

The Cuban Community in Louisville

by Bob Douglas

New Immigrants to Kentucky

Increased foreign immigration is having a major impact on many cities, towns, and rural areas in the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, immigrants and their children comprised slightly over 50% of the nation's population increase. If children born in this decade to pre-1990 immigrants are also added, it amounts to a 70% increase.¹ In particular, it is the Hispanic population which has contributed much to this growth, increasing from 22 million in 1990 to 35.2 in 2000.² This new Hispanic immigration, however, has not been evenly distributed across the country. In particular, the South is a region where this increase is most noticeable. Seven of the top ten states recording the greatest percentage growth in their foreign-born Hispanic population between 1990-2000 were North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas, followed by Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky. As an example, during this decade the foreign-born Hispanic population in Kentucky increased by 496 percent.³ This research will specifically focus on one Hispanic cohort and one Kentucky city, namely the Cuban population who have moved to Louisville. The goal of this study is to describe three types of Cuban immigrants, their immigration process, and some of their consequent occupational and residential spaces in the city.

New Immigrants to Louisville

Since Louisville is the largest city in Kentucky, it might be expected that it would have experienced a substantial increase in new immigrants. This has indeed been the case. Prior to 1990, Louisville was not a major destination for foreign-born immigrants. This changed between 1990 and 1998. During this time period the Immigration and Naturalization Service reported that the net foreign-born immigration to the Louisville Metropolitan Area was 7,073, an increase of about 60 percent.⁴ In a study of fourteen similar size cities, only Nashville, Tennessee and Greensboro, North Carolina had a greater increase during this time period.⁵ Between 2000-2004, Louisville's foreign-born population grew even larger, a 93 percent increase, compared to 10 percent nationally.⁶ In addition to its growth, the composition of Louisville's immigrants has been changing. In 1990 the countries of Germany, United Kingdom, Vietnam, Canada, Korea, and India contributed to the greatest number of the area's foreign-born population. The new immigrants between 1990-1998, apart from Vietnam, show a change

in the magnitude of those countries’ foreign-born arrivals. During this time period, the immigrants from Germany declined from 1,535 to 129, the United Kingdom from 985-200, Canada from 754-306, Korea from 714 to 180, and India from 649-385. On the other hand, arrivals from countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina first appeared and Cuba’s contribution to Louisville’s ethnic mix made its first appearance.⁷

Cuban Immigrants to Louisville

Although the Cuban-born population comprises only a small part of the new immigration to Louisville, their numbers have been growing from 278 in 2002 to 450 in 2008, with a high of 575 in 2004. (See Table I.) It is now estimated that there are over 6000 Cubans living in the metro area.

TABLE I

CUBANS IN LOUISVILLE

Year	Number
2002	278
2003	231
2004	575
2005	463
2006	515
2007	506
2008	450

SOURCE: Kentucky Office for Refugees, Catholic Charities, 1177 E. Broadway, Louisville, KY 40204

Types of Cuban Immigrants to Louisville

For many Cubans, immigration to Louisville began in the Holguin Province of eastern Cuba. Holguin is the second most populated area in the country, with about 300 people per square mile. The capital city of Holguin, as of 2000, had approximately 245,000 people. The province is strongly tied to the production of sugar cane, with much of that industry’s processing equipment manufactured there. The port of Moa also has a large cobalt plant and is a leading exporter of nickel. Within the last 10 years or so tourism and eco-tourism projects have been started. The province has 50 beaches with hotels and more planned. Yet, even with this development, there is much poverty; thus, a goal of many people is to improve their lives by immigrating to the United States.

There are three ways by which this can be accomplished. First, there are those who immigrate as refugees. International law defines a refugee as someone who leaves his/her country because of the real or potential threat of persecution based on his/her ethnic group, political views, or religious beliefs. From 1975 through 2008, the United States resettled roughly 2,779,000 refugees.⁸ These immigrants have come from such war-torn countries as Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Approximately 15 percent of Louisville’s new immigrants are refugees. Approximately 80 languages are spoken in the city’s schools, and in the Americana Apartments, an initial home for many immigrants—families come from 42 countries. However, refugee status comprises the fewest number of Cuban immigrants to Louisville.

