The campaign to crack down on crime in the late 1970s brought with it important

[22] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en el Acto de Clausura del Primer Congreso de los CDR en el XVII aniversario de su fundación," 28 September 1977, http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-el-acto-de-clausura-del-primer-congreso-de-los-cdr-en-el-xvii.

[23] In a June 1975 speech to commemorate the fourteenth anniversary of the founding of MININT, then-First Vice Minister of the Interior José Abrantes Fernández told his audience in Cienfuegos of the increasing "social and revolutionary significance of the fight against common crime, and against all of the vices and ills that … continue to exist within our society as remnants of the past." He insisted, "We must not allow our hardworking people to be victimized by the depredations of a few antisocial groups that want to live without working in a society that offers them every opportunity. This, we will not permit under any circumstance." And while Abrantes Fernández described the social rehabilitation of Cubans who broke the law as one of the Ministry's "permanent objectives," he also emphasized that law enforcement officials must learn to make "a precise distinction between the criminal or antisocial element, and the worker or honest citizen of our country, who always deserves correct, respectful, and cordial treatment." José Abrantes Fernández, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto central con motivo del XIV aniversario de la creación del Ministerio del Interior," June 6, 1975, in *Moncada* X, no. 3, July 1975, 25-27.

concrete developments. Some were extensions of existing approaches. The introduction of additional surveillance technologies was a new way of achieving longstanding "vigilance" goals. Burglar alarm systems – apparently acquired from the Soviet Union – and closed-circuit television cameras were installed at commercial and industrial sites that housed goods and materials often targeted for theft.[24] Other changes marked a departure from previous crime prevention and law enforcement strategies. At the beginning of the decade, the Ministry of the Interior had insisted that its efforts to increase police effectiveness must not depend on increasing the size of the police force. The priority had been to recruit additional civilian volunteers and integrate them more thoroughly with the operations of uniformed units. This orientation to policing may have reflected a general skepticism of bloated state institutions among government leaders at the time.[25] It also stemmed from concerns about scant state revenue and limited budgets.[26] By 1977, the Ministry appears to have shifted its approach. The national head of the PNR, Pascual Rodríguez Braza, claimed that the addition of new officers in the months that followed Castro's September 1977 speech led to a 20 percent increase in the size of the police force in Havana. Police in the capital were also equipped with additional cars to increase the frequency of their motorized patrols. According to Rodríguez Braza, the number of police cars in Havana tripled during this period.[27]

Bolstered by the increased size and technological capabilities of its ranks, the PNR

[24] Jesús Barreto, "Estamos cumpliendo comandante," *Moncada* XIII, no. 9, September 1978, IV.

[25] Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 7, 64–66.

[26] "Carta al Militante," *Moncada* IV, no. 44, January 1970, 17-18. As late as 1975, Ministry officials continued to state that their goal was the construction of "an imminently technical, relatively small" institution. José Abrantes Fernández explained, "We work to adjust the size of our staff to the needs of the population and the economic and social development requirements of the country." See Abrantes Fernández, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto central con motivo del XIV aniversario de la creación del Ministerio del Interior," 26.

[27] Barreto, "Estamos cumpliendo comandante," II.

leadership doubled down on its strategy of classifying and targeting particular neighborhoods. The agency added hundreds of neighborhoods to its list of high priority *focos delictivos* (criminal hubs) "in order to strengthen preventative policing" (*a fin de fortalecer el trabajo policial profiláctico*) in these areas. The decision to pull this bureaucratic trigger meant that there would be "a stronger surveillance apparatus" (*un mayor dispositivo de vigilancia*) in many Havana communities.[28] Again, the link between police perceptions and actual criminal activity was often tenuous, and the designation of areas as *focos delictivos* had at least as much to do with longstanding race and class prejudices.[29] Finally, as it had on multiple previous occasions, the Ministry of the Interior sought to amplify the involvement of the Comités in efforts to control so-called common crime. In this instance, officials did so by increasing the number of CDR Zonal Operations Centers – the units of the organization that coordinated civilian patrols with the police.[30]

The revolutionary government also reaffirmed its dedication to combatting property crime by enacting and publicizing a harsh new law at the beginning of 1978. Decreto-Ley No. 13, issued as a pronouncement by the Council of State, was similar to a statute that had been on the books for fifteen years – Ley No. 1098. Like its predecessor, the new law empowered courts to impose severe sentences, including up to 30 years in prison and even the death penalty, on Cubans convicted of certain forms of robbery and burglary. While Decreto-Ley No. 13 did expand the scope of activities that could lead to such sentences, the law's overlap with the provisions of Ley No. 1098 suggest that Fidel Castro and the Council of State saw their new

[28] Barreto, "Estamos cumpliendo comandante," VII.

[29] This point is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Also see Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 313–14.

[30] Barreto, "Estamos cumpliendo comandante," VIII.

decree partly as a way to signal that the government was doing *something* to address the latest wave of concerns about the security of personal and state property.[31]

Some elements of the law likely had significant and immediate consequences, however, because of how it informed the practices of the growing police force in Havana. Decreto-Ley No. 13 modified the range of behaviors that could be interpreted as rendering a person legally in *"un estado de peligrosidad*" (a state of dangerousness) under Article 48 of the criminal code. For instance, a person accused of having engaged in any sort of "antisocial behavior" (*conducta antisocial*) could now be arrested preemptively on the grounds that they were in *un estado de peligrosidad*. [32] While the police had long enjoyed wide discretion, the new legislation gave officers express permission to arrest anyone whom they alleged to have demonstrated one of a vague and vast array of behaviors that could be construed as "antisocial." Throughout the revolutionary period, leaders had included in this category alleged involvement in property crime, participation in the illicit market, and engagement in sex work. Yet none of this was entirely new. The criminal code still in effect in Cuba in 1978 was the Código de Defensa Social (Code of Social Defense), which had been approved by the republican government in 1936. The concept of *peligrosidad* came directly from that much earlier body of law. Even so, with Decreto-Ley No. 13 on the books and a "get tough" campaign circulating in government media, the revolutionary government reiterated the discretionary authority of PNR officers and encouraged them to use it to the fullest extent possible as part of their "preventative" police work.[33]

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[31] The Council of State was clearly aware of the earlier statute and its similar penalties because the new law included in its "Final Disposition" an order to rescind Ley No. 1098. Decreto-Ley Número 13, 29.

[32] Decreto-Ley Número 13, 25-29

[33] Barreto, "Estamos cumpliendo comandante," V.

Harsh laws, new technologies, an enhanced police force, and an increase in the involvement and attention of Fidel Castro and the Council of State constituted the primary features of a war on crime in Cuba in the late 1970s. Andrés and Viviana appear to have been swept up as this effort was just beginning. In Viviana's case, her arrest and sentence may have reflected the beginning of the broader crackdown or the start of a specific effort to suppress sex work, which some officials perceived to be on the rise as the country began to welcome a growing number of foreign tourists.[34] Whether her alleged offense was the result of some form of dissidence or disagreement with the government, a consequence of efforts to make a living through sex work, or a combination of the two, by 1976 the use of *peligrosidad* or some other highly discretionary charge would not have been a novel development.[35] Although Andrés was arrested prior to the enactment of Decreto-Ley No. 13, his sentence of twenty-nine years for stealing a handful of consumer goods from somebody's home likewise presaged the coming of *mano firme* in Cuba. The terms of his punishment had been made possible by Ley No. 1098, the statute similar to Decreto-Ley No. 13, which had been enacted at an earlier moment of escalating government concern about the levels of burglary, robbery, and theft in the country. MININT officials later questioned, however, how often that statute and its most severe provisions had been enforced.[36] That Andrés received close to the maximum prison term suggests that, already

[34] Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 102–3.

[35] A 1979 law formally classified prostitution as an factor indicative of a person's *estado de peligrosidad*. Hynson, *Laboring for the State*, 198–99. Although alleged engagement in sex work may not have been explicitly classified as a marker of *peligrosidad* prior to 1979, given the discretionary nature of this charge and the latitude it afforded the police, it seems unlikely that its absence from the criminal code would have prevented PNR officers from using it as the grounds for detaining a woman suspected of prostitution. Whether a court would have sentenced such a person to four years prison for *peligrosidad* at the time when Viviana was arrested in 1976 is another question. However, it is plausible to imagine that police officers sometimes used *peligrosidad* as the basis for an arrest and courts subsequently sentenced individuals under other statues.

[36] In fact, MININT leaders claimed that lax enforcement of Ley 1098 had contributed to an increase in robbery and theft in the late 1960s. David K. Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts in the Social Transformation of Cuba" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Surrey, 1973), 122.

in 1976, the Ministry and the courts had begun to move in the direction that revolutionary leaders would advocate publicly in the years that followed.

Andrés's punishment also reflected the outcome of an earlier campaign by Fidel Castro and his close allies to lower the age of criminal responsibility. Castro had mentioned this idea more than once leading up to the enactment of a statute – just three years before Andrés was sentenced – that changed the age of responsibility from 18 to 16.[37] Prior to the new law, Castro had described it as a "real contradiction" that under the system of Obligatory Military Service (Servicio Militar Obligatorio) a 16-year-old boy could be called upon to "take up arms to defend the country" but would not be treated as an adult in a criminal proceeding. The subsequent push to lower the age of criminal responsibility was ultimately rooted in the belief of Castro and other leaders that stringent sentences would have a deterrent effect, causing young people to think twice before breaking the law. Moreover, since 16- and 17-year olds accounted for the majority of individuals cited in juvenile delinquency statistics, representing them as adults would have had the added benefit (in the eyes of some officials) of creating the appearance of a drastic reduction in youth crime figures – even if it did nothing to change the actual number of offenses committed.[38] While hopes of announcing such a "decline" probably did not serve as the primary motivation for the effort to the lower the age of responsibility, the potential upside of a perceived reduction in juvenile delinquency rates would not have been lost on law enforcement officials.[39]

Finally, according to Andrés, he was punished twice for the same offense. This was

[37] Ley 1249, *Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba* LXXI, no. 13 (Edición Ordinaria), 23 June 1973, 47-56.

[38] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso Pronunciado en el Acto Conmemorativo del X Aniversario de la Creación del MININT," 6 June 1971, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1971/esp/f060671e.html.

[39] For more on the effort to lower the age of criminal responsibility, see Booth, "Neighbourhood Committees and Popular Courts," 125; Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 15.

another sign of a hardening in the government's approach to certain kinds of crime.[40] Andrés had originally been arrested in 1975, when he was 15 years old, for stealing a bicycle, a radio, and some articles of clothing. He later told U.S. officials that he had been sent to a juvenile reformatory and was released soon after his sixteenth birthday, in December of 1975. However, the police came looking for him again early the next year. After this second arrest, Andrés claimed, he was convicted again for the same robbery he had committed the previous year. But this time, instead of a youth reformatory, the government transferred him to an adult prison – Combinado del Este – where he began the first year of a 29-year sentence.[41]

There are multiple possible explanations for what happened to Andrés. While there was a statutory basis for this punishment for stealing from an occupied dwelling, the legal authority of the government to retry him as an adult for an offense he committed as a minor is unclear. It is possible that, contrary to what Andrés always maintained in later conversations with his U.S. legal representatives, he was accused of another crime after he was released from the youth reformatory. Or maybe he said or did something perceived by one of the staff members at the reformatory or a member of his local Comité as "counterrevolutionary," and that led to a harsh sanction for a political offense. Andrés never suggested that this is what happened, however, even when it might have been to his advantage to do so after he arrived in the United States. He did indicate that his biological father had been a police officer under Batista and had been killed by the revolutionary government when Andrés was a young child. At one point a mental health professional who evaluated him recorded that Andrés indicated he was "in political disagreement

[40] As Luis Salas has noted in a keen assessment of the 1979 Código Penal, "The fact that recidivists [were] singled out for severe treatment, which requires long periods of incarceration, represents an acceptance that certain criminal types cannot be rehabilitated and should be taken out of circulation." See Salas, *Social Control and Deviance in Cuba*, 135.

[41] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," May 1990, 3-4.

with the [Cuban] system."[42] Yet the respectable government jobs held by his mother and stepfather suggest, at least, that his family was unlikely to have been targeted in the way his father was.[43] In fact, their positions likely would have been seen as indicators of a high level of "integration" with the revolution, in the parlance of the Cuban government. Perhaps, then, what happened is exactly what Andrés said had happened. He was picked up after he reached the age of criminal responsibility and handed a severe sentence for an offense that the government was once again marking for special attention as it geared up for a war on crime.

4.2 Exit Strategy

On the first day of April 1980, several years after Andrés and Viviana were imprisoned, a chaotic incident in the upscale Havana neighborhood of Miramar set off a series of events that would fundamentally alter the courses of their lives. On that day, a driver crashed a city bus with five passengers through the chain-link fence surrounding the Peruvian Embassy, and Cuban guards opened fire on the vehicle. One of those guards, Pedro Ortiz Cabrera, was killed in the process. The Cuban government demanded that the people from the bus be handed over to Cuban authorities, but the Peruvian ambassador refused. In response, Fidel Castro ordered the barriers around the embassy removed. In an official statement published in *Granma*, the Cuban government explained that the Peruvian government was encouraging reckless actions by refusing to turn over the people who had forced their way into the compound. "We cannot protect embassies that do not collaborate on their protection," the statement read.[44] Soon, 1,500 people had entered the diplomatic site in hopes of gaining permission to leave Cuba.

On April 5, the Cuban Foreign Minister announced that, with the exception of the initial

[42] United States Department of Justice Review Panel, Repatriation Case Summary, March 1990, 8.
[43] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," May 1990, 3-4.
[44] "Declaración del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba," *Granma*, 4 April 1980, front page.

group that had rammed the fence, Cubans who went to the Peruvian Embassy would be permitted to leave the island for any country willing to grant them an entry visa. More people rushed to the diplomatic site, and within two days the crowd had grown to include nearly 11,000 people. According to members of the foreign press, the group represented a broad swath of the Cuban population and included "humble working class families," as well as "doctors, architects and lawyers and even military men, generally of low rank." Reporters also noted the "extraordinary diversity of backgrounds" that converged there, as "whites, blacks and mulattos" joined the throng.[45] They waited on the embassy grounds, huddled among the trees with limited access to food, water, and toilets, as the governments of Cuba, Peru, and other American nations attempted to reach an agreement about how to resolve the emerging crisis.[46] On April 8, the five member countries of what was then known as the Andean Pact — Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela — announced that they would create an "evacuation plan" for the Cubans who had entered the embassy to request asylum.[47]

It was not clear at this point whether any of the would-be refugees would go to the United States. On the very same day that the bus had crashed into the Peruvian Embassy in Cuba, the Refugee Act of 1980 went into effect in the United States. This landmark legislation was designed to overhaul refugee admissions, and one of the U.S. Congress's chief goals throughout the process of crafting the new law had been to limit presidential discretion over the annual

[45] Guillermo Martinez and Dan Williams, "New Baby And Song In Cuba," *Miami Herald,* 10 April 1980, 18A. The authors of this article attributed this quote to a story published by Agence France-Presse.

[46] Herald Wire Services, "Embassy-Crashing Asylum Tries Stir Get-Tough Policy by Cuba," *Miami Herald*, 5 April 1980, 10A; Herald Wire Services, "1,500 Cubans Flee Into Embassy," *Miami Herald,* 6 April 1980, 1A, 20A; Martinez, "8,000 Seeking Freedom Jam Embassy in Havana," 1A, 20A.

[47] Arnold Markowitz and Guillermo Martinez, "Five Nations Would Accept Cubans," 9 April 1980, *Miami Herald,* 1A, 20A.

number of refugee arrivals.[48] Top officials in the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter were reluctant to accept a large number of Cuban refugees if it meant surpassing the numerical caps that had already been established in consultation with Congress as part of the process mandated by the weeks-old legislation.[49] Yet an array of groups, including the community of hundreds of thousands of Cubans in the United States, elected officials from the City of Miami, and Cold War hawks were pressing the White House to extend a hand to people they perceived to be "telling the world what they really think of Communist dictatorship."[50] The State Department initially responded to the events unfolding at the Peruvian Embassy with a cautious announcement that the U.S. was considering bringing some of them into the United States, but not more than the country's "fair share."[51]

From the start of the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy, the Carter administration had sought to "internationalize" the response and ensure that the United States was not expected to receive all those who had crowded into the diplomatic compound.[52] Peru committed to taking in 1,000 Cubans. The other Andean Pact member countries agreed to bring in smaller groups, and so did several other nations. Ultimately, the White House determined that the U.S. would admit up to 3,500 of the roughly 10,800 who had been granted permission to leave by the Cuban government. In a consultation with the Senate Judiciary mandated by the Refugee Act, Secretary

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[48] Edward M. Kennedy, "Refugee Act of 1980," *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1 (1981): 141–56.

[49] Stu Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting," 7 May 1980, folder 12 "May 7 - May 14 Notes Stu Eizenstat, n.d.," series 3, box 1, Mirta Ojito Papers (CHC5281), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter MOP-CHC).

[50] David Hoffman, "Reagan Calls for Rescue Mission 'Akin to Berlin Airlift' in Cuba," *Miami Herald*, 10 April 1980, 18A; Heather Dewar and Marilyn A. Moore, "Exiles cry: Let our people go! Ferre: Cubans welcome here," *Miami News*, 7 April 1980, 1A, 4A; Eric Rieder, "Commissioners Join Cry for U.S. to Accept Cubans," *Miami Herald*, 8 April 1980, 8A.

[51] Tom Fiedler, "U.S. Will Take Only 'Fair Share of Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 11 April 1980, 16A.

[52] Victor H. Palmieri, "Options on the Status of Cubans and Haitians, 12 June 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force (220.18.24), Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter CHTF).

of State Cyrus Vance requested emergency approval to incorporate 3,500 additional Cuban refugees into the plan for annual admissions. And for a handful of days, 3,500 was the plan.[53] Eventually, Cuba, Peru, Costa Rica, the United States, and several other countries reached an agreement to provide safe passage for the asylum seekers. The Cubans who had been at the Peruvian Embassy, most of whom had returned to their homes after receiving assurances from the government that they would be permitted to leave the country, were to be transported from the island in a series of flights. First, they would go to Costa Rica. Once there, they would go through a screening process that would facilitate their ultimate transfer to the various countries that had agreed to take them in.[54]

Between April 16 and 18, some 700 Cubans were flown to Costa Rica. Then the Cuban government suddenly stopped the flights, insisting that its citizens who had received permission to leave would have to be transported directly to the countries that had agreed to accept them.[55] While the reasons for this policy reversal were not entirely clear, it may have been motivated, in part, by media coverage of the first groups of Cubans to arrive in Costa Rica. As with previous cohorts of embassy-crashing asylum seekers, the Cuban state press had immediately cast the people at the Peruvian Embassy as "common criminals, *lumpens*, and antisocial elements."[56] Now, the international media was converging on the San José airport to interview the arriving Cubans and painting them in a far more sympathetic light. If this group were instead dispersed

[53] Tom Fiedler and Guillermo Martinez, "U.S. May Admit 3,500 From Cuba," *Miami Herald,* 12 April 1980, 1A, 10A; Graham Hovey, "U.S. Agrees to Admit Up to 3,500 Cubans from Peru Embassy," *New York Times,* 15 April 1980, A1, A10; *U.S. Refugee Programs, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate,* 96th Cong., 2nd Session, 17 April 1980 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 8.

[54] Associated Press, "Cuba Bars Refugee Flights to Costa Rican Staging Area," *New York Times,* 19 April 1980, 6.

[55] Associated Press, "Cuba Bars Refugee Flights to Costa Rican Staging Area," 6.

[56] "Declaración del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba," front page.

directly to their various final destinations, the public relations impact might be dispersed, as well.[57]

But there was more behind the decision.[58] Nearly a month before the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy began, Fidel Castro had floated idea of opening a port to permit the exit of Cubans, as his government had done fifteen years earlier with the port of Camarioca.[59] There is evidence, moreover, that before the flights to Costa Rica began, Castro was already considering using this method to enable the evacuation of the people from the embassy. Castro appears to have shared his thinking with a man named Napoleón Vilaboa, a former member of the clandestine urban movement against Batista who had become disillusioned with the revolutionary government and left the country. Vilaboa soon had returned to Cuba as part of the 1961 invasion at Playa Girón. He was captured and spent over a year in prison for his participation in the failed assault, but was returned to Miami as part of a 1962 deal to swap prisoners for $62 million in aid from the U.S. government. Back in the United States, Vilaboa remained committed to securing the release of a small group of fellow participants in the botched invasion who remained incarcerated in Cuba.[60] In 1978, he got the chance to make good on his promise to his former comrades. He joined a controversial delegation of 75 U.S.-based Cubans who participated in high-level talks with the Cuban government. Known in Miami and Havana as the "*diálogos*" (dialogues), these discussions centered on two issues: the release of additional prisoners, including the remaining group from Playa Girón; and an opportunity for other Cubans

[57] García, *Havana USA*, 57–59; Susana Peña, *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 27–28.

[58] At the time, some diplomats suggested that Castro was "trying to sabotage the evacuation." See "Cuban Dissidents Flown to Freedom," *New York Times*, 20 April 1980, E2.

[59] Martinez, "8,000 Seeking Freedom Jam Embassy in Havana," 20A.

[60] Mirta A Ojito, *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 147–50.

living in the United States to return to the island to see their loved ones.[61]

In 1979, roughly 100,000 Cubans and their U.S.-born children returned to the island to see their families and friends for the first time since they had left.[62] Amid these seismic events for Cubans both on and off the island, Vilaboa reconnected with some old friends who had gone on to occupy powerful positions within the Cuban military and the Ministry of the Interior and continued traveling to Cuba. He was there as the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy unfolded in April of 1980. According to journalist Mirta Ojito, Vilaboa met directly with Fidel Castro in the days before the airlift to Costa Rica began. They discussed the possibility that the Cuban government might allow Cubans from the U.S. to come to the island to retrieve their relatives who wished to leave, provided that they also take some of the people from the Peruvian Embassy. This would enable Cubans in the U.S. to reunite with their loved ones, and it would enable the Cuban government to regain control over how its citizens left the country. A few days later, after returning to the United States and just as the flights to San José began, Vilaboa was informed by a Cuban intelligence officer that he should proceed with the proposed plan. Cubans in the United States could come. All they had to do was find a boat and get it to Mariel.[63]

On April 17, Vilaboa secured time on the most popular radio platform in Miami, WQBA. The station's Spanish-language programming "appealed to the most politically conservative exiles and set the city's agenda regarding Cuba." Vilaboa and WQBA news director Jorge Luis Hernández put the word out – the Cuban government would not stop Cubans from going to get their loved ones in Cuba along with the people from the Peruvian Embassy, whose cause had

[61] García, *Havana USA*, 47–51.
[62] García, *Havana USA*, 51.
[63] Ojito, *Finding Mañana*, 151–53.

inspired marches and major public demonstrations by Cubans in South Florida.[64] "In a matter of hours," Ojito explains, "it seemed that everyone who didn't already have a boat was looking for one."[65]

On April 19, one day after the Cuban government suspended the Costa Rica flights, Vilaboa boarded a 41-foot boat at Miami Beach and left for Cuba.[66] The following day, as he and another boat captain made their way from a harbor near Havana to the Port of Mariel, *Granma* published a piece confirming that the Cuban government would not prevent any boats from entering Cuban waters to pick up their relatives, and the "*elementos antisociales*" from the Peruvian Embassy. By then, dozens of additional vessels were already en route from South Florida, and hundreds more were being prepared to sail.

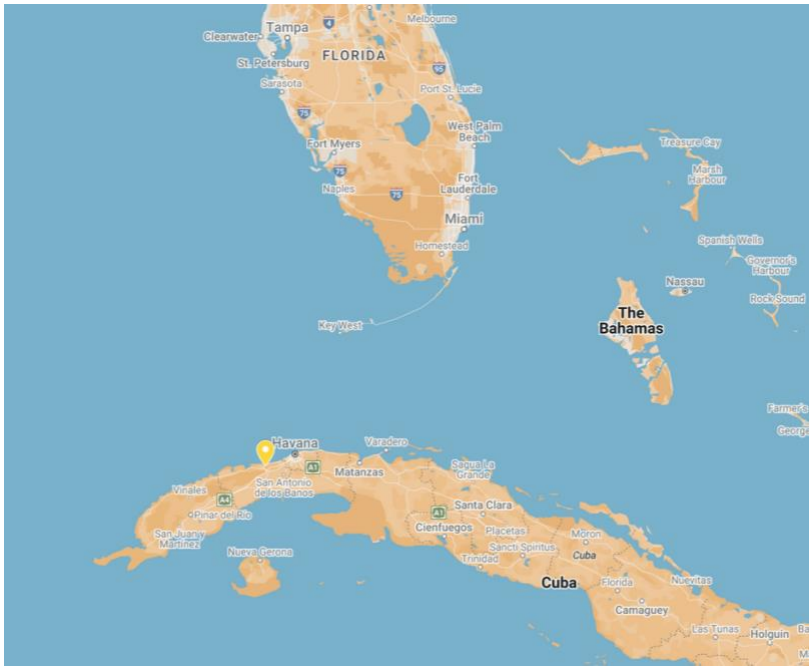


Figure 4.1 **Map of Straits of Florida between Cuba and the Florida Peninsula.** The yellow marker represents the location of the Port of Mariel, approximately twenty-five miles west of Havana. *Created with Google My Maps.*

[64] Dani Williams and Ivan A. Castro, "Enthusiastic Exiles Flood Streets," *Miami Herald,* 8 April 1980, 1A, 8A; Ana Veciana, "How many? Cubans here ask feds what refugee quota will be," *Miami News,* 12 April 1980, 7A; Ferrer, *Cuba,* 413.

[65] Ojito, *Finding Mañana,* 153, 156.

[66] Ojito, *Finding Mañana,* 157.

4.3 Making Enemies

Since the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy began, the Cuban government had sought to mobilize citizens against the people seeking to leave the country. This was one of the revolutionary leaders' well-worn tactics for consolidating support.[67] The state press had acted quickly to depict the people who forced their way into the Peruvian compound, along with a group that was already inside the embassy of Venezuela, as "criminals, *lumpens*, antisocial individuals, bums and parasites." One editorial insisted that, although Cuba did not "persecute nor harass homosexuals," a significant number had gone to the Peruvian Embassy. In the same sentence the authors used the alleged presence of this group, alongside "fans of gambling and drugs," to impugn the character of the asylum seekers. The editorial invoked the longstanding image of the productive revolutionary citizen to underscore the "softness," "delinquency," and "idleness" of the "Cubans" (written in quotation marks) who sought to leave the country. "A man does not wake up in the morning nor work intensely for many hours in the furrow, in the workshop, in the production and utilities centers to serve and feed parasites," the authors wrote.[68] The message was clear: the people leaving were no good; some were gay, some were shiftless, some were criminals, and none deserved to be called "Cuban."

The *Granma* editors published versions of the refrain being used at public displays of condemnation directed at the people who were seeking a way out: "Good riddance to the bums! Good riddance to the antisocials! Good riddance to the *lumpens*! Good riddance to the criminals! Good riddance to the scum!" *(¡Que se vayan los vagos! ¡Que se vayan los antisociales! ¡Que se vayan los lumpens! ¡Que se vayan los delincuentes! ¡Que se vaya la escoria!*).[69] Groups of

[67] García, *Havana USA*, 47.
[68] "La posición de Cuba," *Granma*, 7 April 1980, front page.
[69] "La posición de Cuba," front page.

citizens were mobilized through their workplaces, schools, and neighborhood Comités to condemn their fellow Cubans who had gone to the Peruvian Embassy. Small *"mítines-relámpago*" (lightning rallies) and "*actos de repudio"* (acts of repudiation) began in early April. When some people left the embassy compound temporarily to collect food and other items from their homes, they encountered crowds of people who hurled insults, and sometimes fists. These smaller actions were largely coordinated by the Comités, which helped to organize pressure campaigns in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces to compel Cubans to participate, and quickly grew into major demonstrations sponsored by the government.[70]

The first mass rally was organized for April 19 to coincide with the 19th anniversary of the defeat of the invading force at Playa Girón. The Cuban government claimed that a million people turned up for the "*Marcha del Pueblo Combatiente*" (March of the Fighting People).[71] The demonstrators marched past the Peruvian Embassy, where some 1,500 asylum seekers remained because they had not received "safe-conducts" (*salvoconductas*) or they did not trust government assurances that they would be permitted to leave the country later if they returned to their homes first.[72] The marchers chanted "*Pim, Pom Fuera — Abajo la gusanera*" (Pim, Pom, Get out! – Down with the bunch of maggots!), shouted "*Yanquí*, remember Girón," and danced down Fifth Avenue in Miramar to *conga* music.[73]

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[70] "Pleno respaldo popular al editorial de Granma que define la posición de Cuba ante los hechos registrados en la Embajada de Perú," *Granma*, 8 April 1980, front page; Martinez and Williams, "New Baby And Song In Cuba," 1A, 18A. For more on these *actos de repudio,* Abel Sierra Madero, "'Here, Everyone's Got Huevos, Mister!': Nationalism, Sexuality, and Collective Violence in Cuba during the Mariel Exodus," in *The Revolution from Within: Cuba, 1959-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 244–74.

[71] U.S. press outlets reported that the number of marchers was in the hundreds of thousands.

[72] A Peruvian diplomatic official claimed that the Cuban government stopped giving safe-conducts to its citizens inside the compound on Wednesday, April 9. Martinez and Williams, "New Baby And Song In Cuba," 18A.

[73] Dan Williams and William R. Amlong, "As Cubans Stage Celebration Miami Exiles Launch Flotilla," *Miami Herald*, 20 April 1980, in "The Cuban Exodus" (Special Reprint), *Miami Herald,* February 1981, 4.

The government's decision to organize the mass demonstration for the anniversary of the Girón invasion laid bare its effort to portray the ongoing crisis as a product of machinations by counterrevolutionary Cubans who were once again abetting the U.S. imperial project.[74] It was also part of a deliberate effort to convert the upheaval into a galvanizing experience for a generation of young Cubans who did not have personal memories of the terrifying invasion and thrilling victory that had taken place nearly twenty years earlier. It was, in the words of Lillian Guerra, "an opportunity for older Cubans to relieve the euphoria of those days and a chance for kids to experience it for the first time."[75] Indeed, long after the April 19, 1980, march, Cuban state media and the Ministry of the Interior returned repeatedly to the idea that the response to the situation at the Peruvian Embassy was just "Like during Girón," and that it was the "First Great Battle of a Generation of Young People."[76]

The effort to create another Girón through the series of mass demonstrations that began on April 19 was the latest episode in a longstanding campaign to generate support for the revolutionary government and its initiatives by focusing Cubans' attention on an ostensible enemy.[77] Fidel Castro himself had made clear that he saw a shared enemy as essential to the revolutionary project. In fact, on at least one occasion, he stated unequivocally, "The Revolution needs an enemy." He asserted that efforts by "imperialism" (that is, the United States) to "mobilize its bunch of maggots (*gusanera*)" had "virtue in that it invigorates the revolutionary, it

[74] Several scholars have noted this. See, for example, García, *Havana USA*, 56.

[75] Guerra, *Patriots and Traitors*, 380.

[76] "Como en Girón, la PNR en combate," *Moncada* XIV, no. 24, April 1980, 20; "Primer Gran Batalla de una Generación de Jóvenes," *Moncada* XV, no 4, June 1980, front cover.

[77] Two reporters for the *Miami Herald* claimed that Fidel Castro gave a December 1979 address in which he said, "Perhaps in a certain way we have been needing an enemy. When we have a clearly defined enemy, engaged in a hard-fought battle, we are more united, energetic and stimulated." See Williams and Amlong, "As Cubans Stage Celebration Miami Exiles Launch Flotilla," 4. While I have not yet been able to find a record of this speech, such a statement would be consistent with Castro's documented rhetoric.

fires him up, it awakens his fighting spirit." For a revolutionary to fully develop, Castro said, "he needs his antithesis, which is the counterrevolutionary."[78]

Castro and other government officials frequently invoked "the enemy" when discussing crime and the people allegedly responsible for it. While Cuban leaders often made a distinction between those who committed "counterrevolutionary" acts and the perpetrators of "common" offenses, from their first days in power they had cultivated a certain ambiguity between the two categories. The Council of Ministers laid an early foundation for this practice when it embedded the category of "counterrevolutionary" in the Cuban criminal code in July 1959.[79] During the early 1960s, the government significantly blurred the conceptual boundaries between "counterrevolutionary" and "common" (or "antisocial") crime when it classified offenses such as selling beef on the illicit market and burglarizing an occupied home as "counterrevolutionary."[80] In the years that followed, officials at the Ministry of the Interior often referred to their remit as the struggle against both "the antisocial enemy and the counterrevolutionary enemy," and the fight against both "counterrevolutionary and antisocial crime."[81] Such phrasing maintained an implicit distinction between these categories, while also reinforcing the idea that they were

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[78] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado ante los miembros del PURS de las provincias de Pinar del Río, La Habana y Matanzas," 22 February 1963, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/f220263e.html. For an analysis of the development of a Manichaean political culture in 1960s Cuba, see Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[79] Ley Num. 425, 7 July 1959, *Leyes del Gobierno Provisional de la Revolución* X (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1959), 7-25, https://ufdc.ufl.edu/aa00063775/00010, Latin American Collections, University of Florida, Digital Library of the Caribbean (hereafter LAC-UF). For a discussion of this important development, see Adèle G. van der Plas, *Revolution and Criminal Justice: The Cuban Experiment, 1959-1983* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1987), 16.

[80] Ley Num. 1018, 20 March 1962, *Leyes del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba* XLII (La Habana: Finanzas al Día, 1963), 14-16, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00063776/00012, LAC-UF; Ley Num. 1098, March 26, 1963, *Leyes del Gobierno Revolucionario de Cuba* 47 (La Habana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963), 20-23, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00063776/00017, LAC-UF.

[81] Dirección Política, Ministerio del Interior, "XIII Aniversario," *Moncada* VIII, no. 12, April 1974, 3-4; Sergio del Valle, open letter to Ministry of the Interior employees, *Moncada* X, no. 1, May 1975, n.p..

intimately related.

In 1980, after the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy began, government leaders went beyond blurring the conceptual line between "common criminals" and "counterrevolutionaries." They sought to erase it. Less than a week after the bus crashed into the diplomatic compound, *Granma* editors were already demonstrating this shift. "More and more the boundaries between the common criminal and the counterrevolutionary are disappearing," they wrote with regard to the thousands of people who were then seeking a way out of the country.[82] As part of the coordinated smear campaign against the would-be emigrants, the official magazine of the Revolutionary Armed Forces published the names of the six people who had been on the bus that broke through the fence at the embassy, as well as their alleged criminal records. The list included the following individuals and allegations: a man "linked with antisocial elements" (*vinculado a elementos antisociales*); a man who had been booked for theft at the First Precinct of the PNR, in Centro Habana, and punished on another occasion for a workplace infraction; a man – the driver of the infamous bus – who had been convicted of theft and selling marijuana and later expelled from his job as a bus driver for "robbery" (*robo*); and a man who allegedly sold goods on the illicit market. According to the official publication, the sole woman on the list had been convicted of theft and forging documents. The description also noted, pointedly, that she "[p]ractices santería." The final member of the group was the woman's 12-year-old son. The government outlet accused the boy, "[d]espite his young age," of having routinely "consorted with antisocial elements and delinquents" (*se relacionaba con elementos antisociales y delincuentes*).[83]

[82] "La posición de Cuba," front page.

[83] Jorge Luis Blanco, "Los sucesos de la embajada del Perú," *Verde olivo* XXI, no. 15, 13 April 1980, 11.

Regardless of the veracity of these allegations, the image that the state press sought to evoke was familiar and unmistakable. Not only had the people at the Peruvian Embassy rejected the revolution by seeking to leave Cuba, buy they were also thieves, drug dealers, and scammers who had preyed on their fellow citizens. They represented the dregs of society, people who had never been willing to make the sacrifices necessary for the collective good, who came from crime-ridden, poor, and disproportionately Afrodescendant neighborhoods such as Centro Habana, and who clung to the backwards beliefs held by the practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions. In case anyone missed the point, top government officials spelled it out. As the first boats arrived at the Port of Mariel from Florida, Vice Minister of the Interior Martínez Gil declared to the officers of the PNR, "[T]he boundaries between the common criminal and the counterrevolutionary criminal have been getting erased, and both categories may acquire a single form and a single expression."[84]

In some respects, the coordinated campaign of degradation and abuse in 1980 was not new. Revolutionary leaders had been describing their opponents as "*escoria*" (scum) and calling citizens who left the country "*gusanos*" (maggots or worms) from almost the moment they took power.[85] There were precedents, too, for the *actos de repudio*, including before the revolutionary period. But what happened amid the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy and during the build-up to

[84] Eva Álvarez, "Como en Girón: La PNR en combate," *Moncada* XIV, no. 24, April 1980, 23.

[85] García, *Havana USA*, 16; Bustamante, *Cuban Memory Wars*, 116, 181–84. Scholars in the United States often translate g*usano* as "worm." But it is used in Spanish as a generic term for all sorts of legless creatures, and in the context of Cuba its meaning may have been closer to "maggot." Many of the images of *gusanos* that appeared in editorial cartoons and on protest signs in revolutionary Cuba more closely resembled maggots than the earthworms often invoked by the term "worm" in English. Moreover, a popular joke in Cuba held that the people who had left as "*gusanos*" were welcomed back as "*mariposas*" (butterflies) in 1979, amid the thaw in the relationship between the Cuban government and leaders of the Cuban community in the United States. The joke only really worked because "*gusanos"* could be understood to mean both "maggots" (the larval stage in the life cycle of certain fly species) and "caterpillars" (the larvae of butterflies).

what would become the Mariel boatlift was especially ugly.[86]

In this instance, moreover, the Cuban government did something fundamentally different from what it had done in the past: it made it easy, and sometimes compulsory, for people like Viviana and Andrés to leave the country. The explicit elision of the categories of "counterrevolutionary" and "common" crime seeded the ground for – and served as an explicit justification of – what would ultimately amount to the banishment of tens of thousands of Cuban citizens with criminal records.

4.4 Producing Criminals

The Cuban government achieved this outcome through a controlled process of filtering and selection. Many observers interpreted announcements that circulated in Cuban newspaper and radio stories as indications that "all Cubans who wished to leave the island would be permitted to do so." Yet revolutionary officials and state media outlets maintained a degree of ambiguity in their pronouncements about Mariel. Their declarations were taken by Cubans both in the U.S. and on the island as suggesting that anyone whose relatives came to get them would be permitted to go.[87] The U.S. press expanded the scope of this interpretation, with journalists concluding from statements in Cuban government media outlets that "those in the Peruvian Embassy and, by implication, anyone else wishing to leave Cuba" would be "free to go to the

[86] Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 300–302; Sierra Madero, "'Here, Everyone's Got Huevos, Mister!': Nationalism, Sexuality, and Collective Violence in Cuba during the Mariel Exodus." The shame that many Cubans felt about what some did to their fellow citizens during those enfevered weeks has yet to be fully reckoned with in Cuba today. For an analysis of efforts to do so through theatre, see Mariel Martínez Alvarez, "Actos En Común: Interrupciones y Comunidades En El Teatro Cubano y Cubanoamericano (1970-2020)" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2023), Chapter 3.

[87] García, *Havana USA*, 60. Many scholars and journalists have described the terms of the deal in similar ways. This is understandable, given that this was the implied message in articles published in *Granma* and announcements made by *Radio Habana*. This common characterization of the Cuban government's declaration also reflects how many Cubans in Miami understood it at the time. But, as will be shown, the emigration process was more selective than such accounts suggest.

port of Mariel and board the boats waiting to take them to Key West."[88] Yet the phrasing that actually appeared in those outlets was vague, sometimes even cagey. One such *Granma* editorial stated that boats "coming from Florida to pick up antisocial elements" would not be received with "cannon fire" and that the Cuban government had "no objection to having them take them away."[89] The door to leave Cuba was ajar, but that did not mean that it had been thrown open – at least, not for everyone. Cuban police and migration officials decided who received exit permits and who did not. Included in the former group were most of those who had sought asylum at the Peruvian Embassy, and many – but not all – Cubans with U.S.-based relatives who went to Mariel to bring them back to the United States. It also included Andrés and Viviana, who at the time fell into neither the first nor the second group.



Figure 4.2 **"*¡Puerta abierta a la escorial!*"** (Open door for scum!), *Granma*, 8 April 1980.

[88] John M. Goshko, "State Dept. Seeks to Halt Sealift," *Washington Post*, 24 April 1980.

[89] Quoted in Marlise Simons, "Cuba Approves Refugees' Departure In Florida-Chartered Flotilla of Boats," *Washington Post*, 22 April 1980.

At the beginning of what Cubans were calling the *"puente marítima*" (bridge of boats) from Mariel to Key West, the revolutionary government continued to imply that, in addition to the individuals who had been at the Peruvian Embassy, anyone with relatives who sent for them would be permitted to sail north. On April 21, Radio Havana announced that two boats had been permitted to enter the harbor at Mariel and leave with groups of Cuban citizens. The government radio station stated that others who had been at the embassy would be permitted to leave in the same fashion. The actual process of leaving via Mariel required overcoming multiple logistical and bureaucratic hurdles, however. Cubans had to acquire an exit permit, which required a screening interview, before the migration officials, border guards, and military personnel posted at the docks would allow them onto the boats.[90] Some of the first groups of Cubans who arrived at Mariel to meet relatives who had come to retrieve them were subsequently turned back because they lacked exit documents. Such vessels were directed to take on other, unknown passengers whose departure had already been approved.[91]

Reporters from the United States recorded multiple stories of people who were turned away when they arrived in Mariel. A small group of elderly women who wanted to go to the U.S. to be with their relatives explained that they had taken a fourteen-hour bus trip from their town in eastern Cuba to Havana, where they then arranged for a car to take them the remaining twenty-five miles to Mariel. When they finally made it to the port town, however, they were told by migration officials that they could not leave because they did not have exit permits. The authorities directed them to return to Havana to request the proper documentation. In the days

[90] The exit permit requirement had been established in 1961, in part to limit the "brain drain" of Cuban with high levels of education or valued skills. García, *Havana USA*, 16–17; Bustamante, *Cuban Memory Wars*, 183.

[91] Benedict L. Stabile and Robert L. Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 2, folder 2, series 5, box 1, MOP-CHC, 2.

that followed, Cubans crowded around the limited number of telephones where it was possible to make long-distance calls to relatives in the U.S. who might arrange for boats to pick them up in Mariel. Then they lined up at offices where exit permits could be requested by those who had safe-conducts showing that they had been at the Peruvian Embassy or confirmation from relatives that a boat captain would be arriving with their name on a list.[92]

But some Cubans had little trouble securing permission to leave the country, whether they wanted to or not. Already in the first days of the boatlift, U.S. reporters on the ground in Cuba were noting that "a few common criminals" were waiting to leave from Mariel, including some who had been "let out of jail and given exit visas."[93] In Havana, news spread that migration officials were expediting permits for formerly incarcerated people and that some Cubans were receiving visits from police officers who informed them that they would be granted permission to leave. The government established temporary offices in certain neighborhoods to process these exit documents, and individuals with criminal records were reportedly being given priority over those who had been at the Peruvian Embassy.[94]

The Cuban government consistently denied that it was forcing people with criminal records out of the country. Yet its leaders also insisted that they had "the absolute right to authorize the exit of anti-socials who want to leave."[95] Years later, Fidel Castro would admit that

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[92] Jo Thomas, "Cubans Phoning Kin in U.S. to Get Them," *New York Times*, 24 April 1980, A17.

[93] Jo Thomas, "Castro Turns the Tables," *New York Times*, 24 April 1980, A1.

[94] Charles R. Babcock and Margot Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1980, A1.

[95] Heather Dewar, "Thunderstorm heads for Straights, 250 boats urged to make for port," *Miami News*, 2 May 1980, 11A. In a note later sent to the U.S. Interests Section, the Cuban government maintained that it had not sent "hardened criminals" to the United States. Rather, Cuban diplomats said that "the majority" of people with criminal records who had left were "thieves, gamblers and prostitutes" who would not have been considered criminals in the U.S. because the actions of such individuals were allegedly "not crimes" in the United States. This claim reflected longstanding revolutionary propaganda about endemic vice and corruption in the United States. See "Evening Reading, Cuba: Cuban Reply to U.S. Note Protesting Cuba's Sending Criminals to the U.S.," 12 June 1980, folder 2, series 4, box 1, MOP-CHC.

the government had encouraged the emigration of people with criminal records and that, while people convicted of "crimes of blood" were not supposed to be granted exist permits, there had been some who left the country "by mistake."[96]

In 1980, the Ministry of the Interior freely acknowledged that its agencies were screening people who sought to leave and attempting to facilitate the emigration of certain Cubans. The MININT Department of Immigration and Alienage (Departamento de Inmigración y Extranjería, DIE) oversaw the special sites for issuing passports and exit permits.[97] According to a staff writer for the official Ministry magazine, arrangements were made "to ensure that all emigration procedures for these undesirable elements were completed," including the "scum" who had been to the Peruvian Embassy.[98] Such accounts from the Cuban government, combined with numerous and consistent reports that the police were knocking on doors and encouraging or compelling people with criminal records to go to such sites to request exit permits, strongly suggests that this is precisely what occurred.

Evidence of the selective nature of the screening process also emerged in the stories of people who later recalled lying to Cuban police and emigration officials about their backgrounds to secure an exit permit. As the boatlift developed, word spread that people deemed "antisocials" by the government were being granted permission to leave the country – including formerly incarcerated people, individuals who had engaged in sex work, and Cubans with non-normative gender and sexual identities. Some Cubans fabricated their stories as a result. There were reports

[96] *Granma Weekly Review*, 24 February 1985 (special supplement,), 2, quoted in Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 231.

[97] Jesús Arboleya Cervera, *Cuba y los cubanoamericanos: el fenómeno migratorio cubano* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 2013), 51.

[98] Jesús Barreto, "Para que se vaya la escoria: Pasaporte a la infamia," *Moncada* XV, no. 1, May 1980, 24.

of people who "forged their papers pretending to be criminals so that they could get out."[99] On the other side of the Straits of Florida, reporters indicated that U.S. immigration officials were hearing repeatedly from Cubans that they had lied about their pasts to convince Cuban authorities to let them go. One 24-year-old woman told the *Miami News* that she had informed a Cuban immigration officer that she "was smoking things, taking drugs" and that she was "homosexual." A man in his early twenties told the same reporter, "When I found out that the people with problems and prisoners were being shown to the immigration centers, I went there immediately." He claimed that he told the authorities that he was "not employed" and "couldn't work," and they issued him his exit documents.[100]

If there had been a truly open door to leave Cuba, such fictions would not have been necessary. But once recorded in Cuban official records and relayed to U.S. immigration authorities and reporters, these stories contributed to the perceptions of the people leaving in the boatlift.[101] Cubans who manufactured criminal histories for themselves thus joined government-certified "antisocials" like Andrés and Viviana in Mariel as the boatlift began.

Reports from Cuba that the government was facilitating and sometimes coercing the exit of people with criminal records were later confirmed in separate accounts provided by individual Cubans who made the voyage. A twenty-four-old named Francisco Fuentes told a reporter in

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[99] David Hume, "Ex-Convict Had No Choice About Trip to U.S.," *Miami Herald*, 2 May 1980, 28A.

[100] Marilyn A. Moore, "U.S. agents weeding out criminals in alien exodus," *Miami News*, 8 May 1980, 9A.

[101] The incentive to confess falsely to illicit activity may also help explain the wide range of estimates that exist for the number of Mariel Cubans who arrived in the United States with criminal records. One of the largest of these figures comes from Rafael Hernández and Redi Gomis, "Retrato del Mariel: el ángulo socioeconómico," *Cuadernos de nuestra américa* 3, no. 5 (1986): 124–51. This study was based on the authors' access to official Cuban emigration records. They suggest that over 45 percent of the people who left in the boatlift had at some point been arrested or incarcerated. If those records contained a significant number of false confessions made by people who were fabricating stories to attain exit permits, that might partially account for an estimate that was significantly higher than the roughly 20-to-30 percent typically cited in U.S. sources.

Key West that he had been fired from his job for refusing to join the Young Communist League (Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas) and his local Comité. After that, he said, the government had insisted that he go to a rural area to cut sugar cane. When Fuentes refused, he was sent to prison for eight months. Years later, when the boatlift began, the police knocked on his door and told him to "leave for Florida or go to jail." Fuentes claimed that Cuban officials gave him documents indicating that he had been at the Peruvian Embassy. That was "a lie," he said. "Now I'm in a free country," he declared, "so I will tell the truth." Outlets from Miami to New York featured similar stories of people with criminal records who were either encouraged or compelled to join the nascent boatlift.[102] Another man who had recently arrived in Key West from Mariel made an appearance on a popular Spanish-language radio station in Miami and told a story much like that of Fuentes. He claimed that he had joined the boatlift after Cuban authorities came to his home and threatened him with death if he refused to leave. He also claimed that he, along with upwards of a thousand other Cubans with criminal records, had been instructed by officials on the island to tell U.S. immigration agents that they had been at the Peruvian Embassy. If not, Cuban authorities allegedly told him, "they would face a firing squad" in Florida.[103]

The similarities among such independent accounts, the precision with which they were rendered, and the fact that some Cubans volunteered self-incriminating stories upon arrival bolstered the credibility of these stories. After Jesús Blanco Pérez arrived in Florida, he provided an especially detailed description of the path that he and many other Cubans with criminal records had taken to Mariel. He told the *Miami Herald* that he had been locked up multiple times in Cuba for what the paper described as "petty crimes – vagrancy, theft, dealing on the black market." He was no longer in prison when the boatlift began, but the police found him in

[102] Babcock and Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," A1.
[103] Heather Dewar and Ana Veciana, "New fleet heads for Cuba," *Miami News*, 29 April 1980, 1A.

Havana. “They forced me to leave,” he explained. Blanco Pérez reported that the police had picked him up – along with many others who had at some point been incarcerated – and directed them to “leave the country or go to prison for four years.” He said that he was taken to a building on 43rd Avenue, in the Versailles neighborhood, on the border between the *municipios* of Marianao and La Lisa. His impression was that none of the people processed at the site on 43rd Avenue were “political prisoners.” The police used it to issue passports and exit documents only to so-called common criminals, Blanco Pérez said, “only the *lumpen*, as they call us.”[104]

The authorities then loaded him and some 100 other formerly incarcerated Cuban citizens onto a bus and transported them to Mariel. There, officials searched them, took all their personal possessions, and held them in a building operated by the Border Guard (Tropas Guardafronteras). After he was put on a boat and taken to the United States, Blanco Pérez told his story to U.S. immigration authorities. “I told the truth because I don’t think I have anything to fear here,” he explained to the *Miami Herald*. “I want to start a new life. I know many who are common criminals, are saying they were in the [Peruvian] embassy when they arrive here. I knew that if I said that, sooner or later they would find out that it was not true.” In fact, U.S. authorities had few ways to determine whether the stories Cubans told them were true. But Blanco Pérez and at least some of the other Cubans who arrived in the boatlift felt that it was best to be honest.[105]

Andrés was also honest about the fact that he had arrived at the Port of Mariel directly from prison. If the government transported him using the same method it employed for other incarcerated Cubans who left in the boatlift, he would have arrived in Mariel on one of the “separate buses,” distinct from the city buses regularly taking Cubans from Havana and other

[104] David Hume, “Ex-Convict Had No Choice About Trip to U.S.,” *Miami Herald*, 2 May 1980, 28A.
[105] Hume, “Ex-Convict Had No Choice About Trip to U.S.,” 28A.

cities to the port town.[106] Andrés later told his legal representatives that he had not been issued any exit documents, and that the police simply "put [him] on a boat."[107] Viviana's trajectory from prison to Mariel is less clear from the available record. She may also have been taken to Mariel directly from prison. Indeed, this is what several documents about her life later produced by U.S. officials suggest. Yet on at least one occasion Viviana insisted that she had been released from prison before the boatlift began.[108] Whether that state institution was in Guanajay, just outside Havana, or in her home province of Villa Clara is also unclear.[109] What is almost certain, however, is that she and Andrés were two of the people whose criminal records marked them for removal from the country.

Viviana and Andrés were probably confined in locations at Mariel designated for Cubans with criminal records who were waiting to be assigned to a boat.[110] According to others who left in the boatlift, most of the people who made their way to Mariel were held in a tent compound that they dubbed "El Mosquito" because of the conditions there, including the incessant buzz of biting insects. Some later reported that they were denied food for days and that they faced beatings from guards and attacks from dogs.[111] It is unlikely that accommodations for Andrés, Viviana, and other formerly incarcerated people were any better.

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[106] Dary Matera, "'Everybody going crazy' in Cuba port," Dary Matera, *Miami News*, 1 May 1980, 13A.

[107] United States Department of Justice Review Panel, Repatriation Case Summary, March 1990, 2.

[108] Cuban Review Plan (U.S. Department of Justice), "Interview Summary," June 1988, Series II, ALAS.

