

## *Adjustment and Assimilation The Cuban Refugee Experience<sup>†</sup>*

by Michael G. Wenk\*

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro achieved power in Cuba. By mid-year 1961, he openly declared that he was of a Marxist-Leninist political orientation and that his regime would follow this philosophy. This revolutionary turn of events started an unprecedented exodus of refugees.<sup>1</sup> The first persons seeking to preserve their traditional way of life abroad were the upper middle-class and the middle-class Cuban families.

There had been a previous, but limited, exodus of ex-government, banking and industrial officials. The core of Cuba's intelligencia and middle class, however, had initially remained, and had decided not to anticipate the inevitable conclusion that Cuba was to be Communist. By 1961, when the inevitable had become a fact, the exodus began on a

---

<sup>†</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Philip Soskis, Executive Director of the New York Association for New Americans, Inc., an agency of the United Jewish Appeal, whose guidance and whose excellent study titled "The Adjustment of Hungarian Refugees in New York" served both as a model and as an enormous aid in the difficult task of compiling the required information for this study. I am also grateful to Dr. Madeline Engel, Department of Sociology, Lehman College, C.U.N.Y.; Mr. Paul F. Lane, Staff Assistant and Information Officer, Cuban Refugee Program, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare; and Miss Linda Sutherland, formerly Research Assistant of the President's Select Commission on Western Hemisphere Immigration. Through their technical and editorial assistance, this survey became possible.

1. For the consequences of revolutions in terms of refugees, see *The World Refugee Report*, 1968, published by the United States Committee for Refugees and introduced into Congressional Record by Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Its subtitle states 15,594,090 are ". . . homeless-victims of war, intolerance and social unrest." In the remarks of Hon. Edward M. Kennedy, "The World Refugee Report, 1968," *Congressional Record*, Vol. 114, No. 84, p. E4312.

---

\* Michael G. Wenk is Director of Research and Information Division, Department of Immigration, U.S.C.C., Washington, D.C.

large scale. The wave of Cuban refugees moved mainly toward the U.S. mainland, crested sometime in the Fall of 1965, and to this day it continues at an enormous pace. This mass movement of people is, to both the Cuban and the American, living testimony to the words of President Johnson when he stated, "those who seek refuge here in America will find it"<sup>2</sup> and to the memorable accord titled the "Memorandum of Understanding."<sup>3</sup>

#### THE SURVEY IN GENERAL

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand how the Cuban people who had chosen to leave homeland, possessions, at times families, have started a new life in this country. More precisely, this survey will investigate individuals within the Cuban Community of the United States. Who are they? What is their background? Their education? Their family composition? How do they view and accept their new environment? How have they adapted or neglected to adapt to their new surroundings? And finally, how have they assimilated or failed to assimilate in the new culture?

To answer these questions, which up to now seem to have been untested, we undertook a survey of 200 families representing 534 adults and 593 children (1127 total). Such a sampling, we felt was an adequate indicator aptly illustrating pertinent trends in the process of assimilation and adaptation peculiar to the Cuban Community in the United States.

Questionnaires containing 85 items were sent out to various families; families which were picked at random from our case files with proper geographic distribution being the only qualifying criteria. Needless to say, it was our intention, through such a geographic selection, to achieve a fair and nationwide representation.<sup>4</sup> The result of these questionnaires and the accompanying personal interview are the basis of our study.

2. Excerpt from a speech by President Lyndon B. Johnson while signing the 1965 Immigration Law at the Statue of Liberty, New York, October 3, 1965.

3. The "Memorandum of Understanding" was negotiated by the Swiss Embassy in Havana, which represents U.S. interests in Cuba, and the Cuban Foreign Ministry. The agreement's priorities are based on the desirability of reuniting immediate relatives of Cubans already in the United States: a) parents of unmarried children under the age of 21, b) spouses, c) unmarried children under the age of 21, d) brothers and sisters under the age of 21, e) a priority was included for other close relatives living in Cuba of persons now in the United States who reside in the same household as the immediate relatives. As cited in John F. Thomas, "Cuban Refugee in the United States," *International Migration Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring 1967, p. 46.

