

2-1-1987

Haitian Refugees in South Florida, 1983-1986 (Dialogue #77)

Alejandro Portes

Alex Stepick

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd>

Recommended Citation

Portes, Alejandro and Stepick, Alex, "Haitian Refugees in South Florida, 1983-1986 (Dialogue #77)" (1987). *LACC Occasional papers series. Dialogues (1980 - 1994)*. Paper 27.
<http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd/27>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the LACC Publications Network at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LACC Occasional papers series. Dialogues (1980 - 1994) by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

HAITIAN REFUGEES
IN SOUTH FLORIDA, 1983-1986

Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick

Dialogue #77

February 1987

Published by the Latin American and Caribbean Center
Florida International University
Miami, Florida 33199

Editor: Mark B. Rosenberg

PREFACE

"Haitian Refugees in South Florida, 1983-1986" reports the findings from on-going longitudinal research being conducted by Dr. Alejandro Portes, Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University and Dr. Alex Stepick, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Florida International University.

As the report states, Haitians represent one of the most deprived groups to have arrived in the United States in recent years. This report examines their progress in adapting to life in the South Florida area. It follows from earlier research in 1980 and 1982 in which representative samplings of Haitian arrivals were re-interviewed. Funding for the research was provided by the National Science Foundation.

Comments concerning the findings presented herein or other information about the research should be directed to either Dr. Portes or Dr. Stepick.

Mark B. Rosenberg
Editor
Occasional Papers Series Dialogues

HAITIAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH FLORIDA, 1983-1986

INTRODUCTION

Between 1977 and 1981, fifty to seventy thousand Haitians arrived by boat in South Florida with the number peaking in 1980 during the Mariel Cuban boat-lift. Both flows gained national attention and gave rise to much public concern. Coming illegally, aboard overcrowded vessels, black Haitian immigrants became targets of widespread hostility and were regularly denied their claim for political asylum. Instead, many were deported and others were placed in the category of "Entrants, Status Pending," thus depriving them the most important federal benefit accorded to other refugees, a permanent legal status.

The high seas interdiction program initiated by the Reagan Administration reduced significantly the number of Haitian arrivals after 1981, but an unknown number continued to trickle in. After the years of high public attention in 1980-81, little has been heard from these immigrants and little is known about how those allowed to remain in the country have fared. The question is important because Haitians represent one of the most deprived foreign groups who have recently arrived on U.S. shores and because their early reception was one of the most adverse. Hence, it is by no means certain that they have managed to reach some form of positive adaptation to American society and that they have not lapsed into permanent marginalization and increasing social deviance.

To address these questions a three-year study was conducted by the Johns Hopkins University in collaboration with Florida International Univer-

sity. During the course of the study, representative samples of Haitians arriving between 1980 and 1982 and settling in Miami and Ft. Lauderdale were interviewed shortly after their arrival. This sample, totaling 400 cases, was followed over time and re-interviewed two years later to assess the extent and character of their adaptation to U.S. society. Results are generalizable to post-1980 Haitian refugees in their two principal areas of urban concentration in South Florida, Dade and Broward counties. The study was supported by a major grant from the National Science Foundation. The principal investigator is Alejandro Portes of the Sociology Department at Johns Hopkins and his co-investigator is Alex Stepick of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Florida International. A summary of the study's principal findings is presented below.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Recent Haitian refugees are young with a median age of 29. Females outnumber males in our sample (59% to 41%) and almost half of all respondents were single at arrival. Two-thirds were born in rural places in Haiti although many migrated to cities subsequently, especially to Port-au-Prince. Almost everyone came to the U.S. by boat (14% did so by airplane), but two-fifths had intermediate stops in Cuba or the Bahamas.

The principal demographic change between the time of arrival and 1985-86 (the time of the final interview) is the rapid shift in marital status and the equally rapid increase in number of children. Only one-third (34.5%) maintained the same marital status as when they arrived; the most significant change being a rapid drop in the number of singles. In part as

a result of this increase in nuptiality, a remarkable 61 percent had at least one additional child in the two year interval between interviews. Hence, the average number of children per immigrant increased from 2.6 in 1983 to 3.1 in 1985-86.

