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Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States

MAY 11, 2022 SPOTLIGHT │ By Jane Lorenzi and Jeanne Batalova

Instructors teach an African dance class in Miami.
(Photo: Djenaba Gregory-Faal/Knight Foundation)

Although relatively small, the sub-Saharan African immigrant population in the United States has grown substantially over the last four decades and is likely to continue to increase. Approximately 2.1 million sub-Saharan African immigrants resided in the United States in 2019, representing 5 percent of the total foreign-born population of 44.9 million. This highly diverse group is comprised of individuals from 51 countries, with a range of ethnic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds.

Compared to the total U.S. immigrant population, sub-Saharan Africans are better educated, participate in the labor force at higher rates, and are more likely to speak English at home. Yet they also have lower average incomes and experience poverty at higher rates than the foreign-born population overall.

The first wave of large-scale voluntary migration from sub-Saharan Africa to the United States began in the second half of the 20th century, after significant U.S. policy changes. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 expanded pathways for non-Western European immigrants to come to the United States, mainly through family ties. The Refugee Act of 1980 increased admissions of refugees fleeing conflict, including from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. And the Immigration Act of 1990 created the Diversity Visa to bolster immigration from under-represented countries, including Benin and Cameroon. The 1990 law also made it easier for highly skilled immigrants to migrate for work, opening the door to educated workers and international students from countries including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. More recently, many sub-Saharan immigrants have arrived as family members of those already residing in the United States. As part of travel bans it imposed, the Trump administration temporarily prohibited most arrivals of citizens from four sub-Saharan African countries (Chad, Eritrea, Nigeria, and Somalia) and prohibited citizens of Tanzania from applying for the Diversity Visa lottery. Although the restrictions were lifted by the Biden administration, it is unclear what long-term impact they had on U.S. immigration.

Overall, the number of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States has increased 16-fold since 1980. While most of the 4.6 million Black immigrants in the United States are from the Caribbean, people from sub-Saharan Africa represent a growing share. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the total foreign-born Black population will more than double by 2060, to 9.5 million.

Figure 1. Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States, 1980-2019
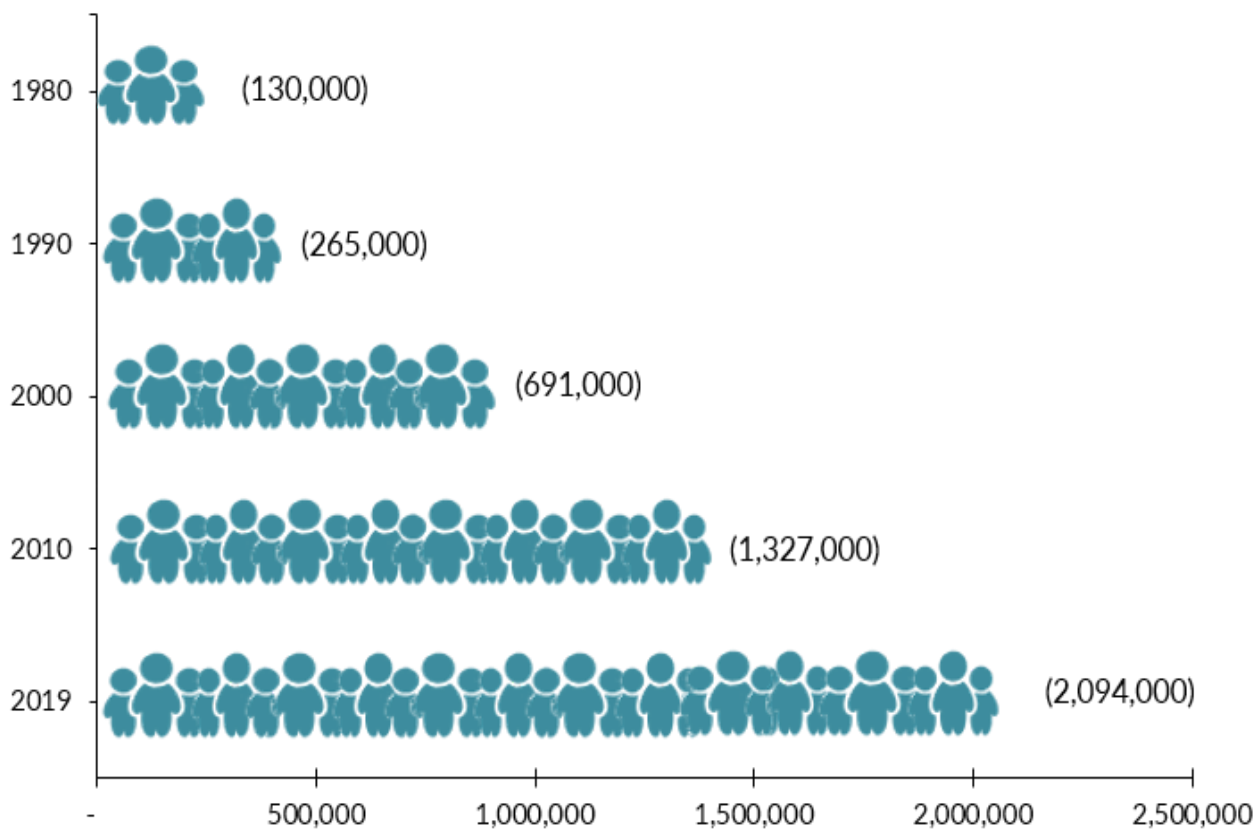
Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2019 American Community Surveys (ACS), and Campbell J. Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-2000" (Working Paper no. 81, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 2006), available online.

Fifty-three percent of sub-Saharan African immigrants came from one of five countries: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, or Somalia. Western Africa is the largest subregional origin, while relatively few immigrants hail from Southern Africa.