[109] There was a women's prison at Guanajay, in the present-day province of Artemisa, very close to Havana. Given that Viviana at one point said that she had moved to the capital as an adolescent, it seems plausible that she was incarcerated in Guanajay. However, the same U.S. government document that mentions "Guanejar prison" places it in Villa Clara, which was her home province. Hence the uncertainty. See U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986, Series II, ALAS.

[110] Charles R and Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," A1.

[111] William H. Wilcox, memorandum to John W. Macy, 5 June 1980, folder 9, box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection (CHC5175), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter FCC-CHC).

Understanding the paths that took people like them to Mariel requires going beyond existing explanations for the Cuban government's decision to initiate the boatlift. It has long been understood that the government sought to discredit the people who rushed to the Peruvian Embassy and the many others who subsequently sought to leave the country in 1980 by calling them "antisocials" and "criminals," and then placing individuals with criminal records on the boats.[112] There was more to the story, however, when it came to the decision by the Cuban government to use the crisis to transport people from prisons and others who had at some point been arrested or incarcerated in the past. There may have been practical considerations, for instance. The Cuban government had just spent several years implementing policies that increased the size of its prison population. Reducing the number of people in that population would have meant also reducing the government's responsibility to provide for them.

Yet the decision to use the boatlift as a mechanism for transporting these groups off the island was probably influenced at least as much by a shift in the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and in its general orientation to policing and incarceration. In 1979, the longtime leader of the Ministry, Sergio del Valle, was replaced. The man from Pogolotti who had become a medical doctor and militant revolutionary was in no way sparing when it came to people deemed threats to the revolutionary state. Moreover, to address so-called common crime, he advocated for intensive policing in largely poor and disproportionately Afrodescendant neighborhoods like the one where he grew up. He also oversaw the increase in the size of the police force in the late 1970s. However, del Valle had also preached the importance of respect for citizens' rights when it came to policing the "workers and peasants" of revolutionary Cuba, and he had consistently advocated for a rehabilitative – if inevitably coercive – approach to sentencing and confinement.

[112] García, *Havana USA*, 55–66.

As Minister of the Interior, he explicitly called on the employees of the various agencies under his command to ensure that stated commitments to preventative programs would no longer be "wet paper" (*papel mojado*), ineffectual and useless.[113] Regardless of the extent to which the Ministry realized this vision, del Valle was one of the more vocal and consistent advocates of this approach among the top officials who guided the revolutionary state.

His successor was not. In fact, his successor was the same man del Valle had been brought in to replace in 1968. Ramiro Valdés had been Minister of the Interior when the UMAP, understood to have been a Ministry project, were created.[114] His removal from the post had coincided with the scandal created by widespread reports of abuse in the camps, and the decision to shut them down. Valdés, who had called on everyday Cubans to help "annihilate crime" during his first turn as Minister of the Interior, returned to the post just as the severe statutes of the Código Penal took effect in 1979.[115] His return suggests that Fidel Castro and others in the Council of State saw him as the right person to oversee the country's police and prisons in an era of *mano firme*.

Like Valdés, Castro had at times questioned the merits of rehabilitation. While he often expressed faith in the power of education – and reeducation – to reform young Cubans, on at least one occasion he had cast serious doubt on the broader applicability of this model. Shortly after Valdes's first stint as Minister of the Interior, Castro told a crowd on the steps of the University of Havana that "there are some types of incorrigible criminals, criminals who because

[113] "Carta al Militante," *Moncada* IV, no. 44, January 1970, 17.

[114] Antoni Kapcia, *Cuba in Revolution: A History since the Fifties*, Contemporary Worlds (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 134–35.

[115] Ramiro Valdés, "Aniquilemos a los ladrones," *Bohemia* 59, 14 April 1967, 79. Note that the title, presumably chosen by the magazine editors, appears to have been somewhat stronger than what Valdés himself wrote in this instance. The title translates to, "Let's annihilate thieves." In the article itself, Valdés described methods that Cubans should employ "*para aniquilar a la delincuencia*" (to annihilate crime).

of their past, because of entrenched habits, are incapable of adapting to normal life, incorrigible, unrehabilitatable" (*irrehabilitables*). He then referred to the fact that some people in prison "continue to do wrong, continue at times to commit murders, and they accumulate more and more years" of confinement. Castro said that this phenomenon was "worthy of sociological study" and that it was important to "contemplate the problem of what to do with that category of incorrigible individuals." Then Castro floated a chilling possible solution: "And it could be that it's necessary to consider one day the need to get rid of them completely" (*E incluso puede ser que se tenga que plantear un día la necesidad de eliminarlos radicalmente*).[116]

Eleven years later, on May 1, 1980, Castro spoke to a massive crowd gathered to commemorate May Day in Havana. More than 6,000 Cubans had already made the voyage from Mariel to Key West, and well over a thousand boats were anchored in the harbor to the west of Havana, waiting to carry more people north.[117] Standing beneath the massive monument to Cuban national hero José Martí in the renamed Plaza de la Revolución (Plaza of the Revolution), Castro lambasted the "e*scoria*" (scum) who were leaving the country. He reiterated some of his recent comments that the "the work of a revolution and the construction of socialism" are "free and voluntary" endeavors. "Anyone who does not have revolutionary genes," Castro continued, "who does not have revolutionary blood, who does not have a mind that can adapt to the idea of a revolution, who does not have a heart that can adapt to the effort and the heroism of a revolution, we do not need in our country." According to the official transcript, the crowd punctuated moments like this with shouts of *"¡Que se vayan!*" and "*¡Que se vaya la escoria!*"

[116] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en la concentración efectuada como culminación de los actos organizados para honrar los mártires del 13 de marzo de 1957," 13 March 1969, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1969/esp/f130369e.html.

[117] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Cuban Entrant Data," folder: Reading File, box 16, Director's File, CHTF; Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 8.

Later in the speech, the Cuban leader reiterated the claim that the Cuban government had "never deported anybody" but that its leaders had the "absolute right to authorize the departure of antisocials, and that is what we are doing."[118]

Castro's references to heritable traits – to genes and blood – may have been more than metaphors. His words may have reflected prevailing ideas about how crime worked. Leaders from Sergio del Valle to Fidel Castro had repeatedly claimed that crime and juvenile delinquency persisted in revolutionary Cuba because pathological ideas and behaviors from the capitalist past had been handed down from one generation to the next. In keeping with a long social scientific tradition in Cuba and across the Americas, they alleged that this inheritance was particularly evident in broken homes and squalid neighborhoods. Castro and some of his allies in the Cuban government may have seen the Mariel boatlift as a way to break the chain of transmission.

In fact, this is exactly how one close observer explained the inclusion of people with criminal records in the boatlift less than three years after it happened. Siro del Castillo was in Miami when the boats from Mariel started to arrive, and over the next decade he would work with many Cubans who had at some point been incarcerated on the island through a variety of roles. Del Castillo was sympathetic to their experiences, in part, because he had experienced the coercive force of the Cuban state firsthand: he had been detained in a labor camp before he left for the United States in 1973.[119] Del Castillo knew from firsthand experience how Cuban reeducation authorities talked about and justified their work. He knew that Cuba, in the eyes of its leaders, had "a serious problem of Juvenile Delinquency." And he knew that one of the primary explanations for its persistence in Cuba was that certain ideas and behaviors had been

[118] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto conmemorativo del Primero de Mayo," 1 May 1980, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/f010580e.html.

[119] Siro del Castillo, notes from interview with the author, Miami, Florida, 29 October 2015.

"inherited from the old society" and transmitted from one generation to the next.[120]

In 1983, del Castillo gave a presentation to the Office of Refugee Resettlement in Washington, D.C., in which he outlined a compelling and comprehensive explanation for one of the most distinctive features of the boatlift. He posited that "[t]he best and only way to cut this transmission of [criminogenic] factors, from the point of view of Castro's regime, is to eliminate (once and for all) the real and potential transmit[te]rs. A totalitarian system has two options to do this," del Castillo argued. "One is to kill all the transmit[te]rs. The other is to do a mas[s]ive deportation. We firmly believe that they took the second one, because with this he also will create problems to the U.S., will embarrass the Cubans of the first waves, and will change the attention of the public opinion from the Peruvian Embassy to the 'Mariel's Criminals.' And this is our modest theory."[121] Modest or not, del Castillo's theory was wholly consistent with the history of criminal policy in revolutionary Cuba and with the events that had precipitated the Mariel boatlift.

4.5 Conclusion

By 1980, people like Andrés and Viviana were no longer getting the benefit of the doubt. The advocates of the rehabilitative approach known as *prevención social* had lost influence within the Ministry of the Interior. The officials in charge of the Cuban criminal legal system were increasingly arguing that certain people were irredeemable – that they could not be helped. To an extent, this trajectory echoed processes then unfolding in the United States. Julilly Kohler-Hausmann describes the 1970s in the U.S. as a period during which there was a shift in government emphasis from "transforming marginalized individuals to protecting good, deserving

[120] Siro del Castillo, "Cubans of 1980," an informal presentation at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Washington, D.C., 16 February 1983, 7-8, folder 5, box 1, series 1, MOP-CHC.
[121] Siro del Castillo, "Cubans of 1980," 8-9.

citizens from these groups."[122] The punitive impulses of many political leaders and some of their constituents, which drove this shift in the United States, also gained momentum in Cuba in the late 1970s. On the island, this culminated not only in a growing prison population and a harsh new criminal code, but also in the decision to banish tens of thousands of people with criminal records by way of the Mariel boatlift.

Fidel Castro and his allies took advantage of years of rhetoric that had gradually eroded the boundary between "common" and "counterrevolutionary" crime. They then claimed that the line between the two had vanished in order to justify their decision. The refrain in all the speeches and the state media editorials was, "*¡Que se vayan!*." Good riddance. Hundreds of thousands of people chanted, "*¡Que se vayan!*," at mass state-sponsored demonstrations for them to signal support for the revolutionary government and disdain for their fellow citizens who were "abandoning" the country. The message was clear: Cuba did not want or need the people who were sailing north. To the political leaders who oversaw their departure, it mattered little whether those people had chosen to board a boat or not.

[122] Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough,* 6.

Chapter 5 Carceral Migrations: The Mariel Boatlift, U.S. Immigration Law, and Ad Hoc Detention

When Viviana arrived in the Cuban port town of Mariel, Rubén – a young man from Havana who also had been in prison until recently – had already come and gone. Each one, it seems, in recent years had been charged by Cuban police with existing in "*un estado de peligrosidad*" (a state of dangerousness). In Rubén's case, the Cuban police may have arrested him because of an allegation that he was not engaged in some form of state-sanctioned labor. The U.S. Department of Justice attorneys who later reviewed information that he provided about his life in Cuba indicated that he had been convicted in 1978 "on a charge of 'endangerment' – i.e., for refusing to work." While Viviana would later claim that she had been released from confinement well before the boatlift began, Rubén's record is clear: he was released from prison by Cuban authorities "to join the Mariel boatlift."[1]

The boat carrying Rubén docked at Key West in early May 1980.[2] About a week later, Viviana followed.[3] Some of the first people they encountered there would have been men

[1] U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990, Series I, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

The reference by the Department of Justice attorneys on the panel to "endangerment" was likely a poor translation of the Cuban legal category of "*peligrosidad*," a feature of the country's criminal statutes since the 1930s that empowered the police with broad discretionary authority. As discussed in Chapter 3, this charge was used by revolutionary law enforcement officials to penalize a wide range of alleged transgressions, ranging from political dissidence to absence from assigned work duties to engagement in non-normative sexual activity.

[2] U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

[3] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986, Series II, ALAS.

wearing olive green fatigues. To them, the military personnel who helped to oversee the arrival of Cuban newcomers must have looked eerily family: the attire was not so different from that of the Cuban Border Guard (Tropas Guardafronteras) who had seen them off at the Port of Mariel.[4] Both Viviana and Rubén would soon find themselves living under the watch of more people in uniforms. The U.S. government put Rubén, and then Viviana, on planes and transferred them to Fort Chaffee, an Army base in northwestern Arkansas.[5] If they had entered the United States with hopes of being free to make new lives for themselves, their arrival at Fort Chaffee must have been a shock. Once again, they were confined – this time behind the chain-link fences of a U.S. military base.

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This chapter explores the crucial first months of the U.S. government response to the Mariel boatlift, a chaotic period during which nearly the entire boatlift population arrived, and the Carter administration made a series of ad hoc policy decisions with profound consequences for the lives of people like Rubén and Viviana. Their paths reflected a complex process of selection and filtering that had begun in Cuba and continued after they arrived in the United States. Both large-scale policy decisions and countless individual expressions of discretionary authority by a range of state actors fundamentally shaped their trajectories.

As had been the case with the system of criminalization and policing that Rubén and Viviana navigated in Cuba, there was a direct relationship between beliefs, prejudices, and

[4] For references to the different entities involved in receiving the Mariel Cubans at Key West and in Miami, see Joseph B. Treaster, "Florida's Governor Asks U.S. Help on Cuban Refugees," *New York Times*, 30 April 1980, A11; Combined Miami News Services, "Flights, aid offers show rising interest in assisting refugees," *Miami* News, 10 May 1980, 6A.

[5] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, July 1990, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS); U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986.

narratives about "distinct human types" and the hasty decisions that U.S. law enforcement agents made about the potential threat posed by individuals arriving from Mariel.[6] The Cuban government had granted exit permits to tens of thousands of people because they had criminal histories or because they fabricated such histories. With pen marks in files created in Key West, Miami, and military bases around the country, U.S. immigration officials categorized at least 25,000 of these same individuals as suspected "criminals" because of the information they shared about their pasts.[7]

The stories told through official documents and news stories about people with criminal records arriving from Mariel contributed to an overarching narrative that decisively shaped U.S. government responses to the boatlift. After initially taking a hands-off approach – informed by the precedents of Cold War-era refugee policies and vehement support for the exodus from Cubans in South Florida – the Carter administration responded to pressure from Congress and negative press coverage by implementing ad hoc processes designed to control the movement of "Mariel Cubans" into the country and, ultimately, to stop the boatlift. Congressional demands to prevent the unrestricted admission of Cuban newcomers stemmed from two primary concerns. First, a major piece of new legislation, the Refugee Act of 1980, had gone into effect just weeks before the boatlift began. The sudden admission of tens of thousands of Cubans threatened immediately to undermine its purpose and its authority. Second, influential lawmakers were deeply concerned about the evidence that there was a significant "criminal element" among the people coming off the boats in Key West.[8]

The demographic profile of the newcomers reinforced growing suspicions about their

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[6] Juan Carlos Fernández, "Una nueva visión de un antiguo oficio," *Moncada* V, no. 2, July 1970, 27.

[7] Juan Clark, Jose I. Lasaga, and Rose S. Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1981), 7.

[8] Morton Lucoff, "U.S. to begin processing refugees," *Miami News*, 1 May 1980, 11A.

pasts and the potential threat that they posed. Gender, family status, age, and race were crucial factors in shaping perceptions of the Mariel arrivals. The U.S. government identified 70 percent of the overall boatlift population as male and classified 60 to 65 percent of Mariel Cubans as unmarried. Approximately 67 percent of all arrivals were under the age of 36.[9]

These characteristics differentiated the new Cuban arrivals from their predecessors, but the racial composition of the newcomers represented perhaps the most significant point of distinction. Estimates of the percentage of Afrodescendent Cubans among the Mariel arrivals ranged from 20 to 40 percent.[10] Federal data compiled at the end of the boatlift suggests that at least 30 percent of the newcomers were categorized upon arrival as Black or *mulato*.[11] Race constituted a major contrast between Mariel Cubans and the established Cuban community. At the time, at least 90 percent of the Cubans already living in the United States were classified as "White."[12] The boatlift was different. For the first time since the Cuban revolution, the people participating in a mass migration from the island reflected to some extent the racial diversity of

[9] The demographic data reported by federal agencies were not always consistent. Slight conflicts in information are sometimes evident even within the same report. The estimates reported here reflect a range of figures presented in multiple documents regarding the 124,779 total Mariel arrivals. Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980, folder 133, box 24, series II, Cuban Refugee Center Records (CHC0218), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter CRC-CHC); Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 30 November 1980, folder 134, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC. Also see Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 33–37. The gender gap may have reflected the number of boatlift arrivals who had been coerced into leaving because of their criminal records and the participation of men who had hoped to leave the island during the Freedom Flights between 1965 and 1973 but had not been permitted to do so because of military service requirements. See Thomas D. Boswell, Manuel Rivero, and Guarione M. Diaz, *Bibliography for the Mariel-Cuban Diaspora* (Gainesville: Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, 1988), 5.

[10] Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus*, 7.

[11] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980.

[12] Benigno E. Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races: A Review and Interpretation of the Problem," *Latin American Research Review* 11, no. 1 (1976): 104; María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 68; Thomas D. Boswell and Manuel Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980" (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, Research Institute for Cuban Studies, 1988), 23.

its population.

The Carter administration responded to growing concerns about the "criminals" among the new arrivals by implementing a more rigorous screening procedure. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) determined fairly quickly that thousands of the Mariel Cubans had criminal records. Immigration officials also concluded, however, that most of those with such a history had been arrested and imprisoned for offenses that the U.S. government considered to be minor in nature. Federal officials frequently told reporters that this group consisted mostly of people who had been arrested for offenses such as "petty theft" and "black marketeering."[13] The number of Mariel Cubans suspected of crimes that the federal government deemed serious (often characterized by officials "felonies") was miniscule. Several dozen Cubans classified as "felons" by federal authorities arrived during the first weeks. Of course, most of the people arriving from Mariel had no criminal record at all, and many had close relatives in the Miami area.

The White House created three primary pathways into the United States to reflect each of the four main categories created for Mariel Cubans: 1) individuals with close family members in South Florida; 2) individuals not thought to have relatives in South Florida; 3) individuals suspected of having committed offenses seen as minor in Cuba; and 4) individuals suspected of having perpetrated crimes perceived as serious. Most of the people in the first group were taken to holding areas and screening sites in the Miami area and quickly released to their relatives. Those who did not have close family members in South Florida, and newcomers like Rubén and Viviana who admitted that they had at some point been arrested or incarcerated in Cuba for minor offenses, were transported by the U.S. government to one of four "resettlement camps"

[13] Heather Dewar, "85 of new Cuban refugees held in probe," *Miami News*, 2 May 1980, 1A, 11A.

created on military bases around the country. There, they were interviewed by the INS and other federal law enforcement agencies. In most cases, the people in this group were then added to the caseload of a resettlement agency and set up for placement with a "sponsor" – someone who would agree to find them a job and a place to live. Finally, several hundred Mariel Cubans suspected of having committed "felonies" before they arrived were sent directly to federal prisons for further screening and, in some cases, for hearings to determine whether they were eligible for admission to the United States.

These Carter administration policies, refracted through disparities already created at the point of departure in Cuba, produced major race and gender discrepancies in the screening and resettlement process.[14] Like Rubén and Viviana, half of the nearly 125,000 Cubans who made the voyage were sent to one of the camps created by the Carter administration. And like Rubén, an estimated 50 percent of the roughly 62,500 people transferred to the camps by the Carter administration were people of African descendant. By contrast, Black and *mulato* Cubans accounted for only about 10 percent of the approximately 62,200 Mariel Cubans who were processed in South Florida and released to relatives in the area. Men were also overrepresented in the camp population. People classified as male made up 60 to 70 percent of Mariel arrivals, but they comprised nearly 85 percent of those sent to the camps.[15] Viviana, then, formed part of a distinct minority of women who had to navigate life confined in these spaces.[16]

During their time confined at U.S. military bases, Viviana, Rubén, and tens of thousands

[14] Alexander M. Stephens, "'I Hope They Don't Come to Plains': Race and the Detention of Mariel Cubans, 1980-1981" (MA thesis, University of Georgia, 2016).

[15] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980.

[16] For an exploration of the experiences of Mariel women in the camps and the gendered dimensions of prejudices directed at camp residents, see Melissa Hampton, "'A Tent City Is Not a Place for a Family': Mariel Cuban Women and Gendered Disorder at Regional Resettlement Facilities," *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2021): 3.

of other Cuban newcomers experienced the boredom, frustration, and occasional dangers typical of life in refugee camps.[17] They waited to hear when they would be approved for release, and they lived alongside other bored and frustrated people who had not anticipated being detained after they arrived in the United States. The people in the camps also faced an uncertain future in a country where hostility to their presence was growing, and where the federal government not inclined to provide them with all the support that they might need. Throughout this complicated and vitally important period of contingency, the Carter administration made decisions that fundamentally shaped the futures of many who had made the voyage from Mariel.

5.1 Tempest-Tossed

Rubén had left Mariel first. While he was waiting to be assigned to a boat in the harbor, the 110-mile crossing to Key West was proving treacherous for many of the 15-to-20,000 people who preceded him.[18] Some of the vessels that ferried them to Florida were barely seaworthy. Many set sail dangerously overloaded with passengers. At first, most boats that arrived were owned by Cubans living in South Florida who already had one or who chartered one for the purpose of retrieving their relatives and those of others in the established U.S. Cuban community. Some fishing vessels with seasoned crews took contracts to bring groups across the Straits, but the thousands of boats that eventually made the passage often did so under the guidance of inexperienced captains who were not prepared for the hazards they encountered.[19]

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[17] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

[18] As of May 8, more than 23,000 arrivals had been recorded by the U.S. government. George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 8 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports – Miami, box 1, Subject File, Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force (220.18.24), Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter CHTF).

[19] Stuart Eizenstat, transcript of undated interview with Coast Guard Admiral John Costello, 14, folder 13, series 1, box 1, Mirta Ojito Papers (CHC5281), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter MOP-CHC); Benedict L. Stabile and Robert L. Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 4-5, folder 2, series 5, box 1, MOP-CHC.

By the third day of what some U.S. press outlets were calling the "Freedom Flotilla," the Coast Guard was receiving distress calls from boats that had broken down or run into other problems at sea. Some had to be towed to Florida. In the meantime, Key West filled with boats on trailers "lined-up 50 to 100 deep" at the ramps where vessels launched for Mariel.[20]

Then, "the weather went to hell." The gusts were strong enough to force the Naval Air Station near Key West to shut down its operations. The number of search-and-rescue calls reaching the Coast Guard soon became overwhelming. After the tempest passed, the Coast Guard found multiple "abandoned and capsized craft." One of the overturned boats held the bodies of two people who lost their lives trying to make the crossing to retrieve their relatives. Two days later, the weather turned again. A "line of thunder storms" brought severe winds and "12 foot seas." This time a warning about the storms reached the Cuban Border Guard and led to a temporary slowdown in vessels departing the island. That decision likely saved lives.[21]

When Rubén made the voyage in early May, the 10-to-12-hour crossing remained perilous, but the Border Guard continued to oversee the launch of crowded boats from Mariel.[22] At least 25 people died at sea during the most intense phase of the mass boatlift.[23] Yet the daily maritime traffic also became routine, which created opportunities for ritual and for profit. If the boat that carried Rubén passed near the Coast Guard cutter "Shoalwater," he might have heard a rock song blasting from its speakers with the chorus, "You don't have to live like a refugee!"

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[20] Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 4.

[21] Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 7, 10-11.

[22] Stabile and Scheina, 14; John M. Crewdson, "Hundreds in Boats, Defying U.S., Sail for Cuba to Pick Up Refugees," *New York Times*, 25 April 1980, A1, A10.

[23] Some 112,000 of the nearly 125,000 total boatlift participants arrived in the U.S. during the first 7 weeks of the process. Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Cuban Entrant Data," folder: Reading File, box 16, Director's File, CHTF; William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 27 May 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection (CHC5175), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter FCC-CHC); Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus."

The ship's crew had chosen the 1980 hit, "Refugee," by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers as the anthem for its work in the Straits.[24] Reports emerged that commercial captains were charging U.S.-based Cubans between $1,000 and $5,000 for each relative they retrieved from Mariel.[25] And a group started selling T-shirts commemorating the "Freedom Boatlift," some of which had been acquired by Cubans on the boats to wear for their arrival in Key West.[26]

Onshore, the first groups of Cubans from Mariel were embraced by the established South Florida Cuban community and covered favorably by the U.S. press. Initial news stories centered on families reunited after years apart and new arrivals eager to begin their lives in the United States. Subscribers to national newspapers read that "[w]omen and children" were boarding boats in Mariel followed by "the very old, and then couples, some holding hands."[27] The television news audience in South Florida heard that there were "grandmothers" and "babies" among "the seekers and hopeful" who were arriving in Key West.[28]

Yet wariness almost immediately tempered this warm welcome. Even some of the sympathetic early accounts were accompanied by warnings that "criminals" were arriving alongside the grandmothers and the babies on the boats. Captains reported that Cuban officials were capping the number of relatives of U.S.-based Cubans permitted on each vessel. The Cuban authorities insisted that captains make room for passengers they selected, including people who

[24] "Theme song adopted for Cuban exodus," *Miami News*, 5 May 1980, 7A.

[25] Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 8; John M. Goshko, "State Dept. Seeks to Halt Sealift," *Washington Post*, 24 April 1980.

[26] Bob Murphy, "Cottage tee shirt industry has designs on the freedom theme," *Miami News*, 9 May 1980, B1.

[27] Jo Thomas, "More Boats From Florida Reach Cuban Port to Pick Up Refugees," *New York Times*, 23 April 1980, A6.

[28] Beverly McFarland, WTVJ Newstape Cut Stories, no. 249, 25 April 1980, Wolfson Florida Moving Image Archives, Miami Dade College Archives Department, Miami, FL (hereafter Wolfson Archives).

had not been among the more than 10,000 Cubans at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana.[29] Just a few days after the boatlift began, the *New York Times* ran a news story stating that Fidel Castro was "ridding himself of a few people that no country would want." The outlet's Cuba reporter spoke with a woman in Havana who told her that "two of her brothers, both common criminals, had been let out of jail and given exit visas" to join the exodus from Mariel.[30] Several days later, the *Washington Post* published the following headline: "FBI Discovering Some 'Undesirables' Among Flood of Refugees from Cuba." FBI director William H. Webster informed reporters that "a small number of Cuban intelligence agents, criminals and prostitutes have been discovered."[31] A few days later, Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré told local outlets that Fidel Castro was "using the Freedom Flotilla to rid Cuba of criminals and social misfits."[32] Just over a week into the boatlift, then, the foundation for what would become the dominant story about the new arrivals was already being laid. It appeared that, like Rubén and Viviana, a significant number of them had at some point been in trouble with the law in Cuba.

For a time, though, prominent voices continued to urge support for the people arriving from Mariel. Outside the established communities of Cubans in the United States, some of the most forceful calls to embrace the people arriving in the boatlift came from those who saw refugee admissions as a key tool of U.S. foreign policy. Conservative columnist George Will lamented that "the West has so completely lost its flair, even its appetite, for ideological warfare." He endorsed a longstanding U.S. Cold War doctrine of embracing refugees from

[29] National Forum on Immigration and Refugee Policy, "From Mariel to the Present: A Chronology of Events," folder 12, box 2548, Subject Files, Dante B. Fascell Congressional Papers, University of Miami Special Collections (hereafter DFP-UMSC); John M. Crewdson, "Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla," *New York Times,* 24 April 1980, A1, A15

[30] Jo Thomas, "Castro Turns the Tables," *New York Times*, 24 April 1980, A1, A12.

[31] Charles R. Babcock, "FBI Discovering Some 'Undesirables' Among Flood of Refugees From Cuba," *Washington Post,* 29 April 1980, A4.

[32] Heather Dewar and Ana Veciana, "New fleet heads for Cuba," *Miami News,* 29 April 1980, 1A.

socialist states.[33] Will described the latest Cuban arrivals as "the kind of people who built America" and "a resource more precious than all the oil under Saudi Arabia." He even suggested that President Jimmy Carter should invite them over for a lunch at White House.[34]

Members of Congress from both parties deployed similar rhetoric. In a speech at the christening of the U.S.S. *Michigan* – a submarine designed to carry missiles with nuclear warheads – U.S. Representative Lucien Nedzi, a Democrat and the son of Polish immigrants, said of the nascent Mariel boatlift, "Cuba, a regional 'showplace' for communism, has suffered the recent embarrassment of thousands of desperate people risking all to leave."[35] Republican Representative John Edward Porter of Illinois delivered remarks that began with the famous words of writer Emma Lazarus. "Give me your tired, your poor…The wretched refuse of your teeming shore…Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me," he said, quoting the poem by Lazarus inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Porter then essentially plagiarized George Will, at times repeating almost verbatim the columnist's claims that the Mariel arrivals were a "precious resource" and that they had "voted with their feet." The President, Porter said, "should wade out into the Atlantic Ocean to welcome with open arms these homeless, tempest-tost."[36]

Porter also inserted into the Congressional Record the full text of a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, which invoked similar Cold War themes.[37] The editors of the *Journal* charged the

[33] Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1986), xvii–xviii. As historian Carl Bon Tempo has explained, however, U.S. foreign policy "played an important, but not the sole and starring, role in the history of American refugee affairs." Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

[34] George F. Will, "A Nation of Emigrants," *Washington Post*, 27 April 1980, F7.

[35] 96 Cong. Rec. 9556 (1980).

[36] 96 Cong. Rec. 9532 (1980).

[37] 96 Cong. Rec. 9571 (1980).

Carter administration with hypocrisy for having criticized the governments of Malaysia and Thailand when they recently turned away Southeast Asian asylum seekers, only to then threaten fines for the captains ferrying "our own boat people" from Cuba across the Straits of Florida. The editorial diminished concerns expressed by elected officials in both Florida and Washington about "the expenses of resettlement" and the "social impact on Dade County" in South Florida, as well as reports from immigration officials that "Castro [was] sending us prison inmates." While not insignificant, these problems could "be met with a minimum of imagination and effort" according to the editors of the generally conservative news outlet. After all, "America has assimilated immigrants before." Jimmy Carter, they wrote, should "go down to Key West to shake hands with the next group of refugees to come off the docks."[38]

But officials who went to those docks were troubled by what they saw. In one of the first Congressional hearings to devote significant time to the unfolding mass migration in the Straits of Florida, members of the House Judiciary Committee shared concerns about the *types* of people who were on the boats. The starkest warnings came from Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman, a Democrat from New York's 16th District.[39] Holtzman joined the hearing fresh off a trip to South Florida, where she witnessed firsthand the arrival of Cubans from Mariel. "I saw, on the one hand," she said, "enormously impressive efforts by the local Cuban community, both in Key West and Miami, to help in the resettlement of their [com]patriots." Yet alongside "people who clearly were fleeing political persecution" or "seeking family reunification," Holtzman informed the committee, she also met "people we can term 'common criminals.'" Especially concerning was the story she heard from "a young ma[n] who said he had been imprisoned twice for petty

[38] "Our Boat People," *Wall Street Journal*, 29 April 1980, 22.

[39] Holtzman was also the Brooklyn-born daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants and a Harvard-educated lawyer who had worked civil rights cases for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and helped lead a campaign to deport Nazi war criminals who had been improperly admitted to the United States.

theft." He told Holtzman that he had been taken by Cuban officials to a "central processing center" where he and some 700 other formerly incarcerated people were given a choice: "Either go to the United States now or face jail." Holtzman said that when she asked the young man if anyone had "picked the alternative, facing jail," he simply laughed. While she acknowledged that it was possible that the story was fabricated, she reported that "virtually every single adult male" with whom she had spoken in Key West that morning admitted to having been in prison at some point before leaving Cuba.[40]

As similar stories made their way into a growing number of U.S. press accounts, they hastened a shift in the ways that many perceived the newcomers.[41] Most of the people making their way onto the boats were not people with criminal records. Some were political dissidents. Many wanted to be reunited with their loved ones. Many were disillusioned with the revolutionary government and the political culture it had cultivated. And many were losing faith in the assurances of its leaders that working hard and sacrificing in the present would lead to collective prosperity in the future. They were tired of "only one ounce of meat each week" and "too much rice and beans."[42] Of course, Cubans who had spent time in a jail, prison, or labor camp undoubtedly held some of these same motivations. But ten days from the start of the boatlift, the threatening presence of "criminals" among the new arrivals began to overshadow

[40] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 96th Cong., 2nd Session, 30 April 1980 (unpublished hearing reproduced by National Archives), 31-32, https://congressional-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1980-hjh-0056?accountid=14667.

[41] Multiple U.S. news outlets published accounts from Mariel Cubans in which they a detailed a process strikingly similar to the one recounted to Holtzman. See, for example, Dewar and Veciana, "New fleet heads for Cuba," 1A, 6A; David Hume, "Ex-Convict Had No Choice About Trip to U.S.," *Miami Herald*, 2 May 1980, 28A; Charles R. Babcock and Margot Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1980, A1; Dewar, "85 of new Cuban refugees held in probe," 1A.

[42] John M. Crewdson, "Young Refugee Lured by Talk Of U.S. Plenty," *New York Times*, A9l Also see Jo Thomas, "Castro Turns the Tables," *New York Times*, 24 April 1980, A1, A12.

accounts that conveyed the spectrum of reasons that had led Cubans to leave from Mariel.[43]

The Carter administration had hoped to avoid this situation, even before officials began to hear reports about "criminal" arrivals. The State Department helped to negotiate a plan to fly Cubans who were seeking asylum at the Peruvian Embassy to Costa Rica, where 3,500 of them would be vetted for admission to the United States as refugees. But the Cuban government suspended the flights shortly after they began, and then its media outlets announced that the Port of Mariel would be opened to allow for the departure of a far larger group.[44] The State Department responded by informing the Cuban government that the United States was "not prepared to take the refugees directly without processing in accordance with our laws," and officials simultaneously worked to dissuade "the Miami Cuban-American community from going along with this Cuban attempt to undercut the international efforts" to resolve the situation.[45] The Carter administration issued warnings that boat captains who broke U.S.

[43] This is clear from the many articles on the boatlift published in the two major newspapers in Miami and multiple national outlets during the first weeks of the exodus. My reading of these materials is corroborated by systematic studies of both Miami print media and the national press. Sociologists Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick found that the *Miami Herald,* "the voice of the Anglo establishment" in South Florida, began to focus much of its attention on the reports of Cubans who had come from prisons and mental institutions starting on May 1, 1980. See Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 23–27. Brian Husker and Gray Cavender conducted an analysis of more than 18 months of coverage of topics related to the Mariel boatlift in the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times.* Their research revealed a similar timeline: after roughly 10 days of coverage that they coded as more "positive" than "negative," stories centering on the "three deviant themes" of "criminality, mental illness, and homosexuality" began to take over. Among Cubans who exemplified one of these three forms of "undesirability," those with alleged criminal pasts received the most attention. See Brian Hufker and Gray Cavender, "From Freedom Flotilla to America's Burden: The Social Construction of the Mariel Immigrants," *Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1990): 323–32.

[44] J. Brian Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," May 1980, 2, folder: Reading File, box 16, Director's File, CHTF. Napoleón Vilaboa, who later claimed to have discussed plans for the boatlift with Fidel Castro, said in 1980 that the Cuban government was anticipating that the total number of emigrants "might exceed a quarter of a million." See Joseph B. Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," *New York Times,* 13.

[45] U.S. Department of State, "[President's] Evening Reading: Cuba," 21 April 1980, folder 5, series 5, box 1, MOP-CHC.

immigration laws against transporting "illegal aliens" risked a fine of $1,000 for each visa-less Cuban they took to Key West. The Coast Guard alerted boats in the Straits of Florida that "violators may be arrested and vessels seized."[46] These threats generally failed to deter the people who were buying or hiring boats to bring their loved ones to the United States.

The federal government was, in fact, reluctant to impose such harsh sanctions. The agency responsible for potential arrests was the INS, but its leadership appears to have directed employees not to exercise that authority. One INS officer even claimed to a Miami newspaper, "My boss told me, 'Don't you dare arrest anybody.'"[47] The hesitancy stemmed from both precedent and perceived political expediency. As Victor Palmieri, the new U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, explained to a Congressional subcommittee, "Under existing procedures it is practically impossible to deport anybody. We have had 20 years of accepting any Cuban who can get out, and you don't turn that situation around overnight. I don't know whether we should want to turn it around."[48] The White House received warnings from law enforcement and elected officials in South Florida of the potential for "riots in the streets" and "violence" from members of the established Cuban community if the federal government used all the coercive tools at its disposal to stop the boatlift.[49] As Carter prepared his reelection bid, moreover, he feared that detaining boat captains for transporting Cubans risked alienating "Cuban American voters."[50]

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[46] David Hume and Robert Rivas, "First Cubans Reach Keys — By Boat," *Miami Herald* (Broward Edition), 22 April 1980, 12A; John M. Crewdson, "Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla," *New York Times*, 24 April 1980, A1.

[47] Crewdson, "Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla," A1, A15; Jack Knarr, "Cuban ferries defy U.S. orders," *Miami News*, 24 April 1980, 1A.

[48] Graham Hovey, U.S. Aides Concede Cuban Influx Cannot Be Stopped," *New York Times*, 25 April 1980, A11.

[49] Stuart Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting," 7 May 1980, folder 12, series 3, box 1, MOP-CHC; Eric Rieder, "Ferre Warned of Riot If U.S. Halted Boats," *Miami Herald*, 26 June 1980, 1C; "U.S. Aide Sees Full Exile Funds," *Miami Herald*, 26 June 1980, 1C.

[50] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 22.

Compounding such concerns was the fact that, just a few days into the boatlift, the President had watched as a military attempt to rescue U.S. diplomats being held hostage by students in Iran failed in dramatic fashion. The widely reported incident ended with a helicopter crash and eight dead servicemembers. Carter presumably did not want to generate additional damaging headlines about how the government was arresting people for assisting Cubans who, up to that point, frequently had been represented in the U.S. as refugees from a "Communist dictatorship."[51]

5.2 "Generally Restrictive"

Compounding the complexity of the issue for the White House was the fact that the boatlift began at a moment when both Congress and many U.S. residents were expressing skepticism about calls to welcome refugees. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians since 1975 had been met with growing, and sometimes violent, public displays of hostility to refugees.[52] In a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing – four days before the first boat arrived from Mariel – Senator Alan Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming, told his colleagues, "[T]here is a feeling in America by the American people that somebody had better cut off the line of people continuing to come into the United States." He called on Congress to consider the "claims on local resources" being made by refugees, and pointed to the alleged impact of Southeast Asians on growing welfare rolls and strained school districts in cities such as San Francisco and Houston. Simpson warned that a lack of "selectivity" in refugee admissions risked creating "rather incendiary feelings in this country" if large numbers of newcomers were added to the "labor pool, to compete directly with those who are American citizens and who are now

[51] David Hoffman, "Reagan Calls for Rescue Mission 'Akin to Berlin Airlift' in Cuba," *Miami Herald*, 10 April 1980, 18A; Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 121–27.

[52] Bon Tempo, 167–72; Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 40–54.

out of work."[53] Simpson, who was then starting to advance the initial version of a major immigration reform bill that would become the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, was far from the only member of Congress to raise such concerns. In 1980, White House staff likewise worried that the "mood of the Congress (and perhaps the country)" was "generally restrictive."[54]

Policies regarding Cuban migration had evolved amid this broader shift. After the end of the Freedom Flights in 1973, the U.S. government established a system of priorities that privileged former and current political prisoners, their close family members, and a select number of relatives of other Cubans already living in the United States. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration oversaw plans for a "phasedown" of the Cuban Refugee Program. Prior to the boatlift, then, the federal government narrowed the categories of Cubans who would be admitted as refugees and restricted the number to be admitted each year.[55] The proverbial door to the United States had been slowly closing for Cubans before any boats lined up to leave for Mariel.

Amid these efforts to establish a narrower process for admitting Cuban refugees, a campaign developed to expand admissions for other Caribbean migrants who had become accustomed to having the door slammed in their faces. Tens of thousands of Haitians had boarded small boats and made the perilous 800-mile crossing to Florida in recent years. Yet many never made it to Miami, or any other U.S. community, because the federal government began detaining the growing number of Haitians who were seeking asylum in the United States.

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[53] *U.S. Refugee Programs, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate*, 96th Cong., 2nd Session, 17 April 1980 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 21, 26.

[54] Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting."

[55] Office of the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, "Proposed Refugee Admissions and Allocations for Fiscal Year 1980 in Accordance with the Refugee Act of 1980," 15 April 1980, in *U.S. Refugee Programs, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate*, 97-99, 118.

The federal government generally did not classify Haitians as political refugees who deserved protection during the 1970s. Instead of using the "parole" mechanism that had been deployed by multiple presidential administrations to permit the entry of Southeast Asians, Cubans, and others from places with socialist governments, the Ford and Carter administrations treated Haitians – who came from a country with an authoritarian government closely tied to Washington – as unauthorized arrivals. Haitians who got the chance to make legal claims for asylum during the 1970s were met with near-universal denials.[56] The policies governing Haitian asylum seekers were meant to have a deterrent effect. U.S. immigration authorities described them explicitly as necessary to prevent a "flood of economic refugees from all over the Caribbean."[57]

As the boatlift began, the historical contrast between the treatment of Haitians and Cubans in the United Sates became especially glaring. Vessels carrying people from each country were arriving simultaneously in different parts of South Florida. On the second day of the boatlift, INS buses took Cuban arrivals to a community center in Little Havana for screening and resettlement. When INS agents located Haitians who had attempted to enter the U.S. by boat on the same day, agency buses carried them to a federal prison.[58]

In the years leading up to the boatlift, Haitians in the United States and their allies, including African American activists and leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus, had begun staging protests and advancing lawsuits over what they argued was a racist double standard in the treatment of Cubans – then typically understood to be either "White" or "Latin" – and that of Haitians – almost invariably perceived in the United States as "Black."[59] The work of advocates

[56] Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 14–32.
[57] Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish*, 18.
[58] Larry Wippman, "Miami boatlift rushes to Cuba," *Miami News*, 23 April 1980, 1A, 6A; Jack Knarr, "New groups of Haitians arrive at Miami, Dania," *Miami News*, 23 April 1980, 6A.
[59] Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish*, 22–32.

to highlight this disparity had contributed to skepticism among some members of Congress toward a refugee policy that seemed to be more about Cold War geopolitics than a general commitment to protecting people facing persecution.[60]

Congressional efforts to address tensions over refugee admissions culminated in the Refugee Act of 1980.[61] Carter signed the landmark legislation a mere month before the first boat from Mariel arrived at Key West. The new law was intended to standardize the criteria for designating individuals or groups as refugees by defining a "refugee" as someone "unable or unwilling to return" to a country of origin or habitual residence "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."[62] This language aligned the U.S. definition of a "refugee" with that of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. In one sense, the Act expanded the range of people who might be ascribed refugee status by eliminating an existing statutory provision that prioritized individuals from a "Communist or Communist-dominated country" or from "the general area of the Middle East."[63] Yet Congress saw the new law as a vehicle for limiting the discretion of presidential administrations over the number of annual refugee admissions, and the advocates of immigration restriction who supported it saw it as mechanism for reducing the total number of people entering the U.S. as refugees each year.[64]

Both the White House and Congressional leaders tasked with implementing the new

[60] This was evident in one of the first major discussions of the Mariel boatlift in the U.S. House. See *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 74-90.

[61] For an account of the legislative history written by the sponsor of the original 1979 bill in the U.S. Senate, see Edward M. Kennedy, "Refugee Act of 1980," *International Migration Review* 15, no. 1 (1981): 141–56.

[62] Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102.

[63] An Act to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 913 (1965).

[64] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 171–79.

refugee policy worried that the Mariel boatlift threatened to undermine the Refugee Act. They were concerned about the number of Cubans projected to enter the country, and the funding that would be necessary to support their resettlement. U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs Victor Palmieri admitted that the government was "not prepared" for the Cubans' "sudden arrival in this country without proper screening and documentation." He claimed, despite the tens of thousands of Haitians who had requested asylum during the preceding decade, that this was the first time that the United States had been a "country of first asylum."[65] In the past, the State Department had vetted would-be refugees while they waited elsewhere – frequently in camps in so-called third countries – before granting some of them refugee status and the financial support and other benefits that came with it.[66] Unlike most of the people who had arrived in the United States refugees during the preceding decades, the federal government had no way to screen Mariel Cubans before they arrived in Florida.

Faced with the sudden arrival of thousands of Cubans at Key West, the Carter administration deployed an ad hoc set of policies to address the resulting logistical and legal questions. The Carter administration abandoned its initial commitment to a cap of 3,500 Cubans from the Peruvian Embassy, as it quickly became clear that the flotilla would bring with it a far larger number of people. Victor Palmieri and officials from the White House, Department of Justice, State Department, and Office of Refugee Resettlement devised a policy to permit a large group to enter the country without violating the terms of the Refugee Act. Their solution relied on a discretionary mechanism known as "parole." Under established immigration law, the Attorney General had the authority to bestow this provisional status on migrants in emergency

[65] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 18-21.

[66] Lipman, *In Camps*.

cases or when it was deemed in the "public interest" to do so.[67] The parole mechanism had been used in the past to permit the mass entry of multiple groups, including Cubans, as "refugees." The Refugee Act was meant to discourage this use of parole.[68] Even so, the law preserved the Executive's discretionary authority to admit people as refugees in excess of predetermined annual caps if in "an unforeseen emergency refugee situation" the President determines that their admission "is justified by grave humanitarian concerns or is otherwise in the national interest."[69] But Carter and his advisors worried that using this provision to confer refugee status on the most recent newcomers might "set a dangerous precedent" and, in effect, "reward illegal entry."[70] In their early meetings about potential policy responses, White House staff and top administration officials invoked a fear of "inundation" by migrants from Latin America if they conferred blanket refugee status on both Haitian and Cuban arrivals.[71]

The Carter administration's initial decision was to invoke the well-worn authority of parole to permit the entry of Mariel Cubans, but *not* as "refugees." Instead, INS officers designated them as "parolees" for a 60-day period, with the expectation that they would submit petitions for asylum to be adjudicated later and on a case-by-case basis.[72] The members of the House Committee on the Judiciary bristled at this plan. Empowered by the Refugee Act to consult with the administration on refugee policy, they accused the White House of trying to "dodge" the restrictive intent of the new law. Some were perplexed by the distinction that

[67] Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. No. 82-414, 66 Stat. 188 (1952).
[68] Kennedy, "Refugee Act of 1980," 143, 46.
[69] Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 103.
[70] Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, 185.
[71] Stuart Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting."
[72] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 19-20, 75; John M. Crewdson, "Hundreds in Boats Defying U.S. Sail for Cuba to Pick Up Refugees," *New York Times*, 25 April 1980, A10.

Department of Justice officials were making between a "refugee" and an "asylum seeker."[73] Indeed, the President himself had trouble distinguishing between the two. In meeting notes from the early days of the boatlift, his Chief Domestic Policy Adviser, Stuart Eizenstat, had written that Carter "continually uses the word 'refugees' when the rest of the government is deliberately using 'asylum-applicant' and this has led to confusion about whether we have unilaterally decided the status question."[74] Such confusion also reflected the limited scale of the asylum program at the time. In the dozen years leading up to the boatlift, total annual asylum petitions had averaged between 1,000 and 6,000.[75] Of course, before limits on mass discretionary refugee admissions were embedded in the Refugee Act, an administration seeking to admit a large group of people had not needed to consider the use of asylum as a policy option.

This marked the start of what would become a major departure from the way the U.S. government had treated Cubans who entered the country during the previous two decades and how they would categorize and handle Rubén, Viviana, and the many thousands of other Cubans who arrived from Mariel. An early change in procedure at Key West was indicative of this broader shift and its material consequences. Some 4,000 Cubans who arrived during the first phase of the boatlift were greeted by representatives from the Cuban Refugee Program who registered them for the federal assistance available to people from the island for most of the previous 20 years.[76] This was consistent with policies and procedures established in the early

[73] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 55-56, 67-69

[74] Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting."

[75] Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 6.

[76] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 1 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

1960s, which ultimately amounted to what one historian has described as the ""most comprehensive refugee assistance program in American immigration history."[77]

Then Elizabeth Holtzman went to Key West. After she returned to Washington, she reported to the House Judiciary Committee that a series of tables had been set up to process the Cubans as they came off the boats. At one of those tables, she said, someone handed each of them a check (likely the same kind of cash assistance that had been provided by the Cuban Refugee Program for years). For Holtzman and other members of the Committee this reflected a serious problem. They rebuked the Carter administration for conferring refugee benefits on people who were not necessarily "qualifying as refugees."[78] Committee members were also critical of what appeared to be another example of the disparate treatment of Cubans and Haitians, who were not receiving checks when they came ashore.[79] The next day, the Office of Refugee Resettlement shut down the Cuban Refugee Program registration process at Key West.[80] Unless Congress or the Carter administration acted, Cubans who arrived after May 1 would not be eligible for the cash payments or many of the other benefits that their predecessors had received.

5.3 Against the Flow

Even as Congressional leaders engaged in conversations about funding and refugee status, they made it clear that one of their biggest concerns was something that was quickly becoming a chief preoccupation of Carter administration officials and the journalists covering the

[77] García, *Havana USA*, 2.

[78] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 80.

[79] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 78.

[80] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 2 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

boatlift: the U.S. government lacked "control over people coming into the country."[81] The first Mariel arrivals had undergone minimal vetting. During the early days of the boatlift, immigration officials recorded the names of the newcomers who disembarked at the Truman Naval Annex in Key West,[82] issued them a provisional "Form I-94" (a small card with their personal information),[83] and then permitted them to proceed to Miami for more thorough screening at a later date.[84] When the agency attempted to change this policy, presumably with the aim of conducting more extensive interviews in Key West, members of the South Florida Cuban community began transporting the new arrivals to Miami themselves.[85] Much of the initial processing thus took place in a "jammed exhibition hall" at the county fairgrounds in Tamiami Park, about eleven miles west of Downtown Miami.[86] The INS had relatively few staff based in South Florida, so it outsourced some of the screening tasks to local police officers until federal

[81] Babcock, "FBI Discovering Some 'Undesirables' Among Flood of Refugees From Cuba," A4. For concerns articulated by Carter administration officials, see *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 33. For more media coverage, see, for example, Marlise Simons, "Cuba Approves Refugees' Departure In Florida-Chartered Flotilla of Boats," *Washington Post*, 22 April 1980; Heather Dewar, "Key West docks jammed; refugees count tops 5,800," *Miami News*, 1 May 1980, 8A.

[82] Dewar, "85 of new Cuban refugees held in probe," 1A. At one point the INS registered Cubans at a makeshift "reception center" established at the local USO building in Key West. See Graham Hovey, "U.S. Acting to Curb Cuban Influx," *New York Times*, 26 April 1980, 13.

[83] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 75.

[84] Customs officers did at some point begin to issue fines of $1,000 per Cuban passenger to boat captains, but they did not seize boats at the start of the boatlift except in cases where a boat attempted to evade inspection and unload passenger outside of a designated area in Key West. See Janet Battaile, "Cuban Exiles' Boats Pick Up 40 Refugees," *New York Times*, 22 April 1980, A7; Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," 13; "Refugees' Boats Call for Help in Storm Off Florida," *New York Times*, 28 April 1980, A1; Bob Murphy, "Customs: We seized 3 boats for illegal entry," *Miami News*, 28 April 1980, 1A.

[85] Joseph B. Treaster, "Miami Bracing for Exodus With Some Reluctance," *New York Times*, 28 April 1980, A15.

[86] Tom Fiedler, "U.S. to Operate Refugee Center In North Florida," *Miami Herald*, 2 May 1980, 28A. Also see National Forum on Immigration and Refugee Policy, "From Mariel to the Present: A Chronology of Events;" Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," 13; George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 10 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

reinforcements were brought in.[87] After brief interviews with law enforcement officials, most of the first Cubans to arrive were quickly released in the Miami area.[88]

The growing awareness that thousands of Cubans with criminal records were arriving from Mariel began to shape perceptions in the United States of the people arriving in the boatlift. News stories with imprecise comments from state and federal officials fueled the fears that drove this shift. Media outlets rarely offered much information to explain the Cuban context for individuals' alleged offenses and often simply cited the vague and general impressions of U.S. law enforcement and military personnel. The commander of a National Guard unit, who was dispatched to Key West following a "disaster area" declaration by the Florida governor, told a reporter that one of the boats from Mariel appeared to be "carrying a large portion of possible criminals released from Cuban prisons – there's no telling how many."[89] One especially sensational news article led with the statement that there was a "mass murderer" among the new arrivals. Raymond Morris, the INS District Director in Miami, indicated that his agency had detained the newcomer in question "for killing a couple of militia types" in Cuba. But the reporter offered no additional context for this claim or the source of the information on which it was based.[90]

Vague and sometimes inaccurate reporting also led to unfounded fears about the health,

[87] Heather Dewar, "Cuban tide of refugees swells fast," *Miami News*, 30 April 1980, 1A, 7A; Graham Hovey, "U.S. Acting to Curb Cuban Influx," 13; "Refugees' Boats Call for Help in Storm Off Florida," A1; Joseph B. Treaster, "U.S. Seizes 3 Boats With Refugees; Cuban Americans Crowd Key West," *New York* Times, 29 April 1980, A1, A18; Joseph B. Treaster, "Florida's Governor Asks U.S. Help on Cuban Refugees," *New York Times*, 30 April 1980, A11.

