

Haitians are largest immigrant group in Palm Beach County

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Where did immigrants living in Palm Beach County come from?

Haitians are now overwhelmingly Palm Beach County's largest immigrant group, according to new estimates released by the Census Bureau. The figures, based on a 5-year survey conducted from 2005 to 2009, show huge increases in some groups compared with 2000 Census numbers.

Country of birth	2005-2009 estimates	Change from 2000*	% change
Haiti	38,561	10,787	38.8%
Cuba	23,476	4,315	22.5%
Mexico	21,500	4,606	27.3%
Jamaica	18,188	6,879	60.8%
Guatemala	15,242	8,826	137.6%
Colombia	14,600	4,463	44.0%
Canada	11,057	885	8.7%
Brazil	8,936	5,310	146.4%

* 2005-2009 estimates are based on survey samples; each number is imprecise and may have a margin of error. All increases listed here were greater than that statistic's margin of error.

Sources: 2005-2009 American Communities Survey, 2000 Census

STEVE LOPEZ/Staff Artist

By **ADAM PLAYFORD**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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Flocking to Palm Beach County over the past decade, immigrants from Haiti now represent the largest concentration of foreign-born people living here by far, according to data recently released by the Census Bureau.

And "it's going to continue," said Wismick St. Jean, a Haitian activist and business owner. "There's no doubt about that."

The number of Haitians, pegged at nearly 27,800 in 2000, had grown by a third to about 38,500 by the second half of the decade, according to surveys collected from 2005 to 2009 as part of the American Communities Survey.

That's far more than the next-largest group, Cubans, at 23,476 and Mexicans at 21,500. Haitians also were the top immigrant group in 2000, but by a smaller margin.

St. Jean said he hopes the new figures will push government agencies to work more closely with the Haitian community and to produce more documents in Creole.

Many Haitians pick Palm Beach County because it offers an existing Haitian community, affordable housing and an amenable job market, with opportunities for people with different levels of education, said Quetel Osterval, executive director of the Haitian Evangelical Crusade Association.

"Miami's already well-known to be saturated, so they kind of moved to the north a little bit and found a safe haven for them to make a living," said Osterval, who came here from Haiti when he was young.

The actual number of Haitians is almost certainly larger than what the survey indicates, as the count stopped before Haiti was devastated by an earthquake at the start of 2010. The disaster brought an untold number of Haitians to the U.S. And many are leery of filling out government surveys, particularly Haitians here illegally, community leaders say.

One recent count by local Haitian church groups showed more than 73,000 Haitian immigrants in Palm Beach County, Osterval said.

The American Communities Survey, dubbed the ACS, has weaknesses. It doesn't offer the decennial census' precision; the 38,500 number, for example, is plus or minus about 2,200. But it is released more frequently and the traditional census is no longer asking in-depth questions, such as where immigrants were born, so the ACS is now the best official picture of Palm Beach County's demography.

The biggest concentration of Haitians - more than 16,000 - live in the Boynton Beach-Delray Beach area, the survey found. Another 8,000 live in or near Lake Worth.

Bishop Mathieu Jean-Baptiste, who founded the crusade association 24 years ago and works with many Haitian churches, said some of the growth is attributable to Haitians who immigrated years ago finally bringing family over.

Like Osterval and St. Jean, Jean-Baptiste predicts that the Haitian community will continue to grow.

"This is not people who come here to make a few dollars and go home," he said. "They're here, they're starting families, they become business owners, schoolteachers. In every aspect of life in Palm Beach County, you can find the Haitian people. They really make a difference in the county."