Deportees face 'nightmare situation'

Many are sent back to Haiti with very little money, nowhere to go

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USA TODAY



Deportees return to a slate of steep challenges in Haiti: finding jobs and housing in an overcrowded Cap-Haitien, traveling to meet distant relatives without being extorted or killed by gangs on the road, and restarting their lives in a country bereft of government assistance. PROVIDED BY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Haitians in white detention sweat suits shuffle off deportation flights in shackles and into the unknown in Haiti's second-largest city, Cap-Haitien.

Some arrive with small sacks of belongings, others without their phones, money or identification. They're given a hot meal, 25,000 Haitian gourdes (about $191), and one night in a hotel after being screened by police.

Then they are on their own — back amid the gang violence, displacement and hunger that led many to flee.

It has become a weekly ritual.

"It's a kind of a nightmare situation for people," said Yael Schacher, director for the Americas and Europe at Refugees International, who observed an Oct. 8 deportation flight arrival, interviewed deportees and described the scene to USA TODAY.

It has been two months since an Aug. 20 deportation flight marked the first to arrive in Haiti after President Donald Trump revoked Temporary Protected Status for Haitians in the United States. To date, 766 people have been deported to the Caribbean island nation, according to Human Rights First, a U.S. organization that tracks deportations. Flights have accelerated from monthly to weekly.

They return to a slate of steep challenges: finding jobs and housing in an overcrowded Cap-Haitien, traveling to meet distant relatives without being extorted or killed by gangs on the road, and restarting their lives in a country bereft of government assistance.

TPS, used to prevent deportation to countries facing dangerous conditions, was first granted after Haiti's earthquake in 2010 and renewed over the years as the nation struggled. In 2021, President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated, leaving a vacuum where a functioning government should be. Gangs now control much of the capital of Port-au-Prince.

Violence has left 5,700 people dead or wounded this year through September, according to the United Nations, while more than 1,000 women and girls have been raped and at least 230 kidnapped. More than half the population does not have enough to eat, the International Rescue Committee said.

For some of those returning, the Haiti they find is in worse shape than the one they left.

Humanitarian aid is scarce. Deportees from the United States may find relatives who have "lost everything," said Stenley Orbruth Doriscar, a spokesman for GARR, a Haitian group supporting repatriated Haitians.

"The country is not prepared to receive these individuals repatriated from the United States with dignity," he wrote to USA TODAY on WhatsApp.

From U.S. detention to Cap-Haitien

Deportees on one recent flight arrived stunned and unprepared.

Some lacked documents or the means to access their money in the United States, said Schacher, who interviewed many of the arrivals on Oct. 8.

Others struggle with having left family members behind. One man from Maryland was detained after he'd taken his daughter to a hospital and gone back to his car to retrieve something, she said.

"Almost everybody I spoke to was separated from family in the United States," she said.

Some had left Haiti as little as two years ago or been gone for more than a decade, they told Human Rights Watch when it interviewed 44 deportees on two flights in August. Most had been detained before the official end of TPS.

Among them were those who had established lives in Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida and Ohio, the group's report states. They had jobs – nursing assistants, farmhands and construction workers.

A 36-year-old factory worker in Indiana said he was detained in early August during his lunch break, three years after he fled Haiti because criminal groups killed his parents, according to the HRW report. One 38-year-old man who worked in a Florida hotel said he left behind a wife and their 5-year-old U.S. citizen son, who had just started school.

"I was working so he could grow up without experiencing the fear, violence, and uncertainty I had known in Haiti," he was quoted as saying in the report.

The Department of Homeland Security wrote in an unsigned email to USA TODAY that in the past month, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement flights to Haiti have deported some of the "worst of the worst," citing 15 people with criminal convictions, including for violent and drug crimes.

These flights often contain a mix of people: Haitians who lost TPS or another status, detainees who agreed to be deported to get out of detention and some convicted of crimes, said Michelle Karshan, a former press liaison for two Haitian presidents who directs a support program for deportees with criminal histories.

The flights typically leave from Louisiana, sometimes making a stop in Miami to pick up deportees. The HRW report noted that some people were told their documents and belongings would arrive with them but never did.

A few hundred Haitians have instead been deported to Mexico or third countries, said Savi Arvey, director of policy, refugee and immigrant rights at Human Rights First. How those decisions were made are unclear, she said.

DHS wrote in a statement that third-country removals are "an essential public safety tool that remove[s] the most dangerous" immigrants.

Those who arrived in Haiti since August have all landed at Cap-Haitien — far away, on the north coast, from the capital of Port-au-Prince from which many came. The FAA halted flights there in November 2024 after three U.S. commercial jetliners were struck by gunfire.

Haiti's National Office of Migration said it offers help, including medical and other assistance in conjunction with the Haitian Red Cross and the Ministry of Public Health.

But there is no sustainable shelter, health care, transportation, protection or reintegration support, according to HRW.