Second, there are those immigrants who come via the Cuban Entrant Lottery Program. Between 1986 and 1996 the United States Congress took measures to increase foreign immigration. Because the number of persons in Cuba qualifying for immigration visa status did not normally reach the agreed 20,000 maximum, the United States adopted a lottery system through which persons who did not qualify as refugees could seek entry into the United States. This lottery system is unique to Cuba.⁹ Winning the lottery, was another way to leave Cuba. Certain American cities, like Miami, served as so-called “gateway cities” for these Cuban immigrants. Many lottery winners stayed in Miami, but others chose to be resettled in other places. Louisville actively promoted itself as a resettlement city in this lottery program. The city touted the availability of jobs, affordable housing, good schools, and reliable and cheap public transportation. Many winners of the Lottery Program were attracted to Louisville by this positive publicity. There were, however, other reasons for choosing Louisville, as we shall see.

Finally, many Cubans also come to Louisville as “parolees,” based on the “wet foot/dry foot” policy. Those people who leave Cuba by boat but are caught at sea must be repatriated. But those who arrive on United States soil with a “dry foot” are automatically admitted. Many are now coming to Louisville from Texas via Mexico. In 2007, United States Customs and Border Protection processed more than 11,000 Cubans in the United States from Texas. It is suspected that most of the Cubans first came to Mexico by boat and then were smuggled into Texas.¹⁰

In summary, for the three types of Cuban immigrants to Louisville, most are “secondary migrants,” i.e., those who are either refugees, lottery winners, or “parolees”; in other words, those who have moved to Louisville after first being in another city, such as Miami, or in another state, such as Texas. Upon their arrival in Louisville, they are eligible to receive services from various resettlement agencies. In Kentucky, these include Catholic Charities and Kentucky Refugee Ministries. These services provide help in finding employment and schools or programs for learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Nevertheless, these same services are available in any resettlement city; so, why have many Cubans chosen Louisville as their second United States home?

Louisville as Destination

Of all the secondary migrants coming to Kentucky between 2002 and 2007, 88 percent have relocated to Louisville.¹¹ Why has this been the case? First, Louisville has had a good job market. Like many other cities, it is experiencing an aging population, many of whom are retiring. This, coupled with falling birth rates among the predominantly white population, has meant that the work force has shrunk. Major companies in the city, such as United Parcel Service and General Electric, have shown a need for more employees in their work force. The new immigrants have helped to fulfill this need.¹²

Second, the city’s political leadership has worked aggressively to attract new immigrants. The Mayor’s Office for International Affairs was established in 1999 with the goal of supporting and promoting a vibrant international community. It has honored local agencies that have helped with this goal. The city’s Free Public Library was honored in 2004 for immigrant outreach programs. In 2005, Louisville’s Family Health Centers were recognized for addressing the social and cultural needs of the international community. And finally, Jefferson County, Louisville’s principal metro county, offers free ESL classes through its public schools adult education program.¹³ “It’s not that the city has a ‘let’s go and find immigrants approach,’” says Randy Capps a senior research associate for the Urban Institute, “but it hopes that by being a welcoming place, more immigrants will want to settle here.”¹⁴

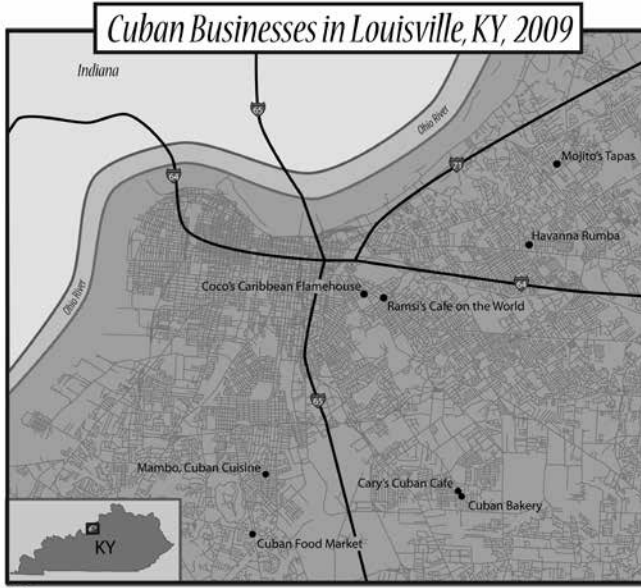
In addition, a conclusion of historical settlement geography is that migrants do not make locational destination decisions in a vacuum. Usually, some form of communication has been established between someone, usually a family member, relative, or friend who has already moved to a place with someone else who is considering a move. In the old Swedish settlement areas in Minnesota, the so-called, "America Letters," were the means by which earlier immigrants informed others back in Sweden of the opportunities and attractions of following them to Minnesota. Today, the means of communication among immigrants and prospective immigrants has changed from letters to cell phones, but the results are the same. For example, the Nuer refugee community in Mankato, Minnesota have largely transplanted their small African village of origin in the Sudan to their new home via multiple phone calls to other Nuer refugees in the United States. Over time, these former Nuer villagers have come together once more to form a new American community.¹⁵

