

During the spring of 1980, over twenty-five thousand Cubans travelled to Fort Chaffee, an Army base on the outskirts of Fort Smith, Arkansas, by way of Mariel, Cuba, earning them the nickname “Marielitos.” Average Americans viewed these “boat people” negatively with growing distrust based on stereotypes perpetuated by comments from Fidel Castro’s government, the United States involvement in the Cold War, and American media. Compared to previous waves of Cuban exiles, the Marielitos faced unfavorable conditions with little support from the United States government. By analyzing the differences between the Marielitos and earlier Cuban exile groups, dissecting media portrayals that created the negative stereotype, and explaining what constituted criminal behavior in Cuba during the years before the Mariel boatlift; this presentation of research will dispel the myth of Marielito refugees as pure criminals.