[88] Jack Knarr, "Cuban ferries defy U.S. orders," *Miami News*, 23 April 1980, 1A.

[89] Dewar, "Key West docks jammed; refugees count tops 5,800," 8A. For examples in a national outlet, see Treaster, "U.S. Seizes 3 Boats With Refugees; Cuban Americans Crowd Key West," A1, A18; Treaster, "Florida's Governor Asks U.S. Help on Cuban Refugees," A11.

[90] Heather Dewar, "Thunderstorm heads for Straits, 250 boats urged to make for port," *Miami News*, 2 May 1980, 1A, 11A.

abilities, and sexualities of the new arrivals. A small number of people with major psychiatric disorders did arrive from Mariel, and federal officials initially struggled to find places for several dozen people who were experiencing a range of mental health challenges.[91] Yet the resettlement agencies that found placements for nearly all Mariel Cubans ultimately reported that the total number of "hard core mental cases" – including those diagnosed with schizophrenia or deemed "a danger to community or themselves" – amounted to just 144 people.[92] While many Mariel Cubans showed signs of emotional and mental distress after arriving in the United States, the number with mental health conditions or intellectual disabilities was far lower than what early media accounts suggested.[93] The same was true of people with communicable diseases. Disturbing reports about the physical state of the newcomers, including a *Washington Post* article featuring quotes from an Army medical specialist who claimed to have seen "a fair amount of active tuberculosis" and "a lot of venereal disease" among Mariel Cubans, were later shown to be inconsistent with the screening data.[94] In fact, a few weeks after the story ran, the Under Secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services informed the White House, "Screening results continue to indicate no serious public health problems among the incoming Cuban population."[95] Later in the summer, exaggerated reports about the number of "homosexual" Cubans who had arrived in the boatlift further contributed to the perception of

[91] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 31 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[92] "Mental Health," n.d., folder 123, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC.

[93] Dary Matera, "'Everybody going crazy' in Cuba port," Dary Matera, *Miami News*, 1 May 1980, 1A, 13A; Edward Schumacher, "Retarded People and Criminals Are Included in Cuban Exodus," *New York Times*, 11 May 1980, 1.

[94] Edward Walsh, "Second Center to Open," *Washington Post*, 8 May 1980, A13.

[95] Nathan J. Stark, "Daily Report on Cuban Activities," 29 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

some in the United States that the new arrivals were "socially deviant."[96]

Yet the most consistent and urgent anxiety expressed by the press, Congress, and the Carter administration were that Fidel Castro was "emptying his jails" and that people with criminal records might enter the United States undetected. [97] Growing unease about the newcomers exacerbated tensions between the federal government and officials from the State of Florida, who alleged that insufficient federal oversight had forced them to organize much of the initial response. Ron Villella was sent by Florida Governor Bob Graham to assist with the early processing efforts at Key West. He told a Miami newspaper that the INS had been reluctant to share information about "how many criminals they have identified." The federal agents were such poor collaborators, Villella alleged, that he and his colleagues from local and state entities had "given up trying."[98]

Mounting suspicions that "criminals and other undesirables" had been "planted among the refugees" led the federal government to deploy additional law enforcement personnel to South Florida, including agents from U.S. Customs, the Border Patrol, and the FBI.[99] The Department of Justice promised to send an additional 100 Border Patrol agents to South Florida to help screen arrivals and "segregate those who seem to be criminals from the rest of the population" so that they could be taken to Miami "for separate processing."[100] Then,

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[96] Julio Capó, Jr., "Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba's Homosexual Exile Community, 1978–1994," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 4 (2010): 90, 100. At least one major news outlet reported that "as many as 20,000" Mariel Cubans were "homosexual." See Warren Brown, "Cuban Boatlift Drew Thousands Of Homosexuals," *Washington Post*, 7 July 1980, A1. The organization that appears to have been the original source for this large figure was, in fact, mobilizing to *support* these individuals.

[97] Babcock and Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," A1.

[98] Dewar, "Key West docks jammed; refugees count tops 5,800," 8A.

[99] Dewar, "Cuban tide of refugees swells fast," 7A.

[100] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 33.

approximately ten days after the first Cubans arrived from Mariel, the Carter administration assumed responsibility for the screening and processing operations and centralized these efforts under the authority of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).[101]

Fears about the "criminal" arrivals also drove Congressional leaders to demand changes to the ad hoc system of vetting that was being used in Key West and Miami. Elizabeth Holtzman implored the Carter administration "to set up a processing and holding center" at a military base. Victor Palmieri assured her that the federal government was in the process of doing exactly that. He said that the government hoped to initiate within the next 24 hours "an airlift from Key West to a military base which can serve as processing, holding, and detention for the people that [Holtzman] mentioned."[102] That is, a place for people believed to have criminal records – a place for people like Viviana and Rubén.

In early May, the Carter administration announced that it was implementing a new set of screening procedures for Mariel arrivals. From then on, when people arrived at Key West, they would undergo preliminary vetting with immigration officials. Cubans who had close family members in South Florida and a small number of people who already had been classified as political prisoners through an existing agreement with the Cuban government would be transferred to Miami for screening and release. The Carter administration's expectation that most of the people in these groups could be released into the care of their relatives. New arrivals who did not have family in the Miami area would be transported to a separate location outside of South Florida.[103] This site would also be used to hold people sometimes described by officials

[101] Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 1 May 1980; Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 2 May 1980.

[102] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 32.

[103] Fiedler, "U.S. to Operate Refugee Center In North Florida," 28A; Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 2 May 1980.

and in the U.S. press as "undesirables," including most of the new arrivals who admitted that they had criminal records Cuba. There, away from the chaotic epicenter of the boatlift, such newcomers would be held for longer periods and screened by officials from the INS, the FBI, and the Public Health Service.[104] The new holding site would also enable federal law enforcement agents to "interview other persons who are coming in…as to the nature of their companions on the boats."[105]

By the time Rubén disembarked in Key West on May 6, this more robust and coordinated system of screening had been put in place. Nearly 1,500 Mariel Cubans already were being held at Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle. There, FEMA oversaw a fenced city of tents for up to 10,000 people on the edge of the military compound. Since it was already apparent that many newcomers lacked family in the Miami area, had criminal records, or both, the Carter administration began preparing additional facilities around the country.[106] Ad hoc holding and screening sites, which the federal government referred to as "resettlement camps," were soon established with capacities for 20,000 at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, 20,000 at Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and 15,000 at Fort McCoy in Wisconsin.[107]

Some of the U.S. officials and local volunteers who participated in the screening process were confident that classifying Cubans at Key West and the camps was a straightforward process. The Coast Guard Chief of Operations during the boatlift later said that it was easy to spot the "convicts" among the recent arrivals who were waiting to be transferred from Key West

[104] Bob Murphy, "U.S. to take over refugee processing by weekend," *Miami News*, May 2, 1980, 11A; Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum."

[105] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 34.

[106] George [Putnam], "Daily Activity Report," 5 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[107] Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 3-4.

to a holding site. “They all had their heads shaved and wore very closely cropped hair,” he later recalled. “They all wore the same clothes, and they all…well, they didn’t act like they had been liberated,” he said. “They looked like they were still in prison. They were really very readily identifiable.”[108]

Arturo Cobo, a Cuban-born veteran of the Bay of Pigs Invasion who lived in Key West in 1980, had helped to organize local efforts to screen the new arrivals and provide them with food, medical care, and shelter before the Carter administration centralized the operation under FEMA. Years later, reflecting on the initial surge of support from the established Cuban community, Cobo told the *Miami Herald* that it was “one of the most beautiful things we’ve done in our 40 years of exile.” He also claimed that he had tried to put a halt to the boatlift after he “detected a boat with common criminals.” Cobo insisted that they were easy to identify by “their shirts and their haircuts.” He said he talked with five of the men from the boat, and they “confessed that they were common criminals immediately.” Cobo said he then urged a FEMA official to call the White House and tell officials there to end the boatlift. He claimed to recall telling the director of FEMA’s operation at Key West, “I am all for the unification of families, but we have to tell the world that Castro is using *Mariel* to send mentally sick patients and criminals who have murdered, raped, assaulted children.” Whether the five men who spoke with Cobo confessed to such offenses is unclear. Given that the U.S. government ultimately determined that a very small portion of the total boatlift population had committed transgression in Cuba that would be classified as felonies in the United States – and even fewer Mariel Cubans were thought to have perpetrated acts of violence – such a scenario would appear exceedingly unlikely. In any case, Cobo made it seem like identifying the “criminals” among the newcomers had been merely a

[108] Eizenstat, transcript of interview with Coast Guard Admiral John Costello, 22.

matter of having one's eyes open.[109]

Yet other close observers of this process acknowledged that it was filled with ambiguity and potential for error. Acting INS Director David Crosland told the House Judiciary Committee that his agency had to rely largely on information from the individual Cubans arriving at the docks, either from those who admitted that they had criminal records or from "their companions on the boats" who conveyed allegations about what they had done.[110] Few, if any, arrived with documentation of their criminal histories (or lack thereof). Even Cobo himself, who spoke with such certainty to the *Miami Herald* about the "common criminals" who had arrived from Mariel, admitted in a more private set of reflections that the INS procedure for vetting new arrivals was deeply flawed. He was troubled by the cursory screening interviews he had observed. He noted that each new arrival's brief response to the question, "Have you ever been arrested in Cuba for any crime?," had been used by agents to make snap judgments about "what kind of person" was in front them.[111]

An Immigration Judge in El Paso was so disturbed by the evidence he encountered from the screening process during subsequent asylum and exclusion hearings that he wrote a long letter to the INS Southern Regional Commissioner detailing his concerns. Judge T.P. Jakaboski described "a widespread language deficiency" among the officials who conducted interviews in the camps. Jakaboski wrote that "Anglo-Saxon" INS inspectors and Border Patrol officers generally lacked the ability to communicate effectively with the Cubans "who have their own

[109] Elaine De Valle, "Activist headed nuts and bolts of coordination, *Miami Herald*, 21 April 2000, 1E.

[110] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 33.

[111] Cobo, interview with Kate Dupes Hawk, 1990, quoted in Kate Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, and Adolfo Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, ed. Kristen Cifers (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 56.

peculiar version of Spanish." He added, "Even Mexican-American personnel were pushed to their linguistic limits, and beyond, in trying to deal with the Cubans." Jakaboski explained that "it came out during many hearings that the officials doing the interviews frequently misunderstood the Cubans."[112] The judge also emphasized that the limits of officers' language skills were compounded by their lack of knowledge of the Cuban criminal legal system, which further undermined their ability translate what they heard into accurate notes and summaries in the immigration files of Mariel arrivals.[113]

In addition to creating room for error, the highly discretionary nature of the screening process left ample space for biases to influence crucial decisions. Both local and federal officials frequently linked observations about the large number of young, unmarried men who were arriving to allegations that many Mariel Cubans were "undesirables."[114] In an article in which an INS officer was quoted as saying that Fidel Castro was "sending his incorrigibles," the *Miami News* reported that "local police had questioned 219 single men" because they "looked 'suspicious.'" Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré had claimed that more than half the men in the interrogated group "admitted to criminal records in Cuba." Ferré had insisted that the INS should "hold those refugees coming here without families until they undergo a thorough investigation."[115] The head of the Dade County Public Safety Department – the sheriff's office for the county surrounding Miami – appears to have implemented precisely such a policy during the early days of the boatlift, when local officials were still heavily involved in the screening

[112] T.P. Jakaboski, letter to Durward E. Powell, Jr., 6 October 1980, in *Immigration Reform, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives*, 97th Cong., First Session, October and November 1981, Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 635.

[113] Jakaboski, letter to Durward E. Powell, Jr., 633.

[114] Dewar, "Cuban tide of refugees swells fast," 7A.

[115] Dewar and Veciana, "New fleet heads for Cuba," 6A.

process. Public Safety Department officers had designated "single men under 40 without relatives" in the U.S. as "high risk" arrivals and subjected them to more rigorous interviews.[116]

As a result of reports from Mariel that unknown individuals were being forced onto boats that had been sent to retrieve the relatives of Cubans living the U.S., the lack of family connections in the United States became a signifier of potential criminality. Vessels that arrived "without a single relative of the Cuban Americans who had hired them" triggered suspicion, especially after they "disgorged sullen-looking young adult males – in sharp contrast to earlier refugee boats with women, children and grandparents."[117] While many of the Mariel Cubans with criminal records had family members in the U.S., including Rubén, it was reasonable to imagine that someone who had been compelled to leave by Cuban police or prison officials might have been less likely to be participating in the boatlift primarily because they had an extensive network of relatives and friends in the United States. Yet U.S. journalists generally presented such details simply as evidence that the individuals in question posed a threat. In contrast with the "women, children and grandparents" – groups framed implicitly as in need of protection – single male newcomers were portrayed by law enforcement, elected officials, and the press as explicitly dangerous.[118]

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[116] Dewar, "Cuban tide of refugees swells fast," 7A.

[117] Charles R. Babcock and Margot Hornblower, "U.S. Plans Refugee Center," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1980, A1.

[118] Scholars have described a tendency among U.S. media outlets to depict Southeast Asian refugees who arrived in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s as young children, which contributed to widespread perceptions of these groups as "vulnerable victims." Jana K. Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975-1982," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 63. Initiatives like "Operation Babylift" in 1975 – in which the U.S. government controversially transported some 2,500 Vietnamese children from orphanages to the United States – served the aims of military and foreign policy officials who had just prosecuted a devastating war and then sought to portray the country as a benevolent place of "refuge." See Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 25, 40–43. Notwithstanding these vital and trenchant critiques, it is worth noting that such narratives also contributed to widespread, if far from universal, U.S. perceptions of Southeast Asians as

In the United States in 1980, as in revolutionary Cuba, journalists and government officials typically took care not to make overt textual references to race as an unambiguous marker of a group's criminality. Kate Dupes Hawk, then a nurse who volunteered to assist with medical care for Mariel Cubans at Key West, was not concerned about this when writing in her journal in 1980. Nor apparently was she worried about allegations of racial bias when she later used that journal as one of the main sources for a book that she co-authored about the boatlift. One night, about a week before Rubén made it to Key West, Hawk observed that "approximately 1,700 single black males arrived." The next day she wrote, "No one comes during the day—especially criminals and undesirables." She described it as "infuriating" to see that "Castro was increasingly sending more undesirables."[119]

Hawk's comments demonstrated the extent to which prejudice informed perceptions of the newcomers among the people they encountered after they disembarked in Key West. As a 23-year-old single man, Rubén would have raised suspicions.[120] As a Cuban of African descent who had been in prison before he left the island, he would have raised even more.[121] The low-level state agents who conducted screening interviews with Rubén and other Mariel Cubans had considerable discretion over the trajectories of the people they encountered.[122] In making

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both in need of and *worthy* of protection. Although initial press accounts of the Mariel boatlift recycled this narrative, representations of Mariel Cubans as young, male, and – increasingly over the summer of 1980 – "Black" reinforced growing U.S. perceptions of them as potential threats.

[119] Hawk, Villella, and Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980*, 123.

[120] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS).

[121] The racial category that Rubén used to identify himself is not clear from the records of his U.S. legal representatives. He may have called himself "*mulato*." He may have preferred some other term used to denote a person's race in Cuba. But local police records produced about Rubén after he resettled in South Florida consistently referred to his race as "Black," which suggests that this is how he was seen by many of the people he encountered in the United States. "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988, Series I, ALAS.

[122] On the importance of such "street-level bureaucrats" in the general work of governance in the United States, see Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public*

determinations regarding who was trustworthy and who was suspicious, they were also determining who would go to Miami, who would go to a camp, and who would go to a federal prison.

These individual discretionary decisions, combined with the Carter administration's policy of sending people without relatives in South Florida to the resettlement camps, contributed to considerable disparities in the distribution of the new arrivals throughout the ad hoc holding, screening, and resettlement infrastructure. Whereas approximately two-thirds of the total arrivals were classified as male, 85 percent of the more than 62,500 Cubans sent to the camps were men or boys. And whereas perhaps one-third of all Mariel Cubans identified as Black or *mulato*, roughly 50 percent of those in the camps were people of African descent.[123]

There were two primary reasons for the disproportionate number of Afrodescendant men among the Cubans who spent their first weeks and months in the United States confined on military bases. Most significant was the Carter administration policy that privileged Cubans who already had relatives and dense social networks in South Florida by permitting them to go through a relatively quick screening process in the Miami area before being released to their relatives. Information collected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during the first month of the boaltift indicated that most of the newcomers had a family member somewhere in the United States, but fewer than half had relatives in Dade County, and only 14 percent had immediate family in the Miami area.[124] The systematic classification of young single men without U.S.-based relatives as "high risk" during the screening process subjected these

Services, Rev. ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

[123] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980.

[124] Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 5 May 1980; Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 10 May 1980.

arrivals to an additional layer of scrutiny. The demographic composition of the established Cuban community, moreover, suggests that White Mariel Cubans were far more likely than their Black counterparts to have such family ties. Between 90 and 95 percent of the Cubans living in the United States before Mariel identified as White or were classified as such on the U.S. Census.[125] While some Black and *mulato* Mariel Cubans had White U.S.-based relatives, the history of racial segregation in intimate relationships in Cuba suggests that those connections were likely limited. Moreover, the persistence of residential segregation in South Florida – and the efforts of both Anglos and White Cubans to exclude Black and *mulato* Cubans from their neighborhoods – meant that even Afrodescendant Cubans who had such family relationships were not guaranteed a place in the homes of relatives who identified as White.[126]

The overrepresentation of Black and *mulato* Cubans in arrest data and the prison system on the island, combined with the Cuban government's efforts to enable or compel tens of thousands of citizens with criminal records to leave in the boatlift, also almost certainly contributed to the racial geography of the holding and screening process in the United States.[127] If a disproportionate number of the people with criminal records who arrived from Mariel were Cubans of African descent, then those who admitted to having histories of arrest and incarceration would have been more likely to be transferred to one of the camps for further

[125] Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races," 104; García, *Havana USA*, 68; Boswell and Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980," 23.

[126] "Anglo" was the term commonly used in South Florida at the time to denote people who identified as White and did not have Latin American ancestry. On these patterns of segregation in the Miami area, see J.D. Nicholas and R.J. Prohías, "Rent Differentials Among Racial and Ethnic Groups in Miami" (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University-Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems, July 1973); Devyn Benson and Danielle Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel: Black Cubans, Racial Exclusion, and Building Community in Miami," *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2021): 6.

[127] Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 313–15.

vetting. Even in the cases of people like Rubén, who had at least one relative already living in South Florida, an admission of a criminal record often meant being transported to a camp.[128]

Upon arrival in the United States, Rubén probably had to wait for several days before he was moved to a resettlement camp. He likely spent part of that time in Key West, confined within a U.S. Navy facility. He may have enjoyed a McDonald's hamburger courtesy of the American Red Cross, but conditions there were not pleasant. Office of Refugee Resettlement leaders reported that they had received a recommendation to close this "holding center" because it had "insufficient sanitation procedures" and lacked "on-site emergency services.[129] It is also possible that Rubén was among the first Mariel Cubans sent to a new "preprocessing holding center" established at a former missile base off Krome Avenue, approximately seventeen miles west of Miami on the edge of the Everglades. The site opened the day he arrived. The day after that, there were 1,411 boatlift participants being held at the place that would become known simply as "Krome." Rubén may have been in one of the first groups of Cubans sent to Krome, which the federal government initially used as place to hold Mariel arrivals who were set to be transported to one of the larger camps.[130] A few days after Rubén arrived, the resettlement camp

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[128] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990.

[129] Cliff Harpe, memorandum to Jim Gigante with subject line, "Food Service Availability in Key West," 27 August 1980, folder 160, box 25, series II, CRC-CHC; George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 6 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[130] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 7 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF; Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 8 May 1980; John Silva and Tom Dubocq, "State to open 2 missile sites here for exiles," *Miami News*, 6 May 1980, 1A; Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 29 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

Krome, first opened at this moment as a site for the temporary confinement of Cubans and Haitians during the Mariel boatlift, went on to become a permanent – and infamous – immigrant detention center. It is seen by scholars as the marker of a key turning point in the history of U.S. immigrant detention. For examples of the extensive body of work that explores the history of Krome, see Jonathan Simon, "Refugees in a Carceral Age: The Rebirth of Immigration Prisons in the United States," *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998): 577–607; Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jana K. Lipman, "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water

opened at Fort Chaffee in northwest Arkansas, where he was sent shortly after.[131]

Viviana docked at Key West on May 14, nine days after Rubén. Since she did not have relatives in the Miami area and she had a criminal record in Cuba, INS officers probably conducted a short interview with her and put her on a plane for Arkansas within the next few days. Federal agencies had initiated their screening operation at the camp two days prior to her arrival in the United States.[132] By then, the INS was making explicit distinctions between Cubans who had spent time in jail or prison for offenses such as theft or participation in the illicit market and those who were alleged to have committed "major" crimes that suggested to officers that they "may be a threat to the community."[133] Carter administration officials frequently described this latter group as "suspected felons," and in their public communications they often emphasized that such individuals comprised a minuscule number of new arrivals – just over 1 percent of all those who ultimately made the voyage.[134] During the first month of the boatlift, between 500 and 600 Mariel Cubans classified as "felons" were detained in federal prisons and detention centers.[135]

That It Is Cooked," *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (2013): 115–41; Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish*; Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Smita Ghosh, "Border Games," *Michigan Journal of Law & Society* 1 (2022): 113–73; Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).

[131] Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 10 May 1980; Combined Miami News Services, "Flights, aid offers show rising interest in assisting refugees," 10 May 1980, 6A.

[132] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 12 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[133] Dewar, "Key West docks jammed; refugees count tops 5,800," 8A; Murphy, "U.S. to take over refugee processing by weekend," 11A; Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 3.

[134] Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 3; Office of Media Liaison, White House Press Office, "Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response," 30 June 1980, 4, folder: Read 2 [1], box 16, Director's File, CHTF.

[135] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "Criminal Aliens Identified," 24 May 1980, folder Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC; Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 30 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

Viviana and Rubén avoided the fate of these formerly incarcerated Mariel Cubans who were put in a prison again soon after their arrival. Instead, the pair formed part of the far larger group of people with records for "petty" or "political" offenses, estimated by federal officials to account for 19 to 30 percent of all Mariel arrivals.[136] And like many Mariel Cubans with histories of arrest and incarceration, they were transported to the camps for additional screening.

Their trajectories were emblematic of the stark contrast between the experiences of Mariel Cubans who were put on a track for resettlement with close relatives in the Miami area and those who were not. Unlike many Cubans at Fort Chaffee, Rubén had a close relative in South Florida. His grandmother had been in the United States for thirty years, and she was living in Hialeah when he arrived.[137] Yet, presumably because of his criminal record, Rubén had to wait in government custody for further vetting. Viviana does not appear to have had any family members in the United States prior to 1980.[138] She, too, had to wait to be screened and paired with a sponsor before she could start her life in the United States. Some Cubans who had arrived in Key West after harrowing voyages from Mariel found themselves in the arms of the family members who had sent for them.[139] Viviana, Rubén, and more than 62,000 others, were instead placed under the watch of military and law enforcement officials.

Witnessing this discrepancy must have been especially jarring for Cubans who had been coerced by their government to leave their country. As an unnamed immigration official put it in

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[136] Bob Murphy, "Sealift arrivals so far total 21,000; one-third are expected to live here," *Miami News*, 7 May 1980, 6A. For the estimate of 19.1 percent, see Clark, Lasaga, and Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect*, 7. For 30 percent, see U.S. Department of State, "CUBA: Sociological Profile of the Refugees," n.d., folder 1, series 5, box 1, MOP-CHC.

[137] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990.

[138] Parole Questionnaire (draft), U.S. Department of Justice Review Program, n.d., Series II, ALAS.

[139] Of the Mariel Cubans who were screened and processed in South Florida as of October 31, 1980, approximately 89 percent reported having family members already living somewhere in the United States. Just under 20 percent had indicated that they had immediate relatives in South Florida, however. See Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980.

comments to a reporter, “These people aren’t emigrating, they’re being deported.”[140] While his comments appear to have been intended merely to emphasize that a significant number of people with criminal records were arriving, his assessment of the mechanism that had brought many of those Cubans to the United States was correct. The people in this group had not asked to make the voyage. Perhaps, though, at some point along the way, some began to consider how they might benefit from the opportunities that many other Cubans had found in the United States. If Rubén and Viviana felt a degree of hope or excitement, it cannot have lasted long before they got the sense that their journey remained perilous. Whether they were grouped with other “criminals” at Key West, or they only realized that the U.S. government had classified them as such when they arrived at Fort Chaffee, they confronted mounting evidence that their path into the United States lay between chain-link fences.

5.4 Unsettlement

Viviana, Rubén, and the thousands of Cubans held with them in Fort Chaffee were not the first new arrivals to start their lives in the United States at the Army base in Northwest Arkansas. Five years earlier, more than 50,000 Vietnamese newcomers had been held in Fort Chaffee immediately after the end of the Vietnam War. Like the first Vietnamese groups to arrive in the United States immediately after North Vietnamese forces took Saigon, the Mariel Cubans had not been classified as “refugees” prior to their arrival.[141] At Key West, Rubén and Viviana would have been given provisional I-94 cards, a form of INS documentation used to permit individuals to enter the United States as “parolees” on a temporary basis. Those cards, however, did not grant them permission to leave Fort Chaffee. That privilege remained multiple

[140] Murphy, "Sealift arrivals so far total 21,000; one-third are expected to live here," 6A.
[141] Lipman, “A Refugee Camp in America,” 60–62.

bureaucratic steps away.

Mariel Cubans spent their first days, and sometimes weeks, at the Arkansas military compound waiting for screening interviews with the INS and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and medical exams with the Public Health Service.[142] Nearly 10 days after the camp opened at Fort Chaffee, more than 17,000 boatlift participants had arrived, and none had completed the screening process. Rubén and Viviana likely formed part of the rapidly growing backlog of people anxious to learn when they would be permitted to leave the confines of the camp.[143]

Once Viviana and Rubén finally went through their screening interviews, they would have been added to the resettlement caseload of one of the non-profit or religious organizations that operated in the camps, which included the United States Catholic Conference and Church World Service. FEMA oversaw the camps when they opened, but these "voluntary agencies," or "VOLAGS" in the parlance of the federal government, operated through contracts with the U.S. Department of State. The primary task of the resettlement agencies was to place people like Viviana and Rubén with sponsors who made a "moral commitment" to help them secure a job and stable housing.[144] The federal government had paid many of the same resettlement agencies to find places for Southeast Asians and other groups admitted as refugees in the past. Now, the Carter administration was relying on the same organizations to assist the new arrivals from Cuba whose legal status remained provisional and uncertain.

For weeks, this process moved at a painfully slow pace for the Cubans in the camps.[145]

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[142] Warren Brown, "Red Tape Can Entangle Even Cubans Who Pass the Tests," *Washington Post*, 5 June 1980, A7.

[143] George Putnam, memorandum to Roger Winter, 18 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports," box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[144] Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 4.

[145] Brown, "Red Tape Can Entangle Even Cubans Who Pass the Tests," A7.

As a result, "the euphoria of the first days in the United States" gave way to "depression, lassitude, boredom and anxiety." FEMA blamed the State Department for the delays. The FEMA leadership at Fort Chaffee claimed to be "extremely dissatisfied with the management of the resettlement process by the State Department working through the volunteer agencies." The resettlement agencies, for their part, frequently blamed FEMA. John McCarthy, head of the U.S. Catholic Conference resettlement program, traded barbs in the press with Tom Casey, who ran the FEMA response to the boatlift. "FEMA is great at filling the camps up," McCarthy explained, "[b]ut they don't realize we also have to get the people out." Casey responded, "If they don't want the difficult tasks, they shouldn't accept the mission."[146]

The agencies working in the camps struggled for a time to get their operations up and running, but one of the main causes of the delay was beyond their control and a direct result of concerns about the backgrounds of the people arriving from Mariel.[147] The Carter administration had determined that nobody would be released from a camp until they had been "cleared by Washington after lengthy interviews" with the INS, the FBI, and other agencies. It frequently took more than a week for those clearances to get back to Arkansas. When staff at the camps made mistakes, it took even longer. At Eglin Air Force Base, federal workers at one point lost the files that had been produced on many of the Mariel arrivals held there. At Fort Chaffee, some of the staff sent smudged fingerprints to FBI headquarters. The agency rejected them and, days later, the Cubans' fingerprints arrived back in Arkansas with the message that they had to be done all over again. At one point the slow pace led Casey to declare – evidently without authorization – that Cubans who had gone through screening and been matched with a sponsor

[146] Tom Fiedler and Guy Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," *Miami Herald*, 1 June 1980, 1A, 18A.

[147] Warren Brown, "Hours and Days of Red Tape Anger Refugees and Families," *Washington Post*, 27 May 1980, A2.

would be released even if they had not yet received full clearance from central offices in Washington. His pronouncement was swiftly rejected by the INS at Eglin, where officials maintained that nobody would be released until they were cleared.[148]

As the length of the wait increased, and the contradictory policy announcements piled up, the atmosphere in the camps grew increasingly tense. Cubans who arrived from Mariel had expected to be welcomed and quickly permitted to begin the work of building lives for themselves in the United States. They had good reason to imagine such an outcome because that was the experience of most of the hundreds of thousands of people who had left the island for the U.S. during the previous two decades. The Mariel Cubans sent to the camps in 1980 confronted a very different reality. They were likely aware, moreover, that many of the people who had made the voyage with them had been released in South Florida almost immediately. Federal administrators acknowledged that there had been a lack of consistency in the screening and resettlement process. Some of the first Mariel arrivals had been met by relatives at Key West and permitted simply to leave with them after receiving instructions to report later to one of the processing sites in Miami.[149] The INS estimated that upwards of 6,000 people had experienced this relatively seamless process as they entered the country.[150] While many of the Mariel arrivals who were not sent to the camps had been held temporarily at Key West or in one of the Miami area sites, it was rare for anyone to have to wait long in those circumstances. Many of the people who had been sent to the camps, by contrast, spent weeks or months in confinement. Cubans who had been incarcerated and then compelled by their government to leave the country understandably would have been frustrated to find themselves in that situation.

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[148] Fiedler and Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," 18A.

[149] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 27 May 1980.

[150] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 28 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

The Carter administration settled on the term "resettlement camps" to describe these sites, which was accurate in that agencies had been contracted by the federal government to help these Mariel Cubans find sponsors and settle in U.S. communities. But this terminology obscured the extent to which, from the start, the camps were carceral institutions. They were enclosed by fences on bases overseen by military police and armed federal agents. The Cubans confined in these sites could not leave until they were approved for release by law enforcement agencies. Access to the camps was restricted. Family members who showed up seeking to sponsor Mariel Cubans could not enter without permission. They first had to wait outside.[151] As much as top Carter administration officials sought to emphasize the "resettlement" element in public, in private meetings some even referred to Fort Chaffee and the other sites as "prison camp situations."[152] The similarities with prison were not lost on those Cubans who had been incarcerated before they arrived in the United States, and some observers in the U.S. media also saw the parallels.

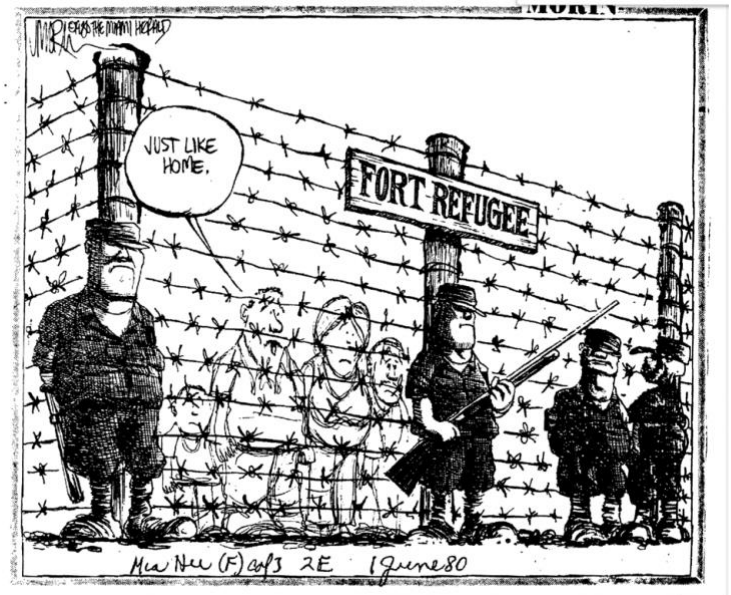


Figure 5.1 **"Fort Refugee,"** *Miami Herald,* 1 June 1980, 2E. Illustration by Jim Morin.

[151] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 30 May 1980.
[152] Stuart Eizenstat, "Notes of Stuart Eizenstat," 4 June 1980, folder 12, series 3, box 1, MOP-CHC.

The growing discrepancy between what Cubans expected and what they encountered had been accompanied by a rapid shift in the policies of the U.S. government. On May 5, the day before Rubén arrived in Key West, President Jimmy Carter gave a brief address to the National Convention of the League of Women Voters in Washington. Afterwords, he took several questions from the Convention delegates. One of his ad-lib responses became a defining moment in the federal response to the Mariel boatlift.

A Kansas delegate to the Convention asked Carter about the "thousands of illegal and legal immigrants arriving daily" in the United States and whether his administration had plans for "enforcing current immigration laws and providing funds and programs for dealing with these newcomers, who are presently a great burden on local communities." Carter initially responded, "We, as a nation, have always had our arms open to receiving refugees in accordance with American law." Yet what he said next garnered far more attention. "But we'll continue to provide an open heart and open arms," Carter said, "to refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination and from economic deprivation, brought about primarily by Fidel Castro and his government."[153] Media outlets made this the focal point in their coverage of the boatlift during the days that followed, and both the established Cuban community and the people leaving from Mariel took Carter's words as an endorsement of the boatlift. His administration had already demonstrated its reluctance to use the enforcement mechanisms provided by federal immigration laws to punish boat captains or stop Cubans from entering the country. Now, Carter's advisors were forced to concede that with his remarks the President had effectively "made policy." As Stuart Eizenstat put it in his notes at the time, the resulting "[h]eadlines were

[153] Jimmy Carter, "League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the League's Biennial National Convention," 5 May 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/249981.

decisive."[154]

Carter had not intended to signal unqualified support for the boatlift, and the White House took advantage of the deteriorating public image of the newcomers to strike a decidedly different tone the next time he addressed the issue. By the middle of May, both government officials and journalists were describing many of the newcomers as "convicts and other undesirables" and readily repeating the Cuban government's claim that the people leaving the island represented the "worst element" of Cuban society.[155] In a May 13 hearing of the House Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International, Committee Chair Elizabeth Holtzman opened the proceedings by decrying the arrival of boatloads of supposed "convicts and mental patients" with "[d]isturbingly high rates of venereal disease and tuberculosis." She warned that state and local social service agencies were being "strained to capacity" and expressed concern over the implications of admitting a large group of working-age people for U.S. citizens "on the lower end of the economic spectrum" during a period of "rising unemployment and deepening recession."[156] The next day, the White House issued a statement outlining new steps that the administration was taking to take control of the boatlift. The official statement, issued the same day that the boat carrying Viviana docked in Florida, included an entire paragraph on the "hardened criminals" and "mental patients" being compelled by "Castro" to board boats bound for the United States. "We will not permit our country to be used as a dumping ground for criminals who represent a danger to our society," the White House

[154] Eizenstat, "Notes of Stuart Eizenstat," 7 May 1980.

[155] Marilyn Moore, Heather Dewar, and Tom Dubocq, "Exiles: U.S. ban will speed Cuban exodus," *Miami News*, 5 May 1980, 10A; Janet Fix and Anders Gyllenhaal, "Boats Bring 4,500 More To Key West," *Miami Herald*, 11 May 1980, 1A.

[156] *Caribbean Migration, Oversight Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 96th Cong., 2nd Session, 13 May 1980 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 3.

explained, "and we will begin exclusion proceedings against these people at once."[157]

Some of the proposals in the White House statement were never implemented, including a plan to screen Cubans before they left the island and charter two large ships to ferry pre-approved individuals to the United States.[158] Other elements of the stated plan went into effect almost immediately, including the decision that the U.S. Customs Service would begin seizing boats used for "unlawfully carrying Cubans." During the same period, the Coast Guard also began to "intercept and turn back" boats sailing south toward Cuba and made its first arrest of a Los Angeles-based Cuban who went to Mariel to retrieve his daughter and grandson.[159]

For Cubans held in the camps, the back-and-forth at the highest levels of the U.S. government echoed inconsistencies in the policies and procedures that they were encountering on the ground. After several weeks, their anxiety and frustration gave way to protests and full-scale revolts. The first signs of unrest appeared at Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle. The Carter administration had selected the site because officials determined that it could be readied quickly, but the tent city hastily erected on the edge of the base lacked the amenities of Fort Chaffee and the other camps that received Mariel arrivals later in May.[160] The Cubans sent to Eglin had not anticipated spending weeks there, and their prolonged stay was marked by the tedium, discomfort, and indignities of camp life, including an outbreak of infestations of lice.[161]

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[157] Jimmy Carter, "White House Statement on the Administration Policy Toward the Cuban Refugees," 14 May 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250335.

[158] On May 25, 1980, *Granma* published an editorial cartoon mocking the Carter administration plan to charter the ships.

[159] William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 23 May 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[160] Fiedler, "U.S. to Operate Refugee Center In North Florida," 28A; Silvia M. Unzueta, letter to Tom Casey, 12 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[161] George C. Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 14 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF; Putnam, memorandum to Roger Winter, 18 May 1980.

On May 24, a group of Cubans being held at Eglin met with federal officials there to ask whether they were planning to do anything to speed the screening and resettlement process. The Cubans wanted "concrete action" and not "only promises."[162]

The officials' answers were unsatisfactory. About 200 of the roughly 8,500 Cubans then confined at Eglin decided to take matters into their own hands. They tried to force their way out through a gate. When Air Force Police officers stepped in to stop them, camp residents apparently "began throwing tent poles, cinder blocks and punches."[163] Some managed to escape during the commotion, but most returned soon afterwards. FEMA administrators claimed that most or all the Cubans "who demonstrated" had been "former inmates of Cuba's La Cabana [sic] prison, where they served terms for minor political offenses."[164] If so, this group was probably not surprised by the response to their actions. Seventeen Cubans were detained for their role in the "melee," and the federal government sent dozens of U.S. Marshals to fortify security at the Air Force base.[165]

Even Mariel arrivals who had relatives prepared to sponsor them faced hold-ups. Near the end of May, FEMA reported that the situation at Eglin had become "intolerable," as over 5,000 people who had been fully cleared for release were still "awaiting resettlement." There were reports from all the camps that family members had been "showing up at camp locations to claim" their relatives and finding that they were not allowed to do so because they had not yet received clearances.[166]

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[162] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 25 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[163] "Refugees Trying to Leave Tent City Cause Disturbance," *Washington Post,* 25 May 1980, A9.

[164] Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 27 May 1980.

[165] Herbert Denton, "17 Refugees Jailed After Melee at Fla. Air Base," *Washington Post,* 26 May 1980, A11; Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 27 May 1980.

[166] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 27 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

Rubén and Viviana witnessed frustrations at Fort Chaffee boil over more than once. On May 26, some 200 Cubans took an opportunity to leave through an open gate. Afterwards, the local county sheriff told reporters that he had received no report of any property damage caused by the Cubans, and that all those who had left the base were thought to have returned by noon the next day. Newspapers described it as an act of "exuberance" and FEMA spokesman Bill McAda likened it to a college "panty raid." One of the Cubans "shouted 'Liberty!' and off they went," McAda explained. "They were laughing and having a big time."[167]

But Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton was not amused. He responded by activating 65 members of the National Guard to patrol the perimeter of Fort Chaffee. Clinton also demanded that the Carter administration do more to "make it plain to the refugees that if they are going to come here they are going to have to obey the law."[168] Federal officials responded by sending 150 active-duty soldiers from nearby Fort Sill in Oklahoma.[169] Their mission was not only to ensure that nobody got out of Chaffee, but also to serve as a buffer between the Mariel arrivals and the residents of nearby towns who had armed themselves and were threatening to shoot any Cubans they saw outside the base.[170]

The increased police and military presence made Fort Chafee look and feel even more like a "prison camp situation," but it did little to quell the growing unrest.[171] Only 400 of the roughly 18,000 people held at Fort Chaffee had been released, and there were small protests during the week that followed. On May 31, Cubans with relatives who had been waiting at the

[167] Associated Press, "Better Security For Camp Asked As Refugees Flee," *New York Times*, 28 May 1980, 14.

[168] Associated Press, "Better Security For Camp Asked As Refugees Flee," 14.

[169] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 28 May.

[170] William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 29 May 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC; Fiedler and Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," 1A, 18A.

[171] Eizenstat, "Notes of Stuart Eizenstat," 4 June 1980.

base and unable to get them out staged demonstrations throughout the day. That evening, a group of Mariel arrivals left the camp but returned soon after, at which point a FEMA official announced to them that the agency was going to implement a new policy to speed the process of reuniting them with their families in the United States. The agency said that Cubans whose relatives had shown up at the camp to retrieve them would no longer have to wait to leave until security checks had been finalized. In response, INS insisted once again that camp administrators were not permitted to release anyone until they had "a security clearance in [their] hands."[172]

The following afternoon, on June 1, several hundred Cubans jumped the brick wall and barbed-wire fence near the main gate of Fort Chaffee. Law enforcement officers posted outside the base turned them back. Just a few hours later, however, upwards of a thousand Cubans pushed their way through the gate and onto the highway that led to the nearby town of Barling. State and county law enforcement agencies responded quickly, according to a reporter who witnessed it, by swinging their "nightsticks like baseball bats, getting a good grip with both hands and swinging from the heels." Some Cubans retaliated by throwing "rocks and chunks of concrete" at the officers. Up the road in Barling, local police and Army personnel were trying to keep some 500 angry Arkansans, "some of whom were armed with shotguns, pistols, and clubs," from going to "battle the Cubans." Some Mariel Cubans who had been pushed back inside the base by law enforcement subsequently set fire to several of the buildings, destroying at least four. Cubans in groups as large as several hundred attempted to "charge the main gate several more times during the night, but were turned back each time by tear gas."[173] Arkansas State Police fired live rounds toward camp residents on at least one occasion, and as many as eight

[172] Fiedler and Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," 18A; Willard P. Rose, "Feds Vow Fast Release of Refugees With Relatives," *Miami Herald*, 1 June 1980, 19A.

[173] Willard P. Rose, "Cubans Rampage in Arkansas," *Miami Herald*, 2 June 1980, 1A, 14A.

Cubans were left with gunshot wounds. Reports of the total number of injuries varied, but several-dozen Cubans and more than ten law enforcement, military, and camp personnel were hurt in the chaos.[174]

It is not clear whether Rubén and Viviana were involved in what happened that day. They would have been at Fort Chaffee at the time, but most Cubans there did not participate in the protests, escape attempts, or clashes with police. At the height of the conflict on June 1, some of the men in the camp had torn bedsheets and wrapped white strips around their arms to signal their neutrality. Others had taken up baseball bats to prevent damage to one of the dining halls. Although many of the newcomers were frustrated with the way the U.S. government was handling them, they worried that the demonstrations and violence would undermine their goal of getting out of the camp as soon as possible.[175]

The initial government response validated these concerns. Screening and resettlement operations temporarily froze. The Carter administration – under pressure from members of Congress and a "furious" Bill Clinton – agreed to increase the size of the security force at Chaffee from 650 to 2,000, which included hundreds of additional soldiers from Fort Sill and troops from Arkansas National Guard. The White House also determined that military personnel had the legal authority to use "reasonable force" to keep the newcomers in the camp, clarifying what had been a point of confusion that had led military police to step aside when groups of Cubans marched on the gate. The commanding officers at Fort Chaffee had not been sure

[174] Jack Knarr, "8 Cuban refugees shot in riot," *Miami News*, 2 June 1980, 1A, 6A; News Services, "Cubans Riot at Center in Arkansas," *Washington Post*, 2 June 1980, A1. At the request of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI opened an investigation into the alleged shooting of five Cubans by the Arkansas State Police. See William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 11 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[175] Dan Williams and John Arnold, "Why the Refugees Rampaged at Fort Chaffee," *Miami Herald*, 3 June 1980, 1A, 17A.

whether the Mariel arrivals had authorization to be present in the United States or whether members of the military had the authority to use force against them. Senator Dale Bumpers, an Arkansas Democrat, failed to understand the uncertainty. “These people are illegal aliens,” he claimed during a press conference. “They don’t have any rights.”[176]

Although the senator’s statement failed as an assessment of Mariel Cubans’ legal status, his words captured the resentment that a growing number of U.S. residents were feeling toward the boatlift arrivals. Even before the events at Fort Chaffee, a majority of those surveyed by Gallup for a *Newsweek* public opinion poll responded that “Cuban emigration” was “bad for the United States.”[177] Some Carter administration officials later suggested that what had been a mere “disturbance” at Chaffee had become “a riot in the public mind” because of the way it was covered in the press.[178] The White House nevertheless felt compelled to respond. Two *Miami Herald* reporters who traveled to Fort Chaffee explained the dynamic perfectly. As the frustration and anxiety of the camp population were expressed through “complaint or violence,” they wrote, “[y]esterday’s poor lost lambs” became “today’s ungrateful wretches."[179]

Race contributed directly to this shift. News coverage of Fort Chaffee after June 1 featured images of Cubans in conflict with the police, in handcuffs, and beneath barbed-wire inside the camp “stockade.” While such photographs generally included multiracial groups,

[176] Willard P. Rose, “Soldiers in the Dark on Riot Orders,” *Miami Herald*, 3 June 1980, 1A, 17A; William H. Wilcox, “Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.,” 2 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[177] “Not Much of a Welcome,” *Newsweek*, 26 May 1980, 25.

[178] Eugene Eidenberg, “Gene and Bob’s unrehearsed conversation,” 4 September 1981, folder: Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[179] Tom Fiedler and Guy Gugliotta, “How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess,” *Miami Herald*, 1 June 1980, 8A.

Black and *mulato* Mariel arrivals were prominently featured among the individuals pictured.[180]



Figure 5.2 **"Chin Up,"** *Miami Herald*, 4 June 1980, 1A.

Such images marked Mariel Cubans as different from recent groups of newcomers to the United States. "In contrast to the multiple images of the Vietnamese refugees as individual children, playful and innocent," historian Jana Lipman writes in her study of Fort Chaffee, "the U.S. media represented the Cubans as older, male, and often of African descent."[181] Of course, these images also reflected the demographic reality of the resettlement camps. The number of Afrodescendant Mariel Cuban men sent to these spaces far exceeded their proportion of the total boatlift population. Images that circulated in the press after the revolt at Chaffee underscored this fact for a national audience in the context of stories about "riots." For many readers, elements of both the text and the visuals would have been familiar – and closely associated with poor and

[180] Associate Press, "Cubans Riot at Camp in Arkansas; Police, Refugees and Civilian Hurt," *New York Times*, 2 June 1980, D15; Jo Thomas, "Troops are Ordered to Arkansas Camp after Refugee Riot," *New York Times,* 3 June 1980, A1.

[181] Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America," 74.

working-class Black communities – thanks to media coverage of the many urban uprisings that had taken place across the United States during the 1960s.[182] After June 1, the resettlement camps became increasingly "socially identified" with Blackness.[183] In the process, so did the multiracial group of people confined within them.

Rubén, Viviana, and the other Cubans at Fort Chaffee watched as dozens of their fellow residents were rounded up as "troublemakers" and "agitators" and accused of fomenting unrest at the camp.[184] Over the next week, authorities at Chaffee locked over 100 of these "dissidents" in the camp stockade. After being interrogated by INS inspectors, at least 60 were transported to the agency's detention center in El Paso, Texas. Some were scheduled for hearings with Immigration Judges to determine whether they would be permitted to remain in the United States.[185] Just one month after 50 members of Congress had insisted that Carter must not attempt to deter Cubans' "rather desperate flight from Communist enslavement," the leaders of the House and Senate called for the immediate deportation of the "rioters" and "criminals."[186]

The Carter administration confirmed that deporting such individuals was the plan. White House officials stressed that the government was taking a hard line on "undesirables" among the arrivals, whether their transgressions took place before or after they arrived in the United States. By the beginning of June, 655 Mariel Cubans had been detained in federal prisons for "serious

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[182] Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s* (New York: Liveright, 2022).

[183] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 114.

[184] Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 2 June 1980; Jack Knarr, "8 Cuban refugees shot in riot," *Miami News*, 2 June 1980, 6A.

[185] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 6 June 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC; Charles R. Babcock, "U.S. to Bar Cuban Criminals, Rioters at Fort Chaffee," *Washington Post*, 8 June 1980, A3; William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 9 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[186] Murphy, "U.S. to take over refugee processing by weekend," 11A; William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 3 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC; 96 Cong. Rec. 13245-47(1980).

crimes" they had allegedly committed in Cuba. Another 47 were being held because immigration officials marked them as having mental illnesses that made them ineligible for entry to the United States. This group, along with the roughly 100 people detained at Fort Chaffee after June 1, was slated for "exclusion hearings" with an Immigration Judge who would determine whether they could remain in the United States. In the meantime, the State Department was working to "convince" the Cuban government to "accept any refugees who may be expelled from this country," though officials admitted that they did not have any indication that authorities in Havana would be willing to do so.[187]

While Carter and his staff emphasized the steps they were taking to get rid of people who might pose a threat to U.S. communities, they also sought to draw a distinction between this group and the other new arrivals. White House Press Secretary Jody Powell warned in a June 7 statement that "it would be grossly unfair and a serious mistake…to look at all of those Cubans as if they were like the few hardened criminals." Powell urged U.S. residents not to succumb to the ostensible manipulations of Fidel Castro, who had "exported these undesirable elements to the United States in a calculated effort to disguise the fact that the vast majority of those Cubans who have come to this country were and are law-abiding citizens whose only purpose was to seek freedom and reunification with their families."[188] The White House took this approach, in part, to mitigate the effects of the recent negative news coverage on the resettlement process. Neither federal officials nor the resettlement agencies wanted to make it harder than it already was to find sponsors for the Cubans newcomers. In fact, a policy to prioritize the quick release of Cubans with family members who had shown up at the camps was implemented the week after

[187] Bud Newman, "Carter agrees to deport worst criminal refugees," *Miami News*, 4 June 1980, 8C; Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 9 June 1980.
[188] Babcock, "U.S. to Bar Cuban Criminals, Rioters at Fort Chaffee," A3.

the unrest at Fort Chaffee.[189]

Powell's remarks reflected a message that Carter administration representatives repeated throughout the summer of 1980: the government was dealing harshly with the few "bad apples" among the Mariel arrivals, but this "small minority" was not representative of the more than 100,000 people who had made the voyage.[190] Carter had explicitly articulated this strategy in a June 5 meeting with senior members of his staff. In notes from the meeting, Stuart Eizenstat reported that the President believed it was essential to "send back people who started [the] riot or criminals." "He wants to get [the] bastards out of there," Eizenstat wrote in his summary of Carter's words, which concluded with, "Only way [to] protect most Cubans is to act on others."[191]

Yet a crucial matter in the efforts to protect the new arrivals remained unresolved – their legal status in the United States. For all the vicissitudes in its response to the boatlift, the Carter administration had been consistent in its reluctance to confer refugee status on Cubans from Mariel.[192] After two decades of labeling virtually all Cubans who arrived in the United States "refugees," many federal officials including Carter continued to use this term when referring to the new arrivals in 1980. This contributed to widespread confusion about whether his

[189] William H. Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 5 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC; Wilcox, "Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00p.m.," 9 June 1980.

[190] Jody Powell, "News Conference," 5 August 1980, folder: Camps-Indiantown Gap, box 1, Subject File, CHTF; Joyce Wadler and Alexandra Korry, "Cuban Refugee Camp Is Quiet After Rioting That Injured 58," *Washington* Post, 7 August 1980, A4.

[191] Eizenstat, "Notes of Stuart Eizenstat," 5 June 1980.

[192] There were small groups of Cubans who arrived during the boatlift who were assigned refugee status, but this was generally because they were considered political prisoners who had already been vetted and approved for admission to the U.S. as "refugees" before the boatlift began. Some of the people classified by the U.S. government as political prisoners arrived by plane rather than by boat. See Nathan J. Stark, "Daily Report on Cuban Activities," 6 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

administration had already "unilaterally decided the status question."[193] In fact, the White House took two months from the start of the boatlift to consider options and announce a decision. By then, the flow of boats from Mariel had "slowed to a trickle."[194] Over 112,000 Cubans – 90 percent of all those who would ultimately arrive – had arrived in Key West during the first 7 weeks of the mass exodus.[195] Except for a small number of Cubans granted refugee status because they had been classified as "political prisoners" and previously approved for entry to the United States, the future legal status of the newcomers in the United States was uncertain.[196]

5.5 "Exiles" to "Entrants"

As they woke up each day in the "hot, white barracks" of Fort Chaffee, Rubén and Viviana remained in legal limbo.[197] Officially, they were "asylum seekers" who had been granted a 60-day parole while they awaited the adjudication of their asylum claims. Both had probably filled out a Form I-589, the official document required to petition for asylum. Yet it was not clear whether seeking this status would even be necessary for Mariel Cubans, as officials from the White House and various administrative agencies continued to debate what to do about the latest arrivals from the Caribbean. The Carter administration remained especially concerned about the risk of "establishing the legal precedent that all a foreigner needed to do to get refugee status was show up in a boat." As a result of its effort to avoid this, explained the *Miami Herald,* Carter had "ended up with a slapped-together, Rube Goldberg-style improvisation loosely based

[193] Eizenstat, "Notes for 12:00 Meeting."

