

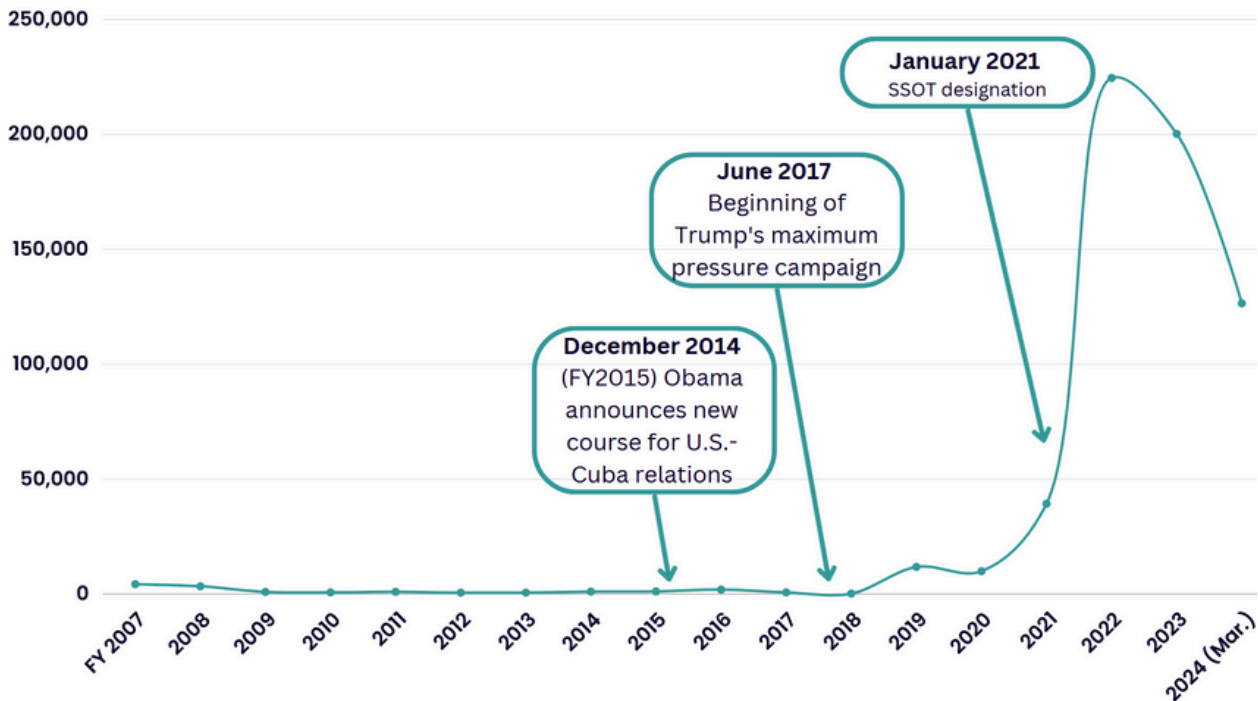


U.S. SANCTIONS: A ROOT CAUSE OF CUBAN MIGRATION

Nearly 600,000 Cubans have attempted to enter the United States since 2021 – a figure higher than the refugee wave of the early 1960s, the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the 1994 rafter crisis combined. Cubans are leaving due to an economic crisis and challenging humanitarian conditions, including lack of access to well-paying jobs, food, medicine, transportation and electricity. The downturn began with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was exacerbated by President Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy that saw hundreds of new sanctions – including the state sponsor of terrorism (SSOT) designation – imposed on an already ailing economy, specifically by targeting tourism, remittances and medical cooperation, three of the primary ways Cuba earns foreign currency.

The Biden administration already recognizes that economic sanctions are a “key driver” of Cuban migration, yet has taken virtually no steps to address this root cause.

Cuban Migrant Encounters U.S. Border Patrol FY2007-FY2024 (through March)



Biden-Harris Migration Plan

In 2021 the White House announced its strategy for “addressing the root causes” of increased migration from Central America. The Biden administration’s solutions included the following: mobilizing private sector investment, digital and financial inclusion, support for farmers, support for small businesses, job creation and supply chain resilience, access to finance, trade facilitation, and global diplomatic engagement, among others. This strategy “coincided with a 43% reduction” in the number of migrants from the region encountered at the border. Yet **when it comes to Cuba, U.S. policy prohibits and actively undermines these approaches to slowing irregular migration**. Dozens of members of Congress have written to President Biden (in May 2023, December 2023 and January 2024) and drawn the same conclusion: **sanctions on Cuba are driving irregular migration**.