4. For an illustration of the geographical distribution of this survey indicating

## BACKGROUND OF SURVEY GROUP

From our own records we were able to tabulate a substantial amount of valuable background material. Essentially, it seemed evident to us from the very beginning that an investigation into the background of the survey participants, especially into the occupational and educational background, would largely tend to indicate well educated, professional, and skilled individuals.

Table 1  
OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES

|   | IN CUBA |       |       |       | IN UNITED STATES |       |       |       |
|---|---------|-------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | Men     | Women | Total | %     | Men              | Women | Total | %     |
| OCCUPTION                               |         |       |       |       |                  |       |       |       |
| Professional                            | 82      | 39    | 121   | 22.6  | 44               | 10    | 54    | 10.0  |
| Clerical, Sales and<br>Minor Managerial | 48      | 30    | 78    | 14.6  | 40               | 22    | 62    | 12.1  |
| Business and<br>Self-Employed           | 37      | 1     | 38    | 7.1   | 12               | 5     | 17    | 3.0   |
| Skilled and<br>Semi-Skilled             | 67      | 22    | 89    | 16.9  | 82               | 20    | 102   | 18.0  |
| Unskilled                               | 22      | 8     | 30    | 5.4   | 75               | 55    | 130   | 24.5  |
| Student                                 | 12      | 4     | 16    | 2.9   | 8                | 6     | 14    | 2.4   |
| Housewife                               |         | 139   | 139   | 26.1  |                  | 125   | 125   | 24.0  |
| Assisting Husband                       |         |       |       |       |                  |       |       |       |
| In Business                             |         | 3     | 3     | .5    |                  | 1     | 2     | .2    |
| Unemployed                              | 2       | 5     | 7     | 1.3   | 4                |       | 4     | .9    |
| Ill or Retired                          |         |       |       |       | 2                | 2     | 4     | .9    |
| No-Information                          | 9       | 4     | 13    | 2.6   | 12               | 9     | 21    | 4.0   |
| TOTALS                                  | 279     | 255   | 534   | 100.0 | 279              | 255   | 534   | 100.0 |

This assumption, we were confident, would be especially true in the occupational concentrations both in Cuba and, after resettlement, in the United States. It was not difficult to substantiate our assumption when the final results of the tabulations were reached. Approximately 60% of the test group had been of professional, business, skilled or semi-skilled background while in Cuba. 80% had attended or completed

the number of individual responses by state, see Table 6. For a general knowledge of major concentration of Cubans in the United States, see Table 7.

more than a mere elementary school education (See Table 2). Interesting is the fact that while the 60% figure applies to the occupational background in Cuba, the drop to approximately 40%, because of resettlement in the United States, within the same occupational categories (See Table 1), is not as dramatic as one may think. Indications are that the Cuban professional, business, skilled or semi-skilled individual, stifled at times by language, nevertheless has a strong tendency to his previous occupation or a derivative thereof. Such a gravitational pull to a previous or related occupation makes the 40% figure quite tenuous and subject to change. An example comes to mind here: Dr. M, a well-known surgeon in Cuba, entered the United States some time in the Fall of 1962. His initial employment upon resettlement was as janitor and general custodian of a local hospital (Occupational category—Unskilled). Within months, he became an X-Ray technician and within one year he became a male nurse (Occupational category—Semi-skilled). During this time he acquired a greater facility for the English language, and as a consequence was able to study part-time at the hospital's medical school.

