

Issue Brief: African Americans and Immigration

Key Words: African American, Caribbean, immigration, identity, community, location

Description: This brief details African and black Caribbean immigration to the United States and how this phenomenon has occurred and changed over time. It also looks at the shift in this group's composition and how members of this group must redefine themselves and their community in a new country.

Key Points:

- The African immigration rate continues to increase; the African American population is projected to grow much faster than the rest of the population.
- Several immigration acts from the 1960s through the 1990s resulted in large numbers of both African and Caribbean immigrants finding the U.S. a more accessible choice for relocation.
- Over the few decades there has been a significant shift in the makeup of the black population emigrating to the U.S. from Caribbean to African.
- Both African and Caribbean immigrants tend to live in just a few cities, forming communities that help them to uphold traditions from home.
- These communities allow recent immigrants to preserve important parts of their culture, while still incorporating a new American culture as part of their identity.

Issue Brief

African immigration to the United States, both voluntary and involuntary, has a long history. According to the US Census Bureau, the African American population is currently about 35 million – nearly 13% of the entire nation, and the number continues to grow. In a span of nine years, from 2000 to 2009, immigration from Africa to the United States more than tripled. In fact, over the past 30 years more African immigrants have entered the country than the half a million slaves who were transported to the U.S. during the transatlantic slave trade. Further, accelerated growth is projected for the African American population, which is growing at a rate 34 percent faster than the entire U.S. population.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the terms “black” and “African American” refer to “people having origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa.” The ethnoracial pentagon seemingly defines the way in which the Census is conducted, as well as the American perspective on race. Though the term black may encompass all African Americans, there are many large populations that self-identify as black, but not African American. This brief will attempt to clarify the distinction when speaking about each group separately, or in conjunction.

Significant numbers of African and African-descendant immigrants did not arrive in the U.S. until the 1960s. Coupled with immigration policy freezes in Europe and unfavorable conditions at home, the United States became a more viable alternative for many Africans leaving their countries. A large number came with the intention of returning home after continuing their education or earning some money. However, once in the U.S. many elected to stay for economic and social reasons. Several immigration acts passed in the U.S. also increased the numbers of naturalized immigrants. The 1965

Immigration Act allowed family members to be brought to the U.S., a policy that initially resulted in an additional 7,000 Haitians per year entering the country. The following decades saw the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and the Immigration Act of 1990, both of which eased the legalization process for many African immigrants. The 1986 act allowed 31,000 Africans to become naturalized; following the 1990 act the number of Africans entering the U.S. each year has continued to grow from 40,000 in 1995 to nearly 127,000 today.

Along with the change in the number of immigrants arriving to the U.S. from Africa and the Caribbean came a shift in the composition of this group. As can be seen in Figure 1, over the past several decades the population of foreign-born blacks in the United States has gradually shifted from a Caribbean concentration to a slight African majority. Despite the rapid growth of the foreign-born black population, only a small number reside outside of a few areas. Almost two-thirds of the entire Caribbean population in the U.S. resides in either Miami or New York. Africans tend to be more spread out, living in cities such as Atlanta, Washington D.C. and New York. These population demographics illustrate how community remains important for both African and Caribbean immigrants even after coming to the United States.

However, tendencies to create such homogenous communities can isolate these new populations from American culture. While new African and Caribbean communities do cultivate a blend of traditions from the homeland with parts of American culture, there can be no social interaction outside the community. In a community of countrymen, there is already a network that makes life easier. For an individual who chooses to move to a

city with no preexisting community, the challenges and discrimination may be greater. But there is also a better chance of interaction and learning about different cultures.

Foreign-born blacks continue to migrate to the U.S. in large numbers, and once they arrive many struggle with the line between assimilation and maintaining their own culture. Most new immigrants choose to move to places where communities of people from their country are already established. Such communities help cultivate a sense of belonging and offer support. They often take the form of organizations that promote the interests of each group, including religious or political groups. Reforming these communities in a new country is vital to maintaining the traditional parts of African and Caribbean culture, while still participating in certain aspects of American life. Africans also tend to preserve strong traditions more so than other immigrant groups. Forming these communities is equally significant because it allows recent immigrants to reaffirm, and maybe to redefine, their identity as Africans immigrants living in America.

Figure 1. Timing of Entry for Foreign-Born Blacks by Region of Birth, 2005

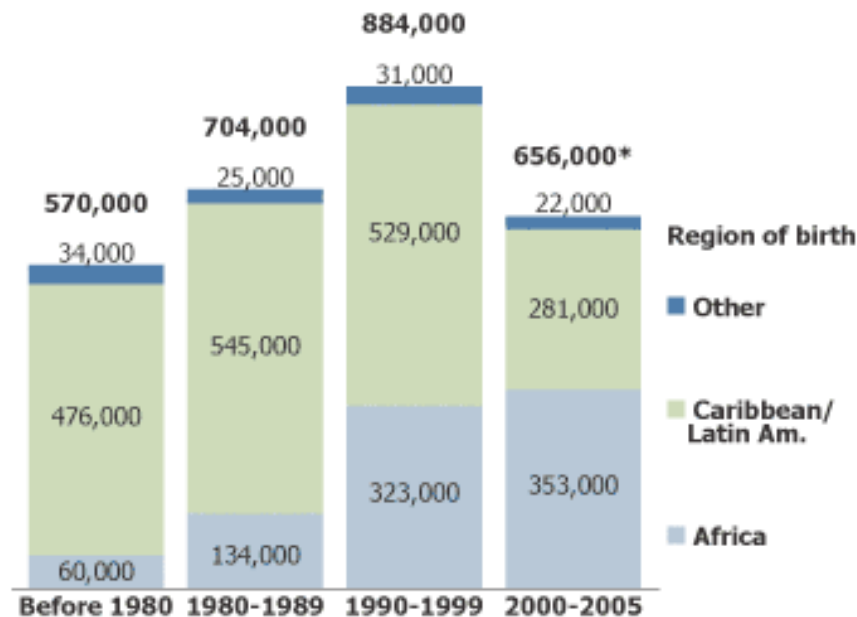


Figure 2

Metros with largest Afro-Caribbean population, 2000.							
	Afro-Caribbean		Percent of black total		Percent of metro total		Growth
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990-2000
New York, NY	403,198	566,770	20.3	25.7	4.7	6.1	40.6
Miami, FL	105,477	153,255	28.5	34.4	5.4	6.8	45.3
Boston, MA	40,825	62,950	20.6	25.6	1.3	1.8	54.2
Newark, NJ	29,818	55,345	7.3	12.1	1.6	2.7	85.6
Washington, DC	32,440	48,900	3.1	3.7	0.8	1	50.7
Atlanta, GA	8,342	35,308	1.1	2.9	0.3	0.9	323.3

http://w3.uchastings.edu/wingate/PDF/Black_Diversity_final.pdf

Figure 3

Metros with largest African-born population 2000							
	African-born		Percent of black total		Percent of metro total		Growth
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990-2000
Washington, DC	32,348	80,281	3	6.1	0.8	1.6	148.9
New York, NY	31,532	73,851	1.6	3.4	0.4	0.8	134.2
Atlanta, GA	8,919	34,302	1.2	2.9	0.3	0.8	284.6
Minneapolis, MN	3,788	27,592	4.3	15.4	0.1	0.9	628.4
Los Angeles, CA	16,826	25,829	1.8	2.7	0.2	0.3	53.5
Chicago, IL	8,738	19,438	0.6	1.2	0.1	0.2	122.5

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