It would appear that this informational process has also been at work among the Cubans in Louisville. The Havana Rumba restaurant, owned by Marcos Lorenzo and Fernando Martinez, opened in 2004.¹⁶ It offers delicious, traditional Cuban fare, such as lechon asado, a marinated slow-roasted pork served with congri, a blend of black beans and rice sautéed together with yucca. The place has been so successful that the two owners have opened another restaurant. At one time, though, just finding a job in Louisville, let alone opening a business, did not seem likely. Martinez' mother had first immigrated to San Diego, California, and her son followed later. Not comfortable in California, a friend told him he should try Louisville. He immigrated to the city in 2000. His brother-in-law and future business partner, Marcos Lorenzo, joined him in 2004.¹⁷ The rest as they say is history. Once in Louisville, they have encouraged friends and relatives to come here as well, helping them in the hunt for housing and jobs. In turn, these new arrivals later tell others in Miami and elsewhere; thus, over time a so-called chain of Cuban migrants to the city has been established.

Cultural Preservation

Sergio Vitier, who with his family lives in Louisville, stated, "Cubans like to preserve their culture. If you live in Miami, you speak Spanish, even if you were born in Miami."¹⁸ In Louisville, there are visible signs of this cultural preservation. As the map shows, as of 2009, there were eight Cuban businesses in the city with six being restaurants, such as Havana Rumba. (See attached map.) There is also a Cuban Bakery and a Cuban Food Market. They have no community center or collective organization in the city as do some other ethnic groups, so many of these business establishments become social establishments as well. A dance hall and St. Rita's Catholic Church (where the mass is conducted in Spanish) also serve as major social/cultural centers. It is also important for Cuban families to preserve their culture through the maintenance and use of the Spanish language. Parents feel this is especially important for their children. For example, schools like Highland and Hawthorne offer bi-lingual classes in English and Spanish which is appealing to many parents.¹⁹

As the map shows, businesses that cater to the Cuban population are dispersed within the city. This scattered distribution mirrors the residential distribution of Cubans in the metro area as well. That is, unlike many ethnic groups in American cities who tend to live in distinct areas or neighborhoods, the Cuban population in Louisville is spatially dispersed. It has been a long-standing finding of research in historical settlement geography that immigrants form ethnic enclaves within cities. New immigrants, such as the Somalis and Sudanese continue to exhibit this spatial form.²⁰ Again, this is not the



Map by Bob Douglas

case with the Cubans. Unlike the Somalis, most of the Cubans coming to Louisville are not refugees. Because of a civil war that was particularly devastating in the 1990s, thousands of Somalis had to flee their country. One tribe in particular, the Bantu, experienced widespread killing and torture before fleeing to refugee camps in Kenya. Beginning in 2003, the United States agreed to resettle about 13,500 Bantus in selected United States cities.

In 2003 and 2004, the first wave of Bantus began coming to Louisville through this resettlement program.²¹ The tendency of these refugees to be resettled in specific cities often results in a clustering of them in particular areas or neighborhoods of subsidized housing in those cities. Most Cubans in Louisville, as we have learned, came to the city not as refugees but in some other way, which may account for their more dispersed residences. It seems that once established in a job and earning good wages, Cubans tend to move to more well-established neighborhoods scattered throughout the city.²²

Conclusion

Louisville, Kentucky, like many American cities, has recently experienced an increase in foreign-born immigrants. This has partially occurred because of the active promotion of Louisville as a desirable city for immigrants to find a place they can call home. One such immigrant group is the Cubans. In coming to Louisville, they have demonstrated similar immigration processes as well as different aspects of residential choice. Settlement geography has shown that most immigrants follow in the footsteps, so to speak, of earlier migrants, i.e. moving as a chain from the same places of origin to the same places of destination. This tendency has been followed by many Cubans following other Cubans to Louisville. Their dominant form of initial entry into the United States has been unique, however. The Entrant Lottery Program has allowed many Cubans to enter the United States legally and has afforded them assistance in finding jobs and housing through agencies such as Catholic Charities. Also, it appears that unlike other ethnic groups who tend to live in neighborhood enclaves in resettlement cities, the residences of the Cuban population in Louisville appear to be dispersed throughout the city. What the Cuban community, as well as all of the immigrant groups have in common, however, is that they have filled many jobs in the labor market as well as established their own businesses and in so doing

have contributed to a remarkably diverse city. It will be of interest to see what, if any, changes in the United States government's policy toward Cuba and economic circumstances will impact future immigration to Louisville.

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