[194] Stabile and Scheina, "Coast Guard Operations During the Cuban Exodus," 36.

[195] The most intense phase of the boatlift was from April 21 to June 8. Smaller groups of Cubans continued to arrive until the Cuban government shut down the boatlift in October 1980. Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Cuban Entrant Data;" Christian R. Holmes, "Daily Executive Summary," 29 October 1980, folder: Bohen Papers, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[196] Suanne Brooks, "Policy on Cuban Refugees," 12 May 1980, folder 184, box 26, series II, CRC-CHC.

[197] Dan Williams, "Anger Still Close to Surface Among Refugees Who Wait," *Miami Herald,* 4 June 1980, 8A.

on the Vietnamese refugee resettlement of 1975 but without the accompanying legal underpinning."[198]

In early June, the federal government weighed the pros and cons of three primary options for resolving the legal status of Mariel Cubans, as well as that of nearly 15,000 Haitians who had arrived in the U.S. in recent years, most of whom had pending asylum cases. A lengthy memorandum from Associate Attorney General John H. Shenefield outlined each possibility and summarized the opinions of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel with respect to the legal sticking points.

The first option detailed by Shenefield would require the Carter administration to invoke the emergency authority provided by the Refugee Act to admit a fixed number of unanticipated arrivals from both countries as "refugees." Pursuing this approach would grant the newcomers immediate access to all forms of public assistance available to people in this status category. Such benefits and services included direct cash payments and English-language and job training, which had been integral to the experiences of most members of the established Cuban community in the United States. The Refugee Act also authorized full federal reimbursement for the costs of state-administered, life-sustaining services provided to people with refugee status during the three years following their arrival. These services included medical care through Medicaid and cash assistance through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).[199] Carter administration representatives would have to fulfill a statutory requirement to consult with the House and Senate Judiciary Committees before making such an emergency authorization, but the chairs of both committees at the time, Senator Ted Kennedy and Representative Peter

[198] Fiedler and Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," 18A.

[199] Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 114-15; Nathan Stark, "Comments on the Draft Memorandum to the President on the Status of Cubans and Haitians," 11 June 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

Rodino, had already indicated that they would not oppose such a measure. [200]

Yet the "refugee" option seemed a major risk to administration officials who worried that it would spur other would-be migrants from the Caribbean and Latin America to arrive in the United States expecting "similar favorable treatment." Moreover, designating certain groups as refugees did not ensure that all *individual*s within those groups would be admitted as such. Each Cuban and Haitian would still have to meet specific "administrative criteria" established in consultation with Congress, which would then be applied to admission decisions by INS officers in coordination with the Department of State. Shenefield indicated that these criteria were likely to be based to some extent on precedent, which meant that Haitians – who had never been designated as a refugee group in the way that Cubans had – were less likely to qualify. Already under fire for the longstanding disparity in the treatment of the two groups of Caribbean migrants, the Carter administration was reluctant to pursue a policy that might reproduce such a result.[201]

A second option under White House consideration would permit recent Cuban and Haitian arrivals to remain in the United States temporarily while they pursued asylum claims on a case-by-case basis. Only those whose claims were affirmed would be considered refugees under U.S. law. Asylum procedures were determined by federal regulations, which at the time held that INS District Directors should do an "initial review" and refer any "doubtful" cases to the Department of State for an "advisory opinion." Shenefield suggested that this amounted to a "more stringent review" process than the one typically used to make admissions decisions for members of groups designated as refugees, which would mean that "fewer Cubans and very few

[200] John H. Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," June 1980, 7-11, folder: Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, box 2, FCC-CHC.

[201] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," June 1980, 7-11.

Haitians" were likely to be conferred refugee status.[202]

From the perspective of the Carter administration, this would have the benefit of signaling to people across Latin America and the Caribbean that they would experience "maximum difficulty" if they sought "a grant of refugee status." Pursuing this option also would reduce the costs incurred as a consequence of the new arrivals, because relatively few would be eligible for the benefits and federal reimbursement funds afforded to refugees. Yet the federal government was already managing a serious backlog of asylum cases – largely a result of the limited number of personnel dedicated to asylum processing, as well as delays when asylum seekers exercised their right to appeal unfavorable decisions. The U.S. asylum system, which until recently had handled perhaps "a few hundred cases annually," was not built to manage mass petitions. Given the historical classification of Cubans as political refugees and the astronomically high rate of recent asylum denials for Haitians, Schenefield believed that pursuing this course of action was almost certain to produce a major disparity in the outcomes of each group's claims. Finally, as both Cubans and Haitians waited for the bureaucratic snarl to clear, their access to support would be limited. There was an open legal question about their eligibility for certain kinds of public assistance, given that their permission to be in the country was provisional and temporary. And unless Congress passed legislation to provide "impact-type assistance" to state and local governments where the newcomers settled, these entities would be on the hook for much of the cost of providing benefits, healthcare, and education services to the Mariel Cubans and the recent groups of Haitian arrivals.[203]

The third option entailed passing a new law. Since the early days of the boatlift, White

[202] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," June 1980, 7-11.

[203] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 11-14; Stark, "Comments on the Draft Memorandum to the President on the Status of Cubans and Haitians," 11 June 1980.

House officials and some members of Congress had been discussing the possibility of "special legislation" to create an alternative legal pathway for admitting both groups of Caribbean migrants without relying on the Refugee Act.[204] This approach would ensure that Congress shared responsibility for the policy decision. It would also mean avoiding the potential consequences of establishing a precedent that "in effect, people who are able to attain physical presence in the United States and claim refugee status will achieve that status because of the difficulty of returning them." A new law would also create "an opportunity to strengthen the tools available to the United States to improve exclusion and deportation operations," Shenfield wrote. Yet the prospects of passing such legislation soon enough to resolve the immediate situation were slim, especially given disagreements in Congress about how the government should respond to new arrivals. Besides, the legal uncertainties and constraints on access to federal support for Cubans and Haitians under a scenario in which they were awaiting asylum decisions also affect them if they had to wait for Congress to enact new legislation.[205]

Both groups of Caribbean newcomers had tremendous stakes in the debate taking place within the Carter administration. While the crucial question about their long-term status held profound implications for their right to remain, their ability to meet their most urgent needs depended on how their initial immigration classification shaped the flow of federal funding and their access to public assistance and social services. In the absence of a clear White House decision, the organizations tasked with resettling Mariel Cubans from the camps also remained in the dark even about the amount of grant money they would receive for their work.[206] The staff of those agencies, moreover, had no way to give people like Rubén and Viviana definitive answers

[204] *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 19, 51-57

[205] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 13-15.

[206] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 14.

about their eligibility for forms of support to help them get on their feet in a new country. Keen observers from the *Miami Herald* newsroom understood precisely what this meant for many of the people who arrived in the boatlift. "Seeking asylum presents few problems if you can dance like Baryshnikov, play cello like Casals, hit tennis balls like Navratilova or design rockets like Von Braun," they wrote, "but if you're a jobless, semi-skilled black Cuban with no English and an arrest record for spitting at a picture of Fidel Castro, then you can use all the help you can get."[207] The same might have been said of a young Black Cuban man who had been arrested for *peligrosidad,* or a young Cuban woman with no U.S. support network who had been accused of engaging in sex work on the island.

In the middle of June, a fourth option appeared on the table. The idea appears to have originated with the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, Victor Palmieri, who suggested measures that included "extended paroles for Cubans and Haitians in INS procedings [sic] as of June 15 (save criminals)," quick legislation to provide "impact aid to affected states, and for some assistance to voluntary agencies," and a future "special legislation package" that would permit both groups to adjust to permanent resident status, receive long-term public assistance, and "remove some potential clogs to future asylum processing." This final provision, Palmieri suggested, would need to include "a statutory ban" on class action litigation to challenge asylum determinations – one of the key strategies used by advocates for Haitians whose petitions for asylum had been systematically denied.[208] Palmieri strongly opposed the "refugee" option because it would mean "locking ourselves in to a posture where we will probably be accepting in the future all who happen to make their way here from Cuba." He insisted that any eventual policy must be framed clearly as a set of "extraordinary measures designed to deal with a unique

[207] Fiedler and Gugliotta, "How Refugee Resettlement Has Become a Mess," 18A.
[208] Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish,* 29–32.

emergency situation." He insisted that it was time "to move decisively away from the special treatment Cubans have enjoyed for 20 years and toward parity with Haitians and all other asylum seekers." Palmieri suggested that the repeal of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, which created an expedited path to permanent residency for Cubans in the United States, should form part of this process.[209]

The White House saw many clear benefits in Palmieri's solution. His option would not set "unfortunate precedents" by designating large groups of sudden arrivals as refugees. Instead, it would mean using the longstanding parole authority provided in the Immigration and Nationality Act to permit Cubans and Haitians to "to remain in the United States under color of law" without requiring any Congressional action. While the parole mechanism had been used to admit most groups of refugees to the United States up to that point, the Cuban and Haitian newcomers would have no such legal status. Excluding them from refugee benefits would reduce the overall cost of the U.S. government response. Of course, the Refugee Act reflected an effort by Congress to stop precisely such a use of Executive discretion. The law had been intended to stop the circumvention of "immigration quotas and Congressional control" and "eliminate the need for *ad hoc*, large-scale parole actions." Administration officials understood that many in Congress would see the decision "as a violation of the spirit of the Refugee Act."[210] The White House did it anyway.

The Carter administration announced the new policy on June 20, 1980. It established that all Cubans who had entered the U.S. from April 21 to June 19 and registered their arrival with the INS, and all Haitians in the U.S. who were in INS proceedings as of June 19, would be

[209] Victor H. Palmieri, "Options on the Status of Cubans and Haitians, 12 June 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[210] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 15-17.

permitted to remain in the country for six months as "Cuban-Haitian Entrants (Status Pending)." This provisional status category was meant to ensure their eligibility for food stamps, facilitate their access to job programs through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), and provide authorization for them to work legally in the United States.[211] Cubans and Haitians who qualified for Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, and AFDC under existing state rules would, in theory, be eligible to receive those benefits. States would, also in theory, receive the standard federal matching funds to offset the costs of providing these benefits to the new Caribbean arrivals. Resettlement agencies would receive grants for each Cuban or Haitian they successfully placed with a sponsor, as well as funding for any "employment counseling and referral services" that they had provided to the people they had already placed. For minors who arrived in the boatlift without parents or other close relatives, additional support would be made available in the form of "English-language training, health services, counseling, and individualized planning for permanent placement." The Carter administration also promised to advance legislation to codify the new "Cuban-Haitian Entrant" category, enable "retroactive reimbursement to states and localities for 75 percent of the total cost of other general assistance, medical assistance, special educational programs, and social services," and create a path for Cuban and Haitian newcomers to gain "Permanent Resident Alien Status."[212]

As was becoming the norm in all White House communications about Mariel Cubans, the announcement included the assurance that "criminals" would "continue to be subject to detention and exclusion or deportation from the United States."[213] Palmieri and other administration officials also took the opportunity to emphasize that the steps taken to deter additional arrivals

[211] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 9.
[212] "Cuban-Haitian Fact Sheet," 20 June 1980, folder: Reading File, box 16, Director's File, CHTF.
[213] "Cuban-Haitian Fact Sheet," 20 June 1980.

had worked. “To date,” Palmieri stated, “our efforts have virtually stopped the boat flotilla from Cuba.”[214] Indeed, more than 114,000 Cubans had arrived on roughly 1,300 boats during the first two months of the boatlift. In the four months from the June 20 White House announcement to when the Cuban government finally halted departures from Mariel, only about 10,000 people made the voyage.[215]

5.6 Conclusion

After making a decision regarding the status of recent Cuban and Haitian arrivals, the Carter administration suggested that the “crisis” had been resolved. Yet it became immediately apparent that the government’s victory lap was, for many Mariel Cubans, the start of a grueling distance race. The White House decision provided for the broadest possible swath of Cuban and Haitian arrivals to remain in the United States, but it also maintained their precarious legal status and constrained their eligibility for important forms of federal aid.

In Fort Chaffee, Viviana continued the work of survival. In the fall of 1980, Cubans from all four resettlement camps who had who had not yet been placed with a stable sponsor were consolidated at the Arkansas Army base. Viviana was at one point released to a family that had agreed to help support her, but she went back to the camp because of a conflict with her sponsors.[216] When she returned, an even larger percentage of her fellow residents at Chaffee were men of African descent. While federal officials frequently noted that “single males” were difficult to resettle, they rarely commented publicly on the challenge of finding U.S. residents willing to sponsor Black and *mulato* Cubans.[217] The staff of resettlement agencies, however,

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[214] “Statement by Victor H. Palmieri,” 20 June 1980, folder: Reading file, box 16, Director’s File, CHTF.

[215] Holmes, “Daily Executive Summary,” 29 October 1980; Office of Media Liaison, White House Press Office, “Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response,” 1-2.

[216] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986.

[217] Eizenstat, “Notes of Stuart Eizenstat,” 4 June 1980.

understood that race remained a major factor in the resettlement process. As of December 1980, 73 percent of the Cubans at Fort Chaffee were classified by the federal government as "male" and "black or mulatto."[218] At the time, Paula Dominique of the Church World Service, told the *New York Times*, "There are people who call up and request a white, college-educated Cuban who speaks English." She informed such callers that they were not ordering from "a Sears catalogue."[219]

As she had in Cuba, Viviana struggled to find firm footing in the United States. She was one of several hundred people who remained in Fort Chaffee until it closed. At the start of the second year of the Mariel presence at the base, the proportion of Afrodescendant men surpassed 95 percent. In the early months of 1982, Carter's successor in the White House, Ronald Reagan, oversaw the transfer of Viviana and nearly 400 other so-called hard-to-sponsor Cubans from Fort Chaffee to federal prisons.[220]

In Florida, where Rubén and more than 80 percent of all Mariel Cubans would soon settle, there were serious doubts about the support they would receive. Despite federal claims about what the new "Cuban-Haitian Entrant" category meant for their eligibility for public assistance, their access to such programs was entirely contingent on rules and decisions at the state level. After the White House announced the suite of public assistance programs that would be available to the new arrivals, a spokesperson for the Florida Department of Health Rehabilitative Services explained, "What they are talking about…is an emergency assistance program, which Florida does not have, and a medical assistance program, which Florida does not

[218] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft)," 24, 25 September 1981, folder: Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[219] Paul Heath Hoeffel, "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans," *New York Times Magazine*, 21 December 1980, 47.

[220] Stephens, "I Hope They Don't Come to Plains," 110, 114; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, "File Review: Cuban History," January 1986.

have." Even for the programs that were in place, the Florida Legislature had not appropriated any funds to support such a large group of newcomers. Under the Carter administration plan, unless Congress could pass new legislation, the state would be expected to cover half the cost of crucial benefits and services. Finally, because so many Mariel Cubans were young men, many did not qualify for SSI, Medicaid, AFDC, and the other programs that *were* in place in Florida because these forms of public assistance had been designed to serve particular groups, including elders, people with physical disabilities, and single women with children.[221]

It was for precisely these reasons that federal Department of Health and Human Services had recommended that the White House admit Cubans and Haitians as "refugees." HHS Under Secretary Nathan Stark could not have been clearer about this in his assessment of the policy options under consideration in June of 1980. "The authority of the Refugee Act of 1980," he wrote, "is the only existing means of aiding the affected communities quickly." Stark insisted that this legal mechanism was the sole way to ensure "adequate financial assistance to help States and communities to accept these new residents." Denying or delaying such federal support, he warned, "aggravates community tensions in the short-run and threatens to create an even more explosive situation in the long run."[222]

Stark was not the only official within the administration to raise this concern. When Associate Attorney General John Shenefield prepared a list of "pros" and "cons" for each policy option under consideration by the White House, he included a prescient and troubling forecast along with his more technical concerns. Admitting the new arrivals without classifying them as refugees, he wrote, would "place tens of thousands of people in an ambivalent status which,

[221] Sara Rimer, "Refugee Aid Questionable Here," *Miami Herald*, 22 June 1980, 1B, 7B.
[222] Stark, "Comments on the Draft Memorandum to the President on the Status of Cubans and Haitians," 11 June 1980.

because of limited benefits and sometimes haphazard access to education and other services, could lead to longer-term social problems for the United States."[223] In South Florida, the problems had already begun.

[223] Shenefield, "Administration Policy on Cubans/Haitians," 17.

Chapter 6 Landfall: "Castro's Problem People" and Housing in Metropolitan Miami

Rolando was probably there during the floods. As he later explained to his legal representatives, he arrived in "Tent City" after spending several months in another tent encampment that had been created to hold and screen new Cuban arrivals at Eglin Air Force Base. In late summer of 1980, he was released to a "sponsor" who agreed to help him find a job and a place to live. But Rolando soon found himself again living among canvas tarps.[1] This time, rather than the U.S. government, the City of Miami was in charge. And instead of a patch of ground at the edge of a military base in the Florida Panhandle, the green tents sat underneath Interstate-95 on the edge of Downtown Miami. The poor drainage at the site meant that when the rain came, the water rose. The periodic inundations compounded what were already difficult living conditions at Tent City. One of the residents compared life there to what Cubans had experienced in Las Yaguas, historically one of Havana's most recognizable slums. During one of the floods, a Cuban-born employee for the City of Miami tried to lighten the mood by joking that it reminded her of "*el solar del Príncipe*," an infamous tenement building in the Cuban capital.[2]

Rolando lived in Tent City alongside some 900 other boatlift arrivals, in a group that changed each day as some residents found jobs and apartments, and other Cuban newcomers

[1] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, May 1990, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[2] Guillermo Martinez, "Tense City: Wait is Endless, Tempers Short for Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 24 August 1980, 2B.

found themselves suddenly on the street and in need of shelter. Thousands of Mariel Cubans passed through the site during its two months of existence from the end of July to the end of September 1980.[3] Rolando likely ended up there because his initial plan for a place to stay fell through. This was common among people who had arrived in the boatlift. It was an occurrence so frequent that resettlement agency staff had a term for it: "sponsorship breakdown."[4] Mariel Cubans like Rolando, who arrived in the country with no real support network, were especially at risk of losing access to stable housing. If Rolando had a conflict or a misunderstanding with the sponsor who had agreed to provide him with a place to stay, he may have been left with few options other than a cot in Tent City. [5]

Even for Mariel Cubans who had relatives already established in South Florida, shelter was not a guarantee. Omar was 16 when he arrived in the boatlift with his mother and sister. They moved in with an aunt in Hialeah, a Dade County municipality immediately adjacent to Miami where, by 1980, Cubans comprised a majority of the population.[6] At some point not long after he and his family arrived, the landlord told his aunt that they could no longer stay with her. At a moment when the rental vacancy rate for Dade County was one-half of one percent, finding an affordable apartment on short notice was an almost impossible task.[7] According to a brief

[3] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 1 November 1980, 107, folder 126, box 24, series II, Cuban Refugee Center Records (CHC0218), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter CRC-CHC); Christian R. Holmes, memorandum to Eugene Eidenberg with subject "Cuban-Haitian Entrants: Action Plan for September," 4 September 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection (CHC5175), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter FCC-CHC).

[4] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 31.

[5] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," May 1990; Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, March 1990, Series II, ALAS.

[6] Nearly three-quarters of Hialeah's population was identified as "Hispanic" in the U.S. Census. Some 60 percent of Hialeah residents were "of Cuban descent." Thomas D. Boswell, "Hispanic Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami," *The Florida Geographer* 24 (1990): 45.

[7] Fredric Tasker and Guillermo Martinez, "Refugee Machine Can Roll If Congress Approves," *Miami Herald*, 13 April 1980, 14A.

later submitted by his legal representatives, when faced with the possibility of his family's homelessness, Omar "broke into two houses to raise money to help pay rent."[8]

When writing in his own words, Omar explained his move into the illicit economy of South Florida in a slightly different way. But his account confirms that housing was central to his thinking. In a statement submitted as part of a parole petition to the U.S. Department of Justice, Omar wrote, "As the days turned to weeks and then to months it seemed like we had never left Cuba. There was no work, no food, no decent place to live. I could'nt [sic] understand. The situation was even worse because no one liked us and they didn't want us here." Isolated and increasingly frustrated, he saw that some of the people around him appeared to be doing quite well. "I started hanging around with people who always seemed to have money, [ ] nice cloth[e]s and fancy cars. Some of them were Americans and some of them were from Cuba," he recalled. "Everyone said don't worry everything is ok. This is where it[']s at, you will never go hungry again. You and your family can have a nice house and other nice things." In the end, however, his version of the story concluded much like the one that appeared in the legal brief written on his behalf – with Omar incarcerated. "Then it was over," he wrote, "my dreams became a living nightmare. When I woke up I was in jail. The rest of course is on my, as you call it[,] rap sheet."[9]

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By the fall of 1980, many South Florida residents, elected officials, and journalists had concluded that Mariel Cubans constituted an unambiguous "problem" for South Florida. It had not started out that way. At least, not for everyone. Local news broadcasts initially showed smiling Cubans disembarking at Key West and members of the established Cuban community

[8] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," United States Justice Department of Justice Parole Review Panel, August 1989, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS).
[9] Statement dated March 1989, PP-ALAS.

who were eager to embrace them. In one segment, a group of people waiting for their relatives at the docks sang "Amazing Grace" in Spanish, accompanied by a man on the guitar.[10] A potent counternarrative about the Mariel Cubans soon emerged alongside such celebratory accounts, however. Stories about "criminals" arriving from Mariel led journalists such as longtime South Florida news anchor Ralph Renick to conclude that some of the boatlift arrivals were "Castro's problem people: killers, thieves, and others who have been in prison who are non- contributors and troublemakers." Although Renick warned his viewers not to let the machinations of the "clever bearded one" turn them "against the exile community," he emphasized the alleged threat posed by some of the newcomers.[11]

Such sharply contrasting depictions of Mariel Cubans were indicative of the diversity of perspectives on the new arrivals at the outset of the boatlift. However, the contested nature of the story told about Cubans who arrived in 1980 – and the range of potential responses to them – is often lost in the recounting of these events. This is understandable given the force of the dominant narrative about their alleged criminality and the brevity of the period during which a public policy centered on providing resources and services remained a salient option. Yet explaining the convergence of the initially disparate views regarding the perceived worth of Mariel Cubans and the proper way to treat them requires attending to the moment when multiple outcomes remained possible. It demands examining in fine-grained detail the various factors that conspired to foreclose multiple potential futures over a very short period.

This chapter returns to that moment in 1980, this time with a focus on the place where most of the boatlift participants settled: South Florida. If at the federal level initial concerns

[10] Beverly McFarland, WTVJ Newstape Cut Stories, no. 249, 25 April 1980, Wolfson Florida Moving Image Archives, Miami Dade College Archives Department, Miami, FL (hereafter Wolfson Archives).
[11] Ralph Renick, WTVJ Newstape Cut Stories, no. 250, 1 May 1980, Wolfson Archives.

centered on screening for the "criminal element," in Dade County the most pronounced anxiety expressed by residents about the arrival of thousands of Cuban newcomers was that they would be a "burden." And if at the federal level one of the factors shaping refugee policy was the perceived double standard in the treatment of "White" Cubans and "Black" Haitians, in the Miami area the apprehension stemmed, in part, from the growing awareness that many of the newcomers were poor and working-class men of African descent perceived to have few connections to the established Cuban community. After generating an initial surge of support, many of the Cubans who had already found a place for themselves in South Florida grew increasingly reluctant to establish the kinds of ties that might have helped some Mariel arrivals who were struggling to do the same.[12]

In the days leading up to the start of the boatlift, local officials and journalists, White residents without Latin American ancestry (often called "Anglos" in Dade County), and some Black Miamians, openly worried that the arrival of thousands of Cubans who had sought asylum at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana would impose a "burden" on South Florida. Soon after the mass migration from Mariel began, these initial concerns intertwined with fears that a significant number of Cubans with criminal records were making the voyage. Together, the "burden" and "criminal" narratives formed a powerful framework for groups that opposed the admission of additional Cubans in 1980 and resented the funding and attention directed toward them after they

[12] Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Felix Roberto Masud-Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Gastón A. Fernández, *The Mariel Exodus Twenty Years Later: A Study on the Politics of Stigma and a Research Bibliography* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002); Monika Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division: Interethnic Struggles for Legitimacy in Multicultural Miami* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Devyn Benson and Danielle Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel: Black Cubans, Racial Exclusion, and Building Community in Miami," *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2021): 6.

arrived. These interwoven representations framed policy decisions that affected them from the local to the federal level.

While necessary for understanding the discriminatory and exclusionary treatment of boatlift arrivals, an analysis of such discourses is not sufficient to explain what happened to them. Indeed, representations of Mariel Cubans were themselves contingent on shifting social and political conditions. For a time, a diversity of perspectives persisted regarding the Mariel arrivals and the appropriate policy responses. Though many in Dade County had rejected these new arrivals from the start, members of the established Cuban community and liberals in Miami and Washington had advocated for their support. As the summer wore on, a combination of existing structures and emergent policies, including the consequential decision by the Carter administration not to confer refugee status on the new arrivals, undermined the advocates of projects to provide for the newcomers. But this was a process – with a relationship to both the social positions of Mariel Cubans *and* to specific material conditions and powerful economic and political interests – not a conclusion wholly predetermined by race, class, gender, sexuality, or immigration status.

In South Florida, Omar, Rolando, and many other Mariel Cubans confronted rising unemployment and scarce options for affordable housing in a metropolitan region with a long tradition of segregating or displacing groups perceived as threats to the local race-and-class order and the profits that it generated.[13] This situation was especially difficult for Cubans who had

[13] Raymond A. Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960," *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 3 (1995): 395–427; Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Melanie Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami: A Social History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Chanelle N. Rose, *The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America's Tourist Paradise, 1896-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

been encouraged or forced to leave their country by a government that had marked them as undesirable and unwanted because of their criminal histories, their mental health, or their general deviance from desired norms. Their experiences also demonstrated the persistent role of race in shaping the resettlement trajectories of Mariel arrivals. Many in this multiracial, disproportionately Afrodescendant group arrived with no resources or established networks of support. Some, like Rolando, spent their first months in the United States living in an assortment of temporary camps. Others slept in city parks and cramped motel rooms. Their struggles to find stable jobs and permanent housing underlined the insufficiency of the systems hastily developed to care for them in a metropolitan area where life was difficult for virtually all its poor residents, whether homegrown or recently arrived.

6.1 Welcome to Miami

The Cuban community in Miami was the first group in the United States to mobilize in response to reports of a crisis involving asylum seekers at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana. "*La comunidad*" – the collective term used for the hundreds of thousands of people in South Florida who generally identified as exiles or refugees – came out in force in early April 1980. Thousands marched through the heart of Little Havana, filling Southwest Eighth Street, known Miami by its Spanish name – "Calle Ocho." South Florida Cubans quickly raised tens of thousands of dollars in cash and filled "[n]ine trucks and a moving van" with donations of food and medicine for the people who had rushed to the grounds of the Peruvian diplomatic compound on the other side of the Straits of Florida. A crowd of 15,000 gathered for a mass rally at Bayfront Park to demand

safe passage for their compatriots at the embassy, and to celebrate what many in Miami hoped might be the beginning of the end for the revolutionary government.[14]

South Florida Cuban leaders traveled to Washington to urge the Carter administration to do more to facilitate a resolution to the crisis. U.S. Senator Richard Stone, a Democrat from Florida, helped the group arrange a meeting with State Department officials.[15] Among the Cubans in attendance was Jorge Mas Canosa, a Miami businessman with a long history of involvement in organizations dedicated to overthrowing the Cuban government. Representing the delegation from Miami, and reflecting a position expressed by many of the Cubans demonstrating in the streets of the city, Mas Canosa asserted, "The United States should provide the means of transportation and the resources to bring most of the refugees up to this country."[16]

Elected officials from the City of Miami, where Cubans accounted for over 40 percent of residents, almost immediately responded with a public display of support for their constituents' demands.[17] The Puerto Rican-born mayor of Miami, Maurice Ferré, led the City Commission in a successful vote to approve a resolution to allow the more than 10,000 Cubans from the Peruvian Embassy to enter the United States. The Commission also voted to designate the Orange Bowl, then the home stadium of the Miami Dolphins of the National Football League (NFL), as a donation center for food and clothing for the group of Cubans seeking to leave their

[14] Heather Dewar and Marilyn A. Moore, "Exiles cry: Let our people go! Ferre: Cubans welcome here," *Miami News*, 7 April 1980, 1A; Dan Williams and Ivan A. Castro, "Enthusiastic Exiles Flood Streets," *Miami Herald*, 8 April 1980, 1A, 8A.

[15] Ana Veciana, "Exiles here try to aid compatriots at embassy," *Miami News*, 9 April 1980, 8A.

[16] Jack Knarr, Dary Matera and Ana Veciana, "Exiles plead for action by U.S.," *Miami News*, 8 April 1980, 1A.

[17] U.S. Census Bureau, "Spanish By Specific Origin," 1980, prepared by Social Explorer, https://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C1980/R13800814. The 1980 U.S. Census was conducted in the Miami area prior to April of that year and, therefore, did not reflect the numbers of Cubans and Haitians who arrived during the period of the Mariel boatlift. See Hector Fernando Burga, "The Mariel Boatlift and Comprehensive Planning: Humanitarian Crisis, Demographic Data, and Cuban-American Community Development," *Planning Perspectives* 36, no. 3 (2020): 440–43.

country. “How can we admit 150,000 Hungarian freedom fighters and 150,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians and not admit the 10,000 Cubans?” Ferré asked the mostly Cuban crowd in attendance at the commission meeting. “Either we admit them or we take down the Statue of Liberty,” he declared.[18]

Yet when Ferré was not in front of a group of hundreds of Cuban-born residents, his open arms came with a caveat. He maintained that he would “welcome anybody,” including both Cubans and Haitians, who had been arriving by boat on the shores of South Florida at an accelerating rate in recent months.[19] Like virtually all local and state officials at the time, however, Ferré cited concerns about the “burden” that would be imposed by a large group of new arrivals. He also echoed his colleagues from around the region when he told the *Miami Herald*, “I don’t think the burden should be placed on the people of Miami.” The federal government, he said, must play a major role. In Hialeah, where Omar and his family would later move in with his aunt, Mayor Dale Bennett agreed. “We have no social services,” Bennett claimed. “We’d have to look for immediate aid.”[20] Florida Governor Bob Graham joined his fellow Democrats Ferré and Bennett in highlighting the financial strain likely to result from a sudden increase in newcomers, especially if the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy was the precursor to “another surge of Cubans leaving the island.” While Graham said that the Cubans “would be welcome in Florida,” he insisted that there would be a “very major need to readjust the federal government’s level of support.”[21]

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[18] Eric Rieder, “Commissioners Join Cry for U.S. to Accept Cubans,” *Miami Herald*, 8 April 1980, 8A.

[19] Jack Knarr, “‘I feel like the Statue of Liberty,’” *Miami News*, 7 April 1980, 1A; Ward Sinclair, “Haitian Boat People: Flotsam in an American Sea of Plenty,” *Washington Post*, 19 April 1980, A9.

[20] Dan Williams, “Exiles Back Compatriots With March,” *Miami Herald*, 7 April 1980, 20A.

[21] Bud Newman, “Embassy Cubans are welcome in Florida, Graham says,” *Miami News*, 9 April 1980, 6A.

Officials from Dade County were especially concerned about the potential number of new arrivals from the Caribbean and the extent of federal support, because the county government was responsible for administering social welfare programs and the local public education and healthcare systems.[22] "It's fine for Maurice Ferre to say he welcomes all of the 10,000 refugees," County Manager Merrett Stierheim told the *Miami Herald*. "But if they get here, Dade County [not the city of Miami] will care for them." Stierheim established a special county task force to plan for the potential arrival of thousands of Cubans and identify strategies to ensure that they had housing, healthcare, and jobs.[23] Aida Levitan, a member of the new task force and head of the Dade County Office of Latin Affairs, explained that housing was likely to be the biggest challenge. According to Levitan, recent arrivals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and elsewhere already found themselves "in a crisis situation finding decent housing…or any housing at all." Like her colleagues in the county government, she insisted that the arrival of Cubans from the Peruvian Embassy, whether they totaled 3,500 or 10,000, would require action on the part of the Carter administration. "If the federal government is going to admit the refugees," she said, "they have to be aware that we need assistance immediately."[24]

The local press likewise foregrounded appeals for the federal government to take responsibility for any decisions that might bring more Caribbean newcomers in South Florida. The area's long running evening newspaper, the *Miami News*, celebrated the "pluralistic society" that had been created in the Miami area in recent years by "the influx of Cubans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, and Nicaraguans." Its editorial board also warned, however, that "local

[22] On the many municipalities of Dade County and its fragmented metropolitan landscape of governance, see Raymond A. Mohl, "Miami's Metropolitan Government: Retrospect and Prospect," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1984): 24–50.

[23] Morton Lucoff, "County task force to plan aid in case Cuban refugees come," *Miami News*, 11 April 1980, 4A

[24] Tasker and Martinez, "Can Dade Absorb Wave of Refugees?," 14A.

medical, social and educational resources have been severely strained for some time" and that the region would need "more and better federal aid, ongoing programs to help the city absorb the refugee waves, [and] economic grants to provide a buffer against cultural conflicts."[25] Leaders at the *News* argued that there were "limits to how many refugees South Florida can sustain – how many children the school system can educate; how many hungry mouths taxpayers can feed; how many jobs even a healthy economy can provide." Since it had been "a federal decision to accept refugees from the south," Washington had a "responsibility" to provide "job-training, housing, and welfare funds – even a relocation plan." Indeed, the members of the *Miami News* editorial board were adamant that South Florida must not be the final destination for all would-be migrants from the Caribbean. "Neither this community nor any American community should be allowed to become the Hong Kong of the Occident," they wrote.[26]

The *Miami Herald*, the South Florida newspaper with the largest circulation, also questioned whether Dade County could "absorb" another "wave of refugees." The paper included stories warning of a severe housing shortage – "less than 1 percent of apartments are vacant" – and a looming economic downturn – "several garment factories have laid off hundreds of workers, perhaps a preview of a long-awaited recession."[27] *Herald* reporters observed that some of the ongoing fiscal challenges in South Florida stemmed, in part, from federal decisions not to admit certain groups as "refugees." In contrast with Cubans, Jews from the Soviet Union, and Southeast Asians, most Haitians and Nicaraguans who recently had settled in the Miami area did not have refugee status. As a result, Dade County was receiving no federal funding for the

[25] "New Cuban refugee signal Castro woes," *Miami News*, 8 April 1980, 14A.
[26] "Sharing the refugee load," *Miami News*, 11 April 1980, 10A
[27] Dan Williams, "Exiles Back Compatriots With March," *Miami Herald*, 7 April 1980, 20A.

education and healthcare expenses necessary to support groups from these countries. Instead, local tax revenues covered the costs.[28]

In response to such concerns about providing for a new group of Cuban arrivals, South Florida business leaders and their allies were often quick to point out that their predecessors had more than compensated for the initial expenses attributed to them through their subsequent contributions. Alvah Chapman, Jr., the head of the major newspaper corporation Knight Ridder, emphasized that the hundreds of thousands of Cubans who had settled in the area had helped to make Miami an "international city" and "brought a considerable measure of prosperity to all." The Georgia-born businessman encouraged the other residents of South Florida "to remember we were all refugees from somewhere at some time," while also opining that Cubans should not be "clannish" and must "recognize that the existing culture has just as much right to prevail as theirs does."[29] Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré likewise argued that, over time, Cubans in South Florida had "proven they are not a burden" and suggested that their presence had helped to drive the area's rapid growth.[30]

Although the trajectory of Miami over the previous two decades served as evidence for these claims, the idea that Cuban newcomers were good for business also reflected years of deliberate efforts to portray their recent history in the United States as a "success."[31] Since 1960,

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[28] Tasker and Martinez, "Can Dade Absorb Wave of Refugees?," 14A.

[29] Heather Dewar and Ana Veciana, "Dade community leaders explain negative reaction," *Miami News*, 10 April 1980, 7A.

[30] Bill Gjebre, "Hesitation on refugees hit by Ferre, 2 city aides," *Miami News*, 11 April 1980, 6A.

[31] On Cubans and transformations in Miami during this period, see Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick, eds., *Miami Now!: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992); Saskia Sassen and Alejandro Portes, "Miami: A New Global City?," *Contemporary Sociology* 22, no. 4 (1993): 471–77; Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*; María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Masud-Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants*; María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University

whenever the pace of Cuban migration increased, other residents of South Florida had become more vocal in expressing anxieties that the newcomers might contribute to unemployment, sap taxpayer dollars, or alter local culture. And at each of these moments, leaders from the Cuban community, including an increasingly influential group of bank executives, and their allies had responded by insisting on Cubans' economic worth.[32] The U.S. government had contributed "its own propaganda efforts" in response to negative press about Cubans in the early 1960s and even released data to show that some Cubans had turned down federal benefits or voluntarily begun to repay the aid that they had received in the past.[33] The impact of these collective efforts could be seen in national headlines like "To Miami, refugees spell prosperity" (1962), "Those Amazing Cuban Emigres" (1966), "Cuban Success Story in the United States" (1967), "Cuba's Exiles Bring New Life to Miami" (1973), and "How the Immigrants Made It in Miami" (1979).[34]

In the first half of April 1980, beyond the Cuban and business communities, two additional groups advocated for opening the door to the people who had sought asylum at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana. Both expressed their views as matters of principle. One of the most articulate representatives of the position of South Florida liberals was Monsignor Bryan O.

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of Michigan Press, 1999); Alex Stepick et al., *This Land Is Our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami*; Christine Lohmeier, *Cuban Americans and the Miami Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014); Mauricio Castro, *Only a Few Blocks to Cuba* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

[32] See, for instance, Harvey Rosenhouse, "El éxodo y el éxito de los Cubanos," *Visión*, 13 March 1970, folder 2, box 35, series IV, CRC-CHC; Carlos J. Arboleya (President, Barnett Bank of Westchester N.A., Miami, Florida), "The Cuban Colony: Past, Present and Future," 1975, folder 64, box 38, series IV, CRC-CHC.

[33] García, *Havana USA*, 30.

[34] "To Miami, refugees spell prosperity," *Business Week*, 3 November 1962, 92-94; Tom Alexander, "Those Amazing Cuban Emigres," *Fortune*, October 1966, 144-149; "Cuban Success Story in the United States," *U.S. News and World Report*, 20 March, 1967; Edward J. Lineman, "Cuba's Exiles Bring New Life to Miami," *National Geographic*, July 1973, 68-95; "How the immigrants made it in Miami," *Business Week*, 1 May 1979, 88-89. This "success story," also sometimes referred to as the myth of the "golden exile," has been the subject of critique by scholars of Cuban migration since almost as soon as it emerged in the 1960s. For a critical assessment of these narratives, see Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*, 74–77.

Walsh, a longtime advocate for new arrivals from the Caribbean and director of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami. As Haitians continued to arrive on small boats in greater numbers and the fate of Cubans at the Peruvian Embassy remained unclear, Walsh published a long editorial in the *Miami Herald* with the headline, "Let's Welcome the Refugees." He invoked the image of the "20 million seekers of freedom and opportunity" who had entered the U.S. through Ellis Island and advocated for a U.S. policy that would enable the admission of Cubans and Haitians *and* ensure that they had the resources necessary to get on their feet.[35]

A partial concurrence with Walsh came from a perhaps unexpected source: the conservative former Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. Like Cold War hawks in South Florida and throughout the United States, he called for welcoming the Cubans (and only the Cubans) in the name of "freedom." At an event in Texas as part of his 1980 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, Reagan suggested that the U.S. should coordinate an evacuation "akin to the Berlin airlift" for Cubans at the Peruvian Embassy. While Reagan indicated that he did not necessarily wish to see all 10,000-plus asylum seekers permanently resettled in the United States, he urged the federal government to assist people who were "telling the world what they really think of Communist dictatorship" and suggested that U.S. emergency aid was in order.[36]

But for some South Floridians, "a limit" on the number of newcomers from the Caribbean had already been reached. According to *Miami News* columnist Jack Roberts, some of his friends and neighbors were "deeply upset that the paradise they discovered 25 or 30 years ago ha[d] been lost in traffic jams and the babble of foreign voices." He deduced that by the time

[35] Bryan O. Walsh, "Let's Welcome the Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 13 April 1980, 1E, 4E.
[36] David Hoffman, "Reagan Calls for Rescue Mission 'Akin to Berlin Airlift' in Cuba," *Miami Herald*, 10 April 1980, 18A.

"the first of many boatloads of Haitians landed along the South Florida coast" in the 1970s, "Dade Countians were pretty well fed up with refugees." Roberts and other Anglos did not want to see thousands more Cubans added to the mix.[37] When the newspaper solicited opinions from its readers, three of every four people who responded agreed with the sentiment that Miami had "done enough for the Cubans." Whether expressing naked prejudice and resentment for the established Cuban community or offering more measured assessments, the consensus among callers was that additional migrants would pose too great a "burden," and that if anyone was going to receive "welfare" it should be the many people in need who were already living in South Florida.[38]

Local residents had deployed similar arguments against their new Cuban neighbors in the past. In the early 1960s, the Dade County Commission had demanded federal funding "to get a heavy and unfair burden lifted from the backs of Dade County taxpayers" because of what it described as "staggering" sums paid to care for Cubans at Jackson Memorial Hospital. In addition, in an unusual visceral iteration of the "burden" argument, hospital administrators at the time claimed to be in urgent need of blood donations because the local supply had been "depleted by the blood given to Cuban refugees." Patients who received transfusions were expected to replenish what they had used by returning to donate blood or asking relatives or friends to do so on their behalf. The hospital alleged that a significant number of Cubans had failed to complete this task and were quite literally living off the blood of the Dade County "taxpayer."[39]

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[37] Jack Roberts, "More refugees? There's a limit," *Miami News*, 9 April 1980, 5A.

[38] "By 3-1, callers would have Cubans stay away," *Miami News*, 10 April 1980, 6A-7A.

[39] Press release, Social Security Administration, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 10 November 1961, folder 24, box 19, series II, CRC-CHC; Kermit Gates, letter to J. Arthur Lazell, 6 June 1963, folder 86, box 34, series III, CRC-CHC; WGBS Editorial #338, voiced by Bernard E. Neary,

The most vocal and bitter opposition to the prospect of more Cuban migration came from Anglos, but some Black Miamians also had concerns. They articulated similar anxieties about how additional migrants might affect the availability of public goods and prevent them from accessing their fair share. In recent decades many had come to feel that they were being squeezed between an Anglo-dominated economic and political elite and a growing population of Cuban newcomers who threatened their access to both jobs and electoral power while receiving comparatively generous public assistance.[40] Working-class Black Miamians, like some working-class Anglos, expressed the sense that they had been "left behind" and passed over by a new Cuban community subsidized by federal benefits through the Cuban Refugee Program.[41]

Facing the possibility of thousands of new Cuban arrivals in 1980, the leaders of the Urban League of Greater Miami debated this history. The organization's president, T. Willard Fair, argued that many Black Miamians had already begun transitioning out of the service jobs they traditionally held before Cubans started to arrive in growing numbers.[42] Yet some members of the Urban League board saw the shift toward Cuban employment in luxury hotels and other segments of the local tourist industry as a form of displacement driven by "blatant racism."[43] Combined with a growing public awareness of how disparities in U.S. refugee policy favored

30 April 1964, folder 86, box 34, series III, CRC-CHC; James T. Peterson, memorandum to J. Arthur Lazell with subject "Blood Appeal," 9 June 1964, folder 86, box 34, series III, CRC-CHC.

[40] Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 97–98; García, *Havana USA*, 29.

[41] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 14.

[42] Fair would later advocate publicly for restrictive immigration policies. See, for example, T. Willard Fair, "Immigration comes at a devastating cost to Black Americans," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 11 March 2022, https://www.phillytrib.com/commentary/immigration-comes-at-a-devastating-cost-to-black-americans/article_00850999-e7aa-5e2e-9132-2b85d61821aa.html. Fair also served on the Board of Directors of the Center for Immigration Studies, a key organization within the nativist network largely developed by John Tanton. "T. Willard Fair," Center for Immigration Studies, https://cis.org/Fair, accessed 16 February 2025. On Tanton and his influence, see Carly Goodman, "Unmaking the Nation of Immigrants: How John Tanton's Network of Organizations Transformed Policy and Politics," in *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, ed. Kathleen Belew and Ramón A. Gutiérrez (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 203–19.

[43] Tasker and Martinez, "Can Dade Absorb Wave of Refugees?," 14A.

Cubans, typically understood by Miamians to be "White" or "Latin," over Haitians, consistently seen as "Black," these concerns made many in the Black communities of South Florida resistant to the idea of admitting the people who had sought asylum at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana.[44]

As the U.S. government worked to negotiate a resolution to the crisis at the embassy, South Floridians voiced this diverse set of views on the possibility that some of the Cubans who had crowded into the diplomatic compound would come to the Miami area. While there was no obviously dominant opinion about whether or not they should come, there was a shared perspective among elected officials and administrators from Dade County and its cities that they would need "federal help" to care for the newcomers and manage the impacts of their arrival.[45]

In the meantime, members of the Cuban community in South Florida remained committed to ensuring that their compatriots who had been at the Peruvian Embassy and their loved ones who wished to join with them in the United States would have the opportunity to do so. In Havana, rumors had begun to spread that the Cuban government would "open a port for all those wishing to leave."[46] In Miami, leaders among Cuban-born residents threatened to "paralyze all Cuban business activities" until the State Department clarified its position on how many of the people at the embassy would be permitted to come to the United States.[47] Every night for a week, South Florida Cubans took to Calle Ocho and Bayfront Park and demonstrated late into the night.[48] On April 14, a group of about one hundred U.S.-based Cubans left Key West in a "flotilla of small boats" with the aim of delivering food and medicine to the people who had

[44] "Haitians Must Be Allowed to Stay," *Miami Times*, 17 April 1980, 4.
[45] Tasker and Martinez, "Can Dade Absorb Wave of Refugees?," 14A.
[46] Associated Press, "The exodus: It's a matter of money," *Miami News*, 8 April 1980, 6A.
[47] Ana Veciana, "How many? Cubans here ask feds what refugee quota will be," *Miami News*, 12 April 1980, 7A.
[48] Dan Williams, "'Nobody's in Charge' As Calle Ocho Throbs," *Miami Herald*, 13 April 1980, 1B, 4B.

sought asylum at the Peruvian Embassy. They were forced to turn back by high winds and rough seas.[49] A week later, the first boats from Mariel traveling with Cubans from the island arrived in Key West. The boatlift had begun, and soon Rolando and Omar would make the voyage.

The Mariel boatlift would not have happened without the mobilization and forceful insistence of the established community of Cubans in the United States. The Cuban government knew that if Mariel was opened for some of its citizens to leave, South Florida Cubans would ensure that there would be boats there to pick them up. After the first vessels returned to Key West, the Carter administration moved to halt the process. But members of *la comunidad* simply refused. In response to threats that the federal government would fine individuals $1,000 for each Cuban they transported from Mariel, U.S.-based Cubans reportedly assured boat captains in Key West that they were ready to cover the fine for each family member or friend who made the return voyage with them.[50] At one point, the Cuba government consented to allow private planes to land and carry people with exit permits from the island to the United States. South Florida Cubans organized dozens of small aircraft to make the trip. At least one such plane returned with two people from Cuba soon after the boatlift began.[51] When the INS attempted to concentrate the screening operation in Key West by refusing to transport Mariel Cubans directly to Miami, members of *la comunidad* "found buses, vans and cars" and began shuttling their compatriots north to their relatives and friends in Dade County.[52] Each time the federal government issued a pronouncement designed to exert control over the nascent boatlift, including a warning that

[49] Jack Knarr and Dary Matera, "Aid flotilla to Cuba turned back by weather," *Miami News,* 14 April 1980, 8A.

[50] Graham Honey, "U.S. Aides Concede Cuban Influx Cannot Be Stopped," *New York Times,* 25 April 1980, A11.

[51] Joseph B. Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," *New York Times,* 26 April 1980, 13.

[52] Joseph B. Treaster, "Miami Bracing for Exodus With Some Reluctance," *New York Times,* 28 April 1980, A15.

violating laws against transporting unauthorized migrants was punishable by arrest, Cubans in the United States called its bluff. As one Cuban-born boat captain put it, "I want to see them arrest me for going to get my parents."[53]

The Carter administration may have been willing to grant the U.S. Cuban community legal leeway, in part, because officials thought that its members would bear a significant portion of the financial and logistical load of helping the newcomers get on their feet. When it came to people like Omar, who had relatives in the Miami area, there was evidence to support that belief. Prior to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on U.S. refugee programs on April 17, committee members received a report that included an appendix about the potential impact of extending refugee status to several thousand Cubans beyond previously agreed limits because of the crisis at the Peruvian Embassy. The report noted that, in general, "Transportation for the movement of most Cuban refugees being resettled in the United States is paid by the Cuban-American community, either through organizations or individuals assisting their families and friends." The Senate committee also read that while the resettlement of Cubans in South Florida had presented some "short-term problems, e.g. housing," in the long run the "absorptive capacity of the Cuban community in southern Florida" had typically enabled "the integration of new arrivals into the local society and economy." Regarding the Carter administration's emergency proposal to admit up to 3,500 Cubans who had sought asylum at the embassy, the report included the following passage: "It should be noted that the Department of State does <u>not</u> intend to pay for reception and placement grants for these refugees. This decision reflects the clear commitment of the Cuban-

[53] John Crewdson, "Hundreds in Boats, Defying U.S., Sail for Cuba to Pick Up Refugees," *New York Times*, 25 April 1980, A10.

American community to provide substantial assistance to these persons, most of whom will be relatives of Cubans already in the United States."[54]

6.2 The "Criminal" Element

At first, even as it became evident that the scale of latest round of migration from Cuba would far exceed what the Carter administration had anticipated, it seemed that the pattern described in the Senate committee report would hold.[55] During the first days of what local media outlets were calling the "Freedom Flotilla," Cubans in Dade County amassed donations of food, clothing, medicines, and other provisions to care for them at the holding and processing sites that were hastily being established in South Florida. They collected funds to support the Mariel arrivals that soon totaled in the millions.[56] At Dade County's Tamiami Park, local officials converted a large shed into a center for processing the new arrivals and connecting some of them with their relatives. On the sidewalk outside, their loved ones blew kisses and yelled up to the windows of the second floor where they could see people waiting to be issued documentation of their 60-day "parole" into the United States. Before they were released, each of these early Mariel arrivals received forty dollars and bags of clothing and food, all from donations collected by their compatriots who had previously settled in the United States.[57]

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[54] Office of the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, "Proposed Refugee Admissions and Allocations for Fiscal Year 1980 in Accordance with the Refugee Act of 1980," 15 April 1980, in *U.S. Refugee Programs, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate,* 96th Congress, 2nd Session, 17 April 1980 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 98-99, 146.

[55] Several days into the boatlift, some of those involved in facilitating it were already anticipating hundreds of thousands of new arrivals. Napoleón Vilaboa, a South Florida Cuban who claimed that he had met with Fidel Castro as part of an effort to orchestrate the boatlift, reported that Cuban officials in Havana had told him that the total number might exceed 250,000. Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," 13.

[56] García, *Havana USA*, 60, 72.

[57] John M. Crewdson, "Cubans Arrive in Key West; U.S. to Penalize the Flotilla," *New York Times,* 24 April 1980, A1; Crewdson, "Hundreds in Boats, Defying U.S., Sail for Cuba to Pick Up Refugees," A10; Treaster, "Calls of Distress Among Rescuers Of Cuba Emigrés," 13.

Omar and his family may have received some of the cash, food, and clothes distributed at Tamiami Park. When they arrived at the end of April, the site was still the primary screening location for Mariel arrivals with family members in the Miami area.[58] Rolando probably arrived at roughly the same moment, given that the federal government transported him to Eglin Air Force Base, which was the first to open of the four "resettlement camps" established by the Carter administration on military bases around the country. At the beginning of May, the federal government began transporting people without close relatives in South Florida, and people who admitted that they had acquired criminal records in Cuba, from Key West to Eglin.[59]

Born and raised in Havana, Omar never indicated that he had any history of arrest or confinement before leaving the country. He later admitted that as a child he had "started stealing just so [he] could feed [his] family" after his father left his mother. Omar wrote that she never knew about his illicit activities and that he was "not proud" of what he had done.[60] His lack of a criminal record, his arrival as part of a family group, and the fact that he had an aunt in Hialeah would have facilitated his relatively quick processing and release in South Florida.

