

How many political prisoners are there in Cuba?

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It is impossible to be precise on the number of people incarcerated by the “revolutionary” government of Cuba (Castro regime) since January 1, 1959. Having reviewed the literature and consulted with experts and former Cuban political prisoners, no reliable statistics are found. This stems from the fact that the Cuban government has never allowed access to information on its prison population or any monitoring of prisons by human rights’ organizations –local independent or international; in fact, it does not even allow independent human rights organizations to exist. Also, there are no known independent efforts sustained over time systematically collecting data on the number of prisons or prisoners and the reasons for their incarceration.

Files recovered from former Soviet bloc countries contain specific references to political imprisonment in Cuba. Those of the former Stasi, political police of the communist German Democratic Republic, reveal some figures for the sixties and seventies. In September 1978, Cuban Brigadier General Enio Leyva Fuente visited the former GDR and, in a meeting with Major General Giel, substitute for the Minister of the Interior, spoke about Cuban political prisoners: "In the West the number of counterrevolutionary prisoners in the 1960s was estimated at 30,000, ...that is exaggerated, in 1965 the highest number of prisoners was 18,000." Also, a letter dated June 1978 from Cuban Minister of the Interior Sergio del Valle informed the GDR's Minister of the Interior, General Dickel: "There are currently 3,300 counterrevolutionaries in Cuba's prisons, but only 2,300 are really counterrevolutionary and 1,000 are delinquents, such as, for example, those convicted of an illegal exit attempt."¹ The Mitrokhin archives of the former Soviet KGB has at least one reference to 8,000 prisoners in 1974 sentenced for counterrevolutionary activities in Cuba.²

In a 1999 study,³ Cuban researcher Efrén Córdova reports that when the Isla de Pinos prison was closed in 1967, its records indicated that more than 13,000 Cubans had been held there since 1959. At that time, he asserts, La Cabaña prison of Havana had 3,000 prisoners and many were at the prison Castillo de El Príncipe, for a total of 19,000 political prisoners in 1967. Cordova also states that by the end of the 1960s there were 60,000 political prisoners in Cuba, but does not detail how he arrived at that figure. In the 1980s, he writes, the penal population ranged between 2,000 and 2,500 prisoners just at one prison, Ariza in Cienfuegos.

Former prisoner of conscience Ambassador Armando Valladares⁴ indicates that when he was imprisoned in Cuba (1960 to 1982), the number of "counterrevolutionary" prisoners island-wide was, according to a blackboard at the Castillo del Príncipe prison, 82,000. This figure included all Cubans arrested for "illegal"

¹Jorge Luis García Vázquez, “El Minint: Espada y Escudo o Guillotina de la Dictadura Comunista”, *Misceláneas de Cuba*, febrero 13, 2007.

² Christopher Andrew & Vasili Mitrokhin, *The world was going our way: the KGB and the battle for the third world* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). (Major Vasili Mitrokin was the senior archivist of the KGB's foreign intelligence service for many years until 1985 and escaped to the West after the dissolution of the USSR with a copy of 25,000 files.)

³ Efrén Córdova, *Represión e Intolerancia*, 1999. <http://www.cubancenter.org/uploads/40years09.html>

⁴ Valladares is the author of the memoir *Against All Hope* and served prison in Cuba for 22 years (1960-1982). He was exiled in the United States and appointed Ambassador of the United States to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (1988-1990).

attempts to leave the country and other counterrevolutionary behavior such as having a pound of meat or coffee. According to Valladares, his fellow political prisoners estimated that there were, at that time, at least 200 prisons and labor camps in Cuba.⁵

More recently, the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, CCDHRN, reported 120 prisoners for political reasons as of May 31, 2018. It notes that these individuals are "held in maximum security" –96 are opponents or disaffected to the regime and 24 are prisoners accused of employing or planning to use some form of force or violence to carry out "acts against the security of the State."⁶ The list does not include individuals held in held in minimum security facilities or labor camps or many thousands of Cubans who are not members of an opposition political movement but are believed to be imprisoned for underlying political reasons yet sentenced, and thus reported, otherwise.