Table 1. Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States by Country and Region of Origin, 2019

Region and Country	Number of Immigrants	Share (%)
TOTAL SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	**2,094,000**	**100.0%**
Eastern Africa	**737,000**	**35.2%**
Eritrea	49,000	2.4%
Ethiopia	256,000	12.2%
Kenya	153,000	7.3%
Somalia	115,000	5.5%
Uganda	44,000	2.1%
Zimbabwe	21,000	1.0%
Other Eastern Africa	99,000	4.7%
Middle Africa	**195,000**	**9.3%**
Cameroon	73,000	3.5%
Republic of the Congo	39,000	1.9%
Democratic Republic of Congo	61,000	2.9%
Other Middle Africa	23,000	1.1%
Southern Africa	**116,000**	**5.5%**
South Africa	111,000	5.3%
Other Southern Africa	5,000	0.2%
Western Africa	**926,000**	**44.2%**
Cabo Verde	36,000	1.7%
Ghana	199,000	9.5%
Liberia	98,000	4.7%
Nigeria	393,000	18.8%
Senegal	31,000	1.5%
Sierra Leone	46,000	2.2%
Other Western Africa	123,000	5.9%
Africa (not elsewhere classified)	**120,000**	**5.7%**

Notes: "Africa, not elsewhere classified" includes people from Africa who did not report their country of birth, and some may have been from North Africa.
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2019 ACS.

Globally, approximately 28.3 million sub-Saharan Africans reside outside their countries of birth, according to mid-2020 estimates by the United Nations Population Division. Of these, about 17.8 million (63 percent) lived elsewhere within the region. Côte d'Ivoire, South Africa, Uganda, Sudan, and Nigeria were the main destinations, hosting 48 percent of all intraregional migrants. Outside the region, the United States was the top destination for sub-Saharan Africans, followed by the United Kingdom (1.4 million), France (1.1 million), Italy (524,000), and Canada (435,000).

[Click here](#) to view an interactive map showing where migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and other countries have settled worldwide.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the 2019 American Community Survey [ACS], as well as pooled 2015-19 ACS data), the Department of Homeland Security's *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, and World Bank annual remittances data, this Spotlight provides information on the sub-Saharan African immigrant population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics. The article focuses on the population of immigrants from the entire sub-Saharan African subregion, as well as those from the largest origin countries (of at least 70,000 immigrants to the United States): Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Somalia, and South Africa.

Definitions

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the **foreign born** as individuals who had no U.S. citizenship at birth. The foreign-born population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, legal nonimmigrants (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization.

The terms "**foreign born**" and "**immigrant**" are used interchangeably and refer to those who were born in another country and later migrated to the United States. Data collection constraints do not permit inclusion of those who gained citizenship in a sub-Saharan African country via naturalization and later moved to the United States.

Sub-Saharan Africa is defined as all African countries except Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and the disputed Western Sahara territory. Due to data limitations and for the purposes of this Spotlight, individuals in the "Africa, not elsewhere classified" category were added to the sub-Saharan African foreign-born group.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- Distribution by State and Key Cities
- Language Diversity and English Proficiency
- Age, Education, and Employment
- Income and Poverty
- Immigration Pathways and Naturalization
- Unauthorized Population
- Health Coverage
- Diaspora
- Remittances

Distribution by State and Key Cities

Sub-Saharan African immigrants reside in communities across the United States. The largest shares lived, as of the 2015-19 period, in Texas (12 percent), New York and Maryland (8 percent each), California (7 percent), and Minnesota (6 percent). The counties with the most sub-Saharan African immigrants were Harris County in Texas, Bronx County in New York, Prince George's County in Maryland, Hennepin County in Minnesota, and Montgomery County in Maryland. Together, these counties accounted for about 14 percent of the total sub-Saharan immigrant population in the United States.

Figure 2. Top States of Residence for Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States, 2015-19
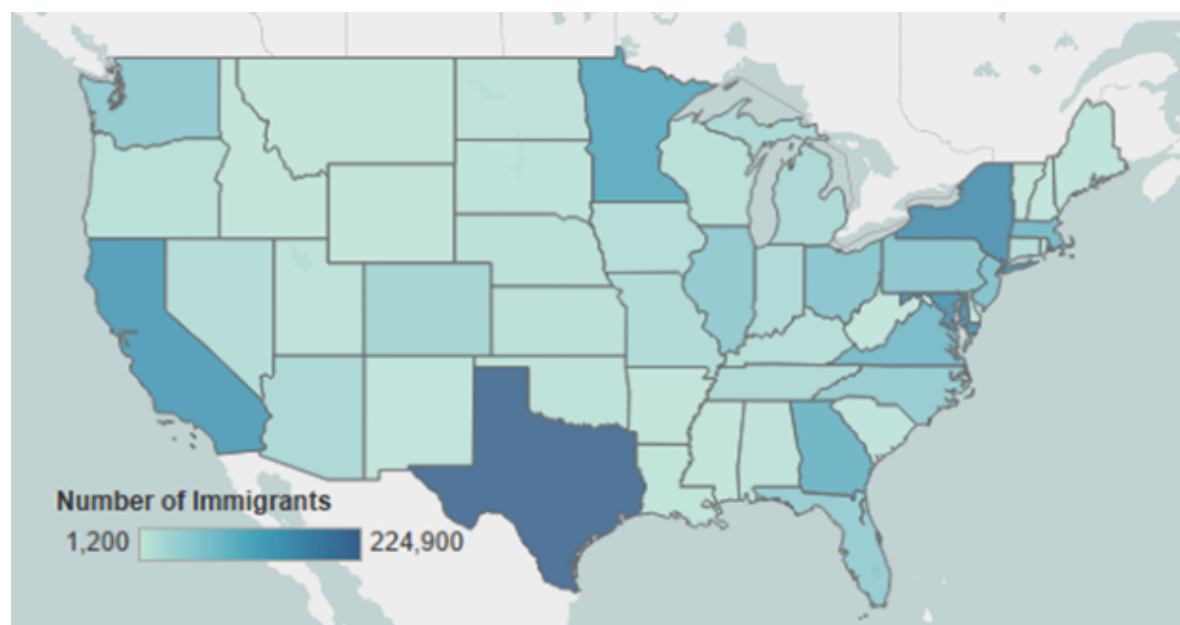
Note: Pooled 2015-19 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state and metropolitan statistical area levels, for smaller-population geographies. Not shown are the populations in Alaska and Hawaii, which are small in size; for details, visit the Migration Policy Institute's (MPI) Migration Data Hub for an interactive map showing geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county, available online.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2015-19 ACS.

