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Cuban Immigrants Flow Into The U.S., Fearing The Rules Will Change

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ⁱ A U.S. Coast Guard crew (foreground) with six Cubans who were picked up in the Florida Straits in May. A larger Coast Guard vessel is in the background. The number of Cubans trying to reach the U.S. has soared in the past year. Many Cubans believe it will be more difficult to enter the U.S. as relations improve, though U.S. officials say there will be no rule changes in the near term.
Tony Winton/AP

There's been a breakthrough in an impasse that's left several thousand Cuban migrants stranded in Central America. In an agreement announced late Monday, Costa Rica and Guatemala will be two of the nations cooperating on [an airlift that will allow as many as 8,000 Cubans to continue north toward the U.S.](#)

That will continue a spike in migration that has been an unintended consequence of talks between the U.S. and Cuba over normalizing relations.

[More than 43,000 Cubans](#) entered the U.S. in fiscal 2015, which ended on Sept. 30 — the largest number in more than 20 years. The figure is up from a little over 24,000 for fiscal 2014.

Under long-standing U.S. policy, Cubans who make it to the U.S. are granted political asylum and receive permanent legal residency — a green card. But many Cubans suspect that improving ties will make it harder to move to the U.S.

[Obama administration officials](#) have denied this, saying the policy of automatically granting residence to Cubans will not change any time soon.

Many newly arriving Cubans still come to the U.S. on boats; in just the last week, more than 30 Cuban migrants landed in South Florida. But in the past few years, the majority of Cubans have made their way to the U.S. not by water, but over land, and via [Central America in particular.](#)

For Jordan Hernandez, who arrived in Miami just over two months ago, it was the culmination of a journey that began a year earlier, when he flew from Cuba to Ecuador.

Many Cubans have chosen this route because Ecuador did not require Cuban visitors to obtain a visa. [Ecuador ended the policy](#) this month, upsetting Cubans, who recently staged protests outside Ecuador's Embassy in Havana.

Hernandez says he lived in Ecuador for 11 months, but couldn't find steady work. He decided to head to the U.S. — making his way by bus and car through Central America.

He considers himself lucky: Shortly after his trip north, Nicaragua closed its borders to Cuban migrants, leaving thousands of Cubans stranded in Costa Rica and other Latin American countries. Through an interpreter, Hernandez says that includes some of his friends.

"I know a lot of people, a lot of friends, a lot of professionals in Cuba that are stuck in Ecuador right now," he said.



Cuban migrants rest at a shelter in La Cruz, Costa Rica, near the border with Nicaragua. Many Cuban migrants have flown to Central America in recent years and worked their way north to the U.S. border. But Nicaragua, an ally of Cuba, recently closed the border to Cuban migrants taking this route. Esteban Felix/AP

Life has not been easy for Hernandez in Miami. He doesn't have friends or family, he's waiting for a work permit and is trying to find a place to live. Hernandez says he's been making a little money by working construction, getting paid under the table.

When he first arrived here, he was homeless and sleeping on the street. That's where he was when he met Alicia Garcia, another former Cuban migrant.

Garcia came to the U.S. 20 years ago and runs a group that's providing aid for the latest wave of Cuban newcomers. She helps them apply for benefits — but says there's currently a waiting list of up to three months. For Hernandez and others without friends or family in the U.S., she says that's a problem.

"If you don't have any family here, where are you going?" she said. "You have to live on the street until your documents are ready. If you don't have any family, then you have to live on the street for two, three months."

For Cubans arriving in Miami, [Church World Service](#) is often one of their first stops. About three dozen newcomers are in the waiting room of the nonprofit group that resettles refugees, including Cuban migrants.

Francisco Figueroa, who works with Cuban newcomers, says many arrive without knowing anyone, in contrast to earlier waves of Cuban immigrants.

"It's a new generation, it's a younger generation. Basically what we're getting is in the 20s, 30s," he said. "So, it's younger people who do not know, or have no family in the United States."

Church World Service helps Cubans who are willing to start new lives outside of Florida, resettling in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Texas and other states where work is available and rent is relatively cheap.

The group's director in South Florida, Oscar Rivera, says his staff can handle the number of Cuban migrants it's seeing right now.

"We're more than able to manage as many as they come, as long as they come in an orderly fashion," he said.

It appears now that his group's workload may soon spike. Under Monday's deal, many more Cubans are likely to make their way to Miami.

<http://www.newsjs.com/url.php?p=http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/12/29/461296212/cuban-immigrants-flow-into-the-u-s-fearing-the-rules-will-change>