Paralleling changes in their family situation these refugees also experienced rapid mobility in space. Again, only one-third stayed put at the addresses where we had found them originally; the remainder moved at least once and 24 percent did so twice or more, although most of these residential moves were within the same urban area. Geographical mobility did not alter, however, the ethnic composition of the neighborhoods where they live. Two-thirds (66%) of our respondents lived in predominantly Haitian neighborhoods after arrival, in 1985-86, the proportion was exactly the same. In the latter years, the number living in predominantly Anglo areas represented only 6 percent and those in Latin neighborhoods, 7 percent.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND INCOME

On the whole, recent Haitian immigrants came from very modest educational backgrounds. They had completed only an average of 4-6 years of formal education prior to arrival and less than 5 percent had graduated from high school. Although extremely low by U.S. standards, these levels of education still are higher than those of the Haitian adult population, 80 percent of which is estimated to be illiterate.

Immigrants tend to be positively self-selected in terms of ambition and drive; and, Haitians are no exception. For example, Haitian enrollment in

formal education courses in the U.S. compensates to a significant extent for their weak educational backgrounds. Over 50 percent of the sample enrolled in education courses during the first 2-3 years of U.S. residence and they completed, on average, 7 months of education. During the last two years, a similar proportion enrolled in formal courses lasting a median of 8 months.

Whereas during the earlier period close to 90 percent of the courses were exclusively for English improvement, during the last two years they had diversified considerably to include a number of voc-tech (24%) and high school and college courses (14%). The relative number of Haitians going to school in the United States is higher than among other recent immigrant minorities. It is thus clear that many Haitian refugees regard the educational system as the key to their advancement in their new country.

In 1983, the employment situation of Haitians in South Florida was most discouraging. Sixty-seven percent were jobless, almost all of them involuntarily. Practically no one had become self-employed (a common route for economic progress among immigrants) and only 2 percent held white-collar or professional jobs, although 21 percent had attained this occupational level in Haiti. Among those who had found some sort of employment, median earnings were \$520 per month or approximately \$3.09 per hour. Reflecting this economic hardship, close to 50 percent have had to rely on food stamps or other forms of public or private assistance; less than 3 percent owned their homes while 30 percent lived in shared rented quarters.

Two years later, the situation had improved considerably. Joblessness dropped by half to 33 percent and involuntary unemployment by almost two-thirds to 24 percent. Almost one-tenth (9.1%) had become self-employed during this period, most running small businesses from their homes. Median earnings increased to \$680 per month and the proportion receiving food

stamps or other welfare support dropped below 25 percent. The number of homeowners doubled and those living in shared rented rooms dropped by 10 percent.

Despite these gains, the employment situation of Haitian refugees is still heavily disadvantaged in comparison with the rest of the South Florida labor force as well as the pre-1980 U.S. Haitian population. For example, 1985-86 unemployment in this sample triples the figure among the Miami economically active population and doubles that reported by the Census for Haitians nationwide in 1980. Another indicator of this precarious economic situation is that the average hourly wage is only \$3.96 among Haitian refugees who found some form of paid employment and that 11 percent receive less than the legal minimum.

During the two year lapse between interviews, the number in white collar (sales and clerical) occupations increased rapidly to 13 percent of the gainfully employed. However, the most typical jobs in which Haitian refugees were found in 1985-86 were basically the same as two years earlier: kitchen helpers (8%), maids (12%), janitors (9%), gardeners (6%), and seamstresses (9%). Their places of employment were overwhelmingly apparel and furniture factories, restaurants, and hotels where they were hired to perform the most menial tasks.

In contrast with other recent groups and, in particular Cubans, Haitian refugees are seldom employed by their compatriots. For example, in a large sample of Mariel refugees interviewed simultaneously with this study, we found that 45% of all wage earners were employed by other Cubans in 1985-86. In contrast, less than 1 percent of our Haitian respondents were employed by other Haitians in 1983; two years later, the figure remained unchanged. The lack of an ethnic economy which can provide jobs for recent arrivals and

support their subsequent entrepreneurial initiatives represents a major handicap for Haitian refugees. It accounts, to a large extent, for the major differences found in employment and economic situation between post-1980 Cuban and Haitian arrivals after five years of U.S. residence.

KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

About one-fourth of Haitians in our sample reported speaking English well or very well in 1985-86. The figure represents a marginal increase over that reported in 1983 and corresponds fairly well to results of an objective knowledge-of-English test administered during the same final survey. At the other extreme, more than half speak little or no English, relying almost exclusively on Haitian Creole.

Lack of knowledge of English contributes and is, in turn, reinforced by the pattern of social relations of Haitians. Three-fourths (78%) did not have a single Anglo-American friend and only a third reported at least some opportunity to interact socially with Anglos. More significant is that the same pattern of social isolation also applies to Black-Americans with whom Haitians share a common race and, frequently, the same urban neighborhoods. Fully 77 percent of our respondents did not have a single Black-American friend. At the other extreme, almost the entire sample (97%) reported that their socializing took place mostly with other Haitians. Although their spouses tended to venture beyond the ethnic circle to a somewhat greater extent, 83 percent still reported primary social relations with their co-nationals.

Recent Haitian refugees thus form part of a highly self-enclosed ethnic community where lack of English and absence of close friendships with the native-born reinforce each other. As other immigrant groups before them, they are thrown onto their own resources for sociability and mutual support. The absence of an ethnic economy forces all but a few to seek employment outside of the Little Haiti areas of Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. Indeed, among the gainfully employed, 61 percent work for Anglos and the rest do so for Blacks (20%) or Cubans (17%). These outside economic relations do not extend, however, to the Haitians' private lives: once the workday is finished, they head back to their own segregated neighborhoods. Although for many maintenance of social relations exclusively with the ethnic community may be a matter of personal preference, there is no doubt that poor English and prejudice against Haitians also play a significant role. These effects are poignantly reflected in the Haitians' perceptions of outsiders' opinions about their own group.

OPINIONS AND PLANS

Most recent Haitian refugees believe that all major ethnic groups in South Florida discriminate against them. Moreover, these perceptions seem to be on the rise. In 1983, 62 percent of our respondents believed that Anglo-Americans discriminate against Haitians and 67 percent reported that Anglos regard themselves as superior; two years later, the figures had increased to 67 and 94 percent, respectively. Hence, by 1986, almost the entire sample perceived at least some form of Anglo discrimination, despite the much lower

number who admitted to having suffered directly one or more such experiences (18%).

Things are not much better with respect to other groups. American blacks were reported to discriminate against Haitians by 53 percent of our respondents in 1985, the number increasing by almost twenty points (to 72%) in 1986. In the later year, a still higher proportion (77%) indicated that Cubans also discriminate against Haitians. Thus, the objective economic and social reality of Haitians in South Florida is subjectively translated into widespread perceptions of inferiority and subordination. The majority regard themselves as members of a discriminated group, although a much lower number report having suffered such experiences themselves.

A consistent finding in past surveys of immigrant groups is the high number who voice satisfaction with their current lives in the United States and the tendency of this figure to increase over time. The same is true even of Mariel refugees, studied in conjunction with the Haitians. In 1985-86, over four-fifths (85%) of Mariel Cubans declared themselves satisfied with their present lives. In contrast, only 32 percent of the Haitians did so. More significant, this last figure represents a 5 percent decline from the number expressing at least some satisfaction two years earlier. Other results point in the same direction: almost half of the Haitian sample believed that there is discrimination in economic opportunities in the United States and a similar number (47%) complain that the American way of life weakens the family; less than a fourth indicated satisfaction with their present economic situation.

GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES

Within this general landscape, there are some notable differences between Haitian refugees settling in Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. The most important are summarized in Table 1. Refugees settling in Miami's Little Haiti are in a somewhat better occupational and economic situation. This is reflected in their higher levels of white-collar and self-employment and their somewhat higher earnings. Despite these advantages, Haitians in Miami tend to rely more frequently and for larger periods on the Food Stamp Program and other forms of welfare assistance than those in Ft. Lauderdale.

There are also significant differences in U.S. acquired education. Refugees in Miami have completed many more months of formal education on the average and they have enrolled more frequently in courses other than formal English instruction (primarily voc-tech and high school). Most of the remaining differences are a consequence of the respective size of the Haitian communities and the ethnic composition of the areas where these refugees live. In both Miami and Ft. Lauderdale, the Little Haiti area is contiguous to black neighborhoods. However, in Ft. Lauderdale, the Haitian community is much smaller, which accounts for the higher proportion there who report that they live in a predominantly black neighborhood.