Click here for an interactive map that shows the geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county. Select individual sub-Saharan African countries from the dropdown menu to see which states and counties have the most immigrants.

The greater New York and Washington, DC metropolitan areas were the U.S. cities with the most sub-Saharan African immigrants (about 10 percent each), followed by Dallas, Minneapolis, and Atlanta. These five metropolitan areas were home to about 35 percent of all sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States.

Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Areas of Residence for Sub-Saharan Africans in the United States, 2015-19
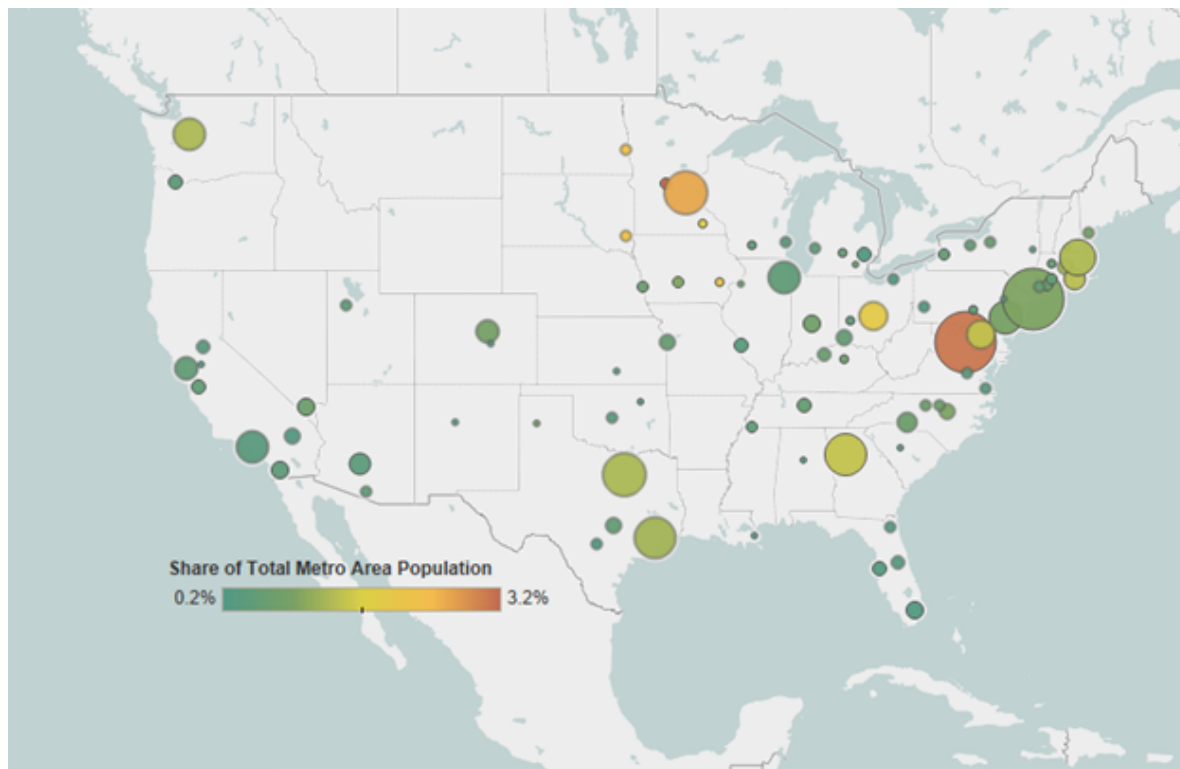
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2015-19 ACS.

Click here for an interactive map that highlights the metropolitan areas with the highest concentrations of immigrants from sub-Saharan African countries.

Table 2. Top Concentrations for Sub-Saharan African Immigrants by U.S. Metropolitan Area, 2015-19

Metropolitan Area	Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa	% of Metro Area Population
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA Metro Area	194,000	1.0%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metro Area	192,000	3.1%
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX Metro Area	99,000	1.4%
Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI Metro Area	95,000	2.7%
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Alpharetta, GA Metro Area	90,000	1.5%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	88,000	1.3%
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area	66,000	1.4%
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD Metro Area	56,000	0.9%
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA Metro Area	53,000	1.4%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA Metro Area	52,000	0.4%

Source: MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2015-19 ACS.

Language Diversity and English Proficiency

In 2019, 26 percent of sub-Saharan African immigrants spoke only English at home, compared to 16 percent of all immigrants. Meanwhile, 25 percent of those ages 5 and over reported limited English proficiency, a much lower rate than the overall foreign-born population (46 percent). Higher levels of proficiency in English are not surprising, as most sub-Saharan African immigrants come from countries where English is an official language. Other than English, top languages spoken were Amharic, French, Somali, Beja or other Cushitic languages, and Swahili and other Bantu languages.

Note: *Limited English proficiency refers to those who indicated on the ACS questionnaire that they spoke English less than "very well."*

Age, Education, and Employment

Sub-Saharan African immigrants are on average younger than the overall U.S. foreign-born population, but older than the native born. The median age of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa was 39 in 2019, compared to 46 for the overall foreign-born population and 37 for the U.S. born. In 2019, 82 percent of sub-Saharan African immigrants were of working age (18 to 64 years old), compared to 78 percent and 59 percent for the overall foreign-born and U.S.-born populations, respectively.