Rolando, on the other hand, met both criteria used by the U.S. government to determine those who would be transferred to a camp. He had no relatives in the United States, and when the Mariel boatlift began he had been in prison. Although the INS would later describe the offense that had landed in prison in Cuba as "fighting with the police," Rolando's legal representatives explained that he saw his conflict with the authorities as "more of an argument than a fight." In a legal brief about his history, they wrote that he had been on his block, in the city of Ciego de Ávila in central Cuba, when the police confronted him about a work assignment that he did not

[58] U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," May 1990, PP-ALAS.
[59] Tom Fiedler, "U.S. to Operate Refugee Center In North Florida," *Miami Herald*, 2 May 1980, 28A; Bob Murphy, "U.S. to take over refugee processing by weekend," *Miami News*, May 2, 1980, 11A.
[60] Statement dated March 1989.

want to do. Rolando had already done a three-year stint in the Revolutionary Armed Forces in accordance with obligatory military service requirements, and apparently he had spent much of that time performing the backbreaking work of cutting sugar cane. It seems that Rolando felt he had already fulfilled his responsibilities as a revolutionary citizen, and he refused to do whatever it was that the police asked of him in the spring of 1980. He was arrested and sentenced to nine months in prison, but the Mariel boatlift began soon after. Rolando spent about a month behind bars, and then he left the country on a boat bound for Key West.[61]

As more people with criminal records arrived, and as their presence among the newcomers became a focal point of media coverage in South Florida and around the United States, some Cubans in Dade County began to reconsider their support for the boatlift. As early as April 30, there were signs that stories about "the criminal element" coming from Mariel was giving some in *la comunidad* "great pause."[62] Even so, South Florida Cubans continued to donate to help their compatriots. Temporary shelters went up at several National Guard armories around South Florida and at the Orange Bowl, located in Little Havana, members of *la comunidad* continued to show up to help care for the newcomers.[63]

Yet people in the established Cuban population grew increasingly concerned about the "strangers" arriving on many of the boats.[64] According to a local reporter, the crowds of people

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[61] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," May 1990.

[62] Morton Lucoff, "U.S. to begin processing refugees," *Miami News,* 1 May 1980, 11A; *Administration's Refugee Program for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 1980, Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States House of Representatives*, 96th Cong., 2nd Session, 30 April 1980 (unpublished hearing reproduced by National Archives), 47 (statement of Victor H. Palmieri, U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs), https://congressional-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1980-hjh-0056?accountid=14667.

[63] Patrice Gaines-Carter, "At Orange Bowl, they serve 'a lot of love' to Cubans," *Miami News*, 3 May 1980, 5A; National Forum on Immigration and Refugee Policy, "From Mariel to the Present: A Chronology of Events," folder 12, box 2548, Subject Files, Dante B. Fascell Congressional Papers, University of Miami Special Collections (hereafter DFP-UMSC).

[64] Marilyn Moore, Heather Dewar, and Tom Dubocq, "Exiles: U.S. ban will speed Cuban exodus," *Miami News*, 5 May 1980, 10A.

who went to wait for their relatives and friends at the docks in Key West were often disappointed by what they saw there. Angel Lopez, who traveled from Orlando to wait for his wife and brother, explained that he felt "very sad" because there were "too many bums coming from Cuba." When groups of new arrivals were asked the towns they were coming from, he said, they informed the onlookers, "Castro let us out of jail and put us on a boat." A woman who overheard Lopez talking to the reporter agreed. "Too many bums," she said," Castro himself will be on the next boat."[65]

The demographic profile of the newcomers reinforced such views. The people who participated in the Mariel boatlift were more likely to be young, male, and single than their compatriots who were already living in the United States.[66] The arrival of a disproportionate number of young men with limited family connections in the United States seemed to many like corroboration for reports that a significant number of the Mariel Cubans had criminal records.[67]

Race also formed a major fault line between the two groups. Whereas at least 90 percent of the established population of Cubans in the United States was classified as White, an estimated 20 to 40 percent of Mariel Cubans identified as Black or *mulato*.[68] This range reflects the inevitable ambiguity of racial categories and the challenges of using them to label and count

[65] Tom Dubocq, "Sunsets drop another curtain of gloom on some who wait," *Miami News*, 6 May 1980, 4A.

[66] Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 33–37; Thomas D. Boswell and Manuel Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980" (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami, Research Institute for Cuban Studies, 1988), 5.

[67] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Entrant Data Report," 31 October 1980, folder 133, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC.

[68] Benigno E. Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races: A Review and Interpretation of the Problem," *Latin American Research Review* 11, no. 1 (1976): 104; García, *Havana USA*, 68; Boswell and Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980," 23; Juan Clark, Jose I. Lasaga, and Rose S. Reque, *The 1980 Mariel Exodus: An Assessment and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1981), 7.

people, especially as they moved across national borders and social contexts.[69] The documents produced about the lives of individual Mariel Cubans sometimes embodied this same ambiguity. Omar was described consistently as "White" in local law enforcement records. However, some of the entries for Rolando in a digitized database of Dade County criminal records list him as "White," and others denote his race as "Black." This might stem from recording errors. But it might also reflect uncertainty among South Florida police about the racial category that they should ascribe to him. It is possible that Rolando identified as "White" as "Black" or as "*mulato*," but the category he used to describe himself likely did not matter much to officers who selected one of two options for "Race" on the incident reports they were required to fill out as part of their work.[70]

What was clear, however, was that a powerful association between Mariel Cubans and Blackness began to develop in South Florida as the boatlift progressed. The arrival of tens of thousands of Afrodescendant people contributed to a sense among many in the overwhelmingly White South Florida Cuban community that they needed to distance themselves from the newcomers.[71] Although earlier groups of Cubans had faced discrimination and resentment upon arrival in South Florida, elites among them had helped to cultivate an image of the community as highly successful "golden immigrants." The proximity of many Cubans to Whiteness as it operated in the United States bolstered this image, but this relatively privileged social position

[69] Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial Migrations: New York City and the Revolutionary Politics of the Spanish Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 7–8.

[70] "Criminal Justice Online System," Clerk of the Court and Comptroller of Miami-Dade County, https://www2.miamidadeclerk.gov/cjis/CaseSearch.aspx.

[71] Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races," 104; García, *Havana USA*, 68; Boswell and Rivero, "Demographic Characteristics of Pre-Mariel Cubans Living in the United States 1980," 23.

was "conditional" in ways that attuned the established community to potential disruptions or threats to it.[72]

In 1980, some members of *la comunidad* began to fear that the new arrivals from Mariel might jeopardize their still-tenuous place in the South Florida social hierarchy. In the eyes of Eugene Eidenberg, a senior White House advisor who helped craft the Carter administration's response to the boatlift, "The Cuban community was really deeply divided as it became clear the population was not what they expected. It was not the prostitutes and homosexuals that turned the tide – it was the young black ones."[73] An unnamed Cuban-born official with the City of Miami affirmed this point in an interview with sociologists Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, in which he bluntly stated his view of the newcomers. "Mariel destroyed the image of Cubans in the United States and, in passing, destroyed the image of Miami itself for tourism," he said. "The *marielitos* are mostly Black and mulattoes of a color that I never saw or believed existed in Cuba. They don't have social networks; they roam the streets desperate to return to Cuba."[74] Like many Cubans who had arrived in South Florida before 1980, the official saw the newcomers' race and supposed lack of connections in the United States as evidence of their undesirability. From his perspective, not only were the Mariel arrivals bad for perceptions of Miami and its Cuban community, but they were not even authentically Cuban.

Whereas the perception of Cubans as "White" had been integral to the "success story" told about Cubans in the United States prior to 1980, the perception of Mariel Cubans as "Black"

[72] Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "'Ser de Aquí': Beyond the Cuban Exile Model," *Latino Studies* 1, no. 3 (2003): 373; Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 34.

[73] Kate Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, and Adolfo Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, ed. Kristen Cifers (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 188.

[74] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 21.

was pivotal to the story of the boatlift.[75] Neither of these narratives were entirely consistent with the demographic realities. Thousands of Afrodescendant Cubans had settled in the Miami area during the previous 20 years.[76] And most Mariel Cubans did not identify as people of African descent. Indeed, the data suggest that most of the individuals who arrived in the boatlift identified as "White," and that they would have been seen that way by other Cubans in South Florida. But in aggregate, the latest cohort to make the journey from the island to the United States came to be "socially identified" with Blackness.[77]

The desire of this class of South Florida Cubans to protect the "success story" and their growing economic and political influence made them especially sensitive to claims that the people arriving from Mariel were likely to be a "burden" or that they were "just a bunch of criminals."[78] These narratives intensified after the boatlift began and became manifest in outbursts by predominantly Anglo groups of homeowners just as Omar and his family were starting their lives in Dade County. A group of about 100 people from neighborhoods along the border between Dade County and Broward County drove to Downtown Miami and blocked traffic to protest plans announced by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to establish a temporary holding site for Cuban and Haitian arrivals at a former U.S. missile base in the area. Protesting homeowners argued that both groups of Caribbean newcomers jeopardized their ability to enjoy what they were owed as property holders and taxpayers. A woman from Miami Lakes told a reporter covering the rally that she was "very, very angry" that the federal

[75] Mirabal, "'Ser de Aquí.'"

[76] Benson and Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel," 6.

[77] Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 114.

[78] John Silva, "Homeowners block plans for Miramar refugee stop," *Miami News*, 7 May 1980, 1A; John Silva and Tom Dubocq, "State to open 2 missile sites here for exiles," *Miami News*, 6 May 1980, 1A.

government planned to "take" her "hard-earned money and give it to Haitians and Cubans."[79] A few days later, the homeowners association for the northern Dade County development known as "Country Club" held another rally, this time attended by about 50 people. Some of them held signs that read "Save America for Us" and "Learn and Speak English, Dammit."[80]

In response to such grievances, prominent members of *la comunidad* continued to lift up Cuban contributions to economic growth in South Florida and highlight how previous arrivals had helped to turn Miami into a cosmopolitan center of hemispheric commerce. To counter the specific charge that many of the latest arrivals were "criminals," South Florida Cubans adopted a strategy similar to that of the White House: they insisted on the need to deport people "with true criminal records" while emphasizing that these individuals constituted a very small minority of boatlift participants.[81]

Liberal members of the press took a similar line, at times couching a defense of the newcomers in rhetoric similar to that used by their conservative colleagues before the scale and composition of the boatlift population became clear. The Editor of the *Miami News*, Harold Kleinberg, wrote that many in the U.S. might not grasp why so many South Florida Cubans had "faced the sea to bring out of captive Cuba their loved ones." But others understood, he said, including "[t]he boat people of the South China Sea," "Haitians, "Jews from East Europe" and "the Pilgims who came ashore in 1620." Kleinberg acknowledged that "some of the hesitation has been because we must weed out the spies and criminals" but insisted that "they are few

[79] Morton Lucoff, "Haitian Refugee Center Plans Protested," *Miami News*, 3 May 1980, 5A.

[80] Bob Murphy, "Sealift arrivals so far total 21,000; one-third are expected to live here," *Miami News*, 7 May 1980, 6A.

[81] Carlos J. Arboleya, "Cuban Influx: Miami's Explosive Blessing," *Miami Herald*, 8 June 1980, 4E. During the first months of the boatlift, the Carter administration consistently publicized the fact that "[l]ess than 1% of the arrivals [had] been detained as suspected felons." See J. Brian Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," May 1980, 3, folder: Reading File, box 16, Director's File, Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force (220.18.24), Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter CHTF).

compared with the true escapees of Castroism." Like South Florida Cubans, Kleinberg and other liberal journalists argued that it was crucial not to allow the presence of a few unsavory individuals to tarnish the image of the freedom seekers who had made the voyage from Mariel.[82]

Still, an uneasiness had begun to set in even among the most vocal supporters of the newcomers. As stories about "criminals" and "bums" from Mariel persisted, the number of volunteers for the processing effort began to decline, and many in the Cuban community distanced themselves from the new arrivals.[83] Before the boatlift began, the dominant concern, including among groups open to welcoming additional Cubans to the United States, had been that they might impose a "burden" on South Florida. Days after the first boats arrived, these anxieties became coupled with fears about the number of "criminals" arriving on the boats. Together, these narratives formed a powerful framework for groups that had opposed the admission of additional Cubans in 1980 and resented the funding and attention directed toward them after they arrived. For a time, a diversity of perspectives on the appropriate way to respond to the Mariel arrivals persisted. But as summer wore on, a combination of existing structures and emergent policy decisions would begin to tip the balance between an approach grounded in projects to provide for the newcomers, and one oriented around efforts to get rid of them.

6.3 No Vacancy

Consistent with the approach to Cuban arrivals that had been employed over the preceding 20 years, both government officials and nonprofit agencies involved in finding places for the newcomers sought to disperse the impact of the boatlift by resettling as many Mariel Cubans as possible outside of South Florida. Yet the pull of the "Magic City" was strong, and

[82] Howard Kleinberg, "Rescue fleet rides on a wave of courage," *Miami News*, 2 May 1980, 12A.
[83] George C. Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 23 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF; García, *Havana USA*, 46.

people initially placed elsewhere often made their way to the Miami area. Like Rolando, Mariel Cubans who had been sent to a resettlement camp often eventually found their way to Miami whether they had relatives there or not. As a staff member with one of the major resettlement agencies put it, "There's one city in the United States every Cuban has heard of – Miami."[84]

This was by no means a new phenomenon. The first groups of Cubans to arrive in the U.S. after the 1959 revolution had been resistant to placements in other regions for multiple reasons. Many who historically had the resources to travel regularly were already familiar with the Miami area and had business or personal connections there. Members of these groups also often thought that staying in South Florida would make for an easy return to the island after the new government was overthrown, which many believed to be imminent.[85] Others among the Cuban arrivals of the early 1960s had struggled to find employment in the areas where they were originally resettled. They made their way to Miami in search of work.[86] The Cubans who arrived in boatlift in 1980 shared some of the same motivations for moving to South Florida. Going to Miami meant going to a place where they could find a familiar culture and climate and where speaking only Spanish would be less of a hindrance to finding a job.

But the Mariel Cubans converged on a "No Vacancy" city. The newcomers arrived in a metropolitan area with a chronic shortage of affordable housing. The rental vacancy rate had dropped to one-half percent in 1980. New construction often reflected the interests of developers who sought the profits usually generated by condominiums and luxury apartments and were not

[84] Guillermo Martinez and Dan Williams, "Dade Struggles To Cope With Refugee Influx," 2 June 1980, *Miami Herald*. On this general pattern (the study is based on data from a period starting in 1985), see Kevin E. McHugh, Ines M. Miyares, and Emily H. Skop, "The Magnetism of Miami: Segmented Paths in Cuban Migration," *Geographical Review* 87, no. 4 (1997): 504–19.

[85] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 99–101; García, *Havana USA*, 22.

[86] "Information Sheet No. 9," U.S. Cuban Refugee Center, 20 November 1964, folder 85, box 4, series I, CRC-CHC.

typically inclined to build shelter for poor and working-class people.[87] A painful irony of the boatlift was that many Cubans who left from Mariel had probably had some hope of escaping the intensifying housing crisis in Havana.[88] Yet even before the boatlift began there had been a widespread understanding that it would be difficult to find places for any new arrivals, even if they totaled only a few thousand from among the people who had been at the Peruvian Embassy. At the time, the *Miami Herald* reported, "The biggest problem, all the officials agree, will be housing." According to Bryan Walsh, finding affordable places for newcomers to live in Miami was "virtually impossible already." Dade County residents on the waiting list for local public housing were waiting an average of four years for a space to open.[89]

Then thousands of Cubans started arriving every day from Mariel. By early May, officials in the Office of Refugee Resettlement were already noting that housing was becoming "an acute problem in the Miami area" and it was "expected to get worse." They reported that they were "beginning to hear stories of people being temporarily housed in converted dog kennels."[90]

[87] Ana Veciana, "Outlook's Dim for Exiles Wanting to Stay in Dade," *Miami News*, 12 May 1980, 1A, 4A; Martinez and Williams, "Dade Struggles To Cope With Refugee Influx."

[88] Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution,* 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 280.

[89] Tasker and Martinez, "Refugee Machine Can Roll If Congress Approves," 14A.

[90] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 2 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

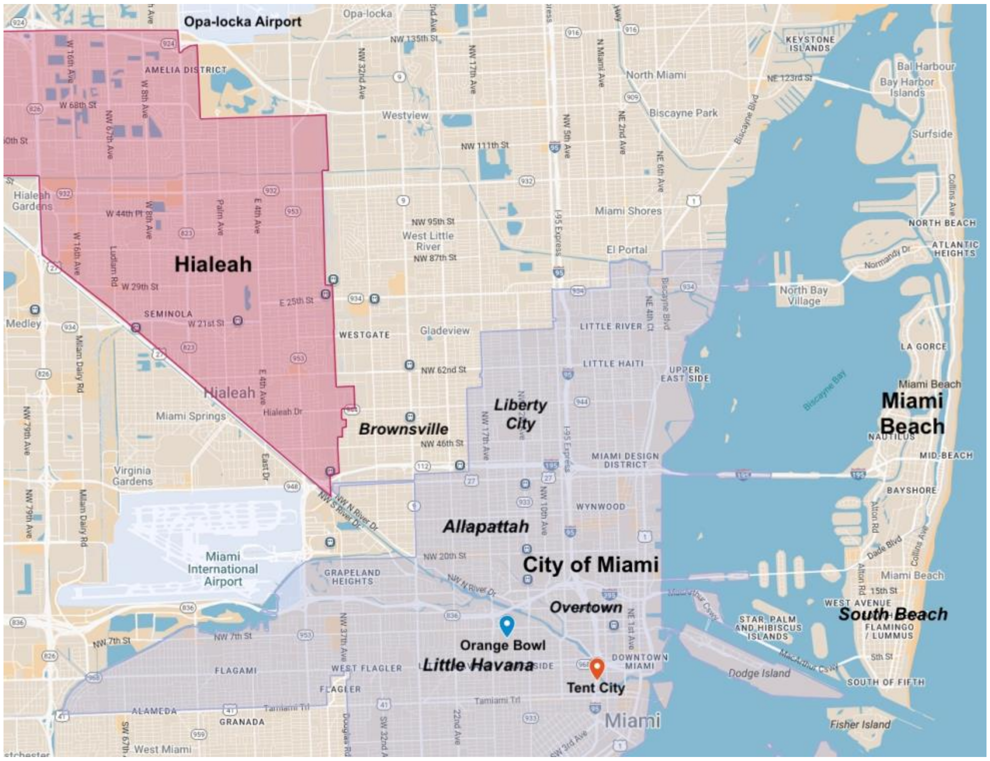


Figure 6.1 **Cities of Hialeah, Miami, and Miami Beach with select neighborhoods.** The blue marker indicates the location of the Orange Bowl. The red marker reflects the location of Tent City, under Interstate-95 and along the Miami River, immediately to the west of Downtown Miami. *Created with Google My Maps.*

Jobs, too, were scarce. The U.S. economy was sliding into a recession as boats from Mariel were pulling up to the docks of Key West, and for the first time in nearly two decades the Cuban Refugee Program was no longer in a position to help.[91] The agency had been funded to assist virtually all Cuban arrivals since the early 1960s by administering cash benefits and collaborating with private agencies to provide a range of social services, including language education, job training, and work placements. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration had

[91] Even leaders of the *Miami Herald*, who at times depicted jobless Mariel Cubans as lazy, undeserving drains on local resources, recognized the void that had been created as a result of changes in federal refugee policy. In early June, the editorial board wrote, “Local officials must demand that Washington establish a new Cuban-refugee program that will at least keep track of the situation even if it cannot dole out welfare payments. And the Florida delegation in Congress must back up those demands with legislative action. If Dade County is abandoned by Washington, left to care by itself for tens of thousands of new refugees, Dade will sink into social and civic morass from which it might take decades or even generations to emerge. South Floridians must not permit that to happen.” See “Cuban Influx Forces Dade To Seek ‘Flood’ Protection,” *Miami Herald*, 4 June 1980, 16A.

directed a "phasedown" of the Cuban Refugee Program aimed at aligning the treatment of Cubans with a more consistent overarching refugee policy, just as Congress was beginning to craft the bill that would become the Refugee Act of 1980.[92]

The landmark refugee legislation passed, boats began arriving from Mariel, the Carter administration decided not to attempt to exercise its emergency authority to confer refugee status on the newcomers, and Mariel Cubans were left ineligible for the benefits that had been available to their predecessors.[93] Other groups tried to fill some of the gaps. The Little Havana Community Center partnered with the City of Miami and the popular Spanish-language radio station WQBA – which at the time used the handle "*La Cubanísima*" in a nod to its massive Cuban-born audience – in order to set up a phone bank for the circulation of job listings.[94] The Latin American Chamber of Commerce in Miami hosted an employment bureau that some Mariel Cubans used in their search for work, but during the month of May only about one-fourth of those who had shown up for interviews got jobs.[95] Such efforts could not match the significant needs presented by the sudden arrival of so many who lacked the social networks and resources that other Cuban arrivals had relied on to land on their feet in the United States.[96] This was

[92] Social Security Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, "Cuban Refugee Program – Program Changes Under Phasedown,"14 March 1978, folder 22, box 19, series II, CRC-CHC; Hale Champion (Under Secretary of Health Education and Welfare), letter to William H. Natcher (Chariman of the Subcommittee on Labor, Health, Education, and Welfare, U.S. House of Representatives), 13 March 1979, folder 22, box 19, series II, CRC-CHC.

[93] Marilyn A. Moore and Mari Moran, "Cubans who lose sponsors walk the mean streets, broke and alone," *Miami News*, 13 June 1980, 1A, 4A.

[94] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 29 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC. While there may not be a perfect or elegant English translation for the WQBA handle, it more or less means "The Cuban-est."

[95] Guillermo Martinez and Dan Williams, "Dade Can't Carry the Entire Burden," *Miami Herald*, 2 June 1980, 8A.

[96] A survey of a representative sample of the Mariel Cubans who settled in the Miami area within several years of arrival indicated that they had "an average of only three relatives awaiting them in the United States," which was "one-third of the corresponding figure" in a sample of Cuban men who arrived in 1973. Alejandro Portes, Juan M. Clark, and Robert D. Manning, "After Mariel: A Survey of the Resettlement Experiences of 1980 Cuban Refugees in Miami," *Cuban Studies* 15, no. 2 (1985): 40, 43.

especially true for Rolando and the other new arrivals who had left their country not because they sought to be reunited with family members but because they had been compelled to leave as a result of their criminal records.

The struggles of Mariel Cubans to find work were not primarily a function of their occupational educational backgrounds. In these respects, the newcomers resembled some of the groups that had preceded them in leaving for the United States.[97] Most of the people who participated in the boatlift were living in Havana before they left for the United States, and many had done jobs not unlike those available in Miami.[98]

There was at least one major point of contrast in their employment histories, however. Mariel Cubans were more likely than their predecessors to have been unemployed or out of the labor force completely before they left the island. Well over 20 percent of the Mariel arrivals reported that they had been jobless during significant periods of their lives, neither engaging in wage work nor looking for it.[99] To an extent, this figure was indicative of the difficult economic conditions on the island in the 1970s. It also reflected the gendered nature of work that persisted in socialist Cuba. Far more women – upwards of half of those who arrived in the boatlift – reported that they had been without a paid job before they left. [100] Among women who participated in the boatlift and began their lives in the U.S. in a resettlement camp, the vast

[97] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 40; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 48.

[98] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 38; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 42. Combined Miami News Services, "Job survey says Cubans should fit in," *Miami News,* 5 June 1980, 1A, 6A.

[99] These numbers are consistent across two different scientific surveys conducted with relatively large samples of Mariel Cubans, the first taken from the resettlement camp population in 1980 and the second taken from Cubans who had settled in the Miami area within several years of arrival. See Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 40; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 48.

[100] These numbers are consistent across two different scientific surveys conducted with relatively large samples of Mariel Cubans, the first taken from the resettlement camp population in 1980 and the second taken from Cubans who had settled in the Miami area within several years of arrival. See Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 40; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 48.

majority had been doing the work of caring for children and maintaining homes during the period leading up to the boatlift, and about one-fifth had been students.[101]

Few women who arrived from Mariel indicated that they had spent time in prison. On the other hand, the significant rate of joblessness among men who later left in Mariel had a clear relationship to their experiences in the Cuban criminal legal system. A survey of the resettlement camp population suggested that over half of Mariel men who reported that they had been without paid work also listed "prisoner" as their "longest held activity" prior to leaving Cuba.[102] Of course, operating outside the state-sanctioned economy in Cuba had been a major factor in the arrest and confinement of many Cubans who later left in the boatlift.

Regardless of their past experiences in the labor force, the message from the bulk of the newcomers trying to make ends meet in South Florida was clear: "what we want is work." Yet many encountered barriers to a stable income in the formal economy. Basic logistics created challenges, including the question of people who lacked cars would make the long daily commutes to potential workplaces in a sprawling metropolitan area with inadequate public transit. While many employers in Miami saw the ability to speak Spanish as an asset, lacking English-language skills posed a hindrance, particularly to those seeking out office and service

[101] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 42.

[102] Nearly 18 percent of men included in a survey of the resettlement camp population indicated that they had spent time in a Cuban jail or prison. A survey taken later in Miami suggests that 48 percent of Mariel Cuban men in Dade County reported having spent time in a Cuban prison. It is not easy to explain this discrepancy. It is possible that people who had just arrived and found themselves confined in a camp were more concerned about the potential impact of admitting that they had been in prison than those who had been settled in South Florida for several years, but many Mariel Cubans were open about their pasts. It is also worth noting that many of individuals in the Miami area sample identified as "political prisoners," which was not necessarily the case among those in the resettlement camp sample. Most earlier estimates of the number of people who had been incarcerated in Cuba for offenses classified as "political" were much smaller, however. This suggests that some Mariel Cubans may have begun to identify with this term *after* living in the large South Florida Cuban community for several years. See Bach, Bach, and Triplett, 42, 45; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 41–42.

jobs.[103] Few Mariel Cubans arrived with a high level of English proficiency, which made them ineligible for positions that required both languages.[104]

The municipal governments of Dade County lacked the infrastructure and resources needed to handle this situation. For much of the preceding two decades, the federal government had funded the Cuban Refugee Program and private agencies to integrate each successive group of Cuban arrivals. Washington had also depended on the established Cuban community to provide shelter to newcomers, to volunteer labor, and to donate money and basic goods. The massive scale and chaotic nature of the boatlift would have strained the old system, and now various traditional forms of support were either diminished or entirely absent.

Officials from city and county governments in South Florida attempted to help fill the gaps. Under a "mission directive" from FEMA, the City of Miami had been using the grounds of the Orange Bowl in Little Havana as a temporary site for holding newcomers who were awaiting screening or placement with a sponsor.[105] By the middle of May, other Mariel Cubans were showing up at the Orange Bowl because they had nowhere else to go.[106]

Then, Black Miamians from some of the city's poorest neighborhoods erupted in pain and rage. On May 17, after a brief deliberation, an all-White jury fully acquitted four Dade County Public Safety Department offices charged in the death of Arthur McDuffie. At 33 years old, McDuffie – an insurance agent, former Marine, and father of two young children – died from injuries he incurred when police brutally beat him after a high-speed pursuit through Miami. Having witnessed a series of police killings in recent years, thousands of local Black

[103] Martinez and Williams, "Dade Can't Carry the Entire Burden," 8A.

[104] Combined Miami News Services, "Job survey says Cubans should fit in," 1A, 6A.

[105] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 31; Gaines-Carter, "At Orange Bowl, they serve 'a lot of love' to Cubans," 5A.

[106] George C. Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

residents were unwilling to accept the latest incidence of impunity without taking action. Many participated in protests and demonstrations, some burned businesses and stole from stores, and smaller groups channeled their anger into attacks on passersby that left eight people dead. A group of White vigilantes drove through Black neighborhoods north of Downtown, shooting and killing three Black Miamians. Police and a security guard fatally shot at least five Black residents. When the uprising ended on May 19, seventeen people had been killed and hundreds more had suffered serious injuries.[107]

Just a few weeks earlier, when predominantly White groups of homeowners in Dade and Broward County protested plans to open a holding site for Cuban and Haitian migrants near their neighborhoods, the federal government had responded with appeasement. When Black Miamians protested police killing members of their community with impunity, the local police and Florida National Guard had responded with force.[108] In the aftermath of the protests and violence in Liberty City and other poor and working-class Black neighborhoods, a series of official promises to invest resources in these areas mostly failed to materialize.[109]

During the uprising, the Miami Police Department had begun enforcing a curfew, which forced a slowdown in the screening process for Mariel Cubans waiting to be released and created a backlog of several thousand people living in the tents set up at the Orange Bowl. The site grew crowded, and it became difficult for the people waiting there to get medical care and meet other

[107] Bruce Porter and Marvin Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980: Crossing the Bounds* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984), 33, 43, 47–73, 173. In addition, one police officer died of a heart attack during the uprising.

[108] On the long history of government responsiveness to White homeowner protest in South Florida – often at the expense of Black residents – see Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 144–49.

[109] Porter and Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980*, 159–70. For more on the responses of Black Miamians to the "McDuffie Riot" and how they understood it in relation to Cuban migration from Mariel, see Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 91–98.

basic needs.[110] The following week, after the curfew was lifted and the backlog eased, a storm tore through the city and blew down all the tents.[111] Whether orders of police or acts of nature, these unexpected developments would have compounded the demoralizing effects of structural forces in the South Florida housing and labor markets.

While far from a paradise, the Orange Bowl was serving an important function for Mariel Cubans who found themselves with limited options for food and shelter. But even this imperfect solution proved tenuous. As reports from Mariel indicated that the number of boats setting sail for Key West would soon dwindle, and as the screening and processing effort in South Florida slowed, FEMA administrators were eager to streamline their work. They were also under pressure to bring down the tents at the Orange Bowl because of the approaching football season. The agency began preparing to close the site at the end of May and made plans to instead hold recent arrivals for a period in Key West. Then they would be put on buses to make the several-hours trip directly to the main processing site at Opa-locka Airport, just north of Miami.[112]

Mariel Cubans who were not immediately able to arrange for someone in the Miami area to sponsor them would go to "Krome North," a section of the former Nike missile base that had been retrofitted as a temporary holding site for Cubans several weeks earlier. At this point, some 650 Haitians already detained at Krome were consolidated in "Krome South," an area at the same former base that lacked the housing and sanitary facilities of Krome North.[113] Advocates

[110] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 21 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF; George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 22 May 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[111] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Report," 25 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[112] Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 27 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC.

[113] At the time, the plan for Krome North was to use it as a temporary holding site for Cubans and then transfer them to one of the larger resettlement camps if they were not sponsored by someone in the

for Haitians were quick to point out that people who had left revolutionary Cuba – still broadly understood as "White" despite the racial diversity of the Mariel population – were once again receiving favorable treatment over "Black" arrivals from Duvalier-controlled Haiti. Conditions at both Krome sites were bad, but there was little question among a range of observers at the time that Haitians had it worse.[114]

With these new arrangements in place, the Orange Bowl site shut down. At this point, accessing decent, secure housing remained exceedingly difficult for many Mariel Cubans. Some of the remaining residents who struggled with chronic mental illness reportedly found themselves put on buses and dropped off at a local mental health crisis center, a facility not equipped to house them long-term.[115] Like Omar and his family, most of those who had initially resettled in the Miami area were staying with relatives. But as more people arrived and small apartments and houses filled up, even some of newcomers with family in the area were left without a roof over their heads. In the case of Omar, his sister, and his mother, it seems to have been his aunt's landlord who determined that they would have to find another place to stay.[116] In other instances, the strains of such situations led to conflicts among family members and friends that eventually left Mariel arrivals without a place to live. Individuals in this situation often

Miami area with 72 hours. Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Report," 26 May 1980, folder: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, box 1, FCC-CHC; Federal Coordinating Officer (FEMA), "FCO Notes," 29 May 1980.

[114] Jana K. Lipman, "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked," *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (2013): 123–24. Krome opened as a temporary fix but would eventually become a permanent facet of a growing U.S. immigration enforcement infrastructure. For an analysis of how Krome transitioned from a contingency plan to a permanent fixture of the U.S. immigrant detention system, see Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), Chapter 7.

[115] Martinez and Williams, "Dade Struggles To Cope With Refugee Influx."

[116] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," United States Justice Department of Justice Parole Review Panel, August 1989.

sought shelter at the airport and local bus stations. The Salvation Army and other private organizations served as temporary stopgaps but had limited capacity.[117]

The effects of the employment and housing crunch, combined with the absence of refugee benefits and the gradual withdrawal of support from *la comunidad*, soon resulted in hundreds of Mariel Cubans in South Florida facing the possibility of homelessness. Concerns about "sponsorship breakdowns" began to circulate among federal officials within a few weeks of the start of the boatlift. The U.S. government had long depended on religious organizations and other private entities to manage the process of refugee resettlement. These so-called voluntary agencies worked to place new arrivals with "sponsors" who agreed to ensure that they had a place to live and assist them in acquiring a job. This usually entailed staying with sponsors for a time, but the individuals who agreed to serve in this role were under no legal obligation to provide such support.[118]

The challenges of finding work as the economy slipped deeper into recession could lead to disputes, as well.[119] Zita Argelia Quialla found herself sleeping in city parks after her friend kicked her out of her home two days after she agreed to sponsor her. Quialla had a college degree and had worked as a teacher and an accountant in Cuba. After arriving in Miami, she spent weeks using pay phones to call about jobs advertised in classified ads but was unable to get a position. In the meantime, she worried about her physical safety as she navigated life in the city

[117] Martinez and Dan, "Dade Can't Carry the Entire Burden," 1A, 8A; Dan Williams, "Miami Dream Has Turned Into Dread," *Miami Herald,* 12 June 1980, 30A.

[118] Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum," 4.

[119] "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials for the Senate Appropriations Committee Hearings held during the week of March 2, 1981," folder: Hearing Transcript and Briefing Books [1], box 4, Subject File, CHTF.

without shelter. Indeed, Quialla told local reporters that she had recently "narrowly avoided being raped."[120]

Sponsorships were not always safe havens from such dangers, especially for Mariel women. The refugee resettlement coordinator for the U.S. Catholic Conference reported that they had received a letter from a man seeking to sponsor a woman who "would not scream to high heaven if I touch her and want to have sex." Another letter, from a retired lawyer, included a request to sponsor a woman "who is well-stacked, curvy like a country road." Some sponsorship breakdowns, then, may have been the result of women fleeing threats, coercion, or violence from their male sponsors.[121]

The number of sponsorships that fell apart also reflected the limitations of the screening process. Some Mariel Cubans appear to have indicated that they had family members nearby when, in fact, they did not. News had circulated among the new arrivals at Key West that those without relatives in the Miami area would be flown out-of-state. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimated that upwards of 34 percent of the people who had been resettled through the South Florida screening sites did not have relatives nearby.[122] Other boatlift arrivals relied on tenuous connections in their eagerness to get out of the camps and begin building a life in Miami. Twenty-four-year-old Ernesto Drago, who had worked as a mason in Cuba, and Jorge Luis Cervantes, a 27-year-old former machinist, were held at Eglin Air Force base until they arranged for the parents of a friend to secure their release by signing up as their sponsors. Their new acquaintances gave the pair a ride to South Florida but were unable to offer them a place in their home. Without jobs, Drago and Cervantes found that even the five dollars

[120] Marilyn A. Moore and Mari Moran, "Cubans who lose sponsors walk the mean streets, broke and alone," *Miami News*, 13 June 1980, 4A.
[121] Associated Press, "Refugee Sponsors Scrutinized," *Miami Herald*, 24 June 1980, 14A.
[122] Martinez and Williams, "Dade Struggles to Cope With Refugee Influx."

charged to stay more than one night at the Salvation Army shelter was too much. They ended up spending their nights in the garage of the Little Havana Community Center.[123]

A few weeks after the tents at the Orange Bowl came down, officials were once again reporting a growing number of "people sleeping on streets and pleading for food" because their sponsorships had broken down.[124] Without the football stadium as an option, Mariel Cubans who fell between the cracks in the processing and resettlement system often had nowhere else to go. Some of those who had temporary accommodations, such as at the Little Havana Community Center, got sent to Krome North instead. If they could not find sponsors quickly, federal officials flew them north to be held at the camp at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, where they had to wait for new placements.[125]

By June of 1980, an estimated 40,000 Mariel Cubans had made their way to South Florida. Local officials projected that this group would require 20,000 new jobs, 10-13,000 new housing units, and 8-10,000 new seats in classrooms. The unemployment rate in the area was listed at 4.9 percent, and it was projected to increase dramatically and average 7 percent or more over the next year. Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré worried that he was not seeing the level of federal funding and organization that had facilitated the entry of earlier groups of Cubans into the local economic and social order, let alone the additional support that he and other local officials had called for even before the boatlift began. Dade County Manager Merrett Stierheim continued to insist that the situation in South Florida constituted a "national problem" and

[123] Williams, "Miami Dream Has Turned Into Dread," 30A.
[124] Nathan J. Stark, "Daily Report on Cuban Activities," 18 June 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House, box 1, Subject File, CHTF.
[125] Williams, "Miami Dream Has Turned Into Dread," 30A.

necessitated a "national solution."[126] At the time, though, the most significant effects of the boatlift – like the challenges that Mariel Cubans had to navigate – were very much local.

6.4 Internal Borders

All Mariel arrivals were vulnerable to discrimination because of the negative stereotypes ascribed to them after they began arriving in 1980. Those with limited formal educations or English skills, and those who lacked extensive support networks in the United States faced additional challenges. These factors compounded the specific difficulties faced by people who had been coerced into leaving Cuba as a result of their encounters with the criminal legal system on the island and were subsequently deemed potential threats upon arrival in Key West. Finally, the Carter administration decision to distribute the boatlift population between South Florida screening sites and the resettlement camps based on the location of their family members and their criminal histories had initiated a powerful dynamic that funneled certain Mariel Cubans toward housing insecurity.

This federal policy had dramatically affected the resettlement trajectories of Black and *mulato* Cubans, who were far more likely than their White compatriots to be sent to Eglin Air Force Base, Fort Chaffee, Fort Indiantown Gap, or Fort McCoy. Once in the camps, many Cubans of African descent struggled to find sponsors who could help them get out. Over the summer, news coverage of "riots" among the Cubans at the military bases hardened the criminal image of those still waiting on sponsorships and further undermined resettlement efforts.[127]

[126] Martinez and Williams, "Dade Can't Carry the Entire Burden," 1A, 8A.
[127] Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 74.

Some of the staff at resettlement agencies reported that it was particularly difficult to find sponsors willing to agree to take Afrodescendant Cubans into their homes.[128]

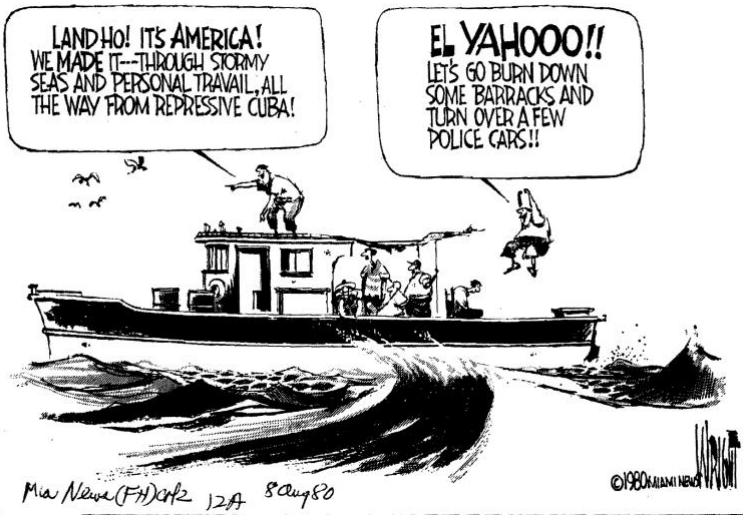


Figure 6.2 **"Land Ho! It's America!,"** *Miami News*, August 8, 1980, 12A. Illustration by Don Wright.

Afrodescendant Mariel arrivals who found sponsors in the Miami area once again confronted specific forms of discrimination. The local built environment reflected generations of efforts by public officials, developers, landlords, and homeowners to control and profit from real estate through processes of displacement and containment.[129] The result was a deeply segregated

[128] Paul Heath Hoeffel, "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans," *New York Times Magazine*, 21 December 1980, 47. The extent of racial discrimination in the sponsorship process became evident in the evolving demographics of the camp's population. At the end of January 1981, 73 percent of the 5,022 people at Fort Chaffee – where the residents of all the resettlement camps had been consolidated – were classified by U.S. officials as "male" and "black or mulatto." By the summer, "black" men made up 95 percent of the Cubans at the camp. See Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft)," 24, 25 September 1981, folder: Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, box 1, FCC-CHC; "Status Report – Fort Chaffee," June 1981, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation," box 1, FCC-CHC.

[129] On the "profitability of segregation" in Miami through the 1960s, see Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 197, 279. Historian Raymond Mohl noted that several surveys of over a hundred U.S. cities found Miami to have "the highest degree of residential segregation by race in 1940, 1950, and 1960." In 1970, "92 percent of Miami blacks still lived in segregated neighborhoods," and in 1980, "Miami still ranked near the top of a list of sixty metropolitan areas in the extent of black residential segregation." See Raymond A. Mohl, "On the Edge: Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan Miami since 1959," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (1990): 47.

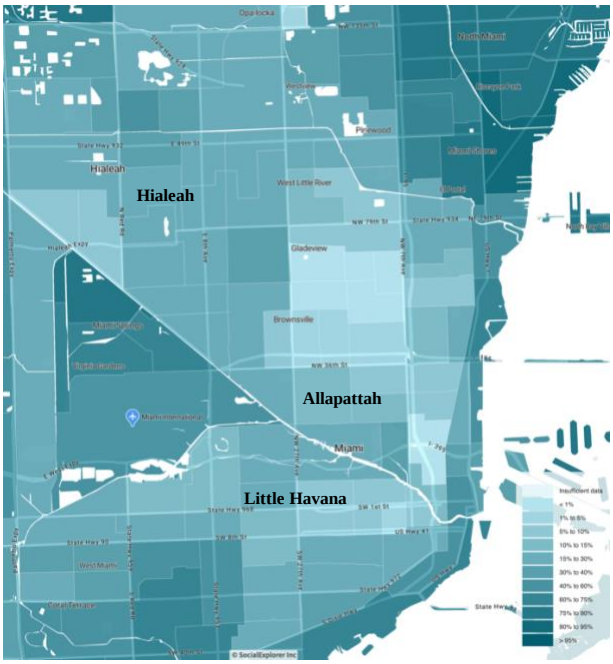
racial landscape. When the boatlift began in 1980, people who identified as "of Spanish origin" on the U.S. Census constituted some 35 percent of all Dade County residents and formed a majority of the population within the Miami city limits.[130] County residents classified in the Census as *both* "of Spanish origin" (the federal category then used to denote individuals of Latin American origin or descent) *and* "Black" were heavily concentrated in the City of Miami. Nearly half of Dade County residents "of Spanish origin" who identified as "Black" lived within the Miami city limits. By contrast, Hialeah – the second largest municipality in Dade County – was home to fewer than 5 percent of county residents with origins in Latin America who also identified as "Black."[131] These figures were indicative of at least two key trends: 1) "of Spanish origin"-and-"Black" Dade County residents were more likely to live in Miami neighborhoods with African Americans than in Dade County communities populated by people who identified on the Census as "of Spanish origin"-and-"White," and 2) residents of Cuban origin, most of whom identified as "White," were the *least* likely of all Latin American migrants in South Florida to live among "Black"-identified neighbors, including those who were fellow Cubans.[132]

[130] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 211; M. Jerome Miron and Robert Wasserman, "Prevention and Control of Urban Disorders: Issues for the 1980s" (Washington, D. C.: Office of Criminal Justice Programs, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, August 1980), 7. Between 1970 and 1980, the "Spanish Origin" population almost doubled, and residents classified as "Black," including Black Caribbean migrants, increased by more than 90,000. In 1980, some 46 percent of Dade County residents were classified as "White, non-Hispanic" and approximately 17 percent were categorized as "Black."

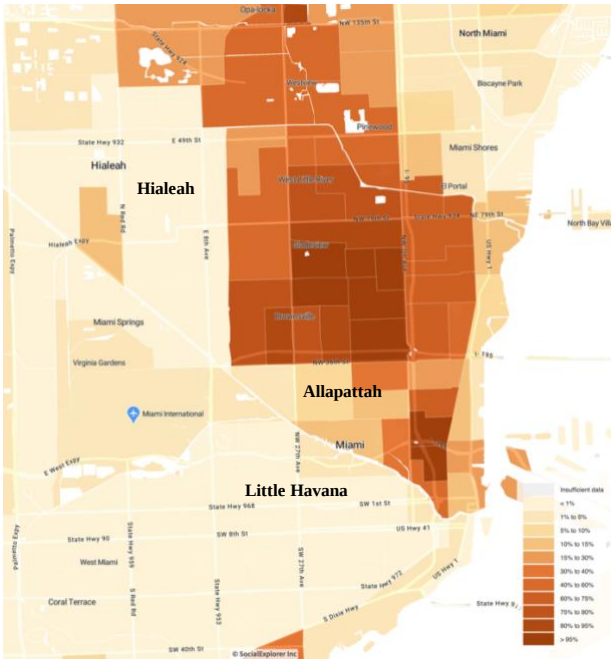
[131] Boswell, "Hispanic Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami," 44.

[132] Boswell, "Hispanic Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami," 44–58. For a journalistic account of some of these dynamics in the decade following the Mariel boatlift, see Alfonso Chardy, "'Invisible Exiles:' Black Cubans in Miami Torn Between Cultures," *Miami Herald*, 8 August 1993.

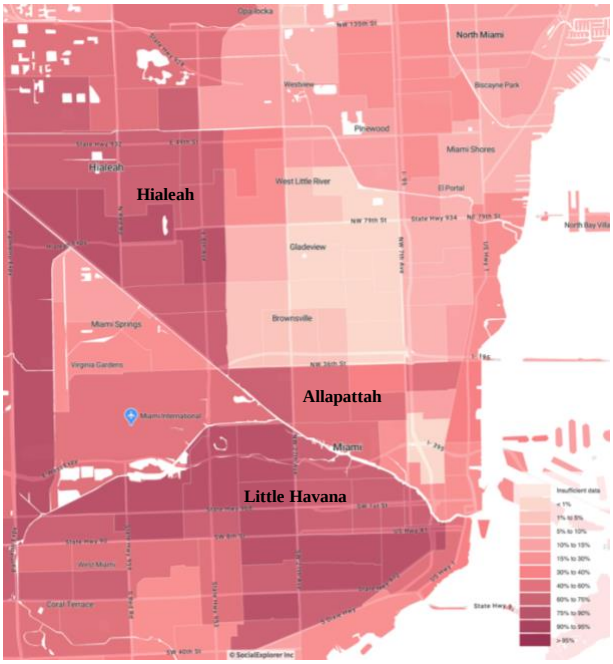
Persons "Not of Spanish Origin, White"



Persons "Not of Spanish Origin, Black"



Persons "of Spanish Origin, White"



Persons "of Spanish Origin, Black"

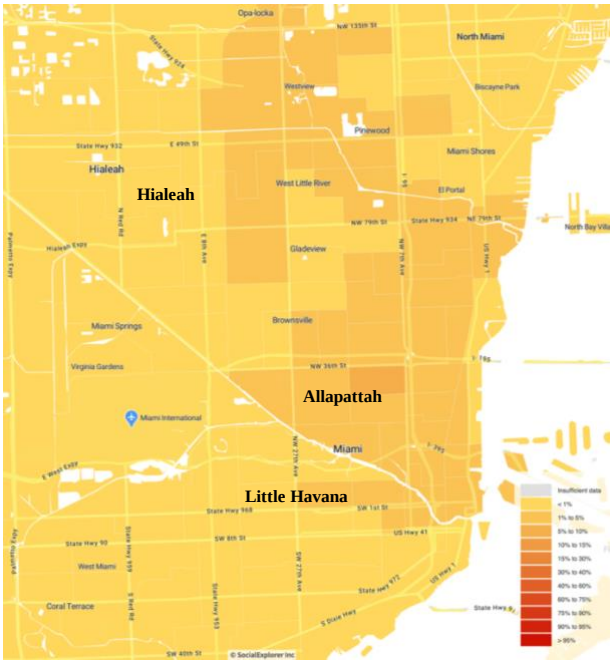


Figure 6.3 **Proportion of residents by origin and race in select regions of Dade County, 1980 U.S. Census.** *Created with Social Explorer*.

These residential patterns stemmed, in part, from deliberate efforts to maintain degrees of racial segregation. A study from the early 1970s found that Anglo residents often took steps to keep Cubans of all races out of their neighborhoods, but in communities that were already home

to a mix of Anglos and White Cubans, the two groups worked together to exclude Cubans identified as people of African descent.[133] As Devyn Spence Benson and Danielle Clealand have shown, property owners in the emerging White Cuban enclaves of Little Havana and Hialeah so routinely engaged in housing discrimination during this period that it became common practice for Black Cubans to ask a lighter-skinned friend to go to see listed apartments in their place.[134] Faced with such hostility, many Black and *mulato* Cubans who had come to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s had opted to move instead to established Afrodescendant Cuban communities in New York and New Jersey.[135]

There is evidence, however, that individuals who identified as people of African descent but *not* as "Black" may have found additional room to maneuver among the color lines of late-twentieth-century Dade County. In their oral history research with Afrodescendant Cubans in South Florida, Benson and Clealand learned that Cubans who identified as "*mulatos*" were at times able to move into Hialeah and other neighborhoods where Cubans identified as "Black" were usually unwelcome and unable to access housing.[136] Data from the 1980 Census reflects this trend. There were few people who identified as "of Spanish origin" and "Black" living in Hialeah and Little Havana in 1980. Yet as the map below demonstrates, people "of Spanish origin" whose race was marked as "Other" accounted for 20-to-25 percent of the residents in several sections of each of these communities. The way in which Census data were recorded makes it impossible to know how many of these individuals identified as "*mulatos*" or using

[133] J.D. Nicholas and R.J. Prohías, "Rent Differentials Among Racial and Ethnic Groups in Miami" (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University-Florida International University Joint Center for Environmental and Urban Problems, July 1973).

[134] Benson and Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel," 6.

[135] Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 143–48.

[136] Benson and Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel," 6.

some other category commonly associated with African ancestry. The numbers suggest, though, that Cubans categorized as neither "White" nor "Black" regularly accessed housing in specific sections of predominantly Cuban areas of Dade County where most residents identified as "White," as well as in neighborhoods that had multiracial populations that included Black Miamians and people with origins in multiple Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Persons "of Spanish Origin, Other"

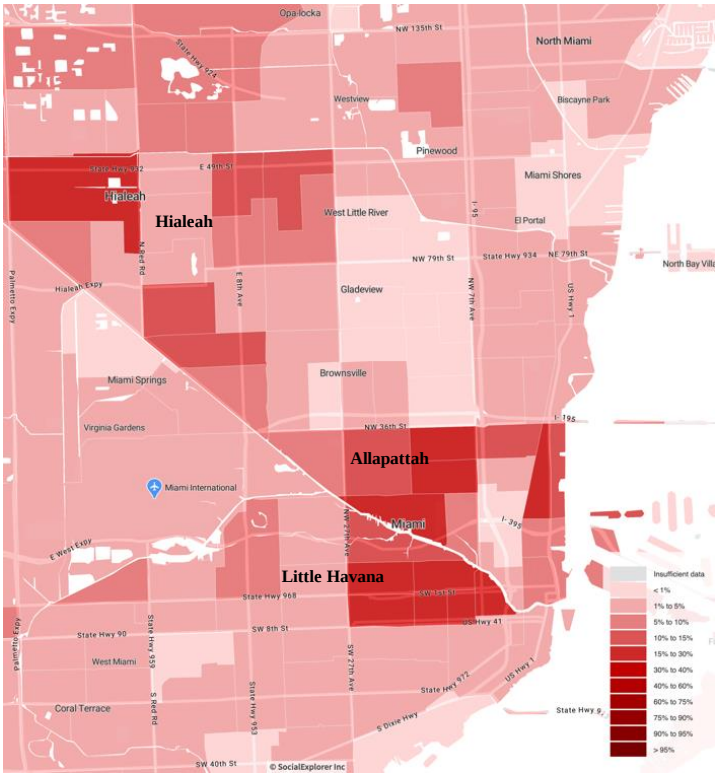


Figure 6.4 **Proportion of residents classified as "of Spanish origin" with race identified as "Other" in select regions of Dade County, 1980 U.S. Census.** *Created with Social Explorer.*

Most Cubans who arrived in 1980 and settled in South Florida found places to live in the county's three largest population centers: the City of Miami, Hialeah, and the Miami Beach. Local officials estimated that 50-to-80 percent of the newcomers soon came to reside within the

City of Miami, and a majority of this group found places to stay in Little Havana. Another large portion of Mariel Cubans took up residence in the Allapattah neighborhood.[137]

During the first half of the twentieth century, Allapattah had been home to many Anglos who participated actively in efforts to police the boundaries that separated them from nearby Black neighborhoods in Miami. In at least one instance, Anglo Allapattah homeowners had led a campaign to elevate their property values that culminated in the eviction of an entire Black community.[138] The area around Allapattah had begun to change in the 1940s, thanks in part to a growing population of Puerto Ricans who arrived in Miami via labor recruitment campaigns on the island and in other states. Puerto Ricans' decisions about where to live were constrained by the discriminatory housing practices that had shaped Miami's residential landscape, and many settled in Wynwood and other spaces bordering both Allapattah and Overtown – formerly known as "Colored Town" – Miami's Black downtown community. In the mid 1960s, the construction of the Interstate-95 expressway through the heart of Overtown and several adjacent neighborhoods displaced thousands of residents, some of whom found their way to Allapattah.[139]

As Cuban migration surged in the 1960s, Allapattah had been one of the few areas in Miami where Cubans of African descent were able to carve out a place for themselves.[140] In 1980, Allapattah was once again a place where Black and *mulato* Cubans were able to find shelter. Like Wynwood, the neighborhood was home to a large, multiracial Spanish-speaking population, and both neighborhoods occupied the metropolitan borderlands between

[137] City of Miami, "Draft Proposal: Cuban Refugee Operation," 1980 November 7, folder 66, box 21, series II, CRC-CHC.
[138] Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 144–49.
[139] Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami*, 145, 153; Connolly, *A World More Concrete,* 264–65.
[140] Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba,* 149–50.

predominantly Anglo and White Cuban areas, and the historically Black neighborhoods of Overtown, Liberty City, and Brownsville.