The relative concentration of Cubans and other Latins in Miami is reflected in the employment figures: Ft. Lauderdale respondents work much more frequently alongside Anglos than Latins; the pattern is reversed among Haitians in Miami. Similarly, those in Ft. Lauderdale are three times less likely to be employed in Latin firms, but twelve times more likely to have found jobs in black-owned enterprises in comparison with Miami Haitians. Clearly, the level of economic and residential integration with the neigh-

boring black community is greater in the smaller of the two Haitian concentrations, although this trend is not translated into closer social relationships: As shown in the table, fewer Ft. Lauderdale Haitians have established at least one Black American friendship than their counterparts in Miami.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite significant economic progress, the early adaptation experience of Haitian refugees in South Florida has been a harsh one. They lag behind every other major group in the region and behind their own compatriots who arrived earlier. Their condition has led to widespread perceptions of discrimination among this group and to lower levels of subjective satisfaction than those normative among other immigrant minorities. This unenviable situation does not mean, however, that Haitians have just abandoned the struggle. Fully 86 percent would come to the United States if they had to make the choice again and over two thirds (69%) intend to become U.S. citizens. Added to their efforts at acquiring additional education and their slow but significant occupational advancement, these figures again highlight the positive self-selection of these refugees and their commitment to carve a new life in their adopted country.

It is unlikely that Haitians will become a major force, economically or politically in South Florida, but it is possible that they can evolve into a stable and self-reliant community. In spite of the changes in the Haitian government in 1986, most Haitians in South Florida will remain here. Perhaps the most important step in promoting their successful integration into

U.S. society is already underway -- granting Haitians a permanent legal status as provided in the Immigration Reform Act of 1986. The tenuous status of these refugees has led many to be treated as if they were illegal aliens and thus to be discriminated against and exploited.

Beyond a permanent legal status, Haitians also need to acquire new skills. There is an urgent need for outside support to help the budding entrepreneurial initiative of recent arrivals and provide them with easy access to ESL courses and vocational-technical training. Federal cuts in funding for these programs over the past few years have undoubtedly deterred Haitians' efforts to improve themselves. Finally, there is a need to combat widespread prejudice in the labor market and in the society at large. Churches have an important role to play since most Haitian refugees are practicing members of the Catholic Church or of various Protestant denominations. Local, state, and federal agencies must also take a more active stance in support of this group's efforts. The alternative--marginalization and permanent confinement into an enlarged, criminal-prone urban ghetto--is one too tragic to contemplate.

Table 1. Selected Economic and Social Characteristics of Recent Haitian Refugees in South Florida, 1985-86

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Miami</u>	<u>Ft. Lauderdale</u>	<u>Total</u>
Percent children born between 1983-86	67.6	41.3	61.2
Percent White Collar	15.0	5.7	13.0
Percent Self-Employed ¹	11.3	2.8	9.1
Percent Anglo co-workers ²	20.4	58.8	30.5
Percent Latin co-workers ²	35.5	2.9	26.6
Percent employed in Black firms ²	5.6	57.9	20.2
Percent employed in Latin firms ²	20.0	7.1	16.8
Mean monthly earnings ¹	\$625	598	617
Percent who speak English	25.2	17.6	23.2
Average months of U.S. education, 1983-86	6.9	2.5	5.8
Percent living in Haitian neighborhood	68.8	58.8	66.5
Percent living in Black neighborhood	13.7	29.4	17.5
Percent at least one Black friend	25.0	15.7	23.1

continued...

Table 1. continued

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Miami</u>	<u>Ft. Lauderdale</u>	<u>Total</u>
Percent currently receiving food stamps	28.5	2.0	22.1
Average months in food stamps program	9.9	2.2	8.0
Percent receiving other welfare assistance	20.9	5.9	17.1
Average months of assistance	6.4	1.7	5.5
Percent who believe "Anglos discriminate against Haitians."	69.2	58.8	66.8

¹ Gainfully employed residents only.

² Wage-earners only.