Figure 4. Age Distribution of U.S. Residents by Origin, 2019
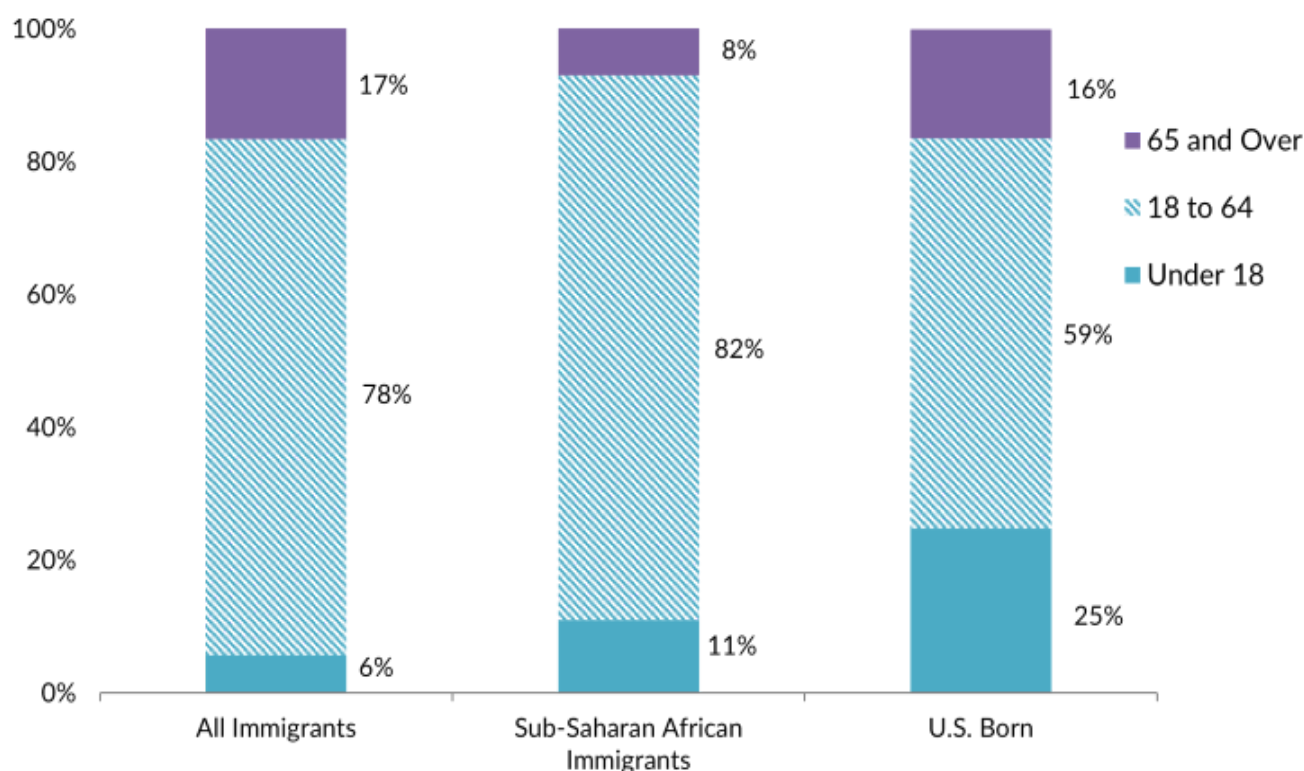
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.
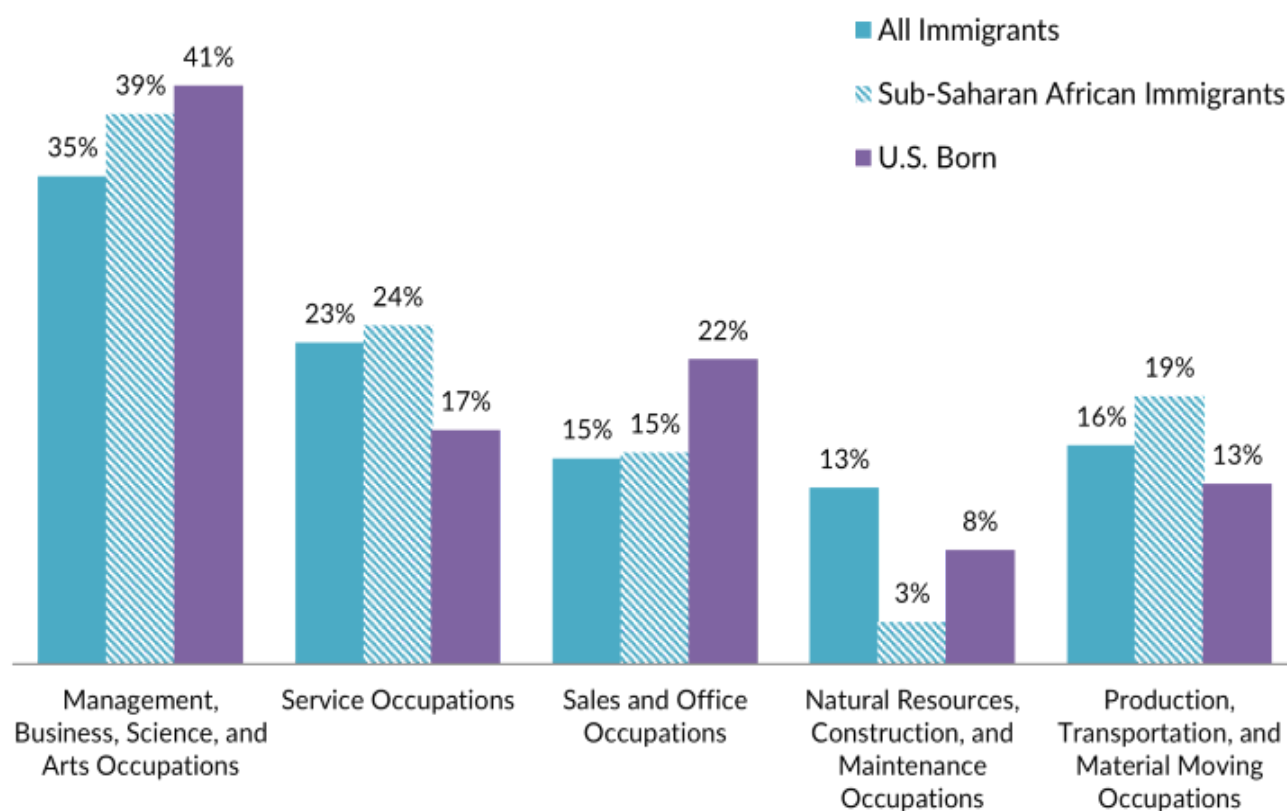Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 ACS.