In January 2023, the Biden administration added Cuba to the list of countries whose citizens may be eligible for humanitarian parole, issuing more than 81,000 visas to Cubans under this program out of more than 380,000 applications through May 2023. However, despite a brief dip in encounters of Cubans at the border, the program falls woefully short and overall migration trends are unaffected, as **border encounters in 2024 are on pace to be even higher than in 2022**.

U.S. - Cuba Migration Accord Meetings

The Biden administration should be applauded for restarting semiannual meetings with the Cuban government to discuss the U.S.-Cuba Migration Accords that had been suspended by the Trump administration. Regarding the most recent meeting in April, Ambassador Brian Nichols, Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs tweeted “U.S. and Cuban officials met to discuss the Migration Accords, a well-established migration management mechanism that promotes compliance with U.S. immigration law and lawful pathways.” He failed to mention the role sanctions play in depressing standards of living in Cuba and limiting legal pathways for immigration, incentivizing Cubans to migrate in an irregular manner.

Conversely, the Cuban Foreign Ministry issued a statement in which it said it “emphatically denounced the negative impact that the U.S. economic blockade and its extreme reinforcement applied since 2019, exert on the socioeconomic conditions of the Cuban population, a **factor that constitutes an important incentive to migration**... [as does] keeping the country on the so-called List of State Sponsors of Terrorism, the preferential treatment still received by Cubans who illegally enter U.S. territory and the validity of the Cuban Adjustment Act.” The Cuban Adjustment Act grants Cuban migrants a fast track to legal permanent residency, food and housing benefits, and immediate employment authorization, all without having to demonstrate persecution to the same extent as asylum seekers. Many also return to Cuba after being granted residency, putting into question how “persecuted” they are.

Other U.S Policy Factors

The Biden administration has resumed issuing immigrant visa categories and restarted the family reunification program, yet the non-immigrant visa process is still frozen, forcing some Cubans to travel to third countries. This hinders exchanges and cooperation, and counterproductively **converts Cuban visitors into Cuban migrants**. Furthermore, the SSOT designation makes many Europeans ineligible for U.S. visa waiver under a program called ESTA. This **provision also impedes hundreds of thousands of Cubans** with dual nationality (mostly Spain) **from traveling** back and forth between the U.S. and Cuba. **Many have instead decided to instead stay in the U.S. and become permanent residents** in order to travel to Cuba without restrictions on their returns to the U.S.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador:

“We’re always looking to convince US authorities, but it’s very hard. We’ve proven that when **we invest in countries at their place of origin, the migratory flow is diminished.**”

“We’re going to keep insisting on **addressing the root causes of migration...** stop politicking, [insist that] rights are above ideology, that **sanctions cannot be maintained...**”

AMLO Plan

Cuban migration is also affecting Mexico, as the route to the U.S. for most Cuban migrants changed from crossing the strait of Florida to crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The U.S. has repeatedly pressured Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) to do more to curb irregular migration. While Mexico stepped up its border enforcement, deportations and cooperation with nations in the region, AMLO proposed a joint plan to reduce migration that includes the U.S. allocating \$20 billion in yearly aid to Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as an **end to the embargo of Cuba**.

In March, Mexico signed an agreement with Venezuela that would see migrants voluntarily return to Venezuela, be guaranteed a job for six months, and receive a \$660 stipend. It is unlikely this deal could have been reached without the October 2023 flexibilization of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela. Mexico is in talks to establish similar plans with Colombia and Ecuador. For now, there is no indication that Cuba will be included in the future, likely due to the threat of secondary sanctions. Last year, when it was reported that Mexico had become a key provider of oil to Cuba, Senator Marco Rubio called on the Biden administration “to communicate that any attempt by Mexico to circumvent U.S. policy will be met with targeted sanctions.”

