

**'We're the Perfect Americans':
South Florida's Haitians Build Proud, Vigorous Community**

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Body

From a distance, Haitian refugees can seem a desperate, dazed and diseased people hopelessly adrift in rickety boats, a horde of economic outcasts. The Bush administration is having them intercepted and returned home.

But here in south Florida, Haitian immigrants have built a growing and vigorous community. While not exactly affluent, they own hundreds of businesses, send their children to school and generally are known as law-abiding and hard workers.

"We're the perfect Americans," said Michel Lubin, a Haitian immigrant whose outlet of beauty supplies for blacks is among the nation's largest. He was speaking in a cramped office surrounded by an American flag, a picture of President Bush, a portrait of ousted Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and a painting of a nude woman in a jungle setting.

The administration maintains that the Haitians are economic, not political, refugees and thus ineligible for asylum. Critics, however, have said the policy is driven in part by a belief that thousands of new immigrants would overwhelm south Florida and disrupt the regional economy, already reeling from a 9.6 percent unemployment rate and the demoralizing collapse of such stalwarts as Pan American and Eastern airlines.

However, many researchers, business executives, teachers, doctors and politicians here do not seem too disturbed by potential influx of 10,000 or more Haitians.

In fact, the heads of schools and hospitals, the very institutions most likely to be burdened by incoming Haitians, said they are no more disruptive than any of the other refugee groups that have poured into this city over the past decade.

Miami Mayor Xavier Suarez often speaks about the plight of Haitians, who comprise a growing number of his constituents. He would like to see more of them allowed into the United States. So too would Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.), who today called on Bush to delay the refugees' return.

"By and large, their impact is not measurably different from any other in-migrating group," said Ira Clark, president of Jackson Memorial Hospital, which works with many of the Haitians. "If it is different, it's probably positive. They're very hard-working people."

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Marietta Mischia, principal of Toussaint Louverture Elementary School, 85 percent of whose 1,220 students are Haitian, said Haitian children "are no more of a burden and no less than the Nicaraguans, the Cubans and everybody else."

About 6,600 Haitians are among the 300,000 children in Dade County public schools here. In the hallways of Louverture Elementary, a visitor can hear Spanish, English, Creole and French. Mischia said Haitian children generally learn English in about two or three years.

"Haitians really believe in education," said Alex Stepick, an anthropologist at Florida International University, who has tracked the lives of Haitian "just comes," as the immigrants are called, over the past decade. "Haitians are forever enrolling in classes."

Twenty years ago, few Haitians were counted in south Florida. Now, authorities said, there could be 100,000 or more in Dade and adjacent Broward County. The "Little Haiti" neighborhood, which began with a few shops in the mid-1970s, encompasses scores of city blocks from south to north.

Ringo Cayard, president of the Haitian American Foundation, said Haitians own 800 businesses in Miami, most of them "mom and pop" shops selling records and tapes, car repairs, groceries, clothes and services. "Haitians are good for America," he said.

Those coming here, particularly by sea, usually come from the Haitian countryside and are poor and often illiterate, Cayard said.

When they arrive, Stepick said, they work as cooks, maids, busboys and gardeners. Many drive gypsy cabs.

Rarely do they take welfare because many are here illegally and because welfare does not provide enough money to support living here and sending some back home. Haitians customarily put up relatives and friends for months, Stepick said.

In general, Haitians have no significant impact on the rate of violent crime, according to Miami police. Cayard said Little Haiti is one of the safest neighborhoods in Miami. Indeed, tourists on foot often stroll the heart of Little Haiti.

"For the past decade, most refugees I've seen are like country boys coming to a big city," said Sgt. Yves Fortune, a Haitian-American officer on the Metro Dade police force. "Contrary to what most people think, newly arrived Haitians are more likely victims of crime than perpetrators."

Polling by Robert Joffe of Mason-Dixon Opinion Research for the Miami Herald and a local television station found that, in December, most Floridians did not want the Haitians ousted.

"Most folks are sympathetic," Joffe said. "I didn't see any evidence of widespread xenophobia. People seem willing to give them a chance."

Some critics said the Bush administration's policy of sending back refugees is racially motivated, and many people here said they detect a double standard. Cuban refugees are welcomed as heroes, but Haitian refugees are sent home.

"There's an ambivalence," said economist Antonio Jorge of Florida International, who has written widely on the regional impact of Cuban refugees. "Everybody wishes them well. But from a practical standpoint, any large migration of unskilled laborers causes problems."

Hospital President Clark said that, "with some preplanning, with some accurate information and with some federal support, we could assimilate the Haitians with less problems than we had taking in the Nicaraguans."

Gov. Lawton Chiles (D) has requested \$ 35 million from the federal Emergency Immigration Fund to help south Florida resettle the Haitians.

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"That's the point," Joffe said. "People here are willing to take them. They just want some help."

Graphic

PHOTO, HAITIAN EMIGRE MICHAEL LUBIN'S BEAUTY SUPPLY STORE IS ONE OF THE ESTIMATED 800 HAITIAN-OWNED BUSINESSES IN MIAMI. CARL JUSTE FOR TWP

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