Some Afrodescendant Mariel arrivals also found housing in historically Black neighborhoods. A number of Black boatlift arrivals rented apartments in Overtown owned by a member of the small established Cuban community of African descent.[141] Bill Sawyer, a longtime leader in the Miami Black community, was contacted by the INS in 1980 to help find housing for newcomers of African descent who were struggling to find places to stay. "When Castro started kicking the black Cubans out of Cuba," he told the *Miami Herald*, "they called me to find housing for them because they wouldn't let them live anywhere else but Overtown." As N.D.B. Connolly explains, Sawyer helped arrange for a group to stay at the Mary Elizabeth Hotel, a once vaunted Black institution that had become "a run-down tenement of over fifty apartments."[142]

Yet Cubans did not always receive a warm welcome in these neighborhoods. For decades, frustration had been mounting among Black Miamians as they watched the federal government channel resources to assist each successive group of Cubans, most of whom benefitted socially and materially from their perceived proximity to U.S. Whiteness. Some of the newcomers whose incomes were subsidized by federal aid payments had agreed to take jobs for low wages in the tourism and service industries that Black Miamians had long counted on for employment.[143]

Nor did Cubans of African descent necessarily identify with or seek to live next-door to African Americans. Indeed, the broader tensions between Cubans and members of the city's

[141] Benson and Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel."
[142] Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 288.
[143] Connolly, 218–22.

longstanding Black communities sometimes undermined the potential for solidarity among Afrodescendant people who grew up on different sides of the Straits of Florida. After the boatlift, the owner of one prominent Black business in Liberty City expressed resentment for the predominantly White Cuban entrepreneurs who had opened shops in African American neighborhoods but refused to "hire Blacks." He also described an encounter at a drugstore where a "black Cuban lady" was working as a cashier and "didn't even want to talk to [him]." He told a interviewers, "They come in our areas, they take our jobs, they take our dollars, and don't even have the decency to learn the language!"[144] Despite such friction, both demographic data and anecdotal evidence leave little room to doubt that Overtown and Liberty City were more accessible to Cubans identified as "Black" than Little Havana, Hialeah, or the predominantly Anglo suburbs farther from the city center.

Multiple groups deployed entrenched ideas about the supposed value of "natives" over "foreigners," sociologist Monika Gosin notes, to distance themselves from the boatlift arrivals. This included some Black Miamians who had long struggled for decent jobs and living conditions in the city and did not necessarily identify with the Cuban newcomers.[145] Asked about the arrival of Afrodescendant Cubans in the boatlift, the head of the Miami chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People spelled this out: "Our color forces us to come together, but I am beginning to detect underlying dissatisfaction with the way all Cuban refugees are treated and the attention Cubans are receiving by federal and local support."[146]

[144] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 12.
[145] Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 49–54, 91–104.
[146] Marilyn A. Moore, "Race may add to problems of black Cubans," *Miami News*, 14 June 1980, 7A

6.5 Tense City

As the summer wore on, some Mariel Cubans of all colors who had not been able to remain on one of the paths to stable housing in Dade County found themselves living on the street. In response to the growing presence of unhoused boatlift arrivals, the City of Miami re-opened the Orange Bowl on June 19. Soon, hundreds of newcomers were living there once again.[147] For a time, when federal officials identified Cubans who had been resettled from one of the camps and then experienced a sponsorship breakdown, they put them on planes and sent them to the Orange Bowl.[148] It became a hub for people struggling to find their footing, as "Miami became the Mecca for hundreds of recent Cuban arrivals who had no place to live and no job with which to support themselves."[149] As it became apparent that the need for such a site would persist beyond the summer, and as NFL pre-season games rapidly approached, local administrators and federal officials from the "Cuban-Haitian Task Force" recently established by the Carter administration began discussing potential alternatives.

In July, they decided on a plan to construct a small, fenced compound with canvas tents under Interstate-95, near the Miami River, in a planned recreational area then provisionally named "Latin Riverfront Park." The Task Force agreed to provide an initial $50,000 to Miami for the establishment of what quickly became known as "Tent City." Federal officials also promised to reimburse the city for the expenses of running the tent encampment for single adults and providing rooms in "very low cost hotels" for families that had been staying at the Orange Bowl. The tents went up under I-95 soon after, and by July 28 the last of the people staying at the

[147] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 31, 106; John W. Macy, Jr., "Executive Summary – Cuban Refugee Situation," 27 June 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation," box 1, FCC-CHC.

[148] George Putnam, "Daily Activity Report," 9 July 1980, folder: Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami, folder 1, Subject File, CHTF.

[149] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 31.

Orange Bowl had been moved to the new site.[150] As more Mariel Cubans in need of a place to stay learned about Tent City, its initial population of some 650 residents quickly grew. Within 48 hours, officials estimated that 850-950 people were living in the tents.[151] Rolando would soon be among them.[152]

By the end of July, federal immigration officials estimated that upwards of 65,000 Mariel Cubans had settled in South Florida. Most of these had been screened in the Miami area, but perhaps 10,000-15,000 had arrived following initial placements in other states, often after stints in one of the resettlement camps. People in the latter group were some of the most likely to experience uncertainty around housing in Dade County because they also were among the most likely to lack established local networks of support.[153]

The geographic location of Tent City was consistent with Miami's established regime of race and class segregation. City officials decided to erect the tents on the eastern edge of Little Havana, in an area characterized by the press as the domain of "alcoholics, drug users and juvenile delinquents."[154] Residents of the neighborhood, many of whom had come from Cuba themselves during the preceding decades, held more complicated views. Some worried that there

[150] Scott L. Hardman, memorandum to Christian R. Holmes titled "Ada Merritt School," 7 August 1980, folder: Tent City, box 9, Subject File, CHTF.

[151] "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 107.

[152] Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, May 1990. While the exact date of Rolando's arrival at Tent City is unclear from the available records, his legal representatives indicated that he was taken there soon after he got to Miami, after spending "a few months in Eglin Air Force Base." Assuming he arrived in the boatlift in early May, this would place him in Tent City as soon as the end of July, shortly after it opened.

[153] Larry Willets, "Data Report on Cubans and Haitians," 5 August 1980, folder 149, box 25, series II, CRC-CHC. At a July 31 meeting with a Cuban-Haitian Task Force staff member, a high-ranking INS official in Miami estimated that 60 percent of Mariel Cubans were no longer living with the people who had initially sponsored them. Most had made other arrangements for housing, but he reported that "a significant percentage are on their own and vagrant." See Mario A. Rivera, "Report," 6 August 1980, folder: Tent City, box 9, Subject File, CHTF.

[154] Mary Voboril, "12 Firms Sue Carter, Miami to Stop Tent City," *Miami Herald*, July 25, 1980, 1C.

might be "bad people" among those at Tent City. Others expressed compassion for the Mariel Cubans who did not "have anywhere else to go." "Let them come," one neighbor told a local reporter. "They are our brothers, and we must help them," said the director of a nearby daycare center.[155]

City leaders saw Tent City as the least objectionable of a set of bad options. Their conclusion was indicative, however, of logics about the relative value of land and the people living on it that had been built up over the previous century. The placement of the site under an overpass eerily echoed an earlier decision, highlighted by historian N.D.B. Connolly, to create playgrounds for local Black children under a nearby section of the same interstate. The first playscape went up not long after the construction of I-95 had laid waste to a massive strip of the neighborhood then known as Colored Town. As with that earlier "underexpressway" project, the history of real estate and segregation in metropolitan Miami made Tent City seem like "a good idea at the time."[156]

But for many Miamians, the new encampment came to embody fears and frustrations about the boatlift that had been growing since the start of the summer. Before Tent City opened, news stories had predisposed local readers to see the people who would live there as unsavory, if not dangerous. The first press accounts of plans for the site described it as a place specifically for

[155] Guillermo Martinez, "Refugee Tent City Troubles Neighbors," *Miami Herald*, 23 July 1980, 1B.

[156] Connolly, *A World More Concrete*, 1. As had been the case with the "underexpressway" playgrounds, there were concerns about the air quality for people living or playing in a space under a highway. Long before Tent City went up, a study had found that the area had some of the worst air pollution in the city. One television news reporter, paraphrasing the poem inscribed on the State of Liberty in New York Harbor, said that Cubans who came to the U.S. "yearning to breathe free, will have to breath dirty air." WTVJ Newstape Cut Stories, no. 273, 24 July 1980, Wolfson Archives. Also see Kassewitz, "Traffic and pollution make tent city location dangerous," *Miami News*, 30 July 1980, 11A.

people who had been living in the Orange Bowl after they were "found sleeping on the streets and in parks."[157]

Coverage of what happened when the shelter at the Orange Bowl was set to close further entrenched negative public perceptions of the people there. When Cubans there learned that they would have to vacate the site, some began to fear that they would be sent to one of the resettlement camps in another state. A group attempted to barricade the entrance to the stadium gate where their cots were located and insisted that they would not leave until they had a chance to talk with city officials. They had grievances about conditions at the Orange Bowl, including poor sanitation and insufficient food, but their most pressing concern was the possibility of being sent to a faraway military base. Some of them had already spent many uncertain weeks in one of the camps, and they did not want to go back. One boatlift arrival at the stadium said that going to a resettlement camp "would be like being prisoners, like being back in Cuba." When a City of Miami police officer attempted to arrest one of the Cubans involved in the protest, others intervened. They freed the man from the officer's grasp and threw rocks and bottles at his police car. They started to overturn the car, but they stopped when one of the officials posted at the stadium got on a bullhorn and asked them to calm down. [158]

The Miami Police Department responded by sending in its SWAT team to surround the stadium and then arrested the man. Lieutenant James Tomalley explained the rationale for the decision to the *Herald*: "**WE HAD TO** give that show of force…We had to show them that they are guests in this country and must obey the laws." Besides, he added, "[w]e had the SWAT officers mobilized anyway for the disturbances at Liberty City so when there was trouble we

[157] Bill Gjebre and Morton Lucoff, "Plans afoot to move refugees from bowl into tents or hotels," *Miami News*, 21 July 1980, 6A.

[158] Ethan Bronner, "Orange Bowl Calm After Refugee Demonstration," *Miami Herald*, 21 July 1980, 4B.

called them in."[159] The same tactics that had been used to put down the uprising in Miami's poorest Black neighborhoods two months earlier were rapidly adapted for the recently arrived, now unhoused, Cubans.

Local news accounts, which framed these events as a "rampage" and a "near-riot" of about 200 men, reinforced the resentment for Mariel Cubans that had already been expressed by many in Dade County.[160] Referring to the collection of tents that had been erected at the Orange Bowl for Mariel Cubans in May, North Miami resident Ann B. Hartzell captured some of those sentiments in a letter to the *Miami Herald*:

> Most Anglos are middle- to lower-class whites who try to survive from one paycheck to the next. Why is the little man now forced to support 70,000 more Cubans? I've seen the 'Tent City' of homosexuals, mental patients, and criminals. Look at *The Herald* article on the hundreds of angry Cuban refugees who jumped the fence at Eglin [Air Force Base]. What are they gong [sic] to do when unleashed on us after Eglin? Burn and loot? They have boasted they want cars, TVs, beautiful clothes, and "freedom to protest." Who cares about middle-aged white women trying to be self-supporting rather than receiving food stamps and welfare – and the elderly on fixed incomes? I go into a store, trying to spend less than $20 a week on groceries, and I'm behind a Cuban with three carts full of food I cannot afford – and I'm supposed to support them? By God, I refuse to do it![161]

When the Orange Bowl population finally made the move to the area designated for them under I-95, the resentment followed. The new Tent City of thirty canvas shelters emerged as a potent symbol of the most salient social problems attributed to Mariel Cubans, a piece of physical evidence rendered in asphalt and canvas to show that their presence was both a burden and a danger. The chairman of the Little Havana Development Authority described it as "the

[159] Bronner, "Orange Bowl Calm After Refugee Demonstration," 4B. Emphasis in original.
[160] Guillermo Martinez, "Cuban Tent City May Rise on Riverfront," *Miami Herald*, 22 July 1980, 8C.
[161] Anne B. Hartzell (Letter to the Editor), *Miami Herald*, 4 June 1980, 6A.

worst thing that they can do." He argued that the decision would contribute additional "problems to an area already plagued with vandalism and alcoholics walking around at night."[162] Governor Bob Graham described Tent City as one sign of a sweeping federal failure and insisted that the U.S. government needed to "regain control over who gains entry into this country." He called it "intolerable" that "Fidel Castro is allowed to dump his undesirables" on the United States.[163]

The local press often invoked images of an undeserving "underclass," which had long been used to disparage or dismiss poor and working-class Black communities in the United States, in its coverage of Mariel Cubans struggling to get on their feet in South Florida.[164] Reporters emphasized the "government-provided box dinners" that Tent City residents ate, while noting that two police officers would be posted there and that the department would "step up patrols" in the surrounding area.[165] The editors of the *Miami Herald* wrote, "Only dramatic Federal action can avert ugly consequences from the dumping of these men into problem-plagued cities such as Miami. It's inconceivable that Governor Graham could nominate President Carter for re-election while the Administration ignores the hundreds of Cubans currently living in tents under an expressway in Little Havana." The *Herald* depicted Tent City residents as lazy and unworthy of public support: "able-bodied men by the hundreds" who spent their time "lounging on cots."[166]

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[162] Martinez, "Cuban Tent City May Rise on Riverfront," 8C.

[163] "Graham: Tent City a Sign of Federal Policy Failure," *Miami Herald*, 26 July 1980.

[164] Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 265–68.

[165] Dan Williams and Al Messerschmidt, "Tent City Is Upheld By Court," *Miami Herald*, 26 July 1980, 2B.

[166] "Comprehensive U.S. Action a Must for Cuban Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 7 August 1980, 6A.

In fact, the place bustled with activity. The residents of Tent City called the site by another name, "*Campamento del Rio*" (River Camp), and many were quick to take ownership of their temporary home. When they identified the cause of a mosquito problem at the site, they fixed it themselves by digging drainage ditches. They handled sanitation and maintenance needs in the encampment under the guidance of Omar Casas, a Mariel Cuban who had spent twenty-one years in prison in Cuba. Some of the people who used the tents for shelter took English lessons and met with job counselors.[167] Rolando may have been one of them. After living in Tent City for about a month, he found a job as a carpenter. Once he had a source of income, he was also able to move out and get his own apartment, just a few blocks away in Little Havana.[168]

Although there were two recorded gun confiscations, reports of drug use in the camp, and several incidents of theft, there was no indication that such activities typified life at Tent City.[169] The site quickly "began to look like a neighborhood unto itself," with people lining up for haircuts form a local barber. A Tent City family even adopted a puppy.[170] Most men left during the day to find work. The small group of women who lived there usually spent their days doing the unpaid labor necessary to make the space as comfortable as possible.[171] It was not perfect, as many Mariel Cubans themselves were quick to point out. The consensus, though, was that there was a better "spirit" at Tent City than there had been at the Orange Bowl, where the inadequate accommodations meant people were living on what amounted to a stadium ramp with a dirt

[167] Mario A. Rivera, memorandum to James Giganti titled "Tent City" with attached report, 10 August 1980, folder: Tent City, box 9, Subject File, CHTF.

[168] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," May 1990; Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, March 1990.

[169] Rivera, memorandum to James Giganti. One person later arrested in Tent City for possessing a gun told police that he got it to protect himself. See Guillermo Martinez, "Hijackings Dramatize Cuban Despair," *Miami Herald*, 19 August 1980, 1A, 14A.

[170] Williams and Messerschmidt, "Tent City Is Upheld By Court," 2B.

[171] Ena Naunton, "City of Canvas Smothers Cubans' Pride," *Miami Herald*, 12 August 1980, 1E

floor. At least at first, people living in the *Campamento del Río* brought a sense of hope and a great deal of life to their temporary home.[172]

News of that reality failed to resonate beyond the encampment under I-95. Policies and practices that shaped the boatlift, the resettlement process, and the Dade County job and housing markets had helped push them towards Tent City. Perceptions of the people living in the temporary shelter, in turn, reinforced prejudices linked with the dynamics that pushed them there in the first place. Dade County residents often pointed to the highly visible "homeless refugees" as evidence to corroborate their worst suspicions about the people who had participated in the boatlift. The site counted a small but highly visible number of gay men among its residents, which was likewise a symptom of structures of exclusion – sometimes operating within individual families – that constrained the options of some boatlift arrivals.[173]

Many people of African descent took up residence within the chain-link fence that separated Tent City from the area of Little Havana surrounding it. While elected officials and members of the media rarely made explicit mention to their race, as Monika Gosin has illustrated, they used coded language, such as the term "ghetto," to discuss a group with a large contingent of Black and *mulato* Cubans.[174] Some of the images of people in Tent City that appeared in newspapers and television coverage ensured that readers and viewers did not need to decipher such codes.

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[172] Mike Clary, "City to Seek School Site For Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 28 July 1980, 1B

[173] One of the young men at the encampment indicated that he had been kicked out of his uncle's home because he was "repulsed by his homosexuality." Finances were a frequent reason that residents gave for having been forced to leave the places they were staying before Tent City. Dan Williams, "Cubans in Dilemma: The Relatives Arrive—And Want to Stay," *Miami Herald*, 31 August 1980, 1A, 28A. For a trenchant analysis of Tent City that explores representations of gay Cuban men at the site, see Susana Peña, *Oye Loca: From the Mariel Boatlift to Gay Cuban Miami* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 61–67.

[174] Gosin, *The Racial Politics of Division*, 73–78.

Many Mariel Cubans at Tent City would have arrived there weary from the stresses of trying to settle in communities hostile to their presence, and exhausted by the near-constant uncertainty about where they would go next. Frustration among the residents of Tent City grew as evidence of the bleak outlook for the boatlift population as a whole continued to mount. One survey of Mariel arrivals who had made their way to the Miami area indicated that 73 percent has not yet found "permanent jobs," and only 9 percent had found housing they could afford on their own. Over 90 percent were getting help with housing, but for the vast majority of this group, that meant staying with family and friends.[175] Like Rolando, many Tent City residents did manage to get jobs and move out, but there remained a steady stream of new arrivals whose sponsorships had broken down or who had recently made their way to Miami but had no place to stay. Local officials estimated that about 3,000 people passed through the site during the month or so after it opened.[176]

The people who took up residence in the tents often expressed frustration and disillusionment with what they had found in Miami. A series of recent episodes in which Mariel Cubans had hijacked planes to return to their homes and their families Cuba underlined the extent to which the hopes of some had turned to bitter disappointment. This was perhaps especially true for those who had not left the island on their own accord. Guillermo Duquesne, a 17-year-old living in Tent City, had joined the boatlift after Cuban officials gave him an ultimatum – go to the United States or go to prison for 10 years. At first, Duquesne told the *Miami Herald*, "I thought this was marvelous…But under these conditions I would be willing to

[175] Ana Veciana-Suarez, "New refugees' dreams fade as reality dawns," *Miami News*, 20 August 1980, 1A, 7A.

[176] Christian R. Holmes, "Cuban-Haitian Entrants: Action Plan for September," 4 September 1980, folder: Gastón A. Fernández: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Reports and Memoranda, box 1, FCC-CHC. Also see "History and Mission of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force/Miami Operation Center," n.d., 4, folder 174, box 26, series II, CRC-CHC.

spend not 10, but even 20 years in a Cuban jail."[177] Whether he fully believed that, he was expressing sentiments that other Mariel Cubans shared.

Many had felt a similar sense of *"desengaño*," or disillusionment, in Cuba when they witnessed 100,000 Cubans who had left the island return for a visit for the first time the previous year. The U.S.-based Cubans had brought suitcases full of consumer goods and photographs of nice houses and new cars. They spoke about the wealth and opportunity they had found in the United States. "We all think they lied to us, that they didn't tell us the truth," Tent City resident Alberto Gonzalez explained to *Miami News*. Unlike Duquesne, he had actively sought to leave Cuba and had been among the people packed inside the grounds of the Peruvian Embassy in April. A former machinist, Gonzalez had found a job in Miami Beach as a night shift porter at the Fountainbleau Hotel, and he supplemented his income by fixing cars during the day. He still felt like he had been deceived about the sort of life he would find when he arrived in Miami. "They made it sound so easy," he said.[178]

Gerónimo Lan, another resident of Tent City, had been incarcerated in Cuba for two years on what he described as "political" charges. Authorities there presented him with the same dilemma they had given to thousands of others: he could either leave the country or go back to prison. "It is not much of a choice and I didn't think too much about it," Lan told a reporter. "I thought I would come here, get work, find a place to live and bring my mother and brothers and sisters. Now I think the best thing to do is to go back to them." He added, "If I am going to eat one meal a day, I might as well eat that one meal in Cuba with my family."[179]

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[177] Guillermo Martinez, "Hijackings Dramatize Cuban Despair," *Miami Herald,* 19 August 1980, 1A, 14A.

[178] Veciana-Suarez, "New refugees' dreams fade as reality dawns," 7A

[179] Veciana-Suarez, "New refugees' dreams fade as reality dawns," 7A.

Deteriorating conditions at Tent City added to their woes. The area had a tendency to flood when it rained, which led to more comparisons with Cuba among the residents. For some, the encampment was reminiscent of the shantytowns and *solares* (tenement buildings) that they thought they had left behind.[180] At one point, there were so many health and safety violations recorded at Tent City that the Dade County Health Department urged the City of Miami and the federal government to address them immediately or shut it down.[181]

The presence of Tent City on the edge of Little Havana underscored once again how important the established Cuban community had been to the integration of previous groups from the island. It also revealed the profound impact of their ambivalence toward the Mariel Cubans. Some members of *la comunidad* were already relatives and friends who had arrived in the boatlift. There was only so much space in their homes. And after the important initial surge of donations and volunteer labor, many in the established Cuban community withdrew. Perhaps they felt that they had done their part. Media coverage of Mariel Cubans who had hijacked planes to go back to Cuba, staged "riots" in the resettlement camps, and become a highly visible "problem" in the heart of Cuban Miami would have done little to inspire earlier arrivals to extend a helping hand.[182]

Then there was the "criminal" element. Earlier in the summer, Carlos J. Arboleya, the prominent Cuban-born president of a local bank, had published a commentary in the *Miami Herald* that captured how an emerging class of Cuban-born political and economic leaders in the city was approaching their relationship to the newcomers. Arboleya admitted that some Mariel

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[180] Guillermo Martinez, "Tense City: Wait is Endless, Tempers Short for Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 24 August 1980, 2B.

[181] Jane Daugherty, "Squalor, Tainted Food Cited at Refugee Camps," *Miami Herald*, 29 August 1980, 1B, 4B; Joe Oglesby, "Tent City Clean-or-Close Order Ignored," *Miami Herald*, 31 August 1980, 1B, 3B

[182] Veciana-Suarez, "New refugees' dreams fade as reality dawns," 7A.

arrivals had been imprisoned in Cuba, but he offered a list of alleged offenses clearly designed to suggest to readers that the boatlift arrivals were not the kind of "criminals" that they had been warned about. He claimed that the newcomers' offenses in Cuba included "refusing to work in sugarcane fields for the revolution, stealing a shirt, traveling without a permit from one town to another to be with a pregnant wife as she gave birth, trying to leave the country on a boat, being disliked by the local vigilante committee, stealing food to eat and refusing to go to an official parade."[183] Some of these transgressions, including petty theft, were among those most often mentioned by Mariel Cubans when they explained their criminal histories to U.S. immigration authorities.[184] Others were less typical, and while they may have been grounded in the truth, they also fit with standard South Florida representations of the abuses of the Cuban government. Arboleya clearly sought to use his space in the *Herald* to combat negative depictions of the new arrivals and elicit sympathy for them.

Like many in the established Cuban community, however, Arboleya was quick to condemn the people he saw as truly undeserving of inclusion. He wrote that Fidel Castro had "infiltrated the new immigrants with sufficient numbers of undesirables and Communist agents to lower the refugees' over-all prestige and respect." Arboleya asserted that these "undesirables" should be deported, and he was adamant that "[t]he Cuban-American community [was] just as concerned about this problem as non-Latins."[185] The alleged criminal histories of Mariel Cubans had raised alarm among established Cubans that the latest arrivals might "tarnish their

[183] Arboleya, "Cuban Influx: Miami's Explosive Blessing," 4E.
[184] Cuban-Haitian Task Force, "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft)," 8.
[185] Arboleya, "Cuban Influx: Miami's Explosive Blessing," 4E-5E.

reputation," and perceptions of their differences with them along the lines of race, class, age, gender, and sexuality reinforced these concerns.[186]

While some members of *la comunidad* continued to advocate for the Mariel Cubans and challenge the prejudices rapidly forming against them, this group represented a distinct minority.[187] There were few influential South Florida Cubans willing to continue to advocate on behalf of new arrivals who were struggling to find their place in South Florida. Cuban President Fidel Castro had loudly proclaimed that the people leaving the island from the Port of Mariel were *escoria* ("scum").[188] By the fall of 1980, many in Dade County agreed with him.

6.6 Conclusion

Some of the Cubans who had previously made the journey across the Straits of Florida had gone from rallying in the streets to advocate for the admission of more than 10,000 Cubans at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana to siding with those who were increasingly calling for the incarceration and removal of certain Mariel arrivals. The evolving rhetoric of Mayor Maurice Ferré echoed this broader shift.[189] In April, while advocating for the Carter administration to admit the Cubans seeking asylum at the embassy, Ferré had threatened to "take down the Statue

[186] Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 155.

[187] A small group of South Florida Cubans, including Siro del Castillo, advocated tirelessly for Cubans who arrived in the boatlift. Del Castillo defended Mariel Cubans scorned by the established Cuban community in South Florida, government officials, and the mainstream press. He worked closely with Mariel arrivals as a director at the makeshift Krome Avenue detention site and at Fort Chaffee. Del Castillo later published a strong critique of "irresponsible and sensational myths" about Mariel Cubans. See Siro del Castillo, "A Plea to Destigmatize Mariel," trans. Judith C. Faerron, *Caribbean Review* XIII, no. 4 (1984): 7.

[188] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso pronunciado en el acto conmemorativo del Primero de Mayo," 1 May 1980, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/f010580e.html.

[189] On the complicated relationship between Ferré and the Miami Cuban community, see Castro, *Only a Few Blocks to Cuba*, 111, 178–79.

of Liberty" if they were not permitted to come.[190] In the fall, as plans were underway to dismantle Tent City, Ferré concluded, "The Cuban Communist dictator flushed his toilets."[191]

The varied and shifting responses of South Floridians to Tent City highlighted the rapidly deteriorating reputation of the newcomers among many in the area and foreshadowed a broader change in policy that would see the initial preoccupation with providing for Mariel arrivals and assisting with their integration into U.S. communities give way to an emphasis on efforts to police and exclude them. An initial diversity of responses, which had included some nativist pleas for outright exclusion but usually reflected a degree of concern with the well-being of the latest group of Cuban arrivals, was giving way to an emerging consensus about the undesirability of Mariel Cubans who were struggling to find a place for themselves in the United States.

The "burden" and "criminal" narratives that had emerged during the early days of the boatlift created pathways to express opposition to the newcomers without explicitly invoking race. But, as in revolutionary Cuba, in the post 1960s United States many government officials and much of the population continued to identify poverty and criminality with Blackness.[192] Tent City, with its highly visible population of unhoused Afrodescendant Cubans, tightened these conceptual links.

As the tenuous networks of social services and care that had emerged to support the new arrivals grew increasingly strained, there were clear signs that municipal officials in South

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[190] Eric Rieder, "Commissioners Join Cry for U.S. to Accept Cubans," *Miami Herald*, 8 April 1980, 8A.

[191] George Stein and Guillermo Martinez, "Little Havana Struck By Boatlift Criminals," *Miami Herald*, 18 September 1980, 1A.

[192] Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

Florida were moving towards a crackdown. In response to the May uprising, the Miami Mayor and Commissioners passed an ordinance that ostensibly committed the city to funding economic revitalization projects in poor and working-class Black communities affected by the riots, while simultaneously requiring the police to "embark on a 'get tough' policy of enforcing laws to inhibit future violence." The Miami Commission had already backed a proposal to hire more police officers, citing a police-to-population ratio roughly half that of comparable U.S. cities.[193] The protests and violence in Liberty City and other Black neighborhoods, combined with the destabilizing effects of the boatlift, had begun to foment calls for coercion.

The actions of the Miami City Commission mirrored, in some respects, the way local governments were responding to Mariel Cubans, especially those who ended up without a regular job or stable housing. There were plans and some legitimate efforts to provide material support. But over time this was superseded by a strategy for resolving the growing sense that there was a "crisis" by policing people and removing them from the spaces of the city. Although the White House and the U.S. Congress ultimately made millions of dollars available for the local effort to support the newcomers, it came after months of delay and deliberation. Local officials insisted that it too little, too late. Municipal officials no longer wanted the responsibility of caring for them. After several months trying to deliver ad hoc social services, they shifted to a focus on policing instead.

[193] Beverly McFarland, WTVJ Newstape Cut Stories, no. 273, 24 July 1980, Wolfson Archives.

Chapter 7 Pulled In: Public Assistance, Illicit Labor, and Suspect Subjects in 1980s South Florida

Rubén ran into trouble almost everywhere he went.[1] Originally from Havana, he had left prison to join the Mariel boatlift during the first weeks of the mass migration from Cuba. Despite having family members in the Miami area, he had spent his first months in the United States detained in the camp for Mariel Cubans at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.[2] During his time at the base, he would have watched many of his fellow Mariel Cubans at Fort Chaffee get released to live with relatives and other "sponsors" who agreed to help them find a job and a place to stay. Rubén may have noticed that a growing proportion of the people who remained at the camp because they could not arrange sponsorships were – like him – people of African descent classified by U.S. authorities as "black or mulatto."[3]

Rubén was eventually able to arrange to live with his grandmother, and in July 1980 he

[1] Portions of section 7.1 of this chapter, entitled "Policing the Crisis," appeared in the following article: Alexander M. Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal': The Mariel Boatlift, Miami, and U.S. Immigration Policy in the 1980s," *Anthurium* 17, no. 2 (2021): 4.

[2] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS); "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, July 1990, PP-ALAS; U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990, Series I, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[3] Frederick M. Bohen, "Monthly Entrant Report for November," 11 December 1980, folder 134, box 24, series II, Cuban Refugee Center Records (CHC0218), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter CRC-CHC).

left the fenced confines of the camp to join her in South Florida.[4] It was not long before he became acquainted with the local police. The DOJ panel reported that he was arrested in April 1981 for "drunk and disorderly conduct." A plan that had been implemented several months earlier to sweep unhoused and otherwise wayward Mariel Cubans out of Dade County and into federal custody remained in effect at the time. Under the terms of an agreement between several municipalities and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, if Mariel Cubans were arraigned at a county courthouse and local prosecutors could establish that their sponsorship arrangement had lapsed and they had no job or no permanent address, then federal agents would revoke their provisional "parole" status and arrange to take them in. This seems to have been what happened to Rubén. According to the DOJ panel, immigration officials rescinded his parole shortly after his April 1981 arrest.[5]

At this point, Rubén' trajectory becomes blurry. Materials later submitted to the DOJ by his legal representatives did not include any indication that he had been detained in 1981. Perhaps Rubén did not mention this when they met to discuss his situation. As in the cases of other indefinitely detained Mariel Cubans, his representatives may not have had all the information that was available to government attorneys. It is also conceivable that, as was true in many instances, his file included errors, omissions, or contradictions that led government officials to make unfounded assertions. It is also possible that the DOJ panel was correct when it

[4] There is a discrepancy between the account Rubén's legal representatives submitted to the DOJ on his behalf and the written narrative provided by the DOJ regarding the date of Rubén's release from Fort Chaffee. In response to a standard questionnaire about this life history, Rubén indicated that he had been in the camp for two months before he was released to live with his grandmother. The DOJ panel claimed that he had spent an additional six months in the camp. Both dates are equally plausible considering the experiences of other Afrodescendant Cubans at Fort Chaffee. I have elected to privilege Rubén's own account because representatives for Mariel Cubans often found errors in the details that the DOJ panels provided regarding their clients.

[5] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

suggested that he had been confined for a period after this first arrest in South Florida, and that he was "provided a second chance at freedom" and released on federal immigration parole again in January of 1982.[6]

What *is* clear is that Rubén kept encountering the police in South Florida. Both the DOJ panel and a Florida Criminal History report found that he was arrested at least 19 times between 1983 and 1987. What is also clear from this lengthy document is that law enforcement officers in South Florida saw Rubén as a "Black Male." More than a third of the charges on his rap sheet were for public order offenses, such as trespassing and loitering, and half the charges were for property crimes, including burglary, robbery, and vehicle theft. Several of his arrests entailed charges for allegedly possessing small amounts of cocaine. Yet only 3 of the 19 arrests listed on his criminal record resulted in convictions.[7] In several instances the charges were dismissed. In others, a jury acquitted him. Although few of the charges led to convictions – and almost none were construed by the DOJ panel as "violent" – his lengthy criminal record was more than enough for government attorneys to depict him as a serial offender who was "likely to commit further crimes."[8] Given the list of allegations brought against him over many years, many readers might see this as a reasonable conclusion.

But there is another way to read this evidence—one that does not lead simply to a judgment about his individual propensity for lawbreaking, but rather to an assessment of the forces and structures that shaped the lives of people like Rubén and contributed to the production

[6] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," July 1990; Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990; U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

[7] "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988, Series I, ALAS.

[8] U.S. Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

of their rap sheets.[9] This alternative reading requires an analysis of the fiscal and labor context into which he and other Cubans arrived in 1980, and the social conditions and policy environment that they navigated in the years that followed.

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Rubén was one of thousands of Mariel Cubans who were eventually detained by federal immigration agents, slated for deportation, and confined for years during the 1980s because Cuba would not accept their repatriation. Legal scholars have long sought to understand the statutes and jurisprudence that enabled their indefinite detention.[10] More recently, geographers and historians have examined the experiences of this group in federal institutions, as well as how Mariel Cubans mobilized to challenge their continued confinement.[11] Yet the backstory that

[9] On the use of multiple charges to control poor and working-class populations, see Issa Kohler-Hausmann, *Misdemeanorland: Criminal Courts and Social Control in an Age of Broken Windows Policing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[10] There is a vast body of legal scholarship on the indefinite detention of Mariel Cubans. For select examples from the 1980s to the present see, William M. Audet, "Representing the Institutionalized Mariel Cubans -- The Wisconsin Experience," *Wisconsin Law Review*, no. 3 (1987): 455–91; Mark D. Kemple, "Legal Fictions Mask Human Suffering: The Detention of the Mariel Cubans Constitutional, Statutory, International Law, and Human Considerations," *Southern California Law Review* 62, no. 6 (1989): 1733–1804; William G. Belden, "Paradise Lost: The Continuing Plight of the Excludable Mariel Cubans," *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 5, no. 2 (1995): 181–92; Yvette M. Mastin, "Sentenced to Purgatory: The Indefinite Detention of Mariel Cubans," *Scholar: St. Mary's Law Review on Minority Issues* 2 (2000): 137; Allyson A. Miller, "Lock Them up and Throw Away the Key: The Comprehensive Enforcement and Immigration Reform Act and the Indefinite Detention of Inadmissible Aliens," *The Wayne Law Review* 52 (2006): 1503–18; Smita Ghosh and Mary Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States," *Law & Social Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2021): 993–1021.

[11] Recent scholarship on this topic includes Elliott Young, *Forever Prisoners: How the United States Made the World's Largest Immigrant Detention System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Ana Raquel Minian, *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Invisible History of Immigrant Detention in the United States* (New York: Viking, 2024). For key works among the relatively few earlier studies of detained Mariel Cubans – one from a criminologist, one from a lawyer, and one from a journalist – see Mark S. Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones: The Imprisonment and Uprising of the Mariel Boat People* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995); Robert S. Kahn, *Other People's Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

explains how they arrived in those institutions in the first place remains largely untold.

Like Rubén, the vast majority of these "Mariel detainees" came into INS custody in the mid-to-late 1980s *after* serving sentences in state institutions as part of a criminal legal process that began with arrests by municipal police officers.[12] These local encounters were Mariel Cubans' primary entry points into the federal detention and deportation pipeline. Understanding the conditions in the places where they lived and the systems of policing that led to their arrest is essential for understanding what came next. As Mariel Cubans became concentrated in South Florida in the early 1980s, both local administrators and federal officials began to abandon tentative efforts to support them through public assistance and job placement. Instead, as will be shown, policymakers across multiple scales of government increasingly saw police, jails, and prisons as the most viable mechanisms for responding to newcomers who were struggling to find their way in the United States.

Excavating the processes through which Mariel Cubans acquired criminal records opens a window into how austerity and punitive solutions to social problems shaped South Florida in the 1980s. The emphasis on policing in the Miami area reflected a broader shift during this period, when welfare provisions grew increasingly meager but local, state, and federal initiatives to combat crime and drugs proliferated. This crackdown campaign distorted the ideological terrain on which public policy was debated by entrenching a set of facile but seductive explanations for social disorder. The emerging political consensus on "getting tough" reconfigured the resource landscape and constrained funding for programs designed to address poverty, substance use, and illicit economic activity through something other than coercion,

[12] Denise Blackburn, "Cuban Entrants in Detention at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary: A Study of Parole Revocation Cases 1980-1984," 24 August 1984, Series II, ALAS.

containment, and removal.[13] The experiences of Mariel Cubans like Rubén both reflected and helped to catalyze a transition from a refugee system structured by Cold War foreign policy interests to a regime of deterrence and restriction increasingly aligned with this criminal law enforcement model.[14]

Mariel Cubans felt the effects of these shifts in ways that paralleled the experiences of other largely poor and working-class U.S. communities, especially those in which most residents were Black, Indigenous, and/or of Latin American origin or descent. Yet they faced specific prejudices because of the intense stigma that quickly adhered to people who arrived in the boatlift and specific barriers to public support because of their immigration status.[15] Many lived for years in the United States under the provisional "parole" status assigned to them upon arrival. They could not benefit from the refugee programs established for earlier groups of Cuban

[13] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[14] Jonathan Simon, "Refugees in a Carceral Age: The Rebirth of Immigration Prisons in the United States," *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998): 577–607; Teresa A Miller, "Citizenship & Severity: Recent Immigration Reforms and the New Penology," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 17, no. 4 (2003): 611–66; Juliet Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis: Immigrants, Crime, and Sovereign Power," *American University Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2006): 367–420; Patrisia Macías-Rojas, *From Deportation to Prison: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement in Post/Civil Rights America* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Amada Armenta, *Protect, Serve, and Deport: The Rise of Policing as Immigration Enforcement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018); Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).

[15] Cybelle Fox, "'The Line Must Be Drawn Somewhere': The Rise of Legal Status Restrictions in State Welfare Policy in the 1970s," *Studies in American Political Development* 33, no. 2 (2019): 275–304. On the importance of public support programs and community organizations for newcomers in the United States, see Domenic Vitiello, *The Sanctuary City: Immigrant, Refugee, and Receiving Communities in Postindustrial Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

arrivals, and initially they lacked guaranteed access to any benefits or job training programs beyond food stamps and ad hoc medical care. Although federal legislation eventually provided for various forms of aid, these programs were contingent on consistent renewal by Congress and on the decisions of a presidential administration led by Ronald Reagan. In 1984, facing a lawsuit from Mariel Cubans who wanted to petition for permanent resident status using the expedited process created by the Cuban Adjustment Act, the Department of Justice ultimately determined that people who had arrived in the boatlift were eligible to do so. But until then their legal status in the United States remained tenuous.[16]

Moreover, as this chapter will show, even when public benefits were theoretically available to Mariel arrivals, they tended to be difficult to access and almost always insufficient. Such obstacles to social provision only become fully visible by shifting the scale of analysis from legislative debates in Washington to the experiences of Mariel Cubans on the ground. Those who struggled amid a severe housing shortage in Miami and the worst recession since the Great Depression often turned to the informal economy and illicit labor to make ends meet. As a result, they increasingly found that the agents of 'public assistance' they were most likely to encounter were those who wore a badge and carried a gun.

7.1 Policing the Crisis

Rubén's first arrest in the United States was likely a function of a campaign that had been initiated the previous fall to "sweep" Mariel Cubans off the streets. Not long after he left Fort Chaffee to join his grandmother in Hialeah, two groups of Mariel Cubans were becoming the focal points of local media coverage about the problems caused by the boatlift: those in Tent

[16] Robert Pear, "Cuban Aliens, but Not Haitians, Will be Offered Residency Status," *New York Times,* 12 February 1984, 1.

City, and others who were living in the cheap hotels of Miami Beach. In both instances, the police and the press were increasingly linking these groups with rising crime rates.

While there had been fears about alleged Cubans "criminals" since the early days of the boatlift, the most prominent concern for much of the summer had not been their impact on crime. Up to that point, most complaints had been about poor people in public spaces and the "burden" that they supposedly represented for South Florida taxpayers. Several headlines had noted when new arrivals were the suspected perpetrators or victims of violence, but when there was talk of crime it usually centered on fears about the past – about the criminal records that Mariel arrivals had reportedly acquired on the island.[17]

At the end of July, however, a flurry of news articles linked apparent increases in certain crime statistics to offenses allegedly committed by Mariel Cubans after they arrived in South Florida. First, there were reports of a Cuban juvenile "crime wave." In fact, this was less an observation of fact than it was a news story featuring the speculation of a local judge that the crime rate among "Latin juveniles" would "double within three years because of the hundreds of hard-core juvenile delinquents who were released from Cuban jails."[18]

Then a group of businesses sued to prevent the opening of Tent City. The plaintiffs claimed that the new residents might cause "potential harm" to their customers.[19] Soon after, Miami press outlets published accounts of Mariel Cubans who had been incarcerated in U.S. federal prisons after they arrived, some of which included misleading information about the

[17] Edna Buchanan, "New Refugees Jailed for Rape, Abduction," *Miami Herald*, 16 June 1980, 3B; "Recent Refugee Held in Sex Attacks," *Miami Herald*, 27 June 1980, 4B; Edna Buchanan, "Refugee's New Life: Death After Bar Argument," *Miami Herald*, 29 June 1980, 2B; "2 new refugees shot and killed," *Miami News*, 8 July 1980, 5A

[18] Al Messerschmidt, "Judge Sees Crime Wave From Boatlift Juveniles," *Miami Herald*, 24 July 1980, 1C, 8C; Mark Silva, "Castro's Ex-Cons Blamed for Tide Of Beach Crime," *Miami Herald*, August 7, 1980, 2C.

[19] Mary Voboril, "12 Firms Sue Carter, Miami to Stop Tent City," *Miami Herald*, July 25, 1980, 1C.

number of boatlift arrivals who had been jailed in Cuba for offenses such as "rape, murder and child molestation."[20] Over the summer, coverage of protests and "riots" in the resettlement camps, and headlines about "ex-convict refugees" who were set to be released in Florida, further reinforced the negative views of the newcomers already held by many in Dade County.[21]

The lawsuit filed to stop the construction of Tent City was based on the presumption that the "homeless refugees" in the encampment were more likely than other people to engage in illicit activity. City of Miami Police Chief Kenneth Harms appeared to share this view. He claimed that, although he had no "no firm statistics," there had been a "considerable increase" in property crimes in the area of the Orange Bowl when Mariel Cubans had been housed earlier in the summer. He promised that police would "monitor very closely the activity at Tent City," but also noted that crime might be less of a problem at the new site because his officers could better control the "more confined" space.[22]

In the City of Miami Beach, another group of Mariel Cubans found themselves at the center of negative press and public attention. Officials estimated that 4,000 newcomers had made their way across Biscayne Bay, with most staying in dilapidated apartments and cheap hotels on South Beach. On July 30, Miami Beach Mayor Murray Meyerson sent a letter to President Jimmy Carter pleading for help as the city entered what he called a "state of crisis." He claimed

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[20] United Press International, "Jailed Cubans Stage a Hunger Strike," *Miami Herald,* August 5, 1980, 10A.

[21] Associated Press, "215 Ex-Convict Refugees To Be Released to Florida," *Miami Herald,* August 8, 1980, 2A.

[22] Silva, "Castro's Ex-Cons Blamed for Tide Of Beach Crime," 2C. A review of press coverage from the time reveals that the police never came up with such "firm statistics" to show that Tent City residents were more likely than anyone else to break the law. This suggests that the concern about increases in crime voiced by business owners and others were really about their resistance to the presence of poor people in public spaces near them. For a cogent analysis of how unfounded claims about "crime" have been used repeatedly to justify efforts to remove poor people from public space, see Adam Johnson, "People 'Feel Unsafe' Because Visible Poverty Is Everywhere," *The Column* (blog), December 27, 2022, https://www.columnblog.com/p/people-feel-unsafe-because-visible.

that "hundreds of refugees [had] been jammed into substandard housing by well-meaning private charities and public agencies with a month's rent paid and no hope of future funding for shelter, food, clothing or medical care." Meyerson also claimed that a group of men who had, "under the Castro regime, lived by their wits or outside the law," were largely responsible for a 30 percent increase in Miami Beach crime, "including rapes, armed robberies and assaults," over the previous three months.[23]

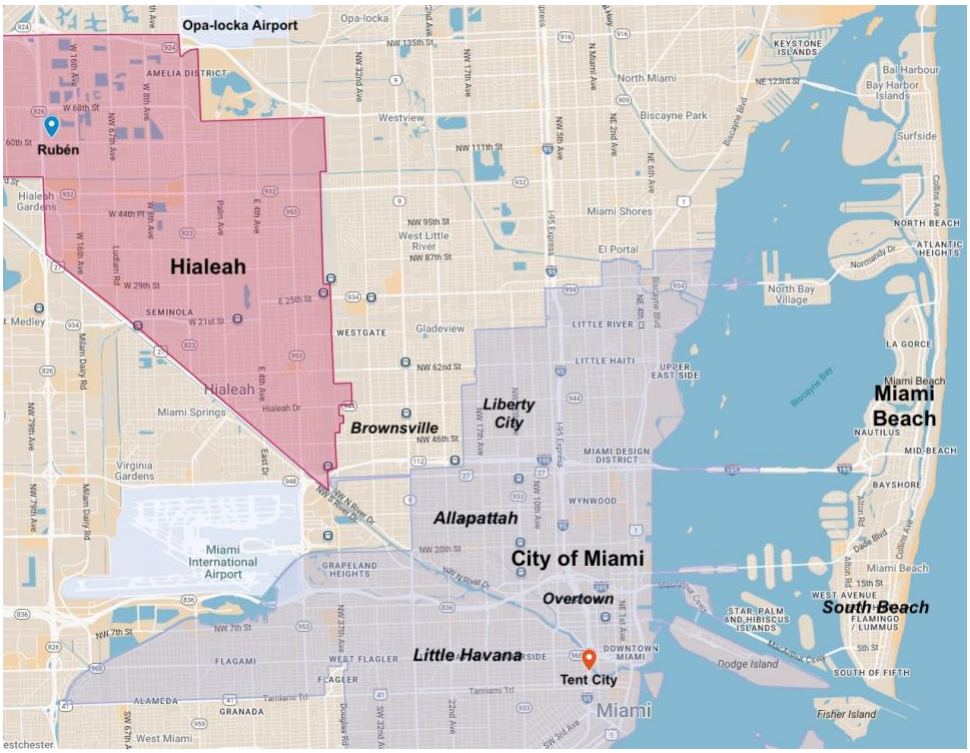


Figure 7.1 **Cities of Hialeah, Miami, and Miami Beach with select neighborhoods and the residential address reported for Rubén.** The red marker indicates the location of Tent City. The blue marker reflects the approximate location of Rubén's residential address in Hialeah, as reported on his Florida Criminal History report in 1988. *Created with Google My Maps.*

These crime statistics began circulating in press accounts soon after Meyerson sent the letter. The Miami Beach Police had begun noting on incident reports whenever a new Cuban or Haitian migrant was involved in an alleged offense. Despite admitting that the department did

[23] Murray Meyerson, letter to Jimmy Carter, 30 July 1980, folder 99, box 23, series II, CRC-CHC.

not yet have sufficient data to draw any conclusions, and that it would take "at least three months" to analyze the impact of the new arrivals on crime rates, Miami Beach Police Chief Peter Corso went ahead and told the *Miami Herald* that he believed Mariel Cubans were responsible for a sharp rise in sexual assaults and weapons offenses.[24] He waited less than two weeks before speaking with reporters again and telling them that his department had received more reports of rape in the past month than it had during all of 1979. "Almost all of it," he said, could be attributed to new arrivals from Cuba, and specifically to the "Cuban prisoners Fidel Castro unleashed upon us." The police and the press broadcast this provisional data, gathered through a method that the City of Miami Police chief described as "not perfect," to deepen the impression of Mariel Cubans as menacing figures in the shadows of sunny South Florida.[25]

Such a dramatic increase in reports of sexual assault would have been legitimate cause for serious concern. These numbers likely did reflect some real shift in what was happening on the ground. The precise nature of that change, however, was not self-evident. Crime statistics are

[24] Dan Williams and Joan Fleischman, "Beach Sees Crime Rise Since Refugee Influx," *Miami Herald*, July 25, 1980, 4C

[25] Mark Silva, "Castro's Ex-Cons Blamed for Tide Of Beach Crime," *Miami Herald*, August 7, 1980, 2C, 4C. The Miami Beach police chief made a point to explain that Haitians did *not* present such a threat. After reviewing police reports of sexual assault in which newly arriving Cubans or Haitians were marked with an "R" for "refugee," he said, "None of them are Haitians." He went on, "The truth of the matter is the Haitians haven't contributed one iota to the crime problem on Miami Beach." This was perhaps unexpected, given the broader resistance to the arrival people from Haiti and the historical use of charges of "criminality" to justify opposition to immigration, in general, and to Black newcomers, in particular. See Llana Barber, "Anti-Black Racism and the Nativist State," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 42, no. 4 (2023): 5–59.

The distinction drawn by the police chief underscores the extent to which Mariel Cubans were at the heart of an emerging discourse about "criminal aliens" in South Florida that would contribute directly to the increased use of this rhetoric – at the time still distinguishable from restrictionism language about "illegal aliens" – at the national level. During the 1980s, the "criminal alien" became a central figure in the development of harsh new immigration laws. See Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal'"; Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail*. On the uses of the term "criminal alien" in California and the southwestern United States, see Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 206, 217; Kelly Lytle Hernández, "Amnesty or Abolition?," *Boom: A Journal of California* 1, no. 4 (2011): 54–68; Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 162-189.

notoriously unreliable. Statistics recorded for most offenses typically embody an array of factors that go unmentioned when the figures are reported. One key factor is the attention that police pay to specific groups of people in particular places. When crime statistics have circulated in the press, they tend to produce "*a statistical narrative about crime*" that obscures the critical role of police play in producing it.[26] During the 1970s, for instance, a feedback loop had developed between the intensification of selective policing practices and reforms to crime reporting methods in the United States. The result was a series of rising crime rates that *appeared* to be driven by Black youth in segregated urban neighborhoods. As Elizabeth Hinton has explained, the resulting "statistical discourse" helped to justify the kinds of intensive policing that drove mass incarceration.[27]

Local police departments have rarely concerned themselves with context, but there were significant additional data points available to them, which might have altered their interpretations of some of the numbers they were seeing. For one thing, the time period often used to gauge the impact of Mariel Cubans on crime rates included the May 1980 uprising in Liberty City, a moment in which mass arrests and a spike in violence likely skewed police data. Although police appear to have understood this, they did not generally mention it in their discussions with reporters.[28]

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[26] Simon Balto and Max Felker-Kantor, "Police and Crime in the American City, 1800–2020," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 3. Emphasis in original.

