

# APA Resource Document

## Addressing the Migration Emergency and Human Rights of Haitians

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### Introduction

Thousands of Haitians are traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum in the U.S., with many settling in camps after being denied entry. The U.S. government is responding with the deportations of thousands to Haiti. These deportations put Haitians at risk of violence, being unhoused, and even death amid Haiti's political, economic, and environmental crises.

Between March 2020 and May 2021, the government summarily expelled nearly 875,000 people, particularly affecting Black immigrants and asylum-seekers, into dangerous conditions in Mexico where asylum-seekers have been subjected to serious violence. There is no public health rationale to treat immigrants and asylum-seekers differently, and it is causing irreparable harm to them<sup>1</sup>.

### Historical Context: The Role of Haiti in the Liberation on the Americas

Without Haiti, the independence process that would give rise to Latin America and the purchase of Louisiana would not have been possible. People from Haiti had an important role in the French Revolution and brought the ideas of independence and liberation to the continent. In 1771, before any nation in the Americas had declared independence, an uprising led by Toussaint Louverture broke out on the island. The Haitian Revolution that started in 1791 led to Haiti's independence in 1804<sup>2</sup>. A slave revolt led by General Louverture made Haiti the first independent nation in all of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the first in the world to abolish slavery. Nearly 100 years of political instability followed as well as payment of a heavy compensation to France<sup>3</sup>, ending any economic possibility of survival and viability and taking away the possibility of development.

This example of a country of slaves that rebelled against their white masters liquidated the colonial power at its roots, defeated the metropolitan armies that tried to subdue it again, extended its revolution to the nearby colonial territory, and generated outbursts of sympathy in other colonies in the Americas. In the end, the new campaign of 1816 would manage to overcome the formidable obstacle of popular resistance through an inter-class transaction that ensured concrete benefits for the people and facilitated the incorporation of the plains masses to the national causes. It should be remembered that

additionally, Haiti and Jamaica were very important, with weapons, money and full support in aiding the Independence of surrounding nations.

The U.S. purchase of the Louisiana territory (15 present U.S. States and 2 Canadian provinces)<sup>4</sup>, one of history's greatest bargains, was fueled by the slave revolt in Haiti. "It would have seemed unthinkable for France to cede any of its colonial territory before 1791. Napoleon had re-obtained the North American province of Louisiana from Spain in 1800"<sup>5</sup>. However, Napoleon's attempt at taking Haiti failed, making Louisiana strategically undesirable, and with war on the horizon with Great Britain, Napoleon was willing to agree to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, on top of historical debts and economic barriers imposed on Haiti, the recent natural disasters, the pandemic, the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in early July 2021, and ongoing socioeconomic and political turmoil have placed Haiti in a precarious situation. Along with these extreme challenges, thousands of Haitians have arrived at our southern border in El Rio Texas, and many have been deported back to Haiti. These families are without legal protection and have been denied the opportunity to file for asylum in Mexico and the U.S. Furthermore, many, if not all of them, will return home in greater poverty.

#### **Impact on mental health:**

As of 2020, the countries with the largest number of Haitian migrants are the United States, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Brazil, and Canada.<sup>6</sup> Haitians have endured cumulative stressors that can influence mental health including poverty, exposure to violence, political instability, and devastation from natural disasters, even before migration to other nations.<sup>7</sup> These experiences are among the primary reasons for Haitians leaving their home country.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

A systematic review and three random effects meta-analyses that examined the prevalence and risk and protective factors associated with symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders among survivors of the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti showed high prevalence of PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms in all groups considered. Above all, they showed that time does not cure PTSD symptoms and that intervention programs should not only consider gender, but also the age of participants in the specific case of depression symptoms.<sup>11</sup>

A mixed method study showed an association between migration to the Dominican Republic with depression, anxiety, and higher mental distress scores, due to factors such as negative social interactions and lack of social support.<sup>12</sup> Higher anxiety was reported for persons who had personally experienced interrogation or deportation or know someone who had. Furthermore, mistreatment by Dominicans was associated with depressive symptoms and functional impairment.<sup>12</sup> Depression was also attributed to experiences such as economic hardship and social stress.<sup>12</sup> Some persons noted feelings of guilt and failure due to challenges such as inability to educate or feed their children and lack of money to financially support family in Haiti.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in another mixed method study in the Dominican Republic, the majority of Haitian migrants reported anti-Haitianism and economic difficulties as reasons for functional difficulty.<sup>8</sup>

Persons indicated feeling that they lack “valeur” (value or worth) based on their experiences of being humiliated and belittled in addition to poverty.<sup>8</sup>

In a southern Brazilian study, the most frequent post-migration living difficulties reported by Haitians included loneliness and boredom, lack of food and water or adequate living conditions, living in an overcrowded home, and the impossibility of returning home in an emergency. High symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression were all associated with difficulties related to adjustment and coping with culture while migrants experiencing ethnic discrimination reported more symptoms of depression and PTSD.<sup>9</sup> High symptoms of anxiety and depression were noted among Haitian migrants experiencing loneliness and boredom as well as those worried about family in their home country. Anxiety and depression were also positively correlated with number of post-migration stressors.<sup>9</sup>

A study in the U.S. found that the strongest predictor of depression among Haitian immigrants is migration related stress (as measured by not feeling at home, sense of loss, novelty, language barriers, discrimination, and occupation). Haitian immigrants born in Port-au-Prince had higher depression scores compared to persons born elsewhere in the country.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, exposure to the 2010 earthquake moderated the relationship between migration-related stress and depression, further indicating the long-term impact that this catastrophic event has had on Haitian mental health.<sup>7</sup>

#### **What Individual Physicians Can Do:**

Haitian children and families are exposed to multiple stresses that may be life threatening during their pre-migration and migration phases, as well as the resettlement phase if they are fortunate enough to successfully migrate. They are at high risk for numerous mental health and psychiatric illnesses including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse. Psychiatrists may play a vital role in advocating for the human rights of the Haitian asylees and, if able, to help complete the psychiatric assessment and make the appropriate recommendations.

#### **What Professional Organizations Can Do:**

Haitian migrants are fleeing political, climate, and health crises in their country of origin. They are exposed to violence while crossing Mexico. Professional organizations need to increase awareness of the current crisis with the Haitian Asylum Seekers who are facing deportation and mistreatment by the U.S. government. They may also advocate and request the current Administration to halt their deportation and speed their asylum-seeking process.

#### **Conclusions:**

The current humanitarian crisis at the U.S.-Mexico Border is a result of multiple factors. Due to several reasons, including the assassination of the Haitian president in July 2021, violence, political corruption, the August 2021 earthquake in Haiti, challenges finding employment, persistent poverty, racism, discrimination, miscommunication about asylum, and restrictive immigration policies, Haitians living in Haiti as well as other countries (such as Brazil, Chile, Panama, Mexico) have trailed through dangerous conditions such as jungles and rivers trying to enter the US with hopes of a better life.<sup>10, 13-15</sup> Instead, they have faced sealed borders, mass deportation to Haiti, life in displacement camps or shelters, homelessness, detainment, separation from loved ones, border policies rooted in racist ideologies, and much more.<sup>10, 13-16</sup> The recurrent negative experiences that Haitians have encountered highlight the

urgency to prioritize support for this population. Consequences of the current situation include re-traumatization, emphasizing the need for mental health resources as well.

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