Sub-Saharan African immigrant adults tend to have higher levels of education than the overall foreign- and native-born populations. In 2019, 42 percent of sub-Saharan Africans ages 25 and over held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33 percent for both all foreign- and U.S.-born adults. Nigerians and South Africans were the most highly educated among the top sending-country nationalities, with 64 percent and 58 percent respectively holding at least a bachelor's degree, followed by Cameroonians (52 percent), Kenyans (49 percent), and Ghanaians (42 percent). Meanwhile, Somalis had the lowest levels of educational attainment, with 14 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

In the 2020-21 school year, about 39,100 sub-Saharan African students were enrolled in U.S. higher educational institutions, representing 4 percent of all 914,100 international students in the United States. Nigeria (12,900), Ghana (4,200), and Kenya (3,500) were the region's top origin countries of international students.

Sub-Saharan African immigrants participate in the U.S. civilian labor force at a higher rate than both the native- and overall foreign-born populations. In 2019, about 76 percent of sub-Saharan African immigrants ages 16 and older were in the civilian labor force, compared to 67 percent of foreign-born and 62 percent of native-born adults, respectively.

Owing in part to their higher levels of education and better English skills, sub-Saharan African immigrants were almost as likely to be employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations as their U.S.-born counterparts (39 percent and 41 percent, respectively). The share was higher for South Africans (62 percent), Nigerians (51 percent), and Cameroonians (49 percent). In contrast, 38 percent of Somali immigrants worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, while 36 percent of Liberians were employed in service occupations.

Figure 5. Employed Workers in the U.S. Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2019

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 ACS.

Income and Poverty

On average, household incomes of sub-Saharan Africans were lower than those for the overall immigrant population. In 2019, households headed by a sub-Saharan African immigrant had a median income of $58,000, compared to about $64,000 for all immigrant households and $66,000 for U.S.-born households.

Among those from major origin countries, households headed by immigrants from South Africa ($111,000) and Kenya ($70,000) had the highest median incomes, while Somali-headed households had the lowest median incomes ($32,000).

Approximately 17 percent of sub-Saharan African immigrants lived in poverty (defined as earning less than $25,750 for a family of four in 2019), compared to 14 percent of the entire immigrant population and 12 percent of the U.S. born. For major origin groups, poverty rates were highest among Somalis (37 percent) and lowest among Cameroonians and Liberians (9 percent each).

Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

Sub-Saharan African immigrants were slightly more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens than the overall foreign-born population (56 percent and 52 percent, respectively). Immigrants from Somalia (68 percent) and Ethiopia (65 percent) had the highest rates of naturalization among the major national-origin groups, while those from Cameroon had the lowest rate (48 percent).

Sub-Saharan Africans are far more likely than the overall immigrant population to have entered the United States during the last two decades: 72 percent arrived since 2000, compared to 50 percent of all immigrants.

Figure 6. Sub-Saharan African Immigrants and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2019
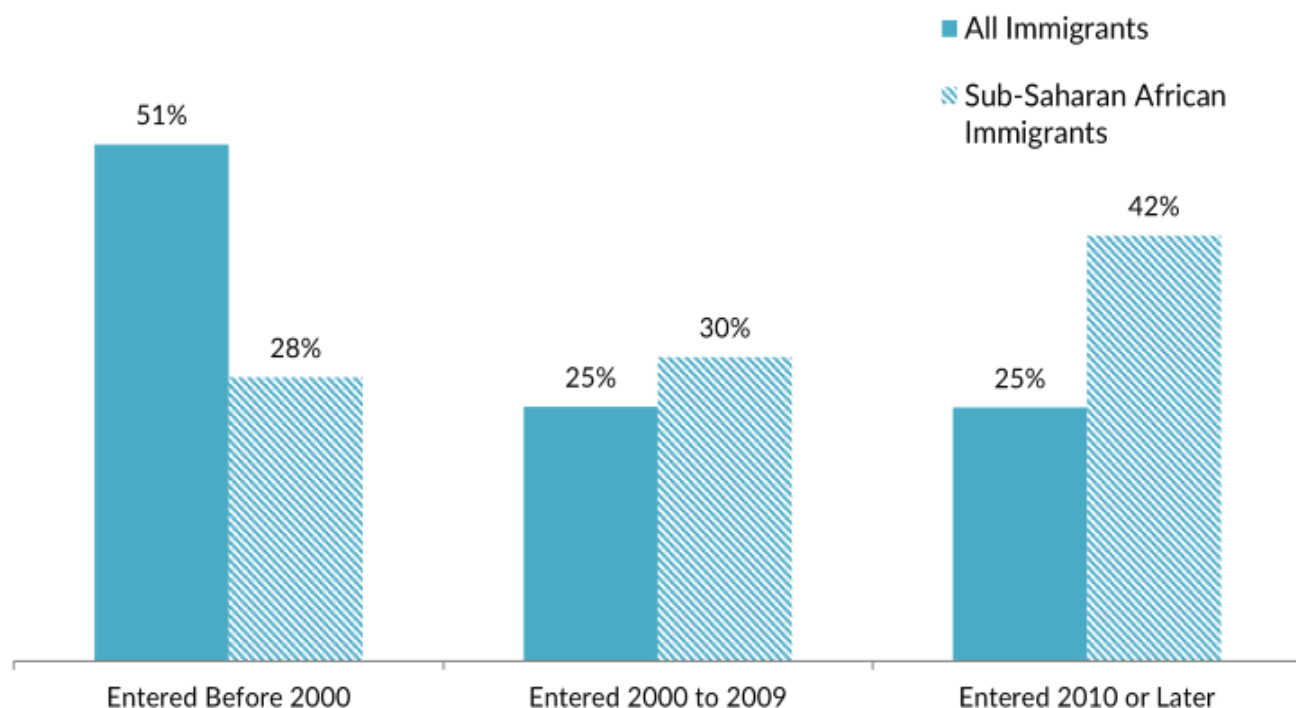
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 ACS.