Table 2  
GENERAL EDUCATION BACKGROUND IN CUBA

|  | Men   |        |       | Women |        |       | Percentage Total<br>Men and Women |        |
|--|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-----------------------------------|--------|
|  | Att.* | Comp.* | Total | Att.* | Comp.* | Total | Att.*                             | Comp.* |
| 1st-8th Grade<br>(Elementary)  | 7     | 47     | 54    | 22    | 71     | 98    | 5.4%                              | 22.1%  |
| 8th-12th Grade<br>(Bachillerato)   | 9     | 53     | 62    | 32    | 38     | 70    | 7.6%                              | 17.0%  |
| 12th-16th Grade<br>(College &<br>University<br>Advanced Degree<br>(Ph.D-M.D.,<br>Lawyer, etc.) | 25    | 50     | 75    | 14    | 19     | 33    | 7.3%                              | 12.9%  |
| 5  | 24    | 29     | 10    | 13    | 23     | 2.8%  | 6.9%                              |        |
| Technical (Train-<br>ing Degree)   | 23    | 25     | 48    | 13    | 2      | 15    | 6.7%                              | 5.1%   |
| SUB-TOTAL  | 69    | 199    | 268   | 91    | 143    | 234   | 29.8%                             | 64.0%  |
| No Information   |       |        | 11    |       |        | 21    |                                   | 6.2%   |
| TOTAL  |       |        | 279   |       |        | 255   |                                   |        |

\* Att. = Attended

Comp. = Completed

In the early part of 1967 he passed the required state medical boards. At the present time he is a fully accredited physician earning well in excess of \$20,000 per annum (Occupational category—Professional).

While Dr. M is somewhat of a dramatic example, his case clearly illustrates this natural gravitation of the Cuban refugee toward a related or derivative occupation, once in the United States. What is most interesting is the relatively large amount of success evident in such an endeavor. To be sure, there is a drop in the professional, skilled and business category in the U.S. figure; a 20% drop to be exact, and this drop, we find, is generally absorbed by the unskilled category (a comparative 20% increase in the unskilled category in the United States; 5.4% in Cuba vs. 24.4% in U.S.A.). Yet, if Dr. M were a valid indication, it would seem that the unskilled figure is subject to a great deal of fluctuation. It is quite evident that the occupational trend, once resettlement has occurred, is definitely upward toward the semi-skilled, skilled and professional level. In short, the desire for occupational improvement and the achievement of such seems to be a singular thrust, clearly evident in the Cuban refugee; and is a significant indication that the assimilation and adaptation process functions rather remarkably well within the Cuban Community.

Let us consider another factor. In studying the occupational tabulations illustrated by our survey we note the category of unemployment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that the nationwide, seasonal adjustment rate of unemployment in the United States, is currently 3.5% (May-June 1968). We call the attention of the reader to the unemployment figure for the Cuban refugee in the United States as indicated in our Table 1. Seasonally adjusted or otherwise, the unemployment rate according to our calculations is 0.9%—well below the national average. In summary, we conclude from our initial findings that the Cuban refugee is not only ambitious and continuously desirous of upgrading his position, but also that he is a very definite and productive asset to his community and to the nation in general.

#### ECONOMIC PROGRESS

The economic picture, which is an important thermometer for the adjustment process, also reflects a rather healthy adjustment cycle for the Cuban refugee family. Studying the gross family income structure, we realize that the average gross family income is within the \$6,000.00—\$8,000.00 (Per year—per family) range. Investigating the “general income” in more detail, we see that more than 20% of the families have a gross income in excess of \$9,000 to \$10,000 per year, 5%—

