Immigration and the African American Community

Key terms:
Immigration, African Americans, Latinos/-as, Afro-Latinos-as, African Immigrants, Reform

Description:
This work offers a brief discussion on matters of overlap in the issue of immigration in the United States and those of the African American Community. It will discuss the economic impact of American immigration policy on the African American community as well as the social and economic cleavages between African Americans with origins in American Slavery and Black Americans originating from other regions of the world.

Key Points:

- African American communities are concerned that immigration policy reform will negatively impact their ability to find work.

- There is a positive correlation between a Latino immigrant presence and mean and median wages for African Americans.

- The intersecting identity of Black and Latino forces many Afro-Latinos to question their place in the American Black-White racial binary.

- There are growing cleavages between the black community with roots in American slavery and those of direct African and Afro Caribbean heritage.
Issue Brief:

The intersection of cleavages stemming from American immigration issue and those of the African-American community are numerous and controversial. Overlaps in this American policy issue with the issues of the African American community have been manifested in a variety of tensions. Among these: black employability in low income jobs, assimilation of the Afro-Latino/Afro-Caribbean communities into the Black community, as well as growing rifts between African Americans and Americans with direct ties to Africa.

In recent years, discussions on immigration reform at both the national and state levels have spurred action from a variety of African American groups. In the summer of 2013 the Black American Leadership Alliance lead a movement against a bill that would reform immigration laws to integrate around 7 million\(^1\) undocumented persons into the American workforce\(^2\). Many in the African American community are concerned that many low skill jobs, such as those in construction, food services, and janitorial work, will be more difficult to attain with the presence of more documented Latinos in the workforce. However, while African Americans living in areas with heavy Latino immigrant populations may experience greater difficulty obtaining jobs, data and statistical analysis has shown that there is a positive relationship between these two issues. For example, one of the many findings of a study led by Jack Strauss, found that for every 1% increase in a city’s


share of Latino population, there was a 3% increase in the mean and median wages of African Americans. This suggests that dissatisfaction in the African American community with continued immigration reform policy might be the result of a misconception of economic rivalry among minority groups.

The push for immigration reform in the United States has largely come from the Latino population. As many consider this an ethnic category, as opposed to a racial category, many Latinos of African descent are largely beginning to identify as black, or Afro-Latinos. For many Afro-Latinos there is significant crossover between the issues faced by the black community and those of the Hispanic community. For example, in Figure 1, we see the Afro-Latina actress Rosario Dawson, who is phenotypically black, advocating in favor of immigration reform, which is more closely aligned with the interests of the Latino community. Yet, in many ways, Latinos have historically been made invisible in the presence of the black-white racial binary. This leaves Afro-Latinos in a position where they have

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a strong affinity for the black community but are not fully incorporated into the African American community or their efforts⁴.

In a similar way, blacks that have closer roots to Africa or are of Afro-Caribbean heritage are also forced question their position in the black-white racial binary of the United States. In other words, many who identify as first or second-generation immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa or the Caribbean feel a growing rift between themselves and the African American community with a history rooted in American slavery.

While the majority of Blacks were born in the United State, Figure 2 shows that there are many Black Americans whom were born in other parts of the world. However, the chart does not tell us what percentage of the larger black group are first of second generation Americans. The disparities between Black Americans and blacks with closer ties to Africa and the Caribbean become more concretely apparent when considering the differences in economic and educational experiences in the United States. For example, according to the Center for Research on Immigration Policy the median income for African immigrant families in 1990 was more than ten thousand dollars greater than the of the Black American family⁵.

⁴ George Priestly, Ethnicity, Class, and Race in the United States: Prospects for African American/Latino Alliances; 57-58
⁵ http://www.library.yale.edu/~fboateng/akata.htm
Moreover, such disparities in experiences for those who identify in the same racial category decreases unity in issues of racial and ethnic equality, as well as in issues of substantive and descriptive representation, and ultimately makes them more difficult to address.

There is a common misconception that issues pertaining to American immigration reform only heavily impact the Latino community. As we have seen in this brief, there are a significant number of ways in which immigration policy affects the black community. The three primary examples presented highlight the major issues that the African American community faces in relation to immigration, showing that there is a greater stake for blacks in this issue than many may have previously considered.

Works:


http://www.library.yale.edu/~fboateng/akata.htm

George Priestly, Ethnicity, Class, and Race in the United States: Prospects for African American/Latino Alliances