About 9 percent (63,200) of the 707,400 immigrants who became lawful permanent residents (LPRs) in 2020 were from sub-Saharan Africa. More than half did so as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens or through family-sponsored preferences (43 percent and 11 percent, respectively). New LPRs from sub-Saharan Africa were much more likely to have been admitted as refugees (26 percent) or through the Diversity Visa lottery program (10 percent) than immigrants overall. Meanwhile, sub-Saharan Africans were much less likely to become green-card holders via employment pathways (9 percent) than all new LPRs (21 percent).

Figure 7. Immigration Pathways of Sub-Saharan African Immigrants and All Lawful Permanent Residents in the United States, 2020
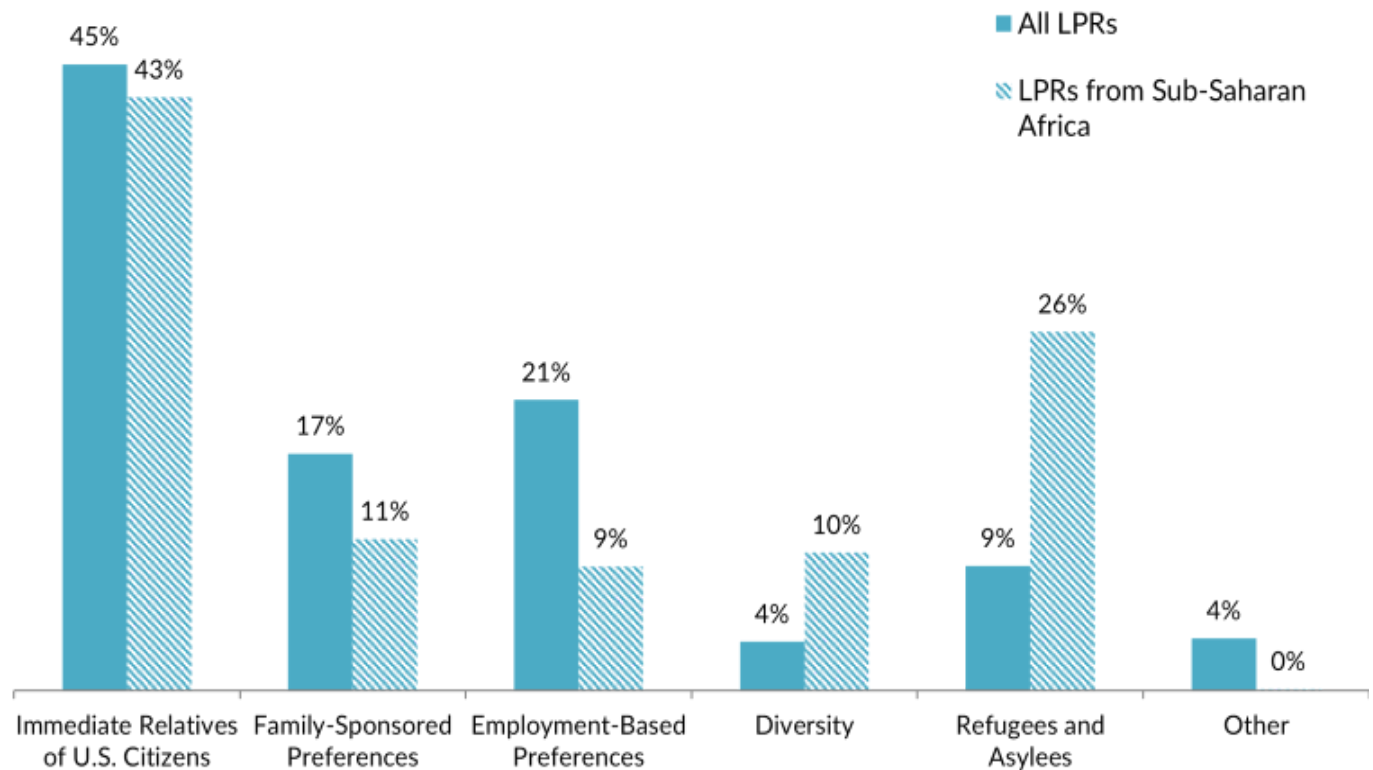
Notes: Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens includes spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. Family-sponsored preferences include adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens as well as spouses and children of green-card holders. The Diversity Visa lottery was established by the Immigration Act of 1990 to allow entry to immigrants from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The law states that 55,000 diversity visas are made available each fiscal year (FY). For the FY 2023 Diversity Visa program, nationals of all countries in sub-Saharan Africa except Nigeria were eligible to participate in the lottery.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 2020 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2022), available online.

Most new LPRs from Burundi (87 percent), Central African Republic (86 percent), and Tanzania (83 percent) obtained their green cards in 2020 by adjusting from refugee or asylee status. The Diversity Visa lottery program was a significant route for immigrants from Benin (accounting for 52 percent of their green cards), Togo (36 percent), and the Republic of the Congo (31 percent).

A total of 11,400 refugees were resettled in the United States in fiscal year (FY) 2021, 43 percent of whom were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo—the largest single country of origin for all refugee resettlement that year. In recent years, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia have been two of the top five countries of origin for refugee arrivals, accounting for 13 percent and 9 percent of all 539,900 refugees arriving between FY 2011 and FY 2021.

Unauthorized Population

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates as that as of 2019, approximately 261,000 (2 percent) of the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States were from sub-Saharan Africa.

As of December 2021, approximately 3,300 unauthorized immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa were active participants in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides temporary deportation relief and work authorization, according to the most recent data available from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). These individuals represented about 1 percent of the 611,500 total DACA participants. Individuals from Nigeria (840 participants), Kenya (550), and Ghana (380) were the largest sub-Saharan African groups to participate in DACA.

Since 2013, there has been an uptick in the number of sub-Saharan African migrants taken into custody by U.S. Border Patrol, primarily at the U.S.-Mexico border. Encounters of sub-Saharan Africans jumped from about 350 in FY 2018 to 1,700 in FY 2019, a record high, before declining slightly amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While a significant increase over earlier years, the 1,300 encounters of unauthorized sub-Saharan African migrants in FY 2020 (the most recent year for which detailed data by nationality have been reported) represented just 0.3 percent of the 405,000 total encounters that year.