Given the nature of the Cuban system, the definition of "political prisoner" reflects changing circumstances. Once the mass executions ceased, armed insurrections were defeated, the remaining resistance was mostly exiled,⁷ and the massive political imprisonment of the 1960s⁸ diminished, the regime was able to institutionalize terror and systematic indoctrination to subdue the population; this considerably reduced direct confrontation with the government. Also, mass migration from the earliest days of the revolution has allowed the most disaffected Cubans to leave the country or devote their hope and energies to finding ways to do so, reducing interest and resources to oppose the regime. It is not necessary to impose patently political prison sentences.

Meanwhile, Cuban state authorities have found less crude –more "sophisticated" or "creative"– ways to exercise socio-political control and punish opponents, dissidents, or the disaffected. Instead of manifest political prison sentences, they favor charges of "pre-criminal dangerousness" ("antisocial" behaviors that undermine "socialist morality"),⁹ "disrespect" (criticizing government leaders including the late Fidel Castro), "disobedience", or for all sorts of offenses an economic nature, given that independent economic activity is systematically criminalized. Most of these "crimes" do not exist as such in countries that comply with international human rights standards. For example, given that all media and mass communications can only be state-owned, those who practice independent journalism are accused of "usurpation of legal capacity." Some opponents are even accused of domestic violence.¹⁰ The government has also come to

⁵ Telephone interview with Armando Valladares, June 11, 2018.

⁶ Lista Parcial de Condenados o Procesados en Cuba por Razones Políticas, *Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional*, La Habana, 11 de junio de 2018. <http://ccdhrn.org/lista-de-presos-politicos-cubanos/>

⁷ The generations that knew democratic republican government and had fought against the Batista dictatorship to restore the democracy were exiled, including political prisoners who had served their sentence or were released on condition of leaving the country.

⁸ In six decades, the Cuban population has almost doubled. In 1959 the population was around 6 million while it is presently around 11 million. Therefore, the political imprisonment of several tens of thousands in the 1960s had not only unique characteristics but also a larger proportional repercussion.

⁹ Cuba's Penal Code defines (Article 72) pre-criminal social dangerousness as the "special proclivity in which a person finds himself to commit crimes, demonstrated by the behavior he observes in manifest contradiction with the norms of socialist morality." It includes "antisocial behavior" as well as habitual drunkenness or dipsomania and drug addiction (Article 73). According to a Cuban lawyer exiled in the U.S. in 2017, Laritza Diversent of Cubalex, the sentence defines the type of dangerousness imputed, since the type of crime determines the type of establishment to which the person will go, but these statistics are secret. (Telephone interview of June 13, 2018.)

¹⁰ For example, the renowned writer Angel Santiésteban was sentenced to five years in prison in 2012 for domestic violence, which he insists was a fabricated case. Likewise, peaceful opponent Wilman Villar died in Santiago de Cuba in January 2012 on a hunger strike in protest of similar charges. See

prefer arbitrary short-term arrests,¹¹ often repeatedly, that do not lead to trials. In recent years, Cuban opponents have suffered tens of thousands of arbitrary short-term detentions. (See a list of documented detentions at <http://ccdhrn.org/informes-mensuales-de-represion-politica/>).

All of the above has allowed for a gradual reduction in the reported number of "prisoners of conscience"¹² or "political prisoners." But, given the refinement of the methodologies to exercise state control, it is essential to understand the political nature –direct or indirect– of many prison sentences and take into account the overall prison population in order to have a comprehensive picture of political imprisonment in Cuba.

Estimating the size of Cuba's overall prison population is also a problem. In 2006, the CCDHRN reported that the country's penal population was between 80,000 to 100,000.¹³ The same organization reported a considerably lower number as of May 2018, "at least 65,000 to 70,000 people in jail,"¹⁴ but did not explain the reasons for the decrease. It also reported "from 150 to 180 high security prisons, correctional centers, settlements and camps" in Cuba. This would mean that 70,000 inmates spread across 180 facilities would average 388 inmates per facility. But it is impossible to know if this average is representative, since all of Cuba's main prisons (there are more than one in some provinces) have capacity for over one thousand inmates. For example, the Combinado del Este prison in Havana is estimated to have between 3,000¹⁵ and 5,000¹⁶ prisoners; on the other hand, many forced labor centers –construction brigades or farms for agricultural work– have several dozen people or even less.

