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Cuba, Populations

Populations and Other Issues in Post USSR Cuba

During the 1950s, the cold war was in full swing. The Soviet Union was one of the biggest fears that had ever struck the American people. The communist superpower, which was located where Russia and other eastern and southern European countries such as Latvia are presently located, was a threat to the democratic ways of the United States. When the USSR became an ally of Cuba, providing weapons and military support, the fear became even greater. The island of Cuba is just a little bit more than 100 miles off the coast of southern Florida, making it a little too close for comfort. Many issues arose from this association. While nothing caused permanent damage to America, Cuba is still feeling the effects. Slowly and surely the USSR fell apart and Cuba loosened policies, as well as borders. They became old news, and their problems became less of a problem for the mainland. Cuba still has many problems visible at first glance, like malnutrition, but many are set in something deeper, such as a plummeting birth rate and foreign pressures. The solutions for these problems are even more complicated, having many positives and negatives and falling in a range of time frames, both long and short term.

To understand some of the devastating troubles that affect the consistently declining Cuban population, one must look at what the demographics of an average Cuban's life looks like. Cuba's society and population was set back by their extremely strict communist government and didn't advance with the rest of the modern first world countries. The average income of a Cuban is just \$20 United States dollars per month, and while the cost of living is much lower than that in the United States, it still is not enough. In an interview with a Cuban couple that makes an above average \$70 a month, they stated "It's barely enough for the two of us... how could we afford a kid?" Living on a small income with little income security has an impact on society (Ahmed). Most Cubans work in the service industry, catering heavily to tourism. The 28% of the population not involved in the service industry splits further into agriculture and industry sectors. (Central)

At first glance, the most prevalent and basic issue affecting the Cuban population is malnutrition. Food is one of the most basic and fundamental human needs and rights, and when that need is not met, it can have a devastating effect on a population, mentally and physically. Malnutrition can be a hard thing to pinpoint, as well, when children aren't starving in the streets, but it can cause many different issues, such as stunted growth and slowed mental development. The rate of anemia in a population is a good indication of overall nutrition content of diet and can be an effective measure of malnutrition in a country. This measure is also simple to implicate in studies and cost effective on a large scale. The most common cause of non-genetic anemia is a lack of good quality iron in one's normal diet. Anemia can have many different symptoms such as fatigue and hypersomnia that can range in severity. According to a recently conducted medical study on Cuba's anemia rate conducted by the International Journal of Cuban Health & Medicine in 2017,

“Of the women studied, 24.6% ... had anemia... Iron deficiency was found in 68% (266/391) of [those who participated in the study] and in 82.3% of those [participants] with anemia. There was a significant association between iron deficiency and anemia...” In comparison to first world countries, Cuba’s proportion of anemic people in the total population is much larger. The foods that contain the most iron are often the most expensive; meats, eggs and legumes come at a high price to a country whose agriculture system is lacking in structure. (Pita-Rodríguez)

Many solutions to this problem seem simple and easy to execute, but when working amongst a large population with a fixed amount of land and a strict government, change and implementation is not so simple. Another issue is that these problems are not just what can be seen, they are often deeply rooted in societal issues that are not so simple to solve. Short term solutions can be applied to the problem while the deeper and more ingrained societal matters are addressed. These issues are often addressed by foreign aid organizations, and that is what happened with the issue of anemia. An organization called the World Food Programme partnered with the Cuban government in 2015 to implement a program called Sprinkles to Grow, or *Chispitas para Crecer*, in Spanish. The program provides ‘magic’ sprinkles filled with essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients. The sprinkles come with an informational pamphlet and instructions for use. The sprinkles can be mixed into any food, which allows people to maintain their normal diets. This provides a quick fix to the matter, but efforts need to be taken to address the larger issues (“Cuba-Magic”)

Societal issues are often not seen at first. They are hidden well beneath issues with seemingly simple solutions, but to fix these issues permanently, one must address the big issue. Cubans are scared to have kids. Cuba’s communist economy puts a huge strain on its citizens. As previously mentioned, income restrictions often discourage couples from parenthood. Many couples use birth control, and put off starting a family. This causes the country’s birth rate to fall. Birth rate is the proportion of births, deaths and other losses and gains in population. It is used to show the total growth and fall of populations in a country. As of 2017 the population growth was -.29%, compared to the United State’s population growth of .81% (“Central”). While reproductive rights around the world are very important, education is also very important. Cuba has the one of the highest rates of abortion in the developed world, second only to Russia, at around 30 abortions per 1000 women. Abortion can not be the cause of the issue however, abortion must be inspired by something and in this case fear of financial security. (Ahmed)

A negative birth rate can cause a rise in average age. As less and less people are in the younger age categories, there are less and less people available in the workforce compared to the population. Because the birth rate of Cuba has been dropping drastically over the past couple of decades, the effects can already be seen in the modern day demographics. The majority of the population lies above the forty year old mark. And if the statistic gets any worse the effects on the workforce, population and moral of the population could be catastrophic. When there are more and more older people, there is a greater requirement for people in the healthcare field, and less and less people to fill other positions. Many of these positions are in the agriculture field (Holodny).