### Figure 8. U.S. Border Patrol Encounters of Sub-Saharan African Migrants, FY 2013-20
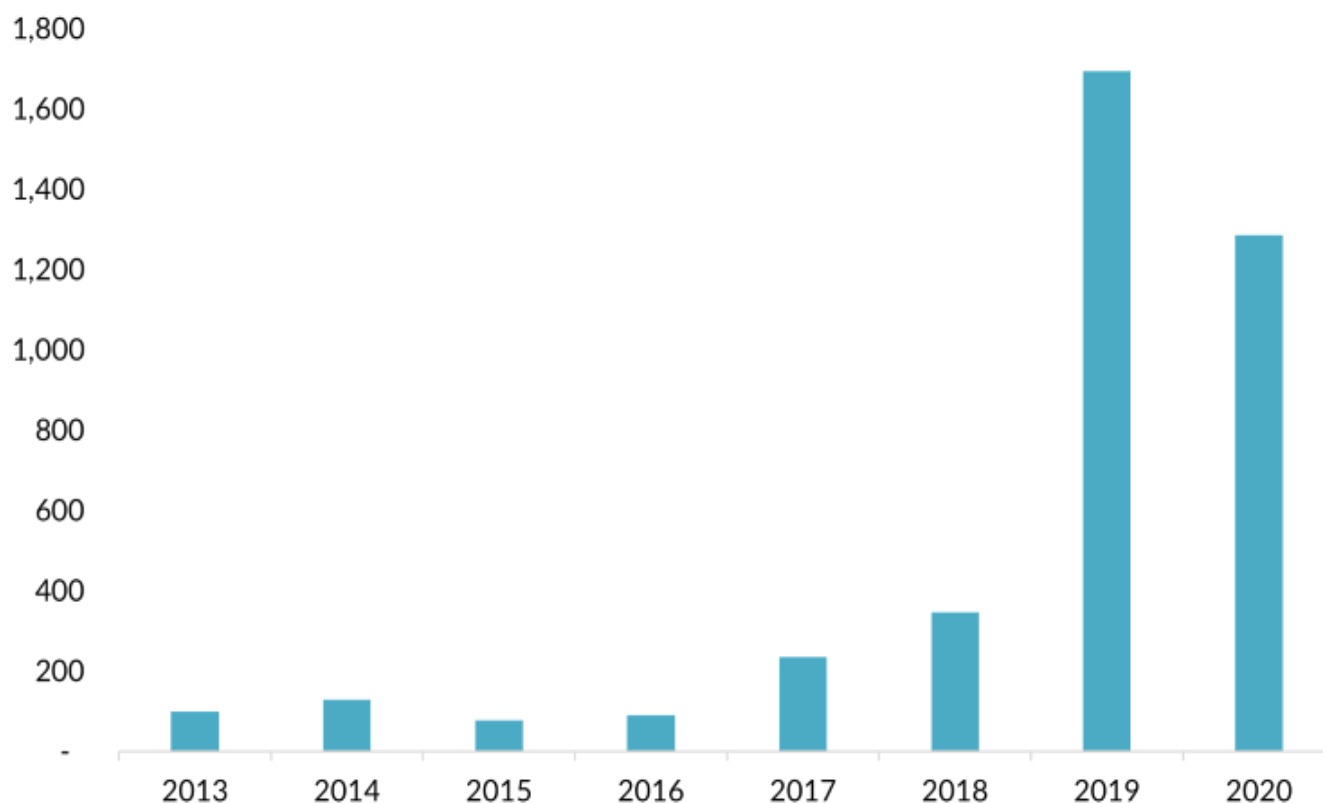
Note: Figure refers to the number of migrant encounters at the southern, northern, and coastal U.S. borders.
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector (FY2007 - FY 2020), updated August 10, 2021, available online.

Health Coverage

Sub-Saharan African immigrants were less likely to be uninsured than the overall foreign-born population (16 percent versus 20 percent, respectively) but more likely than the U.S.-born population (8 percent). Among the largest sub-Saharan origin groups, South Africans had the lowest rate of being uninsured (8 percent) while Nigerians and Somalis had the highest rates (20 percent and 18 percent, respectively).

