



Information and Resources about African Immigrants in the US

New Growth and Diversity

- Voluntary immigration to the US from Africa, historically very small, has grown rapidly in recent years. In 2010, 1.5 million US residents were born in Africa, 40 times as many as in 1960 and four times as many as in 1980. 1.26 million were born in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The following sub-Saharan African countries sent the most immigrants to the US: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan. However, many African immigrants did not specify their country of origin.
- Most African immigrants live in or around cities. The following US metro areas have the largest African immigrant populations: Washington, D.C., New York, Atlanta, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Houston, Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Seattle.

African Immigrants are Educated, but Still Struggling

- Many researchers have noted that educational attainment among African immigrants is exceptional: 64% of African immigrants have one or more years of college education, compared to 50% of all Americans, 42% of all African-Americans, and 66% of Asians.
- However, African immigrant educational attainment is very uneven. The ethnonationalities with the highest educational attainment, such as South Africans and Kenyans, include large numbers of white and Asian immigrants. Only 27% of Somali immigrants, many of whom are refugees, have some college. Educational attainment among African immigrants has decreased over recent decades, and future waves of African immigrants will likely have lower education levels.
- African immigrants are also poorer than average. 20% of African immigrants live below the poverty line (compared to 16% of all Americans), and 41% live below 200% of poverty (compared to 34%). Poverty is also uneven: Ghanaians and Nigerians have slightly lower than average poverty rates, while immigrants from Western Africa, Sudan, and Somalia experience poverty rates above the average of African Americans.
- Despite high average levels of education, African immigrants face a significant “wage penalty” in the labor market. African Americans gain a 24% wage advantage by obtaining a college degree, and Afro-Caribbean immigrants with a degree earn 26% more. For African immigrants, the wage boost conferred by college education is only 11%, even for degrees attained at an American university.

Many Challenges in Common with Other Immigrant Groups

- Organizations serving African immigrants report that their clients face significant legal and economic challenges, including undocumented immigration status; barriers to employment, particularly in better-quality jobs; educational barriers for low-income immigrants; and difficulty accessing public services.
- Respondents also report that many of their African immigrant clients confront serious psychological, behavioral, and health issues, including mental illness, domestic violence and gender inequality, intergenerational conflict, and chronic diseases.
- Many respondents described African immigrants as struggling—and sometimes failing—to adapt and integrate into their new society, in ways that are distinct for refugees and voluntary immigrants, especially the Diversity Visa (DV) population. African refugees are likely to have relatively low levels of education and social capital and significant personal trauma. While African voluntary immigrants are generally better-off than refugees, they receive virtually no assistance with integration, are more likely to be cut off from family and social networks, and are often profoundly disillusioned by their inability to advance in American society.

African Immigrants Are Underserved

- Organizations working with African immigrants generally agree that capacity to serve African immigrants has not yet caught up with the rapid growth of these communities. Concerns included inadequate research and needs assessment; limited cultural competence and linguistic fluency; limited capacity of ethnic-specific organizations; minimal focus on this population by multi-ethnic organizations; and a dearth of organizations doing civic engagement, leadership development, and policy advocacy with African immigrants.
- Small African immigrant ethnic organizations, including ethnic associations, religious institutions, social organizations, and community media outlets provide critical support to African immigrants, often mobilizing community resources to assist individuals in crisis. However, most of these organizations have little financial or organizational capacity, and struggle to address community needs proactively.
- Several respondents pointed to the need for African immigrants to build “panethnic” organizations, as Asian Americans and Latinos have done. The experience of other immigrant communities, especially Asian American immigrants, suggests that over time African immigrants will increasingly shift from organizing and identifying on the basis of “microethnicity”(sub-national grouping, linguistic group, clan, or tribe) to identifying and mobilizing on the basis of panethnicity (i.e., as African immigrants and African-Americans).

Partial List of Research Sources about African Immigrants

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