Agriculture in Cuba is in a weird state. Pressure from foreign countries has caused both the stress of change, as well as an influx of new consumers to purchase agricultural products. Cuba's agriculture utilizes older technology, and has a lack of sustainable practices for transporting and marketing products. The most evident example of this lack of efficiency can be seen in Havana. Havana is Cuba's capital and is home to over 20% of Cuba's entire population. Transportation from the rural agricultural areas to large cities like Havana is severely lacking. One solution has been implemented for this problem already. Urban agriculture has taken off in Havana in the past couple of years. It is estimated nearly 25,000 people or 1% of Havana's population are employed in urban agriculture. This can be both a good and bad thing. Once populations begin to rise again, the probability the land now used for urban agriculture will be transformed into housing or other buildings is great. Also, by bypassing traditional agriculture in rural communities, the rural families are not supported. Animal agriculture, a main source of iron, is not easily supported in urban environments. This lack of efficiency of traditional agriculture systems would not be so devastating if more modern solutions were offered, and this is what many foreign countries are trying to accomplish by influencing Cuban agriculture ("Agriculture").

The United States for one has stepped up to try and influence Cuban agriculture. When Cuba allied with the USSR, the United States placed a trade embargo, or restriction on the sale and purchase of goods from Cuba. This especially affected Cuban agriculture. In the 1950s Cuba's main agricultural export was sugar. The sugar industry in Cuba was heavily subsidised and stabilised by America. America provided quotas for sugar production every year and paid for the production of the sugar. When the trade embargo was placed the deal was dropped. Cuba's sugar production didn't slow, but they had no stable buyers or prices for the product causing prices to drop and the industry to fail. The rest of the agriculture industry followed suit, as many sugar producers had stake in other sectors. Things got better once the USSR stepped in to fill the shoes America left behind. However things turned around once again at the fall of the Soviet Union and no one came to fill the newly empty shoes. The United States has offered guidance, but despite requests to reinstate the trade deals on the sugar industry with Cuba, no agreements have been made so far. (Atwood)

Cuba imports most of its food, along with its income. When the borders opened under the leadership change from a strict dictator, Fidel Castro, to a looser and more open leader, Fidel's brother Raul, the Cuban people chose to capitalise off of the lucrative American tourism industry. Many Cuban nationals embraced American customs and practices such as the use of room share sites like Airbnb. This embracing of American tourists built the economy in this sector quickly. This growth was put to a halt when American diplomats were injured in Havana under unknown circumstances. When former president Barack Obama left office and current president Donald Trump took over the position he adopted a stricter policy on foreign affairs. This policy change had a big effect on American tourism, especially when the diplomats were injured in the capital. American government officials discouraged American tourists from visiting the island. The catastrophic effects this had on the tourism industry can be seen throughout all walks of life in Cuba. Small business owners who had catered their businesses to tourists, as well as large businesses that invested in the industry lost their source of income. An industry that had grown so much in such a short time dropped 40% in years time. American and Cuban officials must come to conclusion

to build up the tourism industry and support the economy once again (Faiola).

All in all, each and every country has their own issues, but the complexity, severity and widespread nature of the problems that plague the population of Cuba warrant a need for international attention. One must take a close look at the deep rooted problems, the problems that lie at the base of society, and find a long term solution instead of short term solutions for the surface problems. The most basic and fundamental rights of a population must be met before anymore progress can be made, the matter of malnutrition must be addressed in Cuba to inspire more change. Cubans must also be able to find and keep financial security to increase population and birth rate. Addressing agricultural shortages goes along with a plummeting birth rate, Cubans need inspiration to go back to the farm. Foreign countries have provided heartache and support for not only the agriculture industry, but also the tourism sector of the economy. Proper communication between governments is key in maintaining a symbiotic relationship between nations. Cubans and others must work together to make a brighter future for the devastation left in the wake of communism and the Soviet Union.

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