

Crime and punishment:

International security lessons from 1980s south Florida Haitian immigrants

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The uniquely distinct culture of Haitian immigrants led to important socio-economic challenges, discriminatory practices, and limited opportunities in 1980s Miami.

The socio-economic challenges faced by Haitian immigrants in the 1980s, including their susceptibility to involvement in crime networks, offer valuable lessons for addressing potential migration waves from Haiti to the US today. During the 1980s and 1990s, many Haitian immigrants encountered barriers to economic integration, leading some individuals to resort to participation in illicit activities for survival. The socio-economic challenges faced by Haitian immigrants in the 1980s, including their susceptibility to involvement in crime networks, offer valuable lessons for addressing potential migration waves from Haiti to the US today. The objective of this research paper is to explore the interconnected nature of crime, immigration, and social challenges faced by Haitian immigrants during the 1980s, shedding light on the historical context that laid the foundation for contemporary discussions on homeland security.

The late 20th century was a complex time for Haitians. Scholarly literature emphasizes the intricate nature of immigrant experiences, highlighting the complex relationships between socio-economic challenges, crime, discriminatory practices, and limited opportunities faced by Haitian immigrants (McDonald, 1970) (Catanese, 1999) (Farmer, 1994). The perceived threat to U.S. national security from 1980s Haitian immigration emanated from concerns about criminal activities and the concept of “convergence” (UNODC, 1989) (Congress U. , 1987) (Haberfeld, 2012). Crime rates in 1980s Miami were influenced by diverse factors, including drug trafficking, poverty, and social inequality, impacting various communities (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees*, 2009) (Martinez, 2000) (Churches, 1980). This period unfolded against the backdrop of broader geopolitical dynamics, shaping the landscape of South Florida, and influencing national security considerations.

Historical Perspectives on Haiti

Haiti's history is a tapestry woven with the threads of colonialism, slavery, revolution, and civil unrest. In 1804, Haiti achieved a groundbreaking milestone as the world's first independent, black-led nation following a successful slave revolt against French rule (Knight, 2000). Despite this triumph, the nation faced important external pressures and internal conflicts throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The 1970s and 1980s introduced numerous challenges for Haiti, significantly impacting the daily lives of its people (Farmer, 1994) (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees.*”, 2009) (Churches, 1980).

Political instability and economic struggles led to widespread poverty, limited education access, and healthcare disparities. Under the authoritarian rule of Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as "Baby Doc," until 1986, social tensions escalated, resulting in human rights abuses and restricted freedom of expression (Miranda, 1995). The lack of infrastructure development, coupled with issues like deforestation and environmental degradation, further hindered progress. The emergence of the AIDS epidemic strained the healthcare system, prompting many Haitians to seek opportunities abroad, particularly in the United States (Farmer, 1994). This period marked a pivotal time in Haiti's history, shaping the nation's trajectory and influencing the decisions of its citizens (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees*, 2009) (Thomas D. Jones, 1993).

Political Crisis in Haiti: "Baby Doc" Duvalier Era

The 1980s political crisis in Haiti, under the authoritarian rule of Jean-Claude Duvalier, was marked by instability, human rights abuses, and economic hardships. Widespread discontent fueled protests and opposition, heightening political tensions. Haitian immigration to Florida surged due to political instability and economic challenges in Haiti (Haberfeld, 2012) (Churches, 1980) (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees*, 2009). The oppressive rule of Jean-Claude Duvalier triggered a mass migration as Haitians sought refuge from human rights abuses and economic hardships. Miami, with its established Haitian community and proximity to the Caribbean, became a major destination for those seeking a new life (Catanese, 1999).

Upon arrival in Florida, Haitian immigrants faced significant social issues. Language barriers and cultural differences hindered integration, and economic struggles were pervasive, with limited employment opportunities and wage disparities. Discrimination and xenophobia added to their hardships, contributing to social isolation, and reinforcing economic disadvantage. Immigration policies, such as the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, treated Cuban and Haitian migrants differently, complicating even more so social dynamics (Thomas D. Jones, 1993).

Grassroots organizations and community leaders worked to aid, promote cultural integration, and advocate for the rights of Haitian immigrants. The challenges faced by the Haitian community in Florida reflected a broader narrative of resilience and determination in overcoming adversity for a better life. But despite these community efforts, the limited social adaptation combined with discrimination led to involvement in informal economies and criminal activities as alternative means of support.

Haitian Immigration to South Florida

Between 1972 and 1977, approximately 200,000 Haitians landed in South Florida, with a significant number settling in the Little Haiti neighborhood (Catanese, 1999). Skilled professionals and workers also left Haiti for cities in the East, such as New York City and Miami (Steven Ruggles, 2022). Doctors, teachers, social workers, and entrepreneurs were among those seeking better opportunities. In the early 1980s, around 40,000 Haitians sought political asylum in the United States, later achieving permanent resident status (Farmer, 1994) (U.S Office of Immigration Statistics. 2023. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2022).