A detailed list of prisons¹⁷ published around 2008 by CubaVerdad.com, a human rights' project based in Belgium, includes 545 prison facilities classified by province. It is unknown how many continue to operate, but there are reports that new specialized prisons have been established, especially for forced labor. These numbers, if accurate, would indicate that CCDHRN's prison population estimate is based on a significantly smaller number of detention centers. For its part, in May 2012, the Cuban government officially reported that there were 57,337 inmates in Cuban prisons (additional official statistics have not been found).¹⁸

A 2004 report cited by the news agency AFP is noteworthy in that it indicates there were between 8 and

<https://rsf.org/en/hero/angel-santiesteban-prats> and See <http://database.cubaarchive.org/case-record-simple-search/1130/>

¹¹ Arbitrary arrest is understood as occurring without legitimate reasons or due process of law.

¹² Prisoner of conscience is a term coined by Peter Benenson in a 1961 article for the newspaper *The London Observer*. It tends to be associated with the human rights' organization Amnesty International; it defines the term to refer to people who have not used or advocated violence and are imprisoned for their identity (sexual orientation, ethnic, national or social origin, language, birth, color, sex or economic condition) or their beliefs (religious, political or other beliefs held consciously).

¹³ "El número de presos políticos en Cuba aumentó sensiblemente en 2005," Libertad Digital, 2006-01-11.

¹⁴ Lista Parcial de Condenados, op.cit.

¹⁵ Confidential information received from a reliable source in Cuba, September 2018.

¹⁶ Raudel García Bringas, *Entre la aceptación y el rechazo - El reto de vivir en Cuba* (Ibukku, 2016). Raudel was held at the Combinado del Este prison from May 2014 to May 2015.

¹⁷ List of prisons in Cuba, http://www.cubaverdad.net/list_prisons_in_cuba.htm (It appears, although it has not been corroborated, that this list was at least partially developed with information collected by CubaalDescubierto.com.)

¹⁸ Fernando Ravsberg, "Cuba sabe por primera vez cuántos presos tiene," La Habana, bbc.com, 22 mayo 2012.

10 correctional centers for minors under 16; this placed Cuba "among the first places in the world, or perhaps the first, in the number of incarcerated children and adolescents of school age."¹⁹

Considering the difficulties described above, it can be conservatively and very broadly estimated that at least 500,000 people have suffered political imprisonment at one time or another since January 1, 1959²⁰, including those enduring short detention. It's important to consider that, in six decades, the Cuban population has almost doubled from around 6 million in 1959 to around 11 million today. Therefore, the political imprisonment of tens of thousands in the sixties has a much higher proportional repercussion, aside from having certain different characteristics (forced labor, physical abuse, severe malnutrition, etc., and organized responses by of prisoners such as "standing," recurring hunger strikes, etc.).

Comparatively, the number of Cuban political prisoners during the military dictatorship of Batista (1952-1958) and previous governments was many times smaller. During the Batista regime, there were approximately 500 sentenced political prisoners.²¹ the entire country had just 14 prisons, including the Isle of Pines facility ("Prisión Modelo") for 2,500 inmates, where political prisoners were usually confined. The accused were entitled to a full legal defense and political imprisonment was, on average, of a relatively short duration while conditions of imprisonment were very civilized. The Castro brothers, Fidel and Raúl, were political prisoners for the armed assault on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba in 1953 and enjoyed not only much more favorable conditions than ordinary prisoners of the era, but also received a commutation of their sentences from Batista.

Cuba Archive documents deaths in prison during two Cuban dictatorships up to the present. (See a recent report at <https://mailchi.mp/cubaarchive/cuba-extrajudicial-killings-assinatos-extrajudiciales> and the database of cases of death or disappearance at database.CubaArchive.org.) A review of this work, that can only document a minor fraction of the actual deaths occurring in Cuba's prisons, illustrates the abuses and terrible conditions that all prisoners, common or political, are enduring.



¹⁹ "Dissident study calls Cuban prisons 'tropical gulag'," Havana, *AFP* (CubaNet), May 10, 2004.

²⁰ During the Bay of Pigs "invasion" by the Cuban 2506 Brigade, for example, tens of thousands (or perhaps hundreds of thousands) of men and women of all ages were detained across the entire island in all sorts of facilities, such as stadiums, for days.

²¹ Juan Clark, *Castro's Revolution: Myth and Reality, Vol. 1* (Miami Alexandria Library, 2013), p. 332 -334.