Table 3  
GROSS FAMILY INCOME IN THE UNITED STATES

| <i>Estimated<br/>Annual Income</i> | <i>Salaried<br/>Employees</i> | <i>Self-Employed<br/>Business—<br/>Including<br/>Physicians</i> | <i>Totals</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---------------|-------------------|
| under \$3,000                      | 16                            |   | 16            | 5.1%              |
| 3,000 - 5,000                      | 57                            |   | 57            | 19.0%             |
| 5,000 - 7,000                      | 74                            |   | 74            | 24.7%             |
| 7,000 - 9,000                      | 59                            |   | 59            | 19.7%             |
| 9,000 - 10,000                     | 20                            | 4   | 24            | 8.0%              |
| 10,000 - 12,000                    | 13                            | 2   | 15            | 5.0%              |
| 12,000 - 15,000                    | 8                             | 2   | 10            | 3.4%              |
| 15,000 - 17,000                    | 4                             |   | 4             | 1.4%              |
| 17,000 - 20,000                    | 5                             | 1   | 6             | 2.0%              |
| 20,000 and over                    | 4                             | 2   | 6             | 2.0%              |
| SUBTOTAL                           | 260                           | 11  | 271           | 90.3%             |
| No Information                     | 29                            |   | 29            | 9.7%              |
| TOTAL                              | 289                           | 11  | 300           | 100.0%            |

\$10,000 to \$12,000 per year, 3.4% \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year and over 5% in excess of \$15,000 per year. Only 5%, a fraction of whom were ill, retired or unemployed, had reported incomes under \$3,000.00.

We must mention here that gross family income generally consists of the salaries of a number of wage earners. Wives, sons, daughters—at times, all three—supplement the earnings of the head of the house. Their income is therefore, of necessity, considered within our income structure. It became evident, for example, that the housewife from Cuba, while primarily remaining a housewife in the United States, acquired, once resettlement had taken place, a dual role—housewife and wage earner. Furthermore—and interesting from a sociological point of view—newlywed Cuban women tend to place an even greater emphasis on the dual role, even to reversing the order of importance, A) wage earner, B) housewife. Many of the women interviewed, in fact, were quite pleased with this new emphasis and readily admitted that such a reversal of emphasis served to increase the family's standard of living and economic stability.

Of the 300 families, we found none on public assistance. One elder-

ly individual did express his desire to receive information on the availability of free medical care; he, however, was the only instance of direct reference to the public assistance that we investigated in our study. Generally, we conclude that this situation was due to the rather high cohesiveness of the Cuban family. It was evident that the elderly, the sick, or otherwise infirm were and remained readily acceptable wards of their children, cousins, aunts, uncles. This singular trait, if pursued further, also gives one some insight into the Cuban's economic progress as a whole. When questioned on where the greatest amount of aid was forthcoming, approximately 70% answered—"my family" or "my relatives helped me." Another 20% concluded that personal friends or friends of their relatives were the most helpful in securing employment for them. Some answered that cooperation from their local communities, re-settlement agencies, and various other related groups had been of assistance to them. Of the 300 families studied, 238 or 76% of the families arriving from Cuba had relatives already on the mainland. These were relatives from whom assistance was therefore readily available. In many cases those relatives had already been settled; they acted as sponsors and first and primary contacts with the new community surroundings.

Interesting to note is the fact that the gravitation to certain key cities, which we found quite evident, seemed due to pre-established occupational preferences and family associations. The re-location pattern, it appears, is not the result of immediate economic considerations. The politician or government orientated individual tends to relocate in Washington, D.C., while the financial and business interest moves toward New York City. The author deems this observation most important since adjustment and assimilation among the Cuban refugees is so readily achievable because of this concentration and emphasis of re-settlement in situations of similar and familiar background. In his desire to become employed in the same occupation he or she had in Cuba, in the search for family association, the Cuban has given himself the ability to settle, assimilate, and adjust in areas and situations serving to accomplish this task most effectively and most expediently. This gravitational association with job, family, and relatives does not thwart total integration into the community and society, contrary to the opinion of some. The Cuban does not establish small enclaves, ghettos, little Cubas, within the United States. On the contrary, indications are that while family associations are evident, these concentrations are generally widespread. To be precise, the Cuban will tend to live near his relatives, yet he remains reasonably distant so as not to become "ghettoized." Such an attitude by its very nature affords security but, more importantly, it serves as the needed

stimuli to form new associations and new productive ties within the community at large.