The immigration trend, particularly through maritime routes, notable since the 1970s, had a significant increase during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 (Miranda, 1995). Approximately 25,000 Haitians were part of the mass migration of over 150,000 asylum seekers arriving in South Florida (Guard., 2023). Between 1995 and 1998, about 50,000 Haitians obtained temporary legal status in the United States (U.S Office of Immigration Statistics. 2023. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2022). As of 2022, Florida houses the largest population of Haitian Americans, totaling 544,043 individuals, constituting 2.4% of the state's population (U.S Office of Immigration Statistics. 2023. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2022). The overall estimate for Haitian Americans in the United States is 1,138,855, according to a 2022 census (U.S Office of Immigration Statistics. 2023. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2022).

US Government Legislation and Policy Responses

Various United States official governmental records reveal documented concerns regarding Haitian immigration. Historical perspectives on the issue date back to the 19th century, with documented sources including a letter from C. Archin in 1892, expressing apprehensions about the risks associated with Haitian immigration in the U.S (Archin, 1892). Fast forward to the late 20th century, the Congressional Hearing on Human Rights in Haiti in 1975 sheds light on concerns about the escalating number of Haitian citizens seeking asylum in the U.S., prompting inquiries into political scenarios, asylum procedures, and the treatment of Haitians by the Immigration Service (Congress U. S., Human Rights in Haiti. Congressional Hearing,, 1975). These two historical examples offer valuable insight into the enduring issues and concerns associated with Haitian immigration over nearly a century.

In 1979, a Congressional hearing developed the Refugee Act (H.R. 2816) (Congress U. S., Refugee Act of 1979. Congressional Hearing. , 1979). This legislation aimed to amend existing immigration laws with several key goals. Firstly, it sought to increase the annual admission ceiling for refugees, responding to the growing need for humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the Act aimed to establish a permanent and systematic refugee admission procedure, providing a more organized approach to refugee resettlement. In emergency situations, it allowed for additional admissions. The Act also proposed amendments to the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962, emphasizing temporary and transitional assistance for refugees.

A “grassroots” response report to the refugee act of 1979 was "Haitian Refugees Need Asylum: A Briefing Paper" (1980) addressing challenges faced by Haitian refugees seeking political asylum in the United States (Churches, 1980). It raised concerns about the denial of due process, superficial inquiry methods, coercive measures, and the questionable assertion by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service that Haitians were primarily seeking economic opportunities rather than genuine political refuge. Emphasizing the need for U.S. refugee policy to differentiate between those fleeing persecution and those seeking economic betterment, particularly advocating for special treatment for Haitian refugees.

Societal rejection to US policies became evident later. In 1992, a New York Times piece heightened concerns over U.S. Haitian policy, branding it as mindless and heartless (Haiti: Refugee Crisis and the Thwarting of Democracy. , 1992). This sentiment was echoed in a second 1992 moving letter to the editor (U.S. Haitian Policy Is Mindless and Heartless. , 1992) that expressed apprehensions about longstanding abuses towards Haitian refugees, including mistreatment by the United States Coast Guard and media misrepresentation. The letter drew a touching analogy to the tragic fate of Jewish refugees on the St. Louis, refused entry to the United

States 50 years earlier, subsequently facing persecution in Europe. Together, these narratives underscore the sentiment of ongoing issues surrounding human rights, migration dynamics, and the treatment of Haitian immigrants, urging a reevaluation of policies.

Crime Dynamics in 1980s Miami: Drug Trafficking and Poverty

The 1980s in Miami witnessed a complex interplay of factors that significantly influenced the city's landscape and shaped historical narratives. Miami's geographical proximity to the Caribbean and its status as a major port made it vulnerable to drug trafficking, which emerged as a prominent component of the city's crime scene. The illicit drug trade became intertwined with national security concerns, prompting law enforcement agencies to grapple with the implications of drug-related violence and its potential for destabilization (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees*, 2009) (UNODC, 1989) (Congress U. , 1987).

During this period, Haitian immigrants in Miami faced discrimination and marginalization, contributing to socio-economic disparities, and pushing some individuals to the fringes of society. This vulnerability made them susceptible to exploitation by criminal networks, further complicating the crime dynamics in the region. The surge in crime, particularly associated with drug trafficking and gang activities, not only shaped the domestic security agenda but also laid the foundation for the evolution of homeland security measures (Haberfeld, 2012).

These experiences with Haitian refugees highlighted the vulnerabilities arising when migration intersects with crime networks, emphasizing the need for comprehensive security strategies that address both. Lessons from this set the stage for contemporary efforts to address the

convergence of crime and terrorism, emphasizing the need to best integrate immigration policy with global cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and technological advancements.

