



Cubans in the New York Metro Area

ALL PEOPLES INITIATIVE LAST UPDATED: 09/2009

QUICK FACTS:

Place of Origin:
Cuba

Location in Metro New York:
New Jersey (West New York, Union City, North Bergen)

Population in Metro New York:
149,769 (ACS 2010 Specific Origin Cuba); 73,324 (ACS 2010 Born in Cuba)

Population in New York City:
41,024 (ACS 2010 Specific Origin Cuba); 17,822 (ACS 2010 Born in Cuba)

Primary Religion:
Christianity (Roman Catholic)

Secondary Religions:
Santería, atheism, Christianity (evangelical)

Status of Christian Witness:
Greater than or equal to 5% evangelical. Less than 10% evangelical.

Primary Language:
Spanish

Secondary Language:
English

Registry of Peoples Code:
102324

Significant Notes:
Cuba was declared an atheistic state after the 1959 revolution. In 1992, the constitution was revised to read "secularist" and guarantee freedom of religion.

Bergenline Avenue, which was revitalized by Cuban immigrants in the 1970s to '80s, is currently the longest commercial avenue in the state of New Jersey, with over 300 stores.⁴

The 2nd-largest Cuban population in the United States is located in the New York Metro area.

"The most important thing to understand about Cubans is that we came here for political reasons," explained Ana, a woman in her sixties who came to Metro New York in 1964. "We are different from other Hispanic immigrants, who come for economic reasons." Ana wanted this important distinction noted. Unlike Central Americans or other Caribbean migrants, Cubans are refugees, forced to flee their homeland because of persecution. With no option to return home, Cubans are determined to achieve the American dream. When they came, they put down roots, educated their children, and built businesses, radically transforming the communities they settled in. The antagonistic relationship between the US and Cuba's leader Fidel Castro has made Cuban-Americans a politicized group that wields significant influence on US-Cuban relations. Most Cubans supported US policies that were designed to weaken Castro, even those that would affect them personally, such as restricting travel to Cuba and limiting the amount of money that could be sent to relatives. Metro New York's Cuban-American community numbers around 150 thousand people. Roughly half were born in Cuba, and half are the second- and third-generation born in the US (ACS 2010).

When Did They Come to New York?

Once a paradise for the wealthy, Cuba fell into the hands of revolutionaries in 1959, who promised equality and social justice. This quickly devolved into a repressive communist regime that imprisoned and killed thousands. Cuban immigration to Metro New York has had several waves. The first group came immediately following the revolution. Another wave arrived between 1965 and 1973 when Cubans were permitted to join family in the US. In 1980, Castro opened the port of Mariel, prompting over 100 thousand "Marielitos" to board rickety boats and come to the US. Since the 1990s, the US has allowed a set number of Cubans to enter as refugees each year.



Photo by Joanna Johnson

Where Do They Live?

"When I first started in Union City, nineteen out of twenty students were Cuban. Now, there are one or two," said Maria, who has been teaching for thirty years. With their strong desire for upward mobility, Cubans have been steadily moving out of the old neighborhoods into more affluent suburbs. The northern New Jersey communities of Union City and West New York, known as "Havana on the Hudson," were two-thirds Cuban in the 1970s.¹ Today, Cubans make up less than twenty percent, even though these communities remain as entry points for other Latino immigrants. Despite the decline, Metro New York still has the world's third-largest population of Cubans outside of Cuba and Miami.²

What Do They Believe?

"I grew up when religion was not allowed in Cuba," Louisa said, "and I don't feel a need for it now." Once a Catholic nation, decades of persecution has taken a toll on Christianity in Cuba. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Cuba lost its economic support, many Cubans began to seek God. A reawakening of faith among nominal believers, coupled with passionate evangelism efforts, has brought many to new life in Christ. In Metro New York, however, most Cubans seem content with a nominal Catholic identity. Some dabble in Santería practices as well. Around five percent of Metro New York's Cubans are evangelical Protestants.³ Most have been Christians for a few generations and are actively involved in a number of established churches in Metro New York.

What Are Their Lives Like?

Education + hard work = success. Most Cubans live by this formula. "It is simply understood by all Cubans that they will get an education and better themselves," said Maria, who came to the US as a child in 1962. Strong family connections and community solidarity have helped Cubans reach their goals. Cubans have left an indelible mark in Metro New York, building thriving businesses, restoring once-neglected communities, and paving the way for new Latino groups.

How Can I Pray?

∞ Pray that the reawakening of true Christian faith in Cuba will have an impact on Cuban-Americans in Metro New York and bring many to new life in Christ.

∞ Pray that Cuban Christians in Metro New York will embrace a new mission to minister to other Latino immigrants who need friendship and spiritual direction.

1. Mark E. Reisinger, "Latinos in America: Historical and Contemporary Settlement Patterns," in John W. Frazier and Eugene Tetley-Fio, eds., *Race, Ethnicity, and Place in a Changing America* (Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing, 2006), 191.
2. Max Pizzaro, "Menedez to Christie: Cuba is a State Issue," <http://www.politick-ernj.com/max/29255/menedez-christie-cuba-state-issue> (accessed August 6, 2009).
3. Personal conversation with Pastor Paul Flores of the Nazareth Baptist Church in West New York, New Jersey.
4. "Bergenline Avenue," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergenline_Avenue (accessed August 6, 2009).