[27] Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 19–22.

[28] Cuban-Haitian Task Force staffer Mario Rivera mentioned this important context following a discussion with INS officers, writing, "Dade County's crime rate has risen by 30 per cent thus far in 1980, and both the Liberty City disturbances and, to a lesser extent, the entrant population have had an impact on that crime rate." See Mario A. Rivera, "Report," 6 August 1980, folder: Tent City, box 9, Subject File, Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force (220.18.24), Jimmy Carter Library, (hereafter CHTF).

There were clear signs, moreover, that what was happening in Miami was part of a broader trend, both chronologically and geographically, which could not be attributed simply to the Mariel Cubans. The increase in the homicide rate in Miami in 1980, a data point that would be cited repeatedly in public discussions about the boatlift and crime, did not represent a dramatic departure from a sharply rising pattern that had begun several years earlier.[29] The Florida Department of Public Safety released a report indicating that statewide rates of homicide and other crimes defined as "violent" were 23.3 percent higher over the first six months of 1980 than they had been for the same period during the previous year. The number of robberies recorded had increased by 37.3 percent across the state.[30] Given that most Mariel Cubans arrived during the fifth and sixth months of 1980, any claim that Mariel Cubans were solely responsible for this larger pattern would appear tenuous.[31]

A crucial factor omitted in public conversations about police data used to blame rising crime rates on Mariel Cubans was the fact that law enforcement agencies had begun to focus their attention on policing some of them. This process helped to create some of the very statistics used to cast them as threats to public safety. The Miami Police had at least one officer posted at Tent City twenty-four hours a day and increased its patrols in the neighborhoods around the encampment. When there was a proposal to move Mariel Cubans from Tent City to an empty school building nearby, both neighborhood residents and city officials clearly understood that this would have meant the addition of police patrols in the area.[32]

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[29] William Wilbanks, *Murder in Miami: An Analysis of Homicide Patterns and Trends in Dade County (Miami) Florida, 1917-1983* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

[30] "Aumentan un 23% los Delitos Violentos en Florida en 1980," *Diario Las Américas,* 14 August 1980.

[31] Emily H. Skop, "Race and Place in the Adaptation of Mariel Exiles," *International Migration Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 454.

[32] Zita Arocha, "Teens Talk Tough, Vow to Keep Turf If Refugees Arrive," *Miami Herald,* August 3, 1980, 6B.

In September, police data showed two- and three-fold increases in calls about "major crimes" in Little Havana and the area immediately around Tent City. Service calls are, of course, not the same as arrests or charges, let alone convictions. Although "murder, rape, robbery and arson" were included in the "major crimes" category, seems that the figures primarily reflected an increase in reports of robbery, auto theft, burglary, and, to a lesser extent, assaults. An honest assessment of the numbers would have required acknowledging that Little Havana, where police were increasing their presence, was also one of the areas of Dade County where population increases resulting from the boatlift were most heavily concentrated.[33] Such an evaluation also would have included the admission that police did not necessarily know how many of the service calls involved Mariel Cubans. Unlike in Miami Beach, the City of Miami and Dade County police were not tracking how many of the people they arrested had arrived in the boatlift.[34]

Rather than engaging in a measured discussion of police data, the mayors of Miami, Miami Beach, and Metro-Dade County treated the release of the statistics primarily as an opportunity to blast the Carter administration for its alleged failure to deal with the crisis. Without specific information about the subjects of the service calls that formed the basis for the report in question, they cast blame on people who had made the voyage from Mariel. "The Cuban Communist dictator flushed his toilets," Ferré declared. Like many in South Florida, the Miami mayor had begun drawing a straight line between the arrival of people who had been in prison in Cuba and apparent changes in South Florida police data.

[33] City of Miami, "Draft Proposal: Cuban Refugee Operation," 1980 November 7, folder 66, box 21, series II, CRC-CHC.

[34] Bill Gjebre, "Big crime rise in ethnic areas," *Miami News*, September 17, 1980, 4A; George Stein and Guillermo Martinez, "Little Havana Struck By Boatlift Criminals," *Miami Herald*, September 18, 1980, 1A, 28A.

Reporters, elected officials, municipal administrators, and law enforcement leaders rarely treated decontextualized or vague police data with any degree of skepticism. In an anxious city, at a time when local and state leaders throughout the country were "getting tough," accounts of rising crime backed by serious-sounding statistical narratives largely went unquestioned.[35] As in many U.S. metropolitan areas, the numbers served to justify directives from the City Commission to "get more officers into patrol and street duty" in the areas in question.[36]

The efforts of previous Cuban arrivals to distance themselves from the newcomers became especially urgent at this moment in the fall of 1980, in the face of evidence that the political power they had begun to acquire in South Florida was in jeopardy. An Anglo-led referendum campaign to repeal a landmark 1973 "Bilingual-Bicultural Ordinance" threatened to roll back what had been one of the first major political victories of South Florida Cubans. While conservative demands to rescind the ordinance were not new, many in *la comunidad* understood the ultimately successful referendum as a direct response to the Mariel boatlift.[37] As the media coverage of supposed "boatlift criminals" increased, the Latin Chamber of Commerce – always concerned about the good name of Cubans in the city – gathered 100 business leaders for an impromptu meeting to be sure they were seen publicly demanding more police in Little Havana, too.[38]

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[35] Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*.

[36] Gjebre, "Big crime rise in ethnic areas," 4A.

[37] Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 34–35; María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 74.

[38] Gjebre, "Big crime rise in ethnic areas," 4A; Stein and Martinez, "Little Havana Struck By Boatlift Criminals," 1A, 28A. The Gjebre article did not break down the alleged increases in crime rates by category, so readers were left to imagine the kinds of offenses that were on the rise. The Stein and Martinez article was unusual. Local reporters tended simply to repeat what they heard about crime from police and elected officials, but this piece included an explanation of the context for the statistics and acknowledged the limits of what police and politicians knew about the nature and significance of such figures.

Miami journalists on the crime beat supplemented the police statistical discourse of Mariel criminality with their own anecdotal evidence. They seem to have rarely passed up the chance to highlight when a "Mariel refugee" was a suspect, either in headlines or in the first few sentences of their stories. Disturbing articles, such as one about a Mariel Cuban arrested for "sex attacks" on two young girls, almost certainly got more attention than a brief story explaining that the individual in question was acquitted of all charges by a jury three months later.[39]

Tent City and South Beach became the focal point of stories about crime during the fall of 1980, as these areas embodied some of the most visible signs of the challenges that some Mariel Cubans faced in South Florida. The tent encampment, the cheap hotels at South Beach, and to a lesser extent the ad hoc holding site at Krome North, were obvious targets for elected officials and the local press whenever they wished to cite evidence of the social problems caused by the boatlift.

Tent City and South Beach also served as clear markers of what leaders in Dade County and its municipalities saw as an alleged federal failure to "take responsibility" for the effects of the sudden mass migration. Local officials understandably were frustrated with how much of the fallout of the boatlift had landed at their feet, but they were also not always forthcoming about the various steps that the federal government had taken to support them. Tent City, moreover, may have reflected a deliberate tactic by City of Miami leaders to dramatize their desire for federal intervention. Assistant City Manager Cesar Odio suggested as much. He later claimed that local leaders had decided to build the site to create a visual representation of the problems they

[39] "Recent Refugee Held in Sex Attacks," *Miami Herald*, 27 June 1980, 4B; "Jury Acquits Refugee Of Molesting 2 Girls," *Miami Herald*, 18 September 1980, 3D.

were facing and pressure President Carter – who was concerned about winning Florida during his reelection bid – to assume responsibility for Mariel Cubans who lacked stable housing.[40]

Local and state officials had begun to pressure the federal government to close Tent City and take custody of the people housed in Tent City almost as soon as it opened. The surge in local news stories about Mariel "criminals" helped them to advance their case. Representatives from the Cuban-Haitian Task Force agreed to find alternative locations for the residents of Tent City so that they could shut down the site by the end of September. The people living there were expected to find sponsors or consent to be transferred to one of the resettlement camps, which were starting to look and function "more and more" like prisons in the wake of multiple protests and revolts.[41]

Some residents of Tent City decided they would rather find their own way than be confined on a far-off military base, so they walked out of the gate and joined the ranks of unhoused Mariel arrivals in Miami. Municipal leaders, including Odio and other Cuban-born municipal administrators, were determined to get rid of newcomers who refused to comply with their plans. They directed police to use public order charges, such as prohibitions on "trespass" and sleeping outside, to arrest unhoused Mariel Cubans who had been unwilling to stay in Tent City.[42]

In a similar one-two punch, the City of Miami Beach abruptly cut off payments to South Beach budget hotels where many Cuban and Haitian newcomers were staying and then ramped up policing. On October 21, the Miami Beach commissioners voted to stop guaranteeing

[40] Alfonso Chardy, "El Mariel cambió la historia de Miami," *El Nuevo Herald*, 24 April 2010, http://www.elnuevoherald.com/noticias/especiales/mariel-es/article2004747.html.

[41] Jana K. Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975-1982," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 74.

[42] Zita Arocha, "Arrested Refugees Given Last Chance," *Miami Herald*, September 28, 1980, 16A.

payments to local hotels. Suddenly, several hundred recent arrivals faced eviction.[43] Exactly one week later, those same commissioners proclaimed an "emergency in crime" and instituted temporary "anti-loitering and stop-and-frisk ordinances." These measures dramatically expanded the discretion of Miami Beach police and enabled them to arrest virtually anyone for any action that they could frame as a potential threat to public order.[44] Immediately after turning people out onto the street, Miami Beach officials essentially gave their police force the green light to round them up.

In the meantime, local officials had continued to insist that the federal government should help. Agents at the Miami Field Office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) were open to that idea. They knew that the parole status of the boatlift arrivals could be rescinded as quickly as it was granted, and they knew that the terms of parole required Mariel Cubans to maintain a means of support and a permanent residence. They claimed, though, that they lacked sufficient personnel to verify such information for all Cubans living on the street.[45]

In October, INS representatives met with Dade County and City of Miami administrators and four local police departments. Representatives from Hialeah, where Rubén settled with his grandmother, were among the participants.[46] They emerged from the meeting with a plan. If police continued to arrest unhoused Cubans using municipal ordinances, INS agents would attend their court hearings and visit them in the Dade County Jail to identify people

[43] Jo Thomas, "Cuban Refugees in Miami Beach Face Hotel Evictions," *New York Times*, October 23, 1980.

[44] Mark Silva, "Beach Oks Big Anti-Crime Push," *Miami Herald*, October 29, 19890, 4B.

[45] Rivera, "Report."

[46] Maria Rodriguez, "Parole Revocation Meeting," 9 October 1980, folder 125, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC.

who had broken the terms of their parole. If agents concluded that a Mariel Cuban was guilty of such a violation, they could arrange to take that individual into federal custody.[47]

Elected officials and the mainstream press later greeted the announcement of the collaborative local-federal plan to "sweep" unhoused Cubans off the streets with great enthusiasm. Miami newspapers had run dozens of articles and editorials condemning the Carter administration for policies that "dumped thousands of homeless newcomers onto the streets of Dade County's cities" amid a recession and a housing crisis.[48] Business owners and politicians worried that the estimated 1,000-2,000 Mariel Cubans "wandering the streets" were repelling shoppers and tourists.[49] Democratic U.S. Representative Claude Pepper told reporters that the plan represented "some real progress" in the effort to get "these surplus, vagrant vagabonds off our streets."[50] By early December, an estimated 750 Mariel Cubans were in the Dade County Jail awaiting trial, mostly for alleged misdemeanors.[51]

The sweeps demonstrated the growing commitment of South Florida leaders to policing and removing the newcomers. Municipal officials had been determined to pursue this approach despite the objections of the federal Cuban-Haitian Task Force, who continued to advocate for a provision-based approach. In meetings with county and city administrators, Task Force staff had firmly rejected the proposal for a mass roundup. They emphasized the need for housing and jobs

[47] Raymond A. Morris (INS District Director, Miami), letter to James Gigante (Director, Cuban-Haitian Task Force, Miami), 1 October 1980, folder 125, box 24, series II, CRC-CHC.

[48] Editorial, "Dade Misled Again on Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 29 November 1980, 6A. As N.D.B. Connolly has shown, Miami was, in effect, always in a housing crisis from the perspective of many of its residents who struggled to find stable, truly affordable housing. N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[49] Dan Williams and Liz Balmaseda, "City Pleads for Help With 2,000 Vagrant Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 7 December 1980, 3B.

[50] Tom Fiedler and Liz Balmaseda, "Lawmakers: Round Up Refugees," *Miami Herald*, 9 December 1980, 1A, 22A.

[51] Syl Ligsukis, memorandum to Fred Bohen titled "Parole Revocation," 11 Decembe 1980, folder: INS [1], box 36, Fort Indiantown Gap Camp File, CHTF.

programs, and highlighted the millions of federal dollars that soon would be granted to states and municipalities affected by the boatlift through an amendment to the Refugee Education Assistance Act, which had been pushed through Congress by members of the Florida delegation.[52]

Cuban-Haitian Task Force representatives argued, moreover that making arrests would hamper their ability to find places for unhoused Cubans. People caught up in the sweep were not likely to be deported for misdemeanors, and so eventually would be funneled back into the federal resettlement system. The Carter administration officials worried that they would struggle to find new placements for people who had been rounded up in Miami, because potential sponsors were reluctant to take in someone whose immigration parole had been revoked as a result of a criminal charge or conviction. They also worried that the scheme could lead to abuses and potential civil rights lawsuits.[53]

When presented with these alternatives, South Florida officials chose policing and confinement instead. They wanted the federal government to get rid of houseless Mariel Cubans, not help them find their feet in Dade County. By December, even some of the most vocal advocates for additional support for Mariel Cubans had joined the calls for a roundup. U.S. Representative Dante Fascell was an influential Democrat from Florida who was generally perceived as a liberal and had co-sponsored the amendment to the federal legislation that guaranteed reimbursement funds to states and municipalities for the costs they incurred to support boatlift arrivals. Yet he later claimed to have initiated a meeting between the Acting INS

[52] Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 186.

[53] [Syl] Ligsukis, memorandum to [Frederick] Bohen titled "Parole Revocation," 21 November 1980, folder: INS [1], box 36, Fort Indiantown Gap Camp File, CHTF; Ligsukis, "Parole Revocation," 11 December 1980.

Commissioner and the Florida Congressional delegation in which he "urged the [Commissioner] to take into federal custody any Mariel refugee who had been apprehended by local law enforcement agencies and charged with a misdemeanor."[54] After several months in which there had been a growing sense that the main "problem" was "homeless Cubans" and "criminal refugees," there was an emerging consensus in South Florida around using police to solve it.

But before the police could get these newcomers in front of federal immigration agents, they had to hold them in the local jail, and that compounded an existing problem for Dade County administrators. When Miami area police arrested people on charges like those later brought against Rubén, they typically took them to the Dade County Jail. As the officials who planned the sweeps were aware, however, for several years the County had been under a federal court order to keep its jail population below a maximum occupancy of 895 people. In fact, three months before the sweeps began, attorneys for the inmates in the jail lawsuit had filed a motion claiming that the institution was overcrowded and in violation of that order. In other words, the Dade County Jail had too many people in it *before* local leaders instructed their police departments to round up unhoused Cubans. After a compliance hearing in December 1980, just as police were preparing to implement the plan to pull new arrivals off the street, the judge issued a new order requiring Dade County to reduce its jail population to 846 people. When this did not generate the desired response, he directed Dade County to entirely cease new admissions to the jail.[55]

South Florida officials responded to the judge's latest orders by claiming that people like

[54] Dante Fascell, letter to Robert E. Bellavance (Executive Vice President, Greater West Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce), 19 January 1982, folder 11, box 2548, Subject Files, Dante B. Fascell Congressional Papers (ASM0361), University of Miami Special Collections (hereafter DFP-UMSC).

[55] *Bridges v. Sandstrom*, No. 74-994-CIV, (S.D. Fla.). Docket sheet (in author's possession). For more on these developments in Miami and their relationship to major transformations in U.S. immigration law, see Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal'"; Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail*.

Rubén had caused them to fall out of compliance with his directives. Officials from the State of Florida agreed, and they threw their weight behind Dade County. The Florida Attorney General filed a "third-party complaint" in the ongoing lawsuit and lay responsibility for the overcrowding squarely at the feet of the U.S. government. The complaint alleged that the population of Mariel Cubans and recent Haitian arrivals in the Dade County Jail was a direct result of the failure of the Department of Justice to screen the migrants who arrived during the preceding months to prevent the entry of those with criminal records or histories of mental illness. Therefore, the State of Florida argued, the federal government should take custody of jailed migrants and compensate the State and Dade County for the costs of confining them up to that point.[56]

The facts were not on their side. Silvia Unzueta, a researcher working for Dade County, organized a team to survey the jail population the same month the State of Florida began preparing its lawsuit. She found that most of the Mariel Cubans in the main Dade County Jail were held there, as Rubén almost certainly was a few months later, for charges "related with alcohol abuse." Often the Cuban inmates explained that their arrest had occurred "near or around a bar." The research team also spoke with Mariel arrivals at another institution, the minimum-security Dade County Training and Treatment Center, known to locals as the "Stockade." Many of the Cubans at the Stockade reported that they had been "arrested while standing on a street corner...having committed no crime." According to Unzueta, "They stated feeling harassed by the police in some areas of the community." [57]

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[56] *Bridges v. Sandstrom;* "Suit in Florida Challenges U.S. Release of Refugees," *New York Times*, 7 February 1981, 6; "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials for the Senate Appropriations Committee Hearings held during the week of March 2, 1981," 47, folder "Hearing Transcript and Briefing Books [1]," box 4, Subject File, CHTF.

[57] Silvia Unzueta, "Study of Hispanic Inmates at the Three Metro Dade County Correction and Rehabilitation Facilities," Office of the County Manager, 31 December 1980, 1-2, South Florida Collection, Government Resources and Information Department, Steven and Dorethea Green Library, Florida International University (hereafter SFC).

Ultimately, her research team interviewed every "Hispanic inmate" held in these institutions during the final week of December. Unzueta concluded that, out of roughly 1050 total inmates at the Dade County Jail, only 103 were Mariel Cubans. If all the boatlift arrivals had been released from the jail immediately, the population of the institution would have still exceeded the limit imposed by the federal court.[58] Despite their lack of evidence, officials in South Florida stuck to their story about the impact of the Caribbean newcomers. Long after the lawsuit had been resolved, both officials and ordinary residents in Dade County continued to insist that the presence of noncitizens in local jails stemmed from "a record of failure on the part of the federal government."[59]

7.2 Precarious Provision

The agreement between local law enforcement and the INS remained in effect when Rubén was picked up for "drunk and disorderly conduct" in April 1981.[60] According to U.S. Department of Justice attorneys, his immigration parole was revoked after this arrest because the INS determined that he was no longer living in his grandmother's house and he had no "job, money, or fixed address."[61] This was exactly what local officials had hoped would happen when they developed their strategy to use the police to deal with Mariel Cubans who were living on South Florida streets. Their aim was to get the INS to take them off their hands and into federal custody.

Jailing Cubans who were struggling to find their way was not the only option available to

[58] Unzueta, "Study of Hispanic Inmates at the Three Metro Dade County Correction and Rehabilitation Facilities."

[59] Fall Term 1981 Dade County Grand Jury, "Immigration and Narcotic Interdiction," in *Final Report of the Grand Jury*, Circuit Court of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida for the County of Dade, 11 May 1982, 4, 24, miamisao.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/gj1981f4.pdf.

[60] Dante Fascell indicated that "the program was suspended" in June 1981 "because the INS claimed it did not have sufficient personnel to conduct it." See Fascell, letter to Bellavance, 19 January 1982.

[61] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

Miami area administrators. It was true that local officials had been forced to wait for months while Congress deliberated over how to get federal funding to municipalities and states that had born much of the initial cost of receiving and resettling the boatlift arrivals. But some money had already made it to Florida when the State filed its complaint against the U.S. government over the Dade County Jail, and more was on its way.

The months leading up to Rubén's first arrest constituted a major inflection point in the response to Mariel Cubans in South Florida. It was a crucial moment of contingency. In December, the Cuban-Haitian Task Force had implored local administrators to choose a solution to the housing challenges of Mariel Cubans that did not involve arresting them. Despite being offered alternatives, South Florida leaders opted instead for a carceral approach. The jails did represent a coercive form of provision, in that people held in these institutions received food and shelter. But the people there also experienced overcrowded conditions and acquired criminal records that would later haunt many Mariel Cubans, including Rubén. The decision to use the jail in place of another form of shelter revealed that the efforts to shutdown Tent City and evict new arrivals from cheap hotels on South Beach the previous fall had been leading indicators of a trend. Local and federal officials provided inadequate and often-temporary forms of care for struggling boatlift arrivals. Then, when people fell through the growing cracks in an insufficient system of support, they responded with policing and confinement.

Dade County municipal leaders did perhaps have reason to speculate that federal funds for police and prisons would be more forthcoming than money for housing Mariel arrivals. So far, direct funding for shelter for the newcomers had been limited. Thanks to the amendment to the Refugee Education Assistance Act advanced by Dante Fascell and Senator Richard Stone, Florida received $23.3 million in federal funds at the end of 1980. The "Fascell-Stone

Amendment" was meant to bridge the funding gap created by the Carter administration decision not to grant refugee status to the new arrivals. Now, Mariel Cubans and Haitian "entrants" who had arrived in Florida during the previous year would be able to apply for cash assistance, healthcare, and other social services available to people classified as "refugees."[62]

These benefits did not necessarily ensure their access to housing. Although Congress appropriated $35 million to fund the resettlement of Cubans and Haitians, much of this went to support the work of the non-profit agencies that contracted with the federal government to place paroled migrants with sponsors.[63] The instability of these sponsorship arrangements, combined with the extremely tight housing market in South Florida, had left thousands of Mariel Cubans out on the street.

By the end of 1980, federal grants to Dade County, the City of Miami, and Miami Beach for the specific purpose of housing recent Cuban and Haitian migrants had reached a total of just over $700,000. When it came to law enforcement costs attributed to the newcomers, however, South Florida saw far more money roll in. A "security" grant of $3.7 million came to Miami area police and corrections departments via the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. Even when factoring in an additional $1.3 million in grants for local non-profit agencies tasked with assisting in resettlement efforts, the funding disparity was clear.[64] No doubt it was not lost on city and county administrators.

When other forms of government support *were* available to boatlift arrivals, they were frequently provisional, unevenly accessible, and insufficient. Government responses to

[62] "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials, 43.; Roger Winter, "Grants to States Under Fascell/Stone Amendment," 1980 December 4, folder 67, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[63] Cuban-Haitian Task Force Office of Public Affairs, "Appropriations and Expenses," 5 December 1981 [1980], folder 111, box 23, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[64] "Grants to South Florida in FY 1980 and FY 1981," [no date], folder 10, box 19, Series II, CRC-CHC.

struggling newcomers simply did not measure up to the task of supporting a large group of people who entered the country during a period of severe economic strain. For most of their first year in the United States, boatlift arrivals had lacked access to the direct cash assistance available to people with refugee status—including virtually all the Cubans who had come during the preceding 20 years.[65] The eligibility restrictions for public assistance programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, often simply called "welfare") meant that Mariel Cuban women without children and most Mariel men had to find ways to get by for nine months before they could get support beyond immediate medical care and food stamps. It also meant that rather than receiving benefits directly through the Cuban Refugee Program, which had been purpose-built to serve new arrivals from the island, Mariel Cubans would have to apply to access them through the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.[66]

When significant support did arrive, it arrived late, and it did not last. Mariel Cubans could not register for the assistance provided via Fascell-Stone Amendment until January of 1981. At the same moment, key agencies responsible for helping people access these resources in the Miami area were struggling for their life. As a new presidential administration led by Ronald Reagan began to implement policy changes in the first months of 1981, some of the decisions had a profound impact on the operations of the Miami branch of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force. As the agency worked to assist new arrivals in the area, its staff was "pared to the bone."[67] Then

[65] The Refugee Act of 1980 provided for 100 percent federal reimbursement for up to 3 years for individuals classified as "refugees" but who did not meet state requirements for programs such as AFDC and Medicaid. However, because Mariel Cubans and recent Haitian arrivals were not classified as refugees, they would not have been eligible for this until the implementation of the Refugee Education Assistance Act starting in 1981. See National Forum on Immigration and Refugee Policy, "United States Immigration and Refugee Policy: An Historical and Legislative Overview," 1981, 8, 10, folder 12, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC.

[66] Sergio Pereira, Letter to Max Rothman, 13 January 1981; Linda S. Berkowitz, press release, 9 January 1981, folder 70, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[67] Silvia Gonzalez, letter to John Cannon, 20 January 1981, folder 71, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.

its leaders had to deal with a federal hiring freeze, directives to cut overtime pay and reduce spending dramatically, and a merger of two different refugee resettlement offices that led to a further reduction in staff.[68] Less than a year after the boatlift began, then, the Reagan administration effectively kneecapped the federal program that had been created to support people who were still trying to find their footing in South Florida.

Rúben would have felt the effects of these kinds of changes. He was first arrested soon after the Miami office of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force was confronted with all these fiscal challenges. It is not clear from the available records where Rubén went after that April 1981 arrest, but the DOJ panel suggested that he was in INS custody from shortly thereafter until January 1982. At that point, the panel wrote, he was "provided a second chance at freedom" and again released on immigration parole.[69]

The timing of his release was inauspicious. At precisely that moment, the Reagan administration was working to restrict and cut the funding that Congress had set aside to provide refugee benefits to Cubans like Rubén. The money for the Cuban-Haitian Entrant Program allocated through the Fascell-Stone Amendment was contingent on renewal by Congress. Reagan had campaigned on promises to slash welfare spending, and his party was now in control of the Senate. Reagan followed through on his pledge in ways that directly affected Mariel Cubans.[70]

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[68] John Hopkins, memorandum with subject "President Reagan's Freeze on Hiring," 23 January 1981, folder 71, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC; Silvia Gonzalez, memorandum with subject "Reducing Unnecessary Federal Spending," February 1991, folder 73, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC; Silvia Gonzalez, memorandum with subject "Budget Reduction and Overtime Utilization," 12 February 1981, folder 75, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.; Work Group on Merger of ORR and CHTF Miami Operations, memorandum to Wilford J. Forbush, 4 March 1981, folder 187, box 26, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[69] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

[70] The Reagan administration imposed a requirement, for instance, that as of February 15, 1982, only states with a General Assistance Program could qualify for reimbursement. Florida had not previously opted into this program. See Minutes of the Dade County Advisory Committee on Refuges, 7 December 1981, folder 12, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC.

The administration cut refugee benefits across the board in 1982 and instituted new rules that kicked 20,000-30,000 recent Cuban and Haitian arrivals in Florida off many of the benefits that they had been receiving. The Florida Congressional delegation eventually managed to claw back some of this funding. However, because of changes in eligibility requirements and administrative rules for distributing the funds, social service providers in South Florida anticipated an increase in evictions among Mariel Cubans and asserted that the new allocation was a "cosmetic approach to a serious problem."[71]

In part because of the limits of federal assistance, most Mariel Cubans did not rely on it.[72] Yet the idea that some of them were in need of public support contributed to a contradictory set of resentments that shaped local policy. On the one hand, there was the persistent sense among longtime residents in South Florida that it was a "federal responsibility" to take care of the newcomers. They argued that Washington needed to do more to ensure that this group would not end up living on the streets of South Florida. On the other hand, Miamians frequently expressed resentment that Florida resources were being "drained", and that "taxpayer" money was being used to the benefit of people who had recently arrived from Mariel.[73] This sentiment was prevalent even in the established Cuban community. For instance, in *El Herald*, then the

[71] Susan Eckstein, *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 132–33. The quote is from Minutes of the Dade County Advisory Committee on Refuges, 14 June 1982, folder 12, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC. Also see minutes from the Committee's meetings on 15 March 1982 and 12 April 1982 located in the same folder.

[72] Alejandro Portes, Juan M. Clark, and Robert D. Manning, "After Mariel: A Survey of the Resettlement Experiences of 1980 Cuban Refugees in Miami," *Cuban Studies* 15, no. 2 (1985): 50, Table 6.

[73] For example, see Board of Directors, Greater West Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce, "Policy Statement on Immigration," 15 December 1981; Charles N. Bracker, letter to Dante Fascell, 22 January 1982, folder 11, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC. In mailers produced by an organization known as S.O.S (Save Our Southflorida [sic]), area residents signed their name on cards with a standardized message to elected officials demanding the declaration of a "state of EMERGENCY in regard to crime, drugs and illegal immigration…NOW!." Rep. Dante Fascell received multiple copies of these mailers. See folder 11, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC.

Spanish-language version of the *Miami Herald*, a piece ran contending that the Cuban-Haitian Task Force "had nothing to do" and was "wasting $2,000,000 in taxpayers' bucks at a time when the word from Washington is cut, cut, cut."[74] The idea that Cuban newcomers were a "drain" on South Florida and the people who considered themselves "the taxpayers" long preceded the Mariel boatlift.[75] Unlike early groups of Cuban arrivals, however, the people who came on boats from Mariel did not benefit from early-Cold War narratives that depicted Cubans who left the island as oppressed freedom seekers who deserved U.S. protection. To the contrary, they suffered from an unusually damning and disparaging set of perceptions and representations that rapidly hardened during the months following the boatlift.

Some federal employees and local social service providers continued to advocate for additional support for the newcomers. Yet the idea that this group was unworthy of care predominated in South Florida. This was reinforced by a broader shift in the United States away from an emphasis on addressing the ostensible root causes of social problems through rehabilitation, welfare, and service-based (if often still coercive) approaches. Elected officials, media figures, and everyday citizens increasingly advocated addressing the effects of poverty and inequality with removal and containment.[76] This was the path that policymakers in South Florida pursued, as well.

7.3 Not What They Expected

Several years after they arrived, many Mariel Cubans were reeling from the effects of a destructive pair of recessions, insufficient public assistance, and the challenges of finding stable

[74] Larry Mahoney, memorandum with subject "Daily media report," 24 February 1981, folder 77, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[75] Mauricio Fernando Castro, "Casablanca of the Caribbean: Cuban Refugees, Local Power, and Cold War Policy in Miami, 1959-1995" (Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 2015), 2.

[76] On this broader shift across the United States, see Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America*.

housing and decent work. In 1983 and 1984, sociologist Gastón A. Fernández conducted a survey of two small groups of boatlift arrivals, one in Minneapolis-St. Paul and the other in the Miami area. Both cohorts consisted of Cubans seeking material aid via social service agencies. Most were unemployed or underemployed. The ones who had work "tend[ed] to be part-time dishwashers, fruit pickers, janitors, and so forth." That is, they had jobs "characterized by low pay, hard work, and few benefits." Although federal policy made Mariel Cubans eligible for work permits, Fernández observed that many of the survey participants were working precarious, low-wage jobs like those often done by migrants living in the country without government authorization. Nearly 40 percent of the Mariel arrivals he surveyed reported that they had no income at all. One respondent said that he "had previously made $174 a month as a part-time maintenance worker without benefits." After he was laid off—a common experience during the 1980-1982 recessions—he ended up "living in a car while his wife and kids were staying in the living room of his brother's apartment." Reflecting on what he had experienced since arriving, he told the interviewers, "Life is brutal in the U.S." It was, he said, "not what I expected when I came." The social workers who assisted these boatlift arrivals described "high levels of depression, anxiety, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy." They observed "a loss of faith" and a waning "sense of a future" among the Cubans they worked with because of their creeping sense that "no matter how hard they tr[ied] there [was] no place for them in this society." These groups felt that "the deck [was] stacked against them." [77] In many respects, it was.

Despite the economic downturn, some segments of the Miami economy were thriving in the 1980s. The city, which a had long branded itself the "Gateway to the Americas," earned a

[77] Gastón A. Fernández, "Social and Political Marginality among Mariel Cubans in Minneapolis-St. Paul and Miami," paper presented at the Meetings of the Institute of Cuban Studies, Florida International University, August 1984, 5, 15, folder 13, Series 5, box 1, Mirta Ojito Papers, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami (hereafter MOP-CHC).

new nickname at the end of the 1970s: the "Capital of Latin America." This time it was not just the city's corporate boosters employing the phrase but also political and business leaders from the rest of the Americas. The new moniker spoke to several trends, including the growth of the Latin American immigrant population in Miami, increased trade and private investment from Central and South America, and the city's growing importance as a hemispheric banking hub.[78] Yet it was also the site of significant investment by the U.S. government, largely as a result of extensive benefits and training programs created to support the growing Cuban community in the United States following the 1959 revolution in accordance with a broader Cold War policy of embracing people from places with socialist governments.[79]

Mariel arrivals like Rubén who settled in South Florida rarely heard more than a faint echo of the Miami boom. Newcomers who worked the lowest paid jobs in manual labor, the service sector, and the informal economy found opportunities because of the increased capital—and illicit drugs—circulating through the city at the start of the 1980s. Yet their share of the overall economic growth was meager, at best. The struggles of Mariel arrivals in the Miami labor market could not be attributed simply to differences between them and the established Cuban community. Contrary to what was often reported at the time, their average levels of formal education in Cuba – roughly 9 years – were not much different from those of the Cubans who

[78] One of the first appearances of this term in the North American press can be found in Herbert Burkholz, "Miami – the Capital of Latin America," 27 September 1980, *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 10. The author reported that Ecuadorian President Jaime Roldos had used the phrase in 1979 during a meeting with a group of Latin American business leaders. For other early journalistic utterances of this phrase, see Bill Peterson, "Miami: Cuba's Uprooted Elite Creating a New Latin Capital," *Washington Post*, 2 December 1978, A21; Jeff Prugh, "Miami Rapidly Becoming Latin America 'Capital,'" *Los Angeles* Times, 4 August 1980, 1, 12; Janis Johnson, "Miami the new 'capital' of Latin America," *Boston Globe*, 15 May 1981, 2.

[79] Castro, "Casablanca of the Caribbean: Cuban Refugees, Local Power, and Cold War Policy in Miami, 1959-1995," 5, 8.

immediately preceded them.[80] Aspects of their occupational histories were comparable to those of the groups of Cubans who had arrived since the late 1960s. About one quarter of the Mariel Cubans reported having jobs in Cuba that classified them as craft or skilled workers, upwards of 8 or 9 percent had been in "service" positions, and somewhere between 11 and 14 percent had been working as professionals, technical experts, or managers.[81] Similar proportions of the Cubans who had arrived during the second half of the "Freedom Flights" in the late 1960s and early 1970s had comparable work backgrounds.[82]

Several trends in the backgrounds of the newcomers probably did, however, make it harder for them to access and maintain the sort of employment that had facilitated the upward mobility of earlier groups of Cubans in South Florida. The Mariel arrivals encountered some of the same barriers to decent jobs, including the need to learn English and anti-immigrant and anti-Latin American prejudices in the United States. Yet in contrast with the established Cuban community, a greater proportion of Mariel Cubans – totaling well over 25 percent – had been doing the sort of manual work in Cuba that was typically classified as "unskilled" or "semi-

[80] While systematic data that would enable a direct comparison of each group's average levels of education prior to arriving in the United States is not readily available, several surveys and studies have indicated that Mariel Cubans tended to have somewhere in the range of 8 to 9 years of formal education on average. This was similar to the average education level of some of the groups that immediately preceded them, though neither Mariel Cubans nor other post-1965 arrivals demonstrated the levels of formal education enjoyed by the Cubans who entered in the United States between 1959 and 1962. See Richard R. Fagen and Richard A. Brody, "Cubans in Exile: A Demographic Analysis," *Social Problems* 11, no. 4 (1964): 391. "A Report of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force," 1 November 1980, 81, Table 4, folder 126, box 24, Series II, CRC-CHC; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 44–45, Table 4. Portes et al. write, "Our findings support those of earlier studies by showing that these refugees were no less educated, informed, or proficient in English than earlier Cuban arrivals" (57).

[81] Similar numbers for these categories were found in a sample of the Mariel Cubans at Carter administration holding camps in 1980 and a representative sample of Mariel Cubans who had settled in Greater Miami by 1983 or 1984. See Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 43, Table 6; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 48, Table 5.

[82] Benigno E. Aguirre, "Differential Migration of Cuban Social Races: A Review and Interpretation of the Problem," *Latin American Research Review* 11, no. 1 (1976): 105, Table 2.

skilled." Fewer Mariel Cubans had worked in the office, clerical, administrative, and sales jobs often categorized as "white collar" before voyaging to the United States.[83] While their experience in manual labor may have prepared them for the punishing conditions of jobs in the service economy, it would not necessarily have prepared them for the specific tasks that employers wanted them to do. That relatively few Mariel Cubans had experience with office jobs was also likely a disadvantage in a local economy increasingly geared toward the service sector and in which opportunities for higher salaries depended on skills and credentials associated with white-collar employment. Even when there were job training programs available to them, many were unable to participate. Mariel Cubans identified multiple barriers that prevented them from taking advantage of such programs, including a lack of transportation and the fact that they simply could not afford to take time away from their current work to train for positions that might offer them some degree of upward mobility.[84]

Rubén's work history reflected some of these challenges, but he managed to secure a string of jobs after leaving Cuba. His first job in the United States was at a business that sold appliances. Whether he was assisting with sales or simply delivering the products, Rubén had probably not learned the soft skills associated with that kind of service work during his time in the Cuban military or in his other job in Cuba as a carpenter.[85] Within a year of arriving in the Miami area, Rubén left for a short stint in New Jersey. If he went in search of higher wages he may have found them at a factory that made components for furnaces and electric heaters. Regardless, he did not stay there long. Rubén soon returned to South Florida, where his jobs

[83] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 43, Table 6; Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 48, Table 5.

[84] Fernández, "Social and Political Marginality among Mariel Cubans in Minneapolis-St. Paul and Miami," 9.

[85] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

included assisting roofing crews and installing tiles.[86]

Rubén seems to have been fortunate to get as much work as he did. Among boatlift arrivals who resettled in the Miami area in the early 1980s, some found positions in garment manufacturing – which had been one of the primary industries in the region – but most ended up in service jobs, taking on the often-difficult, low-wage roles that were crucial to the what was becoming the largest sector of the region's economy.[87] A survey of Mariel Cubans in Miami three years after the boatlift found that, of those with full-time paid jobs, roughly half were working in skilled or semi-skilled manual labor and another 15 percent gave responses that classified them as "Unskilled Service Workers."[88] As with previous groups of Cuban arrivals, this breakdown reflected a significant drop in the relative level of prestige attached to their jobs in Miami compared to the work they had been doing in Cuba.[89]

The manual laborers and service workers were, in some respects, the lucky ones. Many Mariel Cubans in Miami simply had not been able to sustain levels of employment necessary to meet their needs. Of those who had jobs, 7.8 percent were underemployed, working 30 hours per week or less. Crucially, more than 40 percent of the people in the sample were either unemployed or not looking for jobs at all.[90] In 1983, both the unemployment rate (27 percent) and the poverty rate (26 percent) among Mariel Cubans in the Miami area were roughly three times higher than those measured for the established Cuban community prior to the boatlift.[91]

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[86] "Parole Questionnaire," U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, June 1990.

[87] Antonio Izquierdo, "Fears That Refugees Would Overburden Economy Fading," *Miami Herald,* 22 April 1990, 15A.

[88] Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, "Unwelcome Immigrants: The Labor Market Experiences of 1980 (Mariel) Cuban and Haitian Refugees in South Florida," *American Sociological Review* 50, no. 4 (1985): 498.

[89] Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 47.

[90] Portes and Stepick, "Unwelcome Immigrants," 498.

[91] Portes and Clark, "Mariel Refugees: Six Years After," Summary Report, January 1987, folder 4, box 7, Series 1, Cuban Detainees' Litigation Papers (MSS734), Atlanta History Center.

These striking levels of unemployment and joblessness were partly reflections of a set of recent developments far beyond the control of the Mariel arrivals. At the time the boatlift began, the country was in the middle of a recession. The rising unemployment leveled off in the second half of 1980, just after the peak of the boatlift, and a period of modest growth followed. Yet unemployment remained high across the country, and government economic data for the Miami area painted a picture far rosier than the reality on the ground. Although analysts suggested that the economic situation in South Florida was relatively strong in the fall of 1980, data from the U.S. Department of Labor did not include Haitian and Cuban "newly-arrived job-seeking refugees." The South Florida Employment and Training Consortium (SFETC), a labor policy organization, reported that if these individuals had been included, the local unemployment rate would have been 11.6 percent rather than the official tally of 5.2 percent. In a further distortion of the local economic situation, the Department of Labor reported an "all-time record" in the absolute number of employed people in the labor market area based on its survey of local businesses. Yet unlike the unemployment numbers, the survey almost certainly reflected the presence of the new arrivals. Such poor accounting produced statistics which obscured the challenges that Mariel Cubans faced when they first arrived.[92]

The following year, things got worse. In 1981, persistent inflation and high unemployment gave way to the worst unemployment rates since the Great Depression. Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker had taken measures to increase the federal funds rate and then keep it high. The immediate result was a squeeze on credit that had a particularly strong effect on industries such as construction and manufacturing. The national unemployment rate rose above 10 percent in 1982. High unemployment led to a reduction in the number of vacation travelers,

[92] South Florida Employment and Training Consortium, *Labor Market Information Report* 14, 28 January 1981, folder 133, box 40, Series IV, CRC-CHC.

which hit cities like Miami hard because of the importance of tourism to the regional economy.[93]

Some Mariel Cubans were better positioned than others to weather this storm. That the newcomers lacked "social networks" was cited by established Cubans in South Florida to distinguish themselves from the recent and ostensibly undesirable arrivals.[94] This distinction had become especially pronounced by 1980 because of the U.S. government's policy of prioritizing Cubans with family members already living in the United States during the 1965-1973 Freedom Flights. Yet such paucity of established connections in the Miami area mattered beyond how it shaped negative perceptions of Mariel Cubans. It meant that they had fewer people to rely on for housing and jobs. Local officials understood this. As a researcher for Dade County put it, "Perhaps the most serious problem this group faces is a lack of attachment to family and friends outside of Cuba. This lack of a support system has often inhibited effective resettlement efforts."[95] Although rarely articulated publicly at the time, the growing reluctance of many South Florida Cubans to *create* such ties was also a key factor. When conflicts emerged between boatlift arrivals and the relatives, friends, or acquaintances who sponsored them, having multiple contacts in the U.S. could mean the difference between finding another permanent shelter or ending up on the street and in places such as Tent City.

Although Rubén had relatives in the Miami area, his network does not appear to have been extensive. Like many other Black and *mulato* Mariel arrivals, he did not have a dense web of connections in the United States, a reflection of the underrepresentation of Afrodescendants among previous groups of Cuban arrivals. Surveys of distinct groups of Cuban arrivals later

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[93] Tim Sablik, "Recession of 1981-82," *Federal Reserve History*, 22 November 2013, https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/recession-of-1981-82; Whitefield, "Forecasts Bleak for '83 Season," *Miami Herald*, 13 December 1982; Douglas C. Frechtling, "Tourism trends and the business cycle: Tourism in recession," *Tourism Management* 3, no. 4, December 1982, 285-290.

[94] Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 21.

[95] Silvia Unzueta, "The Mariel Exodus: A Year in Retrospect," 30 August 1981, 9, SFC.

corroborated what many in the established Cuban community sensed all along—that the people who had come from Mariel had far fewer points of connection in the United States than their predecessors when they arrived.[96]

The experience of Juan Alfonso, whose father had used his connections within the Cuban government to help his son leave in the boatlift, underscores why such social networks mattered. His uncle chartered the boat that brought him across the Straits of Florida. After Juan arrived, he lived and worked in Miami Beach, where his uncle owned a furniture store. After working for his uncle for a while, Juan and his brother had enough savings to purchase a van and start their own landscaping business. The job was unglamorous and difficult, but as a business owner Juan could benefit from his labor far more than he had as a retail worker. He eventually made enough to purchase a home for his family in the growing suburban Cuban community to the southwest of Miami.[97]

Mariel arrivals who lacked such networks in South Florida did not always have the security of knowing that certain jobs were available to them. They were more vulnerable to the ups and downs of the local economy – and the whims of their employers – as a result. In fact, some boatlift participants ended up back in a resettlement camp, in Tent City, or out on the street because the people who had agreed to sponsor them attempted to coerce them into working for free, steal their wages, or take their food stamps for themselves.[98] Refugee resettlement workers reported that men sometimes called with offers to sponsor women. One man contacted a resettlement agency at Tent City in Miami to express interest in sponsoring "a nice-looking

[96] Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 44, Table 3.

[97] Juan Alfonso, interview with the author, Miami, Florida, 5 February 2022.

[98] Associated Press, "Farmer Exploited Them, Cubans Say," *Miami Herald,* 23 October 1980, 7D; Associated Press, "Half Cuban sponsorships fail, officials in Pennsylvania say," *Miami News,* 19 November 1980, 2A; Robert Pear, "Many Cuban Exiles Left in the Lurch, *New York Times, 26 November 1980,* A14.

lady." To make his preferences clear he added, "Could have a child. Not fat."[99] In another case, a Mariel Cuban named Eribito Espinosa Carranzana told a reporter that he and his wife, Mayté Espinosa García, had been sponsored by a farmer near Savannah, Georgia, who wanted them to work for exceptionally low pay. When Mayté got pregnant, the farmer told the couple that he was sending her to a "special clinic." Instead, he put her on a plane and sent her back to the resettlement camp at Fort Chaffee. When Eribito learned where she was and tried to go to her, the farmer and his sons tied him up and beat him. They attempted to force him to remain on the farm through the end of the harvest. Eribito eventually managed to escape. He made his way to Fort Chaffee, but then he and Mayté, who was still pregnant, were stuck waiting for someone else to agree to sponsor them.[100] The couple might have been able to avoid the whole ordeal if they had been able to access a network of family members or other fellow Cubans in the U.S. who were willing to take them in and help them get on their feet.

The experiences of people like Juan, whose uncle was an established business owner by the time his nephew arrived, reflected a key dimension of the Miami labor market: the Cuban "enclave" economy. Sociologist Alejandro Portes and several of his collaborators popularized the idea that Miami was a prime example of such "ethnic economies," which have been "formed by clusters of immigrant-owned enterprises" who tend to hire "recent arrivals from the same nationality." The aggregate effect, Portes argues, is "significant mobility opportunities for immigrant workers." These economic formations typically depend on the willingness of the latest group of migrants to "spell a tour of duty at menial low-wage jobs," thus providing a consistent supply of cheap labor that enables the survival of "fledgling immigrant enterprises." In

[99] Zita Arocha, "It's a Long Wait for a Kind Sponsor," *Miami Herald*, 31 August 1980, 28A.
[100] Paul Heath Hoeffel, "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans," *New York Times Magazine*, 21 December 1980, 50-51.

return, employers within an enclave are expected to "promote their workers as new positions become open within their firms or support their eventual move into self-employment."[101] In other words, enclaves have tended to function in ways that mirrored Juan's precise trajectory through the South Florida labor market.

The Cuban economic enclave in metropolitan Miami played a vital role in mitigating the effects of the 1980s recession and the stigma surrounding boatlift Cubans. A survey Portes conducted of Mariel Cubans in the Miami area found that, of those who had managed to maintain consistent employment several years after arriving, some 30 percent had jobs within the Cuban enclave. They were either employed by a Cuban-owned firm or formally self-employed.[102]

The Cuban enclave was not equally accessible, however. Although all boatlift arrivals suffered from the stereotypes attached to them during the first year of their arrival, the labor market experiences of Mariel women of all colors and of Black and *mulato* Mariel migrants of all genders suggest that they faced additional barriers to formal work and decent wages. The Cuban enclave mirrored other sectors of the regional economy in its tendency to exclude certain types of workers. Mariel Cubans of African descent like Rubén were less likely to find opportunities in Cuban-owned firms or as entrepreneurs with formal businesses than their White counterparts. There were also relatively few women in these positions.[103] Young and single people, women, and Black and *mulato* Cubans were "overrepresented" among unemployed Mariel arrivals in the early 1980s and "underrepresented in the enclave." Women faced obstacles in the labor market that pushed a disproportionate number of them into poorly paid jobs with few

[101] Portes and Stepick, "Unwelcome Immigrants," 499.
[102] Portes and Stepick, 500–501, Table 3.
[103] Portes and Stepick, 505, Table 5.

protections. In 1983, the median monthly pay of Mariel women in the Miami area was close to the federal minimum wage. As Portes and his collaborators pointed out, this suggests that about half of the women in their sample "earned less than the legal minimum for full-time work."[104] Although significant numbers of both men and women held jobs in the "informal sector"—often getting paid cash for unregistered odd jobbing, street vending, and domestic work— it seems that Cubans of African descent, whatever their gender, were more likely to end up in positions within the informal economy.[105] Established Cubans extended their arms to help lift up some of the boatlift arrivals, but others remained down and out.

7.4 Producing Crime

In 1980s Miami, there was significant overlap between "informal" work and "illicit" work. Although Portes and his colleagues did not include details about illegal forms of money-making in their studies of the labor experiences of Mariel Cubans, the criminal records of Mariel Cubans later detained by the INS suggest that at least some of the informal economic activity that sociologists documented in 1980s Miami revolved around the booming business of cocaine. Yet the most common offenses for which Mariel Cubans been arrested in the United States fell under the category of property crimes. As in Cuba, theft, robbery, burglary, and similar offenses made up a plurality of the charges brought against this group in the United States. While the drug trade has received far more journalistic and scholarly attention, the experiences of these migrants illustrate the extent to which the traffic in stolen goods has been a pervasive feature of

[104] Portes, Clark, and Manning, "After Mariel," 49, 51, 54.

[105] Portes and Stepick, "Unwelcome Immigrants," 500, 504. The authors also found a higher rate of formal employment among people who lived in neighborhoods with "co-ethnics." While they explain it is not clear why this mitigated the pull of the informal economy, they suggest it likely meant access to a denser social network and the job opportunities that came with it. This was probably a contributing factor to the number of Black and *mulato* Cubans in the informal sector, since they were often excluded from the predominantly White Cuban areas such as Hialeah and Little Havana. See Portes and Stepick, 510.

underground economies.[106]

As was the case for many of his fellow boatlift arrivals with long rap sheets, Rubén was arrested multiple times for property offenses. A copy of his Florida Criminal History report later acquired by his legal representatives does not include the 1981 charge for "drunk and disorderly conduct" that was described by the Department of Justice panel tasked with responding to his petition for release from immigration detention. The first arrest listed in the report was for "aggravated assault-battery" in Miami Beach two years later. The documents do not include details about this incident, but under Florida statutes this charge could have been for an offense ranging from simply threatening to harm someone to actually causing another person bodily harm.[107] The outcome of these charges was not listed in his representatives' file. Over the next year, he was arrested seven times, mostly for public order offenses, such as "trespassing" and "disorderly intoxication." Only one charge was for a property crime—for vehicle theft—though here again the report did not specific whether he was convicted or sentenced for it.[108] Then Rubén's criminal history took a clear turn. From February of 1985 to April of 1987, he was arrested 11 times. Eight of those arrests involved property offenses ranging from "burglary" to

[106] This reflects my analysis of client files produced by the Atlanta Legal Aid Society for several hundred Mariel Cubans detained indefinitely in U.S. prisons. These documents include narratives drawn from self-reported information about their criminal histories, copies of local criminal records, and written parole decisions made by panels of attorneys from the Department of Justice who typically had access to the full immigration file (known as an "A-File") of the individual in question. I have converted much of this narrative data into spreadsheets that enable me to identify quantitative patterns in their experiences. The trends I have observed are corroborated by a survey of roughly 1,500 Mariel Cubans detained under INS authority in the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta in 1986. This was a relatively small portion of all the Cubans who had been arrested up to that point. Those with more significant sentences were more likely to still be in state prisons at this point. Even so, it offers a distinct image of the Mariel detainees from the one projected onto them by DOJ officials. Over 25 percent of the Mariel Cubans in Atlanta at the time had been convicted on drug charges. Over 40 percent had been convicted of some sort of property offense. See Scott Thurston and Ann Woolner, "Many detainees are eligible for release program," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, June 1986, 14A.

[107] Chapter 784: "Assault; Battery; Culpable Negligence," *Official Florida Statutes, 1983* (Tallahassee: State of Florida, 1983).

[108] "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988.

"grand larceny" to "possession of burglary tools" to "strong-arm robbery." Rubén was convicted and served time for two of these offenses. The second conviction combined multiple charges stemming from his apparent attempt to steal a television and his involvement in a separate break-in at a beauty salon. Police also arrested him twice for possessing small amounts of cocaine, which were not large enough to suggest that he was making a business out of selling the drug on a regular basis.[109] Like most other Mariel Cubans who were later detained indefinitely, Rubén's illicit economic activities in South Florida revolved around property crime.