Now what?

In Cap-Haitien, many first scramble for immediate needs.

Among those are finding a place to stay, obtaining medicine, including for conditions that may have worsened during detention, and replacing prison garb that could make them a target for criminals. Some needed new identification before they could receive money wired from family.

On Oct. 8, following processing, a few arrivals were picked up by waiting relatives who lived nearby, Schacher said. Many had to figure out if they could reach relatives in other parts of the country, including Port-au-Prince, about 125 miles away.

Buses and taxis may mean using major roads controlled by gangs, who often set up roadblocks. Traveling risks extortion, kidnapping or worse.

Staying in Cap-Haitien, a city bursting with people, brings its own challenges.

Nationwide, nearly 1.5 million residents have been displaced by violence, according to the International Organization for Migration, pushing many into the countryside or cities like Cap-Haitien where it is stretching limited services, housing and employment opportunities.

In addition, some of the Haitians returning from other countries, including between 26,000 and 35,000 Haitians deported each month from the neighboring Dominican Republic, seek out relative safety in the city. That has further strained resources.

"The city is completely saturated," said Angie Bell, who served as mayor of Cap-Haitien until earlier this year.

Some U.S. deportees seek work at call centers or restaurants in Haiti, Karshan said. But opportunities are limited. In 2025, the Royal Caribbean cruise line paused visits to a private beach destination in nearby Labadee, which added to employment struggles.

Sledge Seide, who was deported in June, told USA TODAY in September that he was staying in a friend's building that's under construction. With jobs scarce, he was scraping by with help from friends in the United States, while helping new arrivals find their footing.

"If you just come back, you don't know nobody," he said. "To find a place to stay, for people to try to find a job, it's hard."

Bell said that in her city, some locals are discussing ways to better assist arrivals in finding work and reintegrating into society. Churches may help some individuals, but there isn't a broader program. She said housing is the biggest need right now.

Some stayed in town only a few days before setting out to other parts of Haiti or trying to cross the border into the Dominican Republic. From there, some seek to immigrate to countries such as Mexico or Brazil, which they may have lived in or traveled through.

What's ahead for Haiti

Outside of Cap-Haitien, Haiti is still in shambles.

Food and fuel shortages, limited access to health care and gangs ruling much of the capital city and roads in between have kept the country mired in crisis.

Gangs tax everything that moves through the Port-au-Prince port, from food to fuel, said Allie Pasieka, the International Rescue Committee's deputy director for programs in Haiti.

"The whole country is under crisis, and it's not a safe place," Pasieka said.

That reality hovers over Haitian communities in the United States, where advocates say many of the estimated 330,000 Haitians who lost TPS protection, along with work authorization, constantly fear arrest.

The Haitian community in Springfield, Ohio, that Trump derided as eating dogs and cats, has recently seen less visible ICE activity, but many feel "very much still under attack and struggling" amid the pressure, said Theresa Hice-Fromille, a board member of the Ohio-based Haitian Community Help and Support Center.

Some have called on Congress to restore protections given Haiti's dangers. A bill that would require DHS to designate Haiti as eligible for TPS passed the House in April but stalled in the Senate.

Whether deportations will increase isn't known. Haitian officials were told the United States intended to send two deportation flights a week, each carrying about 200 people according to the Human Rights Watch report.

DHS declined to answer whether it plans to boost deportations to Haiti, citing security and safety concerns. DHS has previously defended ending TPS as a "de facto amnesty program despite Congress never intending it to be permanent."

Compounding the crisis in Haiti is a shortage of humanitarian aid, the majority of which had been provided by the United States since 2024. But in 2025, the Trump administration's cuts to foreign aid and USAID halted nearly 80% of U.S.-funded programs, according to the U.N.

The effect is being seen across a wide range of programs, including access to hospitals and health care, Pasieka said, with international aid donation reaching just 28% of the need.

Haiti still has had no elected president since the 2021 assassination. Recently, the Haitian electoral council postponed the first elections since 2016, scheduled to start in December, as violence continued to disrupt preparations, AFP reported. Criminal groups have expanded from Port-au-Prince into at least five of 10 Haitian departments.

Whether security can be stabilized hinges in part on the U.N. Gang Suppression Force, which took over from the underequipped Kenya-led Multinational Security Support mission. Up to 5,500 personnel from various nations are set to work alongside Haitian police to target gangs, reopen roads and stabilize the capital.

In August, at least 47 people were killed and more than 50 others kidnapped when armed men attacked Kenscoff, a town located in the hills above Port-au-Prince.

Meanwhile, deportees continue to arrive. On Oct. 8, a man arrived from Ohio only to realize he couldn't safely reach his family in Haiti from Cap-Haitien. He broke down crying, Schacher said.

With no other options, he hoped to stay in Cap-Haitien and try to start again, she said, despite the impossible odds.

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