U.S. Government Response and Law Enforcement Policies

The 1980s in Miami serves as a historical juncture where interconnected elements shaped the city's landscape, prompting a reevaluation of policies to balance security concerns with the humanitarian needs of Haitian immigrants. The U.S. government responded by implementing immigration policies, including the establishment of the Haitian Refugee Center, aimed at addressing the humanitarian aspects of the crisis (Haberfeld, 2012) (Kyle, *Migrant Smuggling and the Violence Question: Evolving Illicit Migration Markets for Cuban and Haitian Refugees*, 2009). However, these efforts faced challenges due to the intricate intersection of crime, national security, and immigration, necessitating a comprehensive approach.

Author Lindskoog in 2018, addressed Haitian law enforcement issues in his "Detain and Punish" manuscript (Lindskoog, 2018). Delving into the historical facts spanning from 1973 to 2000. Lindskoog's analysis reveals the discrimination faced by Haitian refugees and their resistance, primarily through legal action and activism, prompting the U.S. government to intensify its detention program. Per *Detain and Punish*, by 1980, the government utilized various facilities for Haitian detainment, deviating from the parole-oriented approach established in 1954. With a pivotal shift occurring in March 1980, as the federal government moved away from parole, signaling a return to stricter immigrant detention policies.

Kristina Shull's 2021 *Journal of American Ethnic History* article addresses Reagan's Cold War on immigrants (1981–1985) emphasizing Haitian, Caribbean, and Central American asylum-

seekers (Shull, 2021). Shull argues that Reagan's punitive policies spurred mass resistance, shaping the current U.S. immigration detention system. Highlighting geopolitical influences and the surge of carceral trends in response to activism. It addresses the amalgamation of criminal legal and immigration systems, known as "crimmigration," blurring distinctions. This fusion, evident since the 1980s, results in immigration violations comprising over half of federal charges and prolonged prison sentences for migrants. These accounts provide a comprehensive evidence-based understanding of the harsh conditions forced upon Haitian immigrants, highlighting the complexities and struggles associated with Haitian immigration and their asylum-seeking experiences in that time.

Evolution of Homeland Security Measures

The dynamics of crime in the 1980s played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of homeland security measures, influencing subsequent policies and organizational structures (Haberfeld, 2012). The acknowledgment that certain crimes could have broader implications for national security highlighted the necessity for a comprehensive approach to protect the homeland (UNODC, 1989). This period laid the foundation for more formalized and expansive homeland security measures that would emerge in the following decades, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001.

Contemporary Understanding of Convergence

According to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime Office (UNODC), convergence is “the third level of relationship between organized crime and terrorism. It occurs when terrorist groups and transnational organized crime groups merge into a single entity) (UNODC, 1989).

The surge in crime during the 1980s prompted a growing awareness of the need for enhanced security measures, laying the groundwork for the development of homeland security initiatives. While the term "homeland security" gained prominence post-9/11, its conceptualization can be traced back to the challenges of the 1980s. This historical juncture underscored the complexities and struggles associated with Haitian immigration and asylum-seeking experiences, emphasizing the ongoing importance of understanding historical contexts to inform present-day strategies for addressing the complex interplay of crime, national security, and immigration.

Contemporary understanding of the convergence between crime networks and terrorism has evolved through enhanced intelligence-sharing, global cooperation, and technological advancements. Evidence based in the experiences of Haitian refugees, who faced vulnerabilities exploited by criminals during perilous journeys, highlighting the interconnected nature of security challenges and migration issues. It's important to note that there is no evidence blaming Haitians refugees for terrorism.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, Haitian immigrants in Miami faced significant socio-economic challenges, discrimination, and limited opportunities, that would have them cast as victims rather than perpetrators. Scholars emphasize the intricate connections between their experiences, socio-economic hurdles, crime, and integration. The perceived threat to U.S. national security during this period was linked to concerns about criminal activities, influenced by factors like drug trafficking, poverty, and social inequality.

During this decade Haitian immigrants witnessed a unique combination of socio-economic challenges, discriminatory practices, and limited opportunities. Amid broader geopolitical dynamics, this era shaped South Florida's landscape and influenced national security considerations. An objective discussion on crime and immigration, grounded in data, is essential for fairness and neutrality, recognizing the interconnected web of socio-economic issues shaping 1980s Florida.

Exploring the interconnected nature of crime, immigration, and the social challenges faced by Haitian immigrants highlights the historical context that underlies contemporary discussions on crime, security, and homeland security. The resilience of the Haitian community in the face of discrimination and adversity underscores the need for nuanced policy approaches that balance security imperatives with humanitarian considerations.

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