#### STANDARD OF LIVING

In this section we intend to reflect on the Cuban's general composition and his current living arrangements. For example, our study indicated that the majority of Cubans tend to have relatively good, certainly adequate, living accommodations. The greatest concentration seems to be the apartment house rentals. More precisely, the average Cuban family tends to reside in a 3 to 4 room apartment. 22.4% (252 individuals) of our test group reside in 3 room apartments, while 283 persons, or 25.0%, reside in 4 room apartments. 17.9% reside in apartments with more than 4 rooms and 13.7% reside in private houses.

Such a distribution, in general, indicates favorable housing accommodations. We realize that quantity of accommodation does not necessarily demonstrate quality of accommodation. Nevertheless, if the monthly rental statistics at the bottom right of Table 4 are an indication, the majority of Cuban families, almost 50%, live in accommodations renting in excess of \$100.00 per month. To be more exact, 20.3% (61 families) of the survey group are renting apartments with monthly rent of \$100.00 to \$125.00; 8.4% (25 families) are renting apartments in the range of \$125.00 to \$150.00 per month; 2.3% (7 families) from \$150.00-\$175.00 per month; 1.3% (4 families) rent from \$175.00 to \$200.00 per month and 12.8% (38 families) pay mortgages on private houses, while 3.1% (10 families) own their own homes. Such data, we feel, lead one to believe that general housing and living arrangements are at least adequate, quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Adaptation to the United States*

In the above, we had concentrated on reading the data and results that emphasize the *objective* position of the Cuban refugee. We have investigated and analyzed occupational categories both in Cuba and the United States. We have described educational backgrounds and educational structures. We have also studied living arrangements and family compositions. All testify to our concentration on the objective. At this

---

5. From our interviews with some of the representatives of the Cuban community of New York City, it was deduced that low cost housing was a problem in the area. On closer investigation, it would seem that the problem is not strictly one of space available but rather centers on eligibility and certain city-wide administrative difficulties. Suffice it to say, that while the general accommodation and housing picture for the Cuban is relatively good, there are problem areas which need special consideration and attention.





Table 5  
ADAPTATION TO THE UNITED STATES

| 1) EXPECTATIONS IN UNITED STATES:    |                         | NUMBER    | PERCENT |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Fulfilled                            | } in some way fulfilled | 133       | 44.3%   |
| Partially Fulfilled                  |                         | 219       | 73.0%   |
| Unfulfilled                          |                         | 86        | 28.7%   |
| No Information                       |                         | 58        | 19.4%   |
|                                      |                         | Sub-Total | 277     |
|                                      |                         | TOTAL     | 23      |
|                                      |                         |           | 100.0%  |
| 2) LENGTH OF TIME "TO FEEL SETTLED": |                         | NUMBER    | PERCENT |
| under 6 months                       |                         | —         | —       |
| 6 - 9 months                         |                         | 9         | 3.0%    |
| 9 - 12 months                        |                         | 14        | 4.6%    |
| 1 year only                          |                         | 22        | 7.4%    |
| 1 - 2 years                          |                         | 37        | 12.4%   |
| 2 - 3 years                          |                         | 91        | 30.3%   |
| 3 - 5 years                          |                         | 72        | 24.0%   |
| 5 years of acquiring citizenship     |                         | 26        | 8.6%    |
| 6 - 8 years                          |                         | 8         | 2.7%    |
| No Information or unspecified time   |                         | 21        | 7.0%    |
|                                      |                         | TOTAL     | 300     |
|                                      |                         |           | 100.0%  |

point, we deem it necessary to channel our efforts toward the study of the *subjective*. How does the Cuban refugee view his adjustment? Does he feel he has assimilated? To what degree? Does he feel he is settled in the United States?

