



Being Black and Immigrant in America

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Black Lives Matter and that includes the lives of Black immigrants. Although the narrative around immigration usually focuses on Latinx people crossing the southern border from countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, or Honduras, black immigrants from these countries, from the Caribbean, and from Africa comprise a significant and growing part of the story of immigration in the United States.

This should not be surprising to Americans. There has long been a large population of black immigrants in this country since the sixteenth-century slave trade began. According to the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* [1], 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World. Of the 10.7 million who survived the Middle Passage, 388,000 disembarked in North America. The remainder ended up in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Over time, many of the descendants of those slaves have migrated to the United States seeking asylum, family

reunification, work or higher education. Today, approximately 50 percent of all black immigrants come from the Caribbean region, nearly 45 percent from the African continent, particularly from sub-Saharan Africa, and 4 percent from South America.[2]

Moreover, black people are a growing segment of the immigrant population in the United States. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, in 1980 there were 816,000 black immigrants. By 2000, the number of black immigrants in the country had risen to 2.4 million. Six years later in 2016, that number had increased to 4.2 million, meaning nearly 10 percent of all black people living in the United States were foreign born. [3] Such rapid growth in the black immigrant population is expected to continue, especially in large metropolitan areas. According to the Census Bureau by 2060, 16.5 percent of all black people in the United States will be immigrants.[4]

But these statistics do not tell the whole story. With few exceptions, the lived experience of black immigrants very much mirrors the experience of black American citizens. They encounter anti-black discrimination and racial prejudice because of the color of their skin. Similar to American born black people, they are often subject to the

same risks of poverty, lack of access to quality health care or affordable housing, over-policing and increased incarceration.

More than other immigrant group, undocumented black foreign-born people find themselves caught in the prison to deportation pipeline. In fact, black immigrants account for a disproportionate number of criminal-based deportations. Seventy-six percent of black immigrants are deported on criminal grounds, compared to 45 percent of all immigrants. [5] Like the prevailing experience of American-born black people, the best explanation for this disparity is the fact that these immigrants are black. When they arrive in the United States, to the broader society, black immigrants lose their individual and national identities. They are no longer Ghanaian, South African, Jamaican, Haitian, or Nicaraguan. They are simply black and, in this society, their lives do not matter.

Anti-black racism has been present in this country since its founding. Despite the fact that black people were forcibly brought here, when asked the questions “who belongs in this nation?” and “to whom does this nation belong?”, America’s answer has been consistently and overwhelmingly – white people. History and our founding documents clearly show that anyone who was not considered white was never meant to be a citizen. This

assumption was quickly incorporated into the immigration system where it persists even today. Despite the words that are etched on the Statue of Liberty – “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” – the United States continues to demonstrate it is unwelcoming to black people, whether native born or immigrant.

Whatever it was about the murder of George Floyd that opened America’s eyes, indeed the eyes of the world, about the persistence of systemic racism, the fact is that there is no going back from that realization. The fundamental question before America and before the world since anti-black racism is global, is “what is to be done about it?”

This moment in our history invites us to finally address the issue of pervasive, institutionalized anti-black racism. It calls us to transform our society, our laws, our systems (including the immigration system) to ensure that all lives matter equally. No exceptions. Time will tell if we are up to the challenge.

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[1] *Trans-Atlantic Database*,

<https://slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>

<<https://slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>>, David Eltis, David Richardson, ed.

[2] *2016 American Community Survey*, US Census Bureau public microdata accessed by Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek

[3] *Current Population Survey*, US Census Bureau, March 2016

[4] *US Immigrant Population Projected to Rise Even as Share Falls Among Hispanics and Asians*, Anna Brown, Pew Research Center, 03/09/2015; “*Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000*” and 2014 population projections, US Census Bureau

[5] *Yearbook and Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse*, 2000, US Department of Homeland Security

