

**From a population of 11 million to little more than 8.5 million:
The real toll of Cuba's migratory crisis**

- Roberto Orro, July 23, 2024.

The streets in Cuba look empty. Dozens of residents in every neighborhood have shut the door to their homes for the last time. Long lines in the Havana airport to board a flight to Nicaragua grow by the day. Some time ago, there was talk of a stampede, a collective fever to escape, to avoid being the last witness of a country's collapse. Nearly three years ago, it was said that Cuba was seeing the biggest migratory wave in its history, and though authorities have not released official data regarding the current population, a new study reveals the real toll of the island's dramatic exodus.

"I have never seen so many people emigrating as I am right now," says 43-year-old Havana resident Valia Rodríguez. "Of course, any Cuban would love to go. I would, for example. If I had the means, I would go, because in this country, with this government, one can't live. And I'll tell you something else, if I hadn't recently given birth, I would have left, because the situation is unsustainable."

Although it's clear that emigration in Cuba has taken off since 2021, official reports and government data describe a current population of just over 11 million who still live in the country. But that number is a figure from the past. Cuban economist and demographer Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos has announced that between 2022 and 2023, the island's population fell by 18%, meaning that in reality, there are 8.62 million Cubans living there today.

In an interview with EL PAÍS, Albizu-Campos, a researcher from the Christian Center of Reflection and Dialogue who worked for 30 years at the Center for Demographic Studies and later, at the Center for Studies of the Cuban Economy, said that, given the lack of up-to-date official numbers, he used the electoral roll from the February 13, 2013 elections, which registers people aged 16 and over, and is based on the last census conducted in the country in 2012. The demographer explained that, although censuses are normally carried out every 10 years, the next one will not take place on the island until 2025 due to the current crisis, a similar delay to that which took place during Cuba's Special Period following the fall of the Soviet Union, which caused the census to be held after 20 years, in 2012. To count the members of the population who are zero to 15 years old, the researcher used data from Cuba's Anuario Estadístico (Statistical Yearbook).

Albizu-Campos places the beginning of today's exodus at the beginning of October 2021, a peak of the current migratory wave, when the number of Cubans reported at the U.S.-Mexico border multiplied. His study also references the 738,680 Cubans who arrived in the United States between October 2021 and April 2024 after receiving immigrant visas, according to figures from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). "That doesn't mean that before, people weren't leaving," says Albizu-Campos. "But, beginning in October 2021, the numbers start to be very large in relation to what was happening."

Between 2021 and now, the Cuban migratory exodus has far exceeded previous mass departures, such as El Mariel in 1980 (125,000), the Balseros Crisis in 1994 (34,500) and Boca de Camarioca in 1965 (about 5,000). What happened in 2021 to convince thousands of Cubans to start leaving their country en masse? An accumulation of chaos and bad decisions. The economy had been moving towards collapse since 2019, there were the economic sanctions of the Trump administration, economic and political measures that sank the country even further, a pandemic

agreement establishing ASCE was signed at Roger's house, and he became its first President. With help from friends Roger had come up with the articles of incorporation. He brought up the idea of setting up a professional organization rather than just a think tank or purely research outfit. He was concerned that the new association would be inclusive regarding research and analysis as well as membership with a diverse professional background. To his credit Roger was one of the few academic economists involved in the foundation of ASCE. Washington is after all a city of economists who mostly work for governmental and international offices and agencies.

In December 1990 ASCE, as proposed by Roger, was affiliated with the Allied Social Science Associations operating under the aegis of the American Economic Association. This allowed ASCE to have a session during the annual meetings of the AEA. Roger attended these meetings usually as presenter or commentator. Behind the scenes he helped recruit participants and searched for interesting papers to be presented. He was actively involved in persuading the AEA to maintain ASCE's session at the annual meetings.

During the more than the three decades' life of ASCE Roger was crucial in stimulating leadership of the association and was in its nominating committee which initiated the election process for the executive board and president. Roger's charm and seriousness of purpose was invaluable in attracting many of the outstanding presidents and board members of the Association. Roger while a close follower of events in the Cuban economy preferred to direct his research to conceptual issues. For example, he wrote papers on the distribution and transition processes that were broadly applicable to transition economies. Roger participated in every one of the annual meetings of ASCE in 1991-2022 as commentator, presenter or chairing panels.

Roger kept his keen interest on ASCE as he actively worked this year with the nominating committee. He remained active as well in many other projects. His sharp mind, for example, focused on comparative statistical analysis of the COVID pandemic gauging results of public health policies across developed and developing countries. In the last year Roger was working on a new book on economic development which applied his unique knowledge and research on production, distribution and institutional development.

Roger will be missed greatly by his friends and colleagues in ASCE. I offer deep condolences to Alicia, Roger Alberto, Juan Luis and grandchildren for the loss of a loving husband, father and grandfather.

Luis R. Luis April 12, 2024