Figure 9. Health Coverage for the U.S. Population by Nativity, 2019
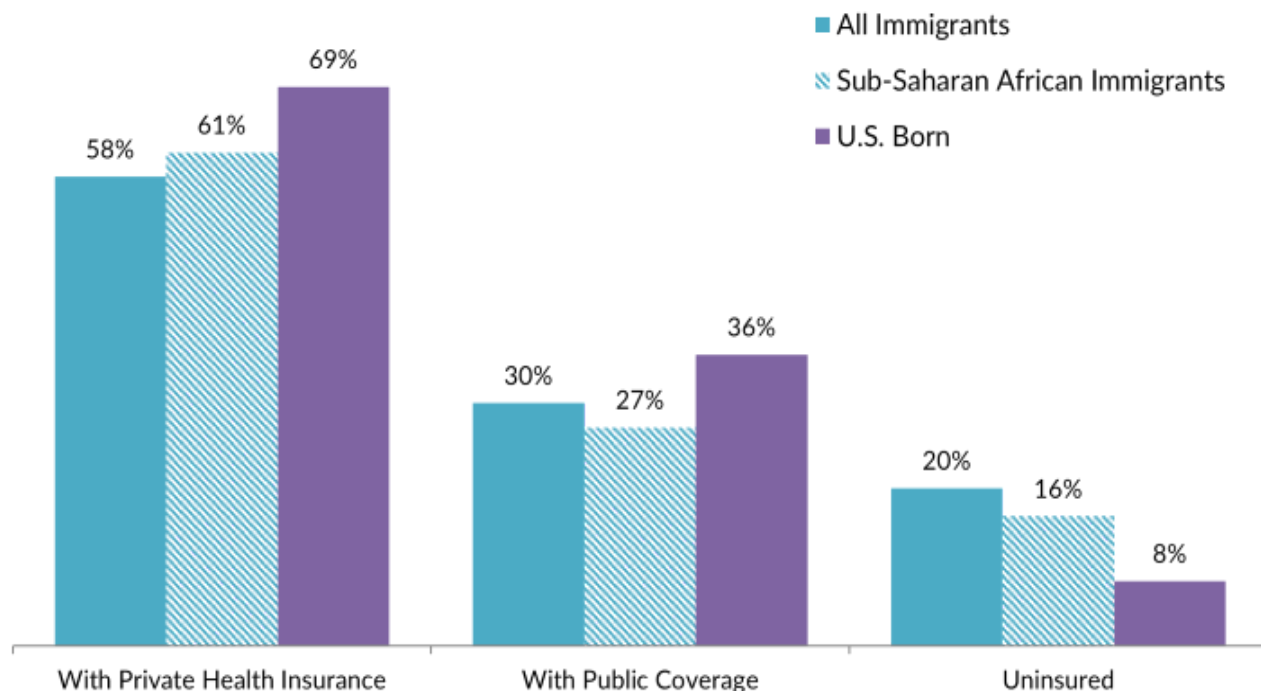
Note: The sum of shares by type of insurance is likely to be greater than 100 because people may have more than one type of insurance.
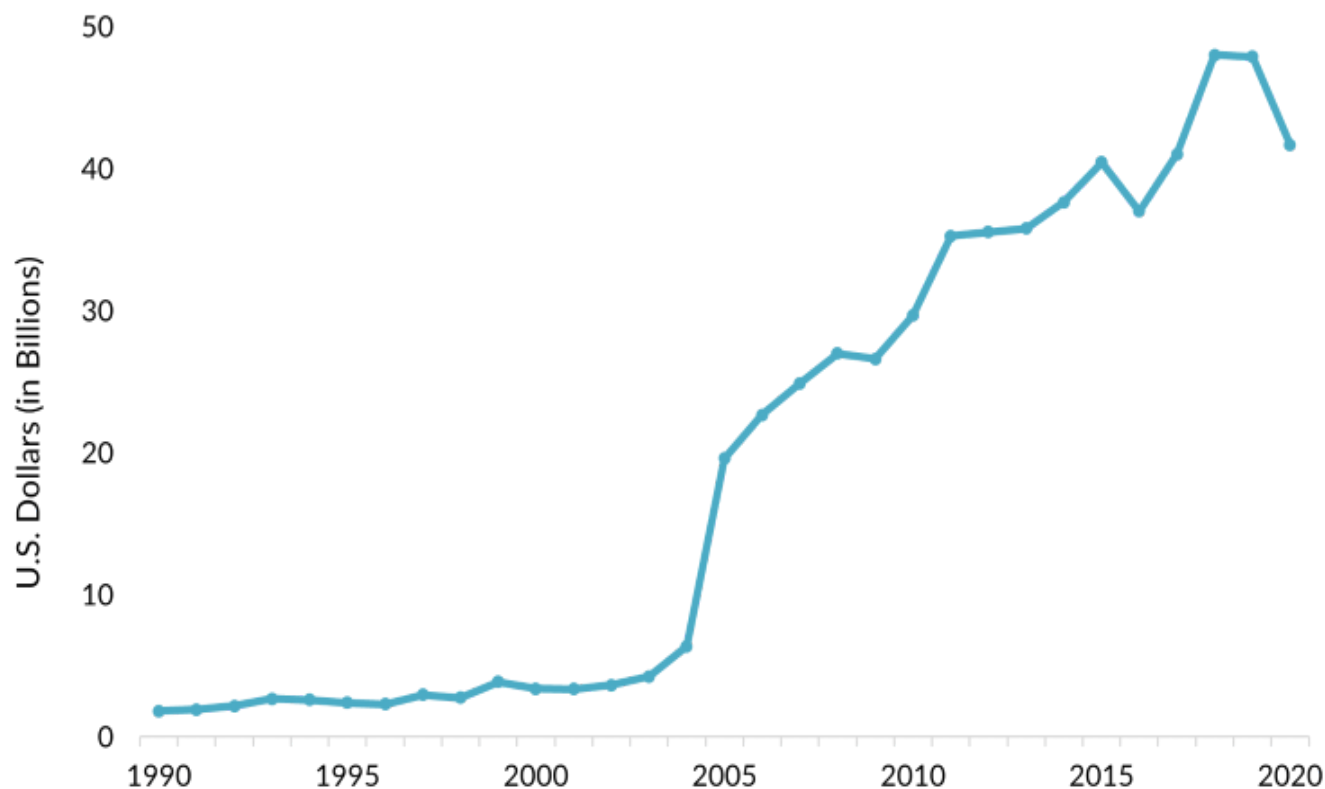**Source:** MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 ACS.

Diaspora

The sub-Saharan African diaspora in the United States is comprised of more than 4.5 million individuals who were either born in sub-Saharan Africa or reported ancestry of a given country in sub-Saharan Africa, according to tabulations from the 2019 ACS.

Remittances

Remittances sent via formal channels to sub-Saharan African countries rose over 14-fold since 2000, from $3.4 billion to the peak of $48 billion in 2018, but subsequently declined. The World Bank estimates that 2020 remittance flows to the region equaled $41.7 billion.

Figure 10. Annual Remittance Flows to Sub-Saharan African Countries, 1980-2020

Note: Figures for 2020 represent World Bank estimates.
Source: MPI tabulations of data from the World Bank Prospects Group, "Annual Remittances Data," May 2021 update, available online.

Some sub-Saharan African economies have been more dependent on remittances than others. Remittances accounted for 35 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Somalia, 30 percent of South Sudan's, and 21 percent of Lesotho's. Although Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, received by far the most remittances in the region in 2020 ($17.2 billion), these transfers accounted for just 4 percent of its GDP.

Visit the Migration Data Hub's collection of interactive remittances tools to track remittances by inflow and outflow, between countries, and over time.

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