Though less common than property offenses, drug convictions comprised the second-largest category of crime on the records of boatlift Cubans who later ended up in federal immigration custody. Oscar was a member of this smaller but still significant group. He had a cousin in Miami who had helped him get on his feet after he arrived from Mariel. Oscar settled in the city in August of 1980. Like Rubén, one of his first jobs in the U.S. was with a roofing crew. Not long after that, he took a position working at a gas station. A year or two later, Oscar started his own automotive body shop, becoming part of the sizable group of self-employed Mariel arrivals in the Cuban enclave economy.[110]

It was a bad time to start a business. The U.S. was in the middle of what was then the most severe economic recession since the Great Depression. Oscar's body shop struggled, and in 1983, he shut it down. Had he participated in one of the surveys that sociologists were conducting with Mariel Cubans in Miami at the time, he would have been among the many unemployed migrants represented in their results.[111]

At this point, wittingly or not, Oscar dipped his toe into a vibrant sector of the local

[109] "Florida Criminal History Report."
[110] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," U.S. Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, November 1990, PP-ALAS.
[111] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," November 1990.

informal economy – the cocaine trade. He had recently gotten married and had a baby, and he no longer had a business. In 1984, a neighbor from his apartment building asked him to deliver some furniture for her. He was directed to pick up an empty U-Haul and drive it to a shopping center. A man met him there, drove the truck away, and then returned. He then instructed Oscar to drive the truck back to the apartments. When Oscar arrived at the designated location, police arrested him. They had been working with an informant who told them that the truck was being used to move cocaine. Oscar was convicted on one count of "conspiracy to distribute" and one count of "possession with intent to distribute," and sentenced to 42 months in federal prison. His social position as a White Cuban with relatives in South Florida had facilitated his access to the Cuban enclave economy. Even so, he struggled to get by, and eventually he got locked up.[112]

By the middle of the 1980s, many Mariel Cubans were losing faith in the possibility of achieving the material success that they had heard so much about from the earlier groups of Cuban migrants who had returned to the island during the year before the boatlift began. For thousands who left Cuba because the police or prison officials compelled them to do so, there was the added sense that they had not asked for this. Staff at the local office of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force in Miami observed that many boatlift arrivals were experiencing "depression and other emotional problems and fears." Some could not "accept the fact that they are here to stay." They felt that they had been "forced to leave" their family and their country behind. Staff members reported that many Mariel arrivals also felt "rejected by the existing Cuban community" and had "little desire or ability to adapt to a new culture."[113] In fact, most would have had the "ability" to adapt to life in the United States. The question of their "desire" to do so

[112] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," November 1990.

[113] "History and Mission of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force/Miami Operation Center," March 1981, folder 174, box 26, Series II, CRC-CHC.

was a different matter. Among the thousands of Mariel Cubans who struggled in South Florida, those who felt that they did not want to be there in the first place must have found it especially difficult to continue scraping by.

Federal policy intensified these challenges. In 1983, those Mariel Cubans who had come to rely on refugee-style benefits under the Cuban-Haitian Entrant Program suddenly found themselves adrift. In the name of cutting federal spending, the Reagan administration and Congressional leaders decided not to renew the legislation that had made the new arrivals eligible for most forms of public assistance.[114] The sociologists who surveyed Miami-area boatlift Cubans that year suggested that many "were compelled to rely on private charity or to invent jobs in a burgeoning 'informal' economy in Miami." They concluded that the "situation did not augur well for their future." The stories of Rubén and Oscar attest to their prescience.

Almost immediately after the Reagan administration cut funding for the newcomers from the Caribbean, Mariel Cubans began to appear in greater numbers in South Florida crime statistics. A local study found that the number of boatlift arrivals charged with criminal offenses through the end of 1981 was relatively low. The authors of the report noted that their findings could not account for all arrests involving Mariel Cubans but suggested that "available information points to the likelihood that this group was never as ominous as pictured in the past and the prospects are that their criminal activity will continue to diminish rather than accelerate."[115] While the Mariel "criminal" stereotype was overblown, this prediction about law enforcement statistics was later proved inaccurate. A subsequent study found that Mariel Cubans

[114] Portes and Stepick, "Unwelcome Immigrants," 496. See also Dante B. Fascell, letter to Denise D. Richter, folder 11, box 2548, Subject File, DFP-UMSC.

[115] Quoted in Robert Fabricio, "Statistics show Mariel people were maligned," *Miami Herald,* January 29, 1982, 21.

were overrepresented in crime data between 1983 and 1984.[116] The Dade-Miami Criminal Justice Council also produced aggregate numbers suggesting that, of the roughly 100,000 Mariel Cubans living in Dade County by 1986, an estimated 15,000-20,000 had acquired criminal records in the area.[117]

Of course, crime statistics were not necessarily faithful representations of criminal activity. The unlawful things that Mariel Cubans did were frequently different from what the police and the press claimed they had done. One of the oft-cited data points used to support accusations that Mariel Cubans were a criminal threat was the increase in the Miami murder from 1979 to 1980. Such arguments were not grounded in a rigorous analysis of the evidence. The murder rate in South Florida had started to climb several years prior to the boatlift. A study of Miami Police Department records later found that, though they were slightly overrepresented in homicide arrest data from 1981 to 1984, Mariel Cuban contributions to those numbers declined drastically after 1985. Throughout the 1980s, Mariel Cubans were roughly as likely to be victims of murder as they were to be arrested on murder charges.[118] If there was a "hurricane of crime, drugs and refugees" in Miami – as a widely circulated *Time* cover story put it – that storm could not be attributed solely or even primarily to the people who came from Mariel.[119]

In fact, Mariel Cubans were often the ones most in danger of being swept away. A 1982 report produced by the Miami Beach Mayor's Task Force on Crime found that the level of involvement of Mariel Cubans in crimes such as murder, rape, robbery, assault, and burglary was

[116] Susan Sachs, "Study: Crime rate rising among Mariels," *Miami Herald*, December 23, 1984, 1A.
[117] "Alien Criminal Tracking," in *Illegal Alien Felons: A Federal Responsibility*, United States, Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, March 12, 1987 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 133.
[118] Ramiro Martinez Jr., "Homicide among the 1980 Mariel Refugees in Miami: Victims and Offenders," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 19, no. 2 (1997): 112–13.
[119] Kelly, "Trouble in paradise," *Time* 118, no. 21, 23 November 1981.

"low," even "at the height of Dade County and Miami Beach's crime peak" at the end of 1980. The report explained that "[t]he image of the Marielito criminal is based not only on the large number of unemployed, homeless, and aimless congregating in South Beach, but also on the squalid housing conditions in which most live."[120] The Miami Beach Task Force's conclusions were unequivocal: the newcomers were poor and some were unhoused, but they were hardly the "hardcore criminals" they had been made out to be. A similar report issued in 1982 by the Dade-Miami Criminal Justice Council also found that the number of Mariel Cubans in the Dade County Jail had peaked at the end of 1980.[121]

Though these studies failed to state it explicitly, they contained evidence of the extent to which crime statistics embody the priorities, interests, and biases of the police agencies that produce them.[122] Both the Miami Beach and Dade County studies noted that spikes in crime and jailing came in the fall of 1980. That is, the numbers peaked at the precise moment when South Florida officials threw people out of their temporary housing situations and then directed police to "sweep" them off the streets.

A closer look at local crime statistics suggests, moreover, that the apparent mid-1980s increase in Mariel Cuban contributions to South Florida crime statistics could also be attributed in part to patterns of policing. An analysis of Mariel Cubans arrested in 1983 indicated that each person charged with a misdemeanor "had an average of four prior convictions." Most were for

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[120] Miami Beach Mayor's Task Force on Crime, "Extent of Hispanic Crime in Miami Beach," 9 February 1982, 1-2, http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00060744/00001, folder 395, box 49, Source Files, 1975-1992, William Lehman Papers, Barry University Archives and Special Collections, Digital Library of the Caribbean.

[121] Roberto Fabricio, "Statistics show Mariel people were maligned," *Miami Herald*, January 9, 1982, B1.

[122] On the ways that such data have functioned as a "statistical narrative" or "statistical discourse" about crime that justifies police actions, see Balto and Felker-Kantor, "Police and Crime in the American City, 1800–2020," 3; Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 19–22.

offenses such as "traffic violations, drunk driving and loitering." The study found that among the Mariel arrivals charged with felonies that year, some 80 percent had prior convictions.[123] More than an increase in the number of boatlift Cubans engaged in criminal activity, then, these statistics manifested the fact that the same people were being arrested repeatedly. These data also suggest that in general—and especially when charging Cubans with misdemeanors—the police were pulling in the 'usual suspects.' In keeping with longstanding practices of urban policing, Miami area officers were using the considerable discretion afforded to them on the street to deploy charges against people they had already marked as troublemakers.[124]

Rubén got marked in this way. Before his involvement in a string of property crimes landed him in prison, seven of his first nine arrests in South Florida were for public order offenses, including "disorderly conduct," "loitering and prowling," and "trespassing." These were precisely the kinds of charges that police throughout the country have used to preserve metropolitan social hierarchies and segregated public spaces.[125] In the decades leading up to the boatlift, the way police used such statutes had raised questions about their constitutionality. Just over ten years before Rubén was first arrested for "loitering and prowling," a challenge to a "prowling" conviction in Jacksonville, Florida, had resulted in a U.S. Supreme Court decision that banned such vague municipal ordinances because they gave the police too much power to make arbitrary arrests.[126] The list of broad and discretionary charges brought against Rubén

[123] Susan Sachs, "Study: Crime rate rising among Mariels," *Miami Herald*, December 23, 1984, 1A.

[124] Egon Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 97–101, 174–77, 192–98.

[125] Steven Kelly Herbert, *Policing Space: Territoriality and the Los Angeles Police Department* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Katherine Beckett and Steven Kelly Herbert, *Banished: The New Social Control in Urban America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Forrest Stuart, *Down, out, and under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 2016).

[126] Risa Lauren Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

during his first years in South Florida suggests that local police were not overly concerned with the latest federal jurisprudence.

Rubén later told his legal representatives that police officers "told him they wanted him to move on." He said he felt "singled out by them."[127] Indeed, it would not have been hard to single out Rubén in his neighborhood. Like many Mariel Cubans who had settled in South Florida, he lived in Hialeah. The municipality northwest of Downtown was one of three population centers in Dade County, along with Miami Beach and the City of Miami, that received the bulk of Cuban newcomers.[128] By 1980, the city was well on its way to becoming the epicenter of Cuban Dade County at the time of the Mariel boatlift.

Hialeah did not want people like Rubén. There is nothing in his representatives' files to indicate the racial term that Rubén used to identify himself. He may have seen himself as "*mulato*" or even as "White." But every available U.S. law enforcement source that referred to his race categorized him as "Black," which strongly suggests that many of the people around him in South Florida saw him as a person of African descent. Very few people who identified as "Black" lived in Hialeah, where Cubans constituted a majority of the residents. In fact, people of Cuban origin throughout Dade County – most of whom identified as "White" – were the least likely of all Latin American migrants in South Florida to have neighbors who identified as "Black." This included fellow Cubans of African descent like Rubén.[129] The fact that Rubén lived at a Hialeah address suggests the possibility that his grandmother who sponsored him, or

[127] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," June 1990.

[128] Department of Community Development, City of Miami, "Draft Proposal Cuban Refugee Operation," 7 November 1980, folder 66, box 21, Series II, CRC-CHC.

[129] Thomas D. Boswell, "Hispanic Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami," *The Florida Geographer* 24 (1990): 44–58. For a journalist account of some of these dynamics in the decade following the Mariel boatlift, see Alfonso Chardy, "'Invisible Exiles:' Black Cubans in Miami Torn Between Cultures," *Miami Herald,* August 8, 1993.

whomever he lived with there, may have been seen as "White" or, at least, as not "Black." Otherwise, his would have been one of the rare households of Black Cubans in Hialeah.[130]

Persons "of Spanish Origin," Any Race **Persons Identified as "Black," Any Origin**

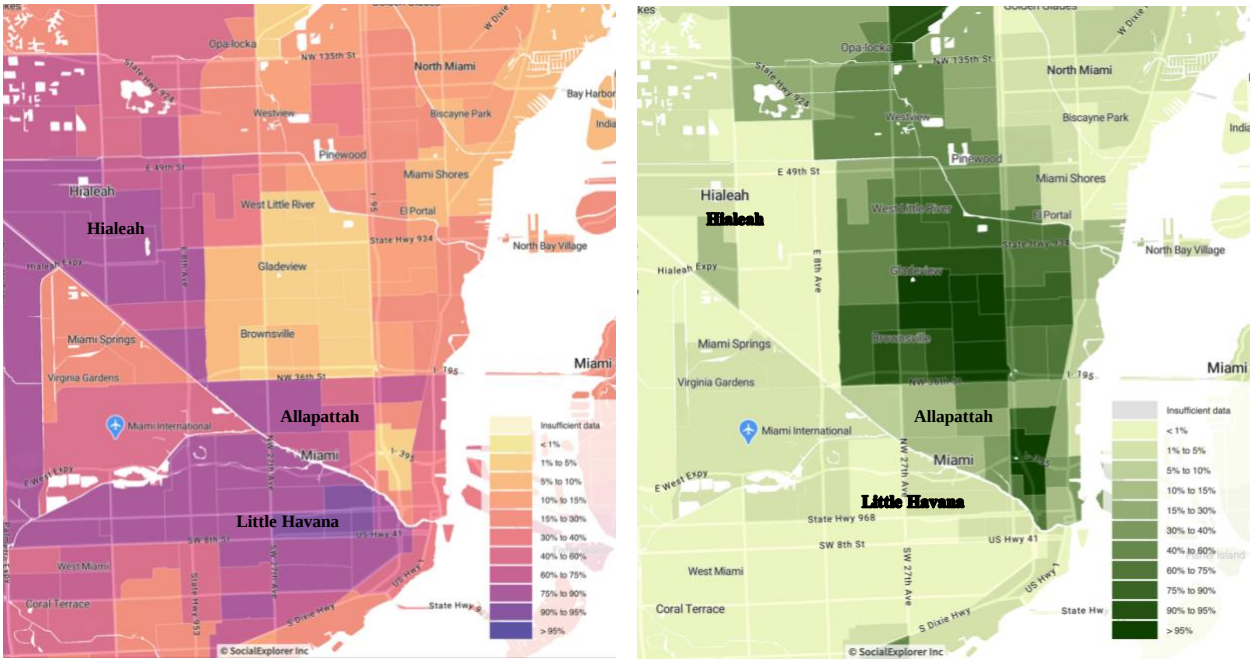


Figure 7.2 **Proportion of all residents classified as "of Spanish Origin" and proportion of all residents classified as "Black" in select regions of Dade County, 1980 U.S. Census.** *Created with Social Explorer.*

Patterns of policing in the United States, and throughout much of the world, have mapped consistently onto the segregated landscape of metropolitan regions.[131] Dade County was no

[130] It is possible that Rubén's grandmother, like other Cubans of African descent who lived in Hialeah, identified as "*mulata.*" See Devyn Benson and Danielle Clealand, "Re-Narrating Mariel: Black Cubans, Racial Exclusion, and Building Community in Miami," *Anthurium A Caribbean Studies Journal* 17, no. 2 (2021): 6. Moreover, Rubén indicated that his grandmother had moved to the United States before the Cuban revolution. Prior to the major growth in the local Cuban population that began in the 1960s, the racial boundaries in Hialeah may have functioned somewhat differently.

[131] For examples from multiple regions and periods, see Eric H Monkkonen, *Police in Urban America, 1860-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*; Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis*; Teresa Pires do Rio Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Jaime Amparo Alves, *The Anti-Black City: Police Terror and Black Urban Life in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); D. Francis, *Policing in Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

different. The Hialeah Police Department was responsible for 13 of the 19 arrests in Rubén's that appeared on his criminal history report.[132] In all likelihood, it was officers from that department who impressed upon him that he was unwanted in the place where he lived. When they told Rubén to "move on," they were not simply enforcing laws. They were enforcing the race-and-class boundaries of their jurisdiction.

7.5 Conclusion

In a context of growing federal austerity, many South Florida officials saw policing and incarceration as primary tools for dealing with social problems they associated with Mariel Cubans. This was the landscape that Rubén confronted in his time in Miami, which coincided with back-to-back economic downturns that converged into what was then the worst recession since the Great Depression. Against this backdrop, his criminal record tells a story that is, if not entirely different, far more complex than the narrative offered by DOJ representatives who concluded simply that he was "likely to commit further crimes."[133]

There was no straight line connecting dire economic conditions in South Florida, lapsed federal support, and increases in crime statistics. The universe of reasons people break laws is vast and cannot be reduced to a simple matter of need. At the same time, the material conditions in Dade County clearly had some bearing on the arrests of Mariel Cubans who did not have stable housing or formal jobs, especially when considering that many of those arrests were for public order charges that made their mere presence in public spaces a potential offense. It would be equally implausible to think that the severe constraints faced by many Mariel Cubans did not

2012); Cathy Lisa Schneider, *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Benjamin Bowling and J. W. E. Sheptycki, *Global Policing* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

[132] "Florida Criminal History Report," July 1988.

[133] Department of Justice Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990.

inform the decisions that some made to pursue illicit sources of income. When faced with difficult material circumstances, most boatlift arrivals stuck to the 'American Dream' program of survival or slow upward mobility through grinding, low-wage work. Others tried to make ends meet – or get ahead – by stealing or selling drugs. When they lived in neighborhoods that subjected them to heightened police scrutiny, whether because police perceived the residents as prone to crime *or* because they stood out in the way that Rubén did in Hialeah, it increased the odds that such activity would lead to their arrest.

By the mid 1980s, the combined effects of limited options and intensive policing became apparent in the growing number of Mariel Cubans who were serving sentences in state prisons. A plurality of them were held by the Florida Department of Corrections, but versions of the process that played out in South Florida unfolded throughout the United States. Groups of these newcomers were incarcerated in other states where smaller concentrations of boatlift Cubans had settled, including New York and New Jersey, Illinois, Wisconsin, Texas, and California.[134] Inside state prisons, they joined a growing population of incarcerated citizens and noncitizens, many of whom likewise lived at the intersection of a shrinking social safety net, economic hardship, and heightened policing. When elected officials started to question whether their states ought to be paying to imprison noncitizens, they saw Mariel Cubans in state prisons as a reliable 'hook' onto which to hang their arguments that the federal government ought to get migrants off their books. They worked to achieve this by pushing legislation to forge tighter links between criminal and immigration law enforcement agencies. In the process, these Mariel Cubans would become key figures in policy debates that would transform the U.S. immigration system itself.

[134] Office of Justice Assistance, "Mariel Cubans in State Prisons," May 1985, in *Illegal Alien Felons: A Federal Responsibility, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Federal Spending, Budget, and Accounting, Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate*, 142.

Chapter 8 Epilogue: Incarceration, Indefinite Detention, and the Era of the "Criminal Alien"

On November 6, 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, a set of major reforms to U.S. immigration law that had been under consideration by Congress for well over a decade. The law, often referred to by its acronym – IRCA – is best known for having created a path to permanent residency for millions of people who had been living in the country without authorization, and for instituting sanctions on businesses that knowingly hired individuals who were not authorized to work in the United States.[1] Scholars of U.S. immigration policy also see IRCA as a crucial moment in a long history of escalating efforts to harden the border between Mexico and the United States, since the law increased the capacity and resources of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Border Patrol.[2]

However, a lesser-known provision of IRCA illuminates the national impact of the stories of the Mariel Cubans at the heart of this study, and their central role in the intensification of Congressional interest and investment in what had been a relatively obscure dimension of U.S. immigration law enforcement until the 1980s. Title V of IRCA provided for the federal reimbursement of states for the "costs of incarcerating illegal aliens and certain Cuban nationals." The statute directed the Attorney General to reimburse state governments for "any alien convicted of a felony" who had entered the United States without inspection or who had

[1] Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 249–62.

[2] Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 164–71.

entered with a nonimmigrant visa but remained in the country without authorization. Remarkably, Title V also included an entire subsection dedicated to some of the people who had arrived in the Mariel boatlift six years earlier. The authors of the final text of IRCA identified this group as "Marielito Cubans convicted of a felony." In doing so, they inscribed in federal law the disparaging nickname for Mariel arrivals that had been popularized by the established U.S. Cuban community and codified the moniker's foundational relationship to perceptions of the newcomers as inordinately "criminal."[3]

When Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, six of the seven people centered in this study were living inside the walls of prisons. Fernando, who as a child had been sent to a reformatory for allegedly stealing cigarettes from a government store in Havana, was in a state institution in Wisconsin serving time for cocaine possession.[4] Andrés, who had left from Mariel after spending the first years of a long sentence for robbery in the Combinado del Este prison, was being held in the U.S Penitentiary in Atlanta as an "excludable alien." He had been in the federal prison system since the summer of 1980, after the authorities at Fort Indiantown Gap accused him of participating in a revolt at the "resettlement camp" in Pennsylvania.[5]

Viviana, who had been imprisoned at least once before the Mariel boatlift began, spent most of her first two years in the United States in Arkansas, confined in Fort Chaffee. When the Reagan administration closed the camp in 1982, officials transferred her to a federal prison.

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[3] Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-603, 100 Stat. 3443.

[4] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," United States Justice Department of Justice Parole Review Program, September 1989, Series II, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter ALAS). All names of clients and detainees have been replaced with pseudonyms. Archival folder and box information has been omitted from citations for these records to preserve these individuals' anonymity.

[5] "Petitioner's Brief in Opposition to Repatriation to Cuba," United States Department of Justice Repatriation Review Panel, May 1990, Series II, ALAS.

Other than a brief stint at a halfway house in Los Angeles, she had been confined in a series of federal institutions throughout her time in the United States. In November of 1986, she was being held in a U.S. prison in the San Francisco Bay area by order of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.[6]

When IRCA became law, Rubén, Omar, and Rolando were all serving time in state prisons in Florida. Rubén and Omar had been convicted of property crimes in the Miami area.[7] Rolando was serving a sentence for what appears to have been a tragic accident. He had gotten into a fight with the brothers of the woman with whom he was sharing an apartment in northern Florida. According to his legal representatives, at some point during the altercation, the woman pulled a knife on Rolando and, when he tried to take it from her, she was cut. The wound seemed minor – nobody in the group called an ambulance – but she died after waiting for treatment at a small rural hospital.[8]

Finally, Luis seems to have been living near Tampa, Florida, in 1986. He had grown up in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood in Centro Habana and been arrested as a young person for "*peligrosidad*" and for stealing a bicycle. After joining the Mariel boatlift, he bounced around the United States. Before landing in Tampa, he had performed seasonal agricultural labor. Just a few weeks after Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, Luis was arrested for

[6] James B. Turnage, Jr. (INS District Director, San Diego), memorandum with subject "Synopsis of File," January 1986, Series II, ALAS; Cuban Review Plan (U.S. Department of Justice), "File Review Summary," June 1988, Series II, ALAS.

[7] "Florida Criminal History," July 1988, Series I, ALAS; U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," August 1990, Series I, ALAS; "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Parole," United States Justice Department of Justice Parole Review Panel, August 1989, Paralegal Papers, Atlanta Legal Aid Society (hereafter PP-ALAS); Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, August 1989, PP-ALAS.

[8] Parole Questionnaire, U.S. Department of Justice Parole Review Program, (later one) March 1990, Series II, ALAS; "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, May 1990, Series II, ALAS.

"possession and delivery of cocaine." He was convicted soon after and sent to a state prison in Florida.[9]

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This project has shown that the processes that made this group of people into "criminals" and, ultimately, rendered them socially excludable began long before the 1987 uprising in the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta, in which some of them participated. In fact, these social, political, and legal processes began before they were arrested and imprisoned in the United States and before they even left Cuba. "Excludable" has revealed structures and dynamics in both countries that repeatedly pushed people to the margins, constrained their options, and sculpted the contexts for their arrest and incarceration.

In Cuba and the United States during this period, distinct versions of austerity compounded problems caused by residential segregation, economic stagnation, coercive labor regimes, and race and class prejudice. In both countries, policymakers and law enforcement officials retreated from programs to support and "rehabilitate" people perceived as the victims of structural inequality and social pathologies. And in both countries, these state actors turned to policing and harsh laws to contain members of stigmatized communities and, eventually, to push them out. While the goals of state projects in each country often differed dramatically, governments in revolutionary Cuba and the post-1960s United States deployed a range of coercive mechanisms to remove people whom officials came to see as obstacles to those goals. In each instance, poor and working-class, disproportionately Afrodescendant groups went from being treated as symptoms of social problems to being treated as "problems" themselves.

[9] "Petitioner's Brief in Support of Reversal of INS Decision to Deny Parole," United States Department of Justice Departmental Release Review Panel, May 1990, PP-ALAS; U.S. Department of Justice, Mariel Cuban Review Panel, "Final Decision," June 1990, PP-ALAS.

This shift did not hinge on partisan divisions. In Cuba, of course, there was only one political party during this period. In the United States, Democrats and Republicans alike threw their support behind "getting tough." Nor did the contours of this trajectory map easily onto typical conceptualizations of "conservative" and "liberal" ideologies, or "right" and "left" politics. Richard Nixon, Edward Kennedy, and Fidel Castro all advocated for ruthless approaches to certain kinds of "criminals" during the 1970s. However, the shift was real, and it had a significant impact on the lives of those at the center of this study and many others.[10]

When Mariel arrivals were arrested and confined in carceral institutions in the United States, a key dynamic of the larger processes that had brought them there gained renewed momentum. Prisons fostered an especially dense network of conceptual connections among race, class, crime, and space. Prisons, in other words, were closely socially identified with Blackness, poverty, and criminality.[11] Geographers Jenna Loyd and Alison Mountz have explained that "this discursive and practical elision between confinement and criminality *preceded* the criminalization of noncitizens in the formal legislative process."[12] The presence of a significant number of Mariel Cubans in state and federal prisons contributed to perceptions of the boatlift population as both predominantly "Black" and distinctly "criminal." Lawmakers, in turn, embedded the perception of Mariel criminality in federal law when they created a specific provision for "Marielito Cubans convicted of a felony" in the Immigration Reform and Control

[10] Matthew Lassiter has demonstrated that a bipartisan "consensus project of racial and carceral state-building" drove crime and drugs policy in the United States from the 1950s to the 1980s. Yet he notes that "[w]hite liberal lawmakers" differed from "racial conservatives" in their support for "urban social welfare programs" and their view of "nonwhite addicts" as genuine "victims" who merited coercive rehabilitation rather than severe prison sentences. Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 7, 11.

[11] Micol Seigel, "'Convict Race': Racialization in the Era of Hyperincarceration," *Social Justice* 39, no. 4 (130) (2014): 31–51.

[12] Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 212.

Act. This marked a key moment in what would become a long history of weaponizing Mariel Cubans for political battle. In the decades that followed, lawmakers and anti-immigration activists regularly invoked the image of formerly incarcerated Cubans landing on U.S. shores and the presence of some of them in U.S. prisons to justify legislation and policies that framed a far larger group of migrants as "criminals," and as people who must be excluded.

8.1 Entering the Era of the "Criminal Alien"

Responses to Mariel Cubans contributed directly to a major transition in the imagined objectives of immigration law enforcement in the United States. For decades, the "illegal alien" had been the "central problem in U.S. immigration policy."[13] In the years that followed the boatlift, the "criminal alien" emerged as the embodiment of a related yet distinct national "problem" produced in the context of rising austerity, mass incarceration, and resurgent nativism.[14] While not a novel concept in the 1980s, the "criminal alien" took on new meaning and gained unprecedented influence in U.S. political culture during this period. The term had been in use by immigration officials in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands since at least the 1950s, a previous moment of escalation in the U.S. war drugs.[15] The supposed threat posed by "criminal aliens" had been invoked by local law enforcement in Southern California since the 1970s to justify their targeted policing of Mexicans and Central Americans and their collaborations with the Immigration and Naturalization Service.[16] Yet the "criminal alien" became a central figure in

[13] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

[14] Julie A. Dowling and Jonathan Xavier Inda, eds., *Governing Immigration through Crime: A Reader* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[15] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 205–17; Kelly Lytle Hernández, "Amnesty or Abolition?," *Boom: A Journal of California* 1, no. 4 (2011): 62–63.

[16] Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 162–89.

national debates over immigration policy in the 1980s largely thanks to lawmakers from New York and Florida.[17] And these elected officials consistently pointed to one group as the strongest evidence of the need for a greater federal focus on confining and deporting noncitizens with criminal records: Cubans who had arrived in the Mariel boatlift.[18]

"Excludable" has demonstrated that explaining the presence of Mariel Cubans in U.S. prisons requires excavating the foundations of the transnational processes through which they became "criminal aliens."[19] But in the eyes of some U.S. lawmakers, the outcome was all that mattered. For them, it generally sufficed to say that these were "bad" foreigners who threatened "good" citizens and their tax dollars. And they needed to go.[20]

The figure of the Mariel "criminal" became a key resource for lawmakers who led a push during the 1980s to force the U.S. government to bear the costs of incarcerating noncitizens and integrate local and state criminal law enforcement systems with the federal immigration

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[17] Peter H. Schuck and John Williams, "Removing Criminal Aliens: The Pitfalls and Promises of Federalism," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 22, no. 2 (1999): 367–463.

[18] Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*, 127–35; Alexander M. Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal': The Mariel Boatlift, Miami, and U.S. Immigration Policy in the 1980s," *Anthurium* 17, no. 2 (2021): 4; Smita Ghosh and Mary Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States," *Law & Social Inquiry* 46, no. 4 (2021): 993–1021; Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 145–72. For an important analysis of the set of policies and practices that legal scholars later began to refer to as "crimmigration" – and an account that emphasizes the role of the Mariel boatlift in catalyzing this larger shift in U.S. immigration law enforcement – see Teresa A Miller, "Citizenship & Severity: Recent Immigration Reforms and the New Penology," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 17, no. 4 (2003): 611–66.

[19] In other words, this project is an effort "to go beyond the label to the contradictory social content which is mystifyingly reflected in it." See Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), vii.

[20] In an analysis focused on a related provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act – which directed the U.S. Attorney General to remove "an alien" convicted of a deportable offense "as expeditiously as possible" – Jonathan Xavier Inda centers a similar distinction between "the normal neoliberal citizen" and "the deviant anti-citizen – the criminal, the homeless, the welfare recipient, the undocumented immigrant." He also describes the "criminal alien" policy of the Barack Obama administration as having reinforced "a conspicuous division between good and bad immigrants." See Jonathan Xavier Inda, "Subject to Deportation: IRCA, 'Criminal Aliens', and the Policing of Immigration," *Migration Studies* 1, no. 3 (2013): 293, 304.

enforcement apparatus in unprecedented ways. In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration – drawing heavily from the research and recommendations of the Select Commission on Immigration Reform that had been established by Jimmy Carter – was aggressively implementing a set of policies designed to deter asylum seekers, including Haitians and a growing number of Salvadorans who were arriving in the United States.[21] Yet as federal administrative agencies deployed harsh measures meant to further constrict legal paths across the border, state leaders and members of Congress were voicing a distinct set of concerns about migrants already living in the country's interior. Some of the loudest and most consistent calls for action came from Florida.[22]

By the time the Immigration Reform and Control Act became law, scenes of Florida elected officials talking about the problem of Mariel Cuban "criminals" had become routine in Washington. In May of 1981, during a series of rare joint Congressional hearings, Senator Alan Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming, announced that he and his Democratic colleague in the House, Representative Romano Mazzoli from Kentucky, would soon begin developing a strategy for the major immigration reform legislation that eventually became IRCA.[23] On the second day

[21] Jonathan Simon, "Refugees in a Carceral Age: The Rebirth of Immigration Prisons in the United States," *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998): 577–607; María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018); Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*; Ghosh and Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States"; Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Gerson A. Rosales, "Yo Canto a Mi Pueblo: Salvadoran Migration, Activism, and Diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1900–1992" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2024).

[22] For a full analysis of the role of Florida lawmakers in this process and the significant influence of Dade County officials, specifically, see Stephens, "Making Migrants 'Criminal'"; Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail*, 145–72.

[23] *Final Report of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, Joint Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary and Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the House Committee on the*

of these hearings, Bob Graham, a Democrat and Governor of Florida, testified on behalf of the National Governors' Association. One of Graham's concerns was "a large rise in the crime rate" in Florida that he attributed to the Mariel boatlift. He insisted that "Castro's criminals" must be removed from his state and that the United States should not "subsidize fail[e]d foreign societies and their undesirables with a policy that declares in effect anyone who can land their feet on the sands of Florida's beaches has permanent license to run through Florida's streets." Graham argued, "Since the Federal Government was unwilling to enforce the immigration laws when illegal criminal aliens entered our country last summer, it must take responsibility for expelling those individuals now."[24]

Graham's phrasing of "illegal criminal aliens" fused the typical restrictionist language of "illegal" migration with a term that up to that point had been relatively obscure beyond law enforcement circles in the U.S. Southwest: "criminal aliens." When he spoke these words, moreover, he had a specific group of Mariel arrivals in mind. He acknowledged that most of the Cubans who had participated in the boatlift were "law-abiding refugees," but he emphasized the impact of the "many known criminals who illegally entered this country." He warned that the U.S. response to the boatlift was "unacceptable" because it signaled to "despots around the world that they can dump their refuse on the United States because we are unwilling or unable to enforce any controls over who enters our country." Graham also decried the situation as "unacceptable" because of the "unduly harsh burden" imposed on "the local communities and States that must pick up the slack for Federal inattentiveness."[25] In other words, when he went to Washington, Graham had in mind people like Rolando, who had spent a month living in "Tent

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Judiciary, 97th Cong., 1st Session, 5 May 1981 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), 12.

[24] *Final Report of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy*, 6 May 1981, 116-117.

[25] *Final Report of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy*, 6 May 1981, 117.

City" under Interstate-95 in Miami, and Omar, who almost certainly had been booked at the Dade County Jail after the first incident on his criminal record in the United States. Indeed, that same jail would have been at the very center of Graham's thinking, as he had recently been named in a lawsuit filed by the State of Florida with the aim of forcing the U.S. government to take custody of noncitizens being held at the institution and reimburse the state and county for the costs incurred to confine such individuals.[26]

Over the next several years, Graham and a bipartisan group of elected officials hailing primarily from Florida and New York pushed the figure of the "criminal alien" into the national spotlight.[27] The Mariel boatlift was pivotal both to their arguments and to the reception they received from other lawmakers. According to Dan Lungren, a Republican member of the U.S. House from Southern California, when unauthorized immigration had been "merely a Southwest experience" there had been "very little action in other parts of the country." Lungren lamented that, from his perspective in the Los Angeles area, "it took the Mariel boat crisis to make it a more nationalized issue."[28]

In 1982, the Governor of Florida returned to Washington for hearings on one of the early versions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. Graham urged Congress to add provisions to the bill that would require the Attorney General to revoke the parole of noncitizens convicted of a crime and reimburse localities when "the Attorney General uses his authority to release large

[26] See Chapter 7 of this study.

[27] Jenna Loyd and Alison Mountz usefully describe the process of converting an ostensible problem of "significant" numbers of incarcerated noncitizens in a handful of states to a "wholesale national crisis" as a "jump in scale." Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*, 131.

[28] *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1983, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and international Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives*, 98th Cong., 1st Session, 1 March 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 166. For a seminal work of legal scholarship that affirms the significance of the Mariel boatlift in this process, see Miller, "Citizenship & Severity: Recent Immigration Reforms and the New Penology," 626–28.

numbers of aliens into a community."[29] At another hearing a year later, Paula Hawkins, a Republican member of the U.S. Senate from Florida, decried the "[t]ent cities" that had been "hastily constructed under the shadow of highway overpasses" and the allegedly insufficient screening process that had been used to "distinguish legitimate refugees from the criminals, the mentally ill, and other outcasts that Castro chose to dump on the United States." Hawkins also alleged that "the Dade County crime rate" had "far outstripped the population increase" following the Mariel boatlift and, like Graham, advocated for the federal reimbursement of states and municipalities that had been compelled to manage the impact of large groups of new arrivals.[30]

In May of 1983, U.S. Senator Alfonse D'Amato, a Republican from New York, introduced an amendment to the version of the immigration reform bill that was then working its way through Congress. His proposed revision reflected an emerging effort to enable federal reimbursement of states "for the imprisonment of any alien who is convicted of a felony." The amendment was backed by sixteen Senators, including Paula Hawkins and her Democratic colleague from Florida, Lawton Chiles. D'Amato specifically mentioned the importance of reimbursing states such as New York and Florida for the cost of incarcerating "Marielito Cubans." He declared that Fidel Castro had "emptied his prisons" and allowed an "estimated 40,000 prisoners" to leave Cuba. He claimed without citing specific sources that New York City had established that "within a 15-month period, 56 murders were committed by Marielito

[29] *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1982, Joint Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, and Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate*, 97th Cong., 2nd Session, 1 April 1982 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 106.

[30] *Immigration Reform and Control Act, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate*, 98th Cong., 1st Session, February 24, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 9-10.

Cubans" and that the perpetrators in all cases were "people who were former prisoners."[31] At the end of his remarks, D'Amato yielded some of his time for Hawkins to speak. She likewise emphasized the supposedly "large number of violent and dangerous individuals" who had arrived in the United States via the Mariel boatlift. Hawkins cited a report issued by a Dade County grand jury a year earlier, which she claimed suggested that there were "three times more Cuban entrants in Dade County jails than one would expect based on countywide demographics." Chiles followed Hawkins on the Senate floor and alleged that largely because of the "Cuban criminals" forced onto boats by "Fidel Castro," Miami had been "dubbed the crime capital of the United States" and that local "[l]aw enforcement costs skyrocketed."[32]

Members of both the Senate and the House ensured that the revisions introduced by D'Amato in 1983 made it into the final version of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The original Senate amendment had been approved despite the opposition of Alan Simpson, the bill's sponsor in the chamber, who described the data cited by D'Amato as "sketchy," objected to the "sweeping" scope of the proposed changes, and protested that "the first time we ever heard of this issue was 2 weeks ago."[33] A year later, New York Representatives Chuck Schumer and Mario Biaggi, both Democrats, advanced a similar amendment in the House. Echoing his Senate colleague, Biaggi argued that "most of these offenders come from the ranks of the so-called Cuban boat flotilla people." He claimed that upwards of 30,000 Mariel arrivals had been "released from prison" and cited the same statistic of unknown provenance shared by D'Amato, which purported to show that "Marielito Cubans" had been responsible for 56 murders over a period of just 15 months in New York City alone.[34]

[31] 98 Cong. Rec. 12821-22 (1983).
[32] 98 Cong. Rec. 12824 (1983).
[33] 98 Cong. Rec. 12825, 12840-41 (1983).
[34] 98 Cong. Rec. 17271-72 (1984).

The bill failed to get through Congress in 1984, but a revised version introduced in the House at the end of 1985 included a new section with provisions to reimburse states for costs associated with incarcerating "any illegal alien" and Cubans who had been "allowed by the Attorney General to come to the United States in 1980."[35] These elements of the bill survived deliberations in the House despite repeated objections by the Reagan administration on the grounds that such expenses "should remain a State and local responsibility."[36] When the final bill came out of conference committee in the fall of 1986, the phrase "Cuban national" had been replaced with "Marielito Cubans convicted of a felony." While the logic behind the inclusion of this pejorative moniker for Mariel arrivals may not have been articulated explicitly in legislative records, years of comments by a bipartisan group of lawmakers from Florida and New York strongly suggest that they emphasized the supposedly unique criminality of this group to defeat opposition to calls for the federal government to reimburse states and localities for the cost of incarcerating migrants. They sought to show, in the words of D'Amato, that "[m]any of these [noncitizens], the Marielitos in particular, are the worst of criminals."[37]

In the years that followed, memories of Mariel continued to reverberate in both Cuba and the United States In the wake of prison uprisings led by Mariel Cubans in Atlanta, Georgia; Oakdale, Louisiana; and Talladega, Alabama, the U.S. and Cuban governments implemented a renewed repatriation agreement that paved the way for the deportation of some of the Mariel

[35] Immigration Control and Legalization Amendments Act of 1985, H.R. 3810, 99th Cong., Sec. 501 (1985).

[36] *Immigration Control and Legalization Amendments, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives*, 99th Cong., 1st Session, September 9, 1985 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986), 5 (testimony of Edwin Meese, III, U.S. Attorney General). Also see comments from John R. Bolton, Assistant Attorney General, to Peter W. Rodino, Jr., in Immigration Control and Legalization Amendments Act of 1986, Report together with Additional and Dissenting Views to accompany H.R. 3810, 99th Cong., 16 July 1986, 125-26.

[37] 99 Cong. Rec. 23833 (1985).

Cubans who had been detained indefinitely in the United States. Multiple presidential administrations led by members of both major U.S. political parties subsequently oversaw the gradual deportation of some 2,000 boatlift arrivals back to Cuba.[38]

The Cuban government has never fully reckoned with the ways it encouraged Cubans to turn on their fellow citizens during the Mariel boatlift, nor has it publicly acknowledged the extent to which it banished tens of thousands of people from the country in 1980.[39] In a decision generally regarded as an effort to correct for some of the excessively harsh provisions of the 1979 Cuban Criminal Code (Código Penal), the revolutionary government revised this set of statutes just eight years later, in 1987. The new Criminal Code reduced some the more severe sanctions that had been prescribed for so-called common crimes and narrowed the categories of offenses to which the death penalty could be applied.[40] Despite this apparent moderation of the government's crime policy, when Mariel Cubans were forcibly returned to the island, law enforcement officials sent some of them to prison once again.[41] Back in their home country, deported Mariel Cubans became known as "*los excluibles*" – "the excludables." The word was no doubt derived from a direct translation of the technical term used to describe their legal status

[38] This reflects the number of Mariel Cubans deported as of 2016. The people in this group had been included on a U.S. list of "excludable" Cubans whose forcible return to the island had been approved by the Cuban government in 1984. Elliott Young, *Forever Prisoners: How the United States Made the World's Largest Immigrant Detention System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 157; Shull, *Detention Empire*, 237–38.

[39] For an analysis of efforts by Cubans themselves to confront the impact of the boatlift through theatre, see Mariel Martínez Alvarez, "Actos en común: interrupciones y comunidades en el teatro cubano y cubanoamericano (1970-2020)" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2023), Chapter 3. For a documentary about Mariel produced by Cuban filmmakers on the island, see *Sueños al pairo*, directed by José Luis Aparicio and Fernando Fraguela (Havana: Estudios ST Producciones Audiovisuales and Juan Primito Productions, 2021).

[40] Michael Bogdan, "Thirty Years of Cuban Revolutionary Law," *Review of Socialist Law* 15, no. 1 (1989): 330–31; Raúl Gómez Treto, "Thirty Years of Cuban Revolutionary Penal Law," *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 2 (1991): 118–20.

[41] Mimi Whitefield, "Ex-Detainees, Back in Cuba, Dream of Returning to U.S.," *Miami Herald*, 15 September 1991, 1A, 4A.

in the United States. In Spanish, however, "*excluible*" is often used to denote something that is unnecessary and dispensable. Evidence collected by reporters through interviews with some in this group suggests that to be identified as an "*excluible*" in Cuba was to be blacklisted for many kinds of government jobs and subjected to targeted and persistent police surveillance. As one of these individuals put it after he was deported in 1991, "The eyes are always on you. The police are everywhere."[42]

Several years later, amid a new round of mass migrations from Cuba and Haiti to the United States, the U.S. government adopted the policy that became known as "wet foot, dry foot." This new protocol, which dictated that Cubans intercepted at sea by U.S. authorities would be returned to the island, was designed to prevent "another 'Mariel'" and limit the scope of future Cuban migration.[43] Two of its architects were President Bill Clinton – who had been Governor of Arkansas when the "resettlement camp" for Mariel Cubans at Fort Chaffee became a political lightning rod – and Attorney General Janet Reno – who had been the Dade County State's Attorney during the Mariel boatlift and throughout the 1980s. Clinton and Reno also oversaw the enactment of two major pieces of legislation in 1996, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which are frequently credited by scholars with dramatically tightening the relationship between criminal and immigration law enforcement in the United States and ushering in massive increases in both migrant detention and deportation.[44]

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[42] Whitefield, "Ex-Detainees, Back in Cuba, Dream of Returning to U.S.," *Miami Herald*, 4A. Also see Chip Brantley and Andrew Beck Grace, "The Excludables," *White Lies*, Season 2, Episode 8, 16 March 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/02/06/1154909871/the-excludables.

[43] Philipp Brenner and Peter Kornbluh, "Clinton's Cuba Calculus," *NACLA Report on the Americas* XXIX, no. 2, 1995, 36.

[44] There is a vast body of legal and social science scholarship on this set of developments, though much of it describes it as a process that only began in the late 1980s. For some of the studies that inform

Yet one of the most obvious legacies of Mariel in contemporary U.S. politics can be found in potent and pervasive recollections of the boatlift as the time when the "criminals" came. Advocates of restrictive immigration policies have leveraged this memory consensus to advance their political agenda since the summer of 1980. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is an anti-immigration organization that was founded just a year before the Mariel boatlift by John Tanton, a pivotal figure often credited with rekindling the U.S. nativist movement. In 1980, FAIR lobbied for the Refugee Act as part of its effort to restrict future admissions to the United States.[45] One of FAIR's first opportunities to appear on a national media platform came when its executive director went on the *Today Show* to express opposition to the admission of Cubans from Mariel. The organization seized on negative reactions to the boatlift in South Florida to amplify its demands for halting immigration in general.[46] FAIR even created mass mailing templates for Florida residents to send the White House the following message: "Declare a ceiling on refugee admissions: Let Americans and the world know that we

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this project, see Simon, "Refugees in a Carceral Age"; Miller, "Citizenship & Severity: Recent Immigration Reforms and the New Penology"; Juliet Stumpf, "The Crimmigration Crisis: Immigrants, Crime, and Sovereign Power," *American University Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2006): 367–420; Dan Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jennifer M. Chacón, "Managing Migration through Crime," *Columbia Law Review Sidebar* 109 (2009): 135–48; Ana Aliverti, "Making People Criminal: The Role of the Criminal Law in Immigration Enforcement," *Theoretical Criminology* 16, no. 4 (2012): 417–34; Dowling and Inda, *Governing Immigration through Crime*; César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández, "Creating Crimmigration," *Brigham Young University Law Review*, no. 6 (2013): 1457–1515; Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Deported: Immigrant Policing, Disposable Labor, and Global Capitalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Patrisia Macías-Rojas, *From Deportation to Prison: The Politics of Immigration Enforcement in Post/Civil Rights America* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Leisy Abrego et al., "Making Immigrants into Criminals: Legal Processes of Criminalization in the Post-IIRIRA Era," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 3 (2017): 694–715; Loyd and Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases*; Ghosh and Hoopes, "Learning to Detain Asylum Seekers and the Growth of Mass Immigration Detention in the United States."

[45] Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 168–69, 176–77.

[46] Carly Goodman, "Unmaking the Nation of Immigrants: How John Tanton's Network of Organizations Transformed Policy and Politics," in *A Field Guide to White Supremacy*, ed. Kathleen Belew and Ramón A. Gutiérrez (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 209–11.

cannot absorb every person expelled by every dictator in the world."[47] In the 1980s and 1990s, John Tanton and his associates published exaggerated claims about the alleged crimes of Mariel Cubans.[48] The boatlift became a hobbyhorse for a range of white supremacist groups.[49] And in the twenty-first century, Mariel has remained a recurrent talking point among organizations that seek to reduce or stop migration to the United States from Latin America, and from much of the world outside of Europe.[50]

Organizations such as FAIR helped to shape the campaign rhetoric and policy positions of Donald Trump.[51] Indeed, Trump and members of his presidential administrations have repeatedly exploited memories of Mariel "criminals" to justify their efforts to restrict immigration and advance a program of mass deportation. On at least one occasion, Trump made this connection explicit. In 2015, he famously announced his presidential campaign with a speech in which he claimed without any evidence that Mexico was "sending people that have lots of problems" who were "bringing crime" to the United States. A few weeks later, he went on

[47] Federation for American Immigration Reform, "The Refugee Crisis: This is Your Day to Write the President about the Future of Florida," folder 3, series 5, box 1, Mirta Ojito Papers (CHC5281), Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

[48] See, for example, Richard D. Lamm and Gary Imhoff, *The Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America* (New York: Truman Talley Books, 1985), 67; John Tanton and Wayne Lutton, "Immigration and Criminality in the U.S.A.," *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* 18, no. 2 (1993): 223–24.

[49] Derrick Anderson and Samuel Taylor, "The Late Great City of Miami," *American Renaissance*, May 1994.

[50] The anti-immigration activists and researchers at the Center for Immigration Studies, the policy arm of the network of organizations founded by John Tanton, have continuously referred to the Mariel boatlift in their publications. A sampling of their website includes the following pieces, which draw explicit connections among Mariel Cubans, crime, and arguments to restrict migration: Mark Krikorian, "Mexico Isn't a Failed State – Yet: But we need to protect ourselves now," 24 March 2009; Dan Cadman, "Open Borders, Anyone?," 22 December 2015; Phillip Linderman, "Terminate Cuba's 20,000 Annual Quota of Migrants," 6 May 2022; Andrew R. Arthur, "Is Venezuela Sending Violent Criminals to the United States?," 15 March 2024. All pieces can be found at the website of the Center for Immigration Studies, https://cis.org.

[51] Goodman, "Unmaking the Nation of Immigrants: How John Tanton's Network of Organizations Transformed Policy and Politics," 203.

a radio program and doubled down on these remarks. He told the host, "And they're sending – if you remember, years ago, when Castro opened up his jails, his prisons, and he sent them all over to the United States…these were the many hardcore criminals he sent over." That, he alleged, was what Mexico was doing in the 2010s.[52] In 2018, Trump claimed that "criminals" were "mixed in" with Central Americans traveling towards the United States in a "migrant caravan."[53] In 2023 – amid conflicts over unhoused newcomers between Democrat-led cities and a Democratic presidential administration – Trump revived his obvious allusions to the Mariel boatlift in a set of claims that would become part of his stump speech in the 2024 presidential campaign. He alleged that unspecified Latin American countries were "emptying out their prisons, and they're emptying out their mental institutions and insane asylums into the U.S., and we're not a dumping ground."[54] Some of his allies began to adopt the same images, which were clearly drawn from media coverage and memories of Mariel.[55] At the start of Trump's second term, his Secretary of Homeland Security defended a decision to end Temporary Protected Status for hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans by arguing, without producing evidence, that

[52] Andrew Kaczynski, "Trump Says Mexican Immigrants Are Just Like "Hardcore Criminals" Castro Sent to U.S.," *BuzzFeed News*, 9 July 2015, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/andrewkaczynski/trump-says-mexican-immigrants-just-like-hardcore-criminals-c.

[53] Linda Qiu, "Trump's Evidence-Free Claims About the Migrant Caravan," *New York Times*, 22 October 2018.

[54] Tom Norton, "Fact Check: Trump Claims Patients from 'Insane Asylums' Emptied Into U.S.," 20 June 2023, *Newsweek*, https://www.newsweek.com/trump-bret-baier-fox-news-border-insane-asylum-claim-1807887.

[55] In fact, when asked to produce evidence for Trump's claims about people being released from mental institutions, the only documentation that his campaign shared was a *Washington Post* article from 1983 – about the Mariel boatlift. When CNN reached out to FAIR and the Center for Immigration Studies, leaders at both organizations mentioned the Mariel boatlift. Daniel Dale, "Fact check: Trump's own campaign can't find proof for his 'mental institutions' immigration story," *CNN*, 29 April 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/29/politics/fact-check-trump-mental-institutions-migrants-doctor/index.html.

Venezuela had "purposely emptied out their prisons, emptied out their mental health facilities and sent them to the United States of America."[56]

Politicians and activists who want to restrict or stop most migration to the United States have found the Mariel boatlift useful for advancing their aims, in part, because so many people across the political spectrum in the United States have remembered it in largely the way Donald Trump does. A 2017 *New York Times* article led with the statement that "long before Donald J. Trump uttered the term 'bad hombres'" to describe Latin American migrants, there had been Mariel Cubans with criminal records "who really did give some immigrants a bad name." The reporter went on to cite uncritically a law enforcement source who opined, "They were street urchins with bad intent."[57] The stories of people like Fernando, Andrés, Luis, Viviana, Rubén, Rolando, and Omar contain material that a wide range of observers interpreted as evidence that they were, in fact, "bad." This tendency has been useful to those who have sought to make the central "problem" of U.S. immigration policy that of the "criminal alien." Dominant memories of Mariel have been deployed by advocates of migration restriction and mass deportation to broaden the scope of this category so that it encompasses a vast group of people on the move within the Americas. The preceding pages reflect an attempt to remember differently.

[56] Greg Allen, "'Beyond betrayal:' Venezuelans in Florida are angry at Trump immigration policy," *NPR*, 4 February 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/02/04/nx-s1-5285470/venezuelans-florida-tps-immigration-trump.

[57] Frances Robles, "'Marielitos' Face Long-Delayed Reckoning: Expulsion to Cuba," *New York Times*, 14 January 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/us/cuba-us-migrants.html.

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