Table 6

CUBAN REFUGEES HAVE BEEN RESETTLED TO SELF-SUPPORT  
OPPORTUNITIES IN ALL 50 STATES  
THEY HAVE GONE TO MORE THAN 2,300 COMMUNITIES\*

|                      | <i>Number of<br/>Refugees</i> |                | <i>Number of<br/>Refugees</i> |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Alabama              | 340                           | Montana        | 152                           |
| Alaska               | 1                             | Nebraska       | 413                           |
| Arizona              | 177                           | Nevada         | 962                           |
| Arkansas             | 77                            | New Hampshire  | 122                           |
| California           | 21,176                        | New Jersey     | 30,460                        |
| Colorado             | 1,128                         | New Mexico     | 326                           |
| Connecticut          | 2,210                         | New York       | 50,506                        |
| Delaware             | 275                           | North Carolina | 632                           |
| District of Columbia | 1,912                         | North Dakota   | 45                            |
| Florida              | 5,868                         | Ohio           | 1,822                         |
| Georgia              | 1,436                         | Oklahoma       | 489                           |
| Hawaii               | 30                            | Oregon         | 682                           |
| Idaho                | 7                             | Pennsylvania   | 2,810                         |
| Illinois             | 13,111                        | Rhode Island   | 371                           |
| Indiana              | 1,053                         | South Carolina | 217                           |
| Iowa                 | 465                           | South Dakota   | 50                            |
| Kansas               | 823                           | Tennessee      | 454                           |
| Kentucky             | 286                           | Texas          | 3,821                         |
| Louisiana            | 4,200                         | Utah           | 15                            |
| Maine                | 27                            | Vermont        | 46                            |
| Maryland             | 1,021                         | Virginia       | 1,495                         |
| Massachusetts        | 5,429                         | Washington     | 342                           |
| Michigan             | 1,734                         | West Virginia  | 154                           |
| Minnesota            | 424                           | Wisconsin      | 576                           |
| Mississippi          | 104                           | Wyoming        | 16                            |
| Missouri             | 1,002                         |                |                               |

Puerto Rico: 16,124; Virgin Islands: 48; Foreign Countries (26): 1,021

Total persons resettled from June 61 to April 30, 1968: 178,487

\* Figures compiled by Cuban Refugee Program, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

To accomplish this task, we made two simple inquiries: a) How long did it take you to feel settled? b) Have your expectations of the United States been fulfilled? The answers, of course, varied. Of the 277 replies, 133 or 44.3% answered that their expectations of the United States have been fulfilled, and 86 or 28.7% answered that their expectations had been partially fulfilled. This gave us a total of 219 or 73.0%

of our study group that admitted to being fulfilled in some form or another. 58 or 19.4% stated that their expectations of life in the United States had not been fulfilled; they had been disappointed, while 23 or 7.6% abstained from answering.

279 of the summary group replied to question A. They stated that the length of time to feel settled generally took from 3 to 5 years. The majority, 91 or 30.3%, agreed that it had taken them 2 to 3 years to feel settled. 37 or 12.4% replied that the span was only 1 to 2 years, while some others felt that it required considerably less time: 9 or 3.0% stated 6 to 9 months, 14 or 4.6% mentioned 9 to 12 months to feel settled. On the other hand, 72 or 24.0% considered 3 to 5 years as the most likely time span necessary, while 34 or 11.3% considered 5 years or more were the least necessary to get established. In short, our analysis illustrated once again that the majority of Cubans assimilated and adjusted rather quickly (generally between 1 and 3 years); that the majority also feel that their expectations of this country have been fulfilled in one manner or another, and that as a consequence they are effective and useful members of their new found communities.

### *Conclusion*

Oscar Handlin once wrote “. . . experience of the past offers a solid foundation for the belief that the newest immigrants to a great cosmopolitan city will come to play as useful a role in it as any of their predecessors. They themselves need only to show the will and energy, and their neighbors the tolerance to make it possible.”<sup>6</sup> These words summarize the conclusion of our study.

The Cuban, we have found, possesses the will and energy to become a productive and beneficial member of society. We have found him to be self-sufficient, remarkably progressive, and grateful. We found in him and his family a most singular desire to adjust and adapt to a new way of life.

---

6. Oscar Handlin, *The Newcomers—Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1959), p. 53.