

Issue Brief: **African Americans/Blacks and Immigration Status**

Key Words:

African, Black, Caribbean, Immigration, Status, Undocumented.

Description:

A brief overview of recent trends in Black African and Black Caribbean immigration, the different statuses they hold and in what proportion, and how the Black community, both immigrant and native, relates to the issue of immigration status.

Key Points:

- The African immigrant demographic does mostly, but not entirely identify as Black (75%), raising issues of assumption, generalization and misrepresentation in ethnoracial categorizations.
- Although the African-born population is relatively small (in proportion to the whole foreign-born population), it is rapidly growing, mostly due to sociopolitical conditions in African countries.
- The African immigrant population has both a lower percentage of undocumented immigrants than that of the whole, and a lower percentage of naturalized citizens, but this latter number is likely to increase in coming years.
- A high number of African immigrants (25%, higher than any other group) hold either refugee or asylum status, which offers a path to permanent residency and eventually citizenship.
- Black Caribbean immigration has been significant at different periods, including undocumented immigration, but is lessening.
- African Americans have mixed, shifting views on immigration policy.

Brief:

For centuries, the African-American experience of immigration to the United States was the antithesis of classical pilgrimage to the “land of opportunity.” It is estimated that over 400,000 African slaves were forcefully brought into what is now the United States¹. Having endured a brutal history of colonization, slavery and exclusion, the African-American community is today the second largest minority in the United States (after Hispanics), mostly composed of U.S.-born citizens with transgenerational roots in the United States. More broadly, the category “black” is understood to include other groups of more recent incorporation, such as Caribbeans and African immigrants.

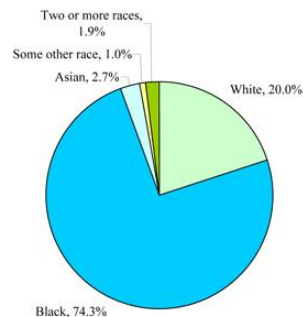
¹ Classroom materials on African Immigration. Library of Congress. 2012.

Voluntary migration from Africa remained virtually insignificant until the late XX century. Since the 1990s, that number has been growing substantially, having more than doubled from 2000 to 2010². African immigrants currently make up an estimated 4% of the foreign-born population, vastly outnumbered by other immigrant communities, especially Latinos and Asians.

Of the more than 1.6 million African immigrants present in the U.S., nearly three quarters (74.3%) identify as black³, an overwhelming majority. Still, roughly 20% identify as White, which may indirectly problematize constructions of ethno-racial categorizations (specially of the census), and the inseparable conflation of African-American and Black into a single group. Less than 2% claim more than one race.

Black Africans, probably the African immigrant subgroup with the most relevance in terms of ethno-racial politics, have a varied distribution along a diverse range of official immigration statuses. For one, due to dire sociopolitical conditions in several African countries, they are much more likely to enter as refugees or be granted asylum than any other immigrant group. In 2007, around a quarter of Black African immigrants in the U.S. held either of these, compared to about 7% of the immigrant population as a whole⁴. This also suggests high numbers in either current or potential legal residency and eventual citizenship, which holds political implications in terms of entitlements, the right to vote, etc. Two other related but distinct statuses, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), which are mostly offered as short-term protection for victims of political conflicts or natural disasters, do not offer pathways to permanent residency or citizenship for the beneficiaries, but only employment authorization and the possibility of temporary extensions. An estimated 4,000 Black Africans hold this latter status.

Figure : African Foreign-Born Population by Race, 2010



Source: 2010 American Community Survey, Table S0504: "Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Africa, Northern America, and Oceania."

² 2000 U.S. Census and 2010 American Community Survey. U.S. Census Bureau.

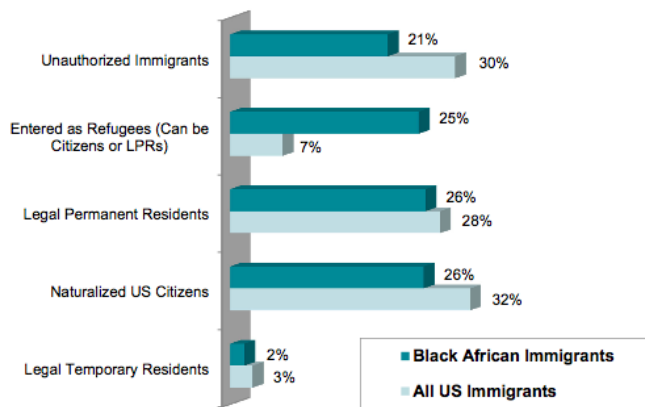
³ 2010 American Community Survey. U.S. Census Bureau.

⁴ Migration Policy Institute. April, 2012.

Another quarter of the group are Legal Permanent Residents (LPR) unrelated to refugee status. Most have entered the country through family reunification visa programs. In terms of citizenship, an estimated 26% of African immigrants had naturalized 2007, although that percentage may rise as many recent immigrants fulfill the length of stay required to claim citizenship.

Finally, a relatively low 21% of Black African immigrants are unauthorized or undocumented, compared to about 30% of the foreign-born population as a whole⁵. This is a reflection of a general condition of comparatively higher socioeconomic and legal status amongst this particular group.

Figure Citizenship and Legal Status of Black African Immigrants, United States, 2006-08



Source: MPI analysis of US Current Population Survey 2006-08 data pooled, augmented with assignments of legal status to noncitizens by Jeffrey S. Passel, Pew Hispanic Center.

Another immigrant group should also be considered when speaking of the relationship of the Black community to immigration status: (black) Caribbean immigrants. More than 95% of those migrating from Haiti and Jamaica, two of the most numerous national subgroups, identify as Black. Caribbean immigration boomed exponentially soon after the immigration reforms of 1965, with Haiti and Jamaica among the countries of origin with the largest number of undocumented immigrants of the 1970s, each alone accounting for over 30% of all Black Caribbean immigrants in 2008-09. At different sociopolitical moments, Haitians have often received Refugee or Asylum status, as well as Temporary Protection Status. Most recently, close to 50,000 Haitians were granted TPS due to the earthquake of 2010.

⁵ Migration Policy Institute. April, 2012.

Caribbean immigrants are only slightly more likely than their African counterparts to be Legal Permanent Residents. Although Caribbeans have historically migrated to the U.S. in much larger numbers than Africans, and still do, the gap is being closed not only by an increment in the influx of Africans, but by a decrease in Caribbean immigration.⁶

Lastly, there is the complex relationship of the native African-American community to the issue of immigration as a whole. In April 2006, in the midst of the wave of immigrant rallies across the nation, the Pew Research Center published an article that revealed some ambivalent sentiments: African-Americans were twice as likely as Whites to believe that undocumented immigrants should receive social services (43%), but they also reflected a higher level of anxiety about jobs being taken away from U.S. citizens.⁷ More recently, African-American leaders from organizations such as the NAACP have spoken against reactionary, punitive state immigration laws and have instead favored what is called a “comprehensive” legal approach that includes a path to legalization and citizenship. Barack Obama, the first African-American President, has endorsed that approach and offered temporary relief to undocumented immigrants through the implementation of a Deferred Action policy. His own position and rhetoric could eventually aid in softening the anxieties that the African-American community may have from their own disadvantaged experience in the midst of an economic recession.



Source: www.colorlines.com

⁶ Immigration Policy Institute. April, 2012.

⁷ “Attitudes Toward Immigration: in Black and White.” Pew Research Center. 2006.

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