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# **New Streams: Black African Migration to the United States**

By Randy Capps, Kristen McCabe,  
and Michael Fix



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## Executive Summary

The United States has a long history of Black immigration driven by the slave trade of past centuries, but free Black immigration from Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon. Today there are about 1.1 million Black African immigrants, comprising 3 percent of the total US foreign-born population. Black Africans are among the fastest-growing groups of US immigrants, increasing by about 200 percent during the 1980s and 1990s and nearly 100 percent during the 2000s. Like all US immigrant groups, most Black Africans are admitted through family reunification channels; but Black Africans are much more likely than other groups to be admitted as refugees or through the diversity visa program, which aims to increase flows from underrepresented countries by allowing immigration from these countries of individuals without a formal job offer or strong family ties in the United States. As a consequence of their various channels of admission, the US population of Black African immigrants is rapidly becoming more diverse in its origins.

Black African immigrants generally fare well on integration indicators. Overall, they are well educated, with college completion rates that greatly exceed those for most other immigrant groups and US natives. In fact, the United States, Canada, and Australia disproportionately attract better-educated African migrants, while the less educated tend to go to the United Kingdom, France, and other European countries. Black African immigrants in the United States have relatively high employment rates (exceeding 70 percent for most countries of origin). Black African women are also substantially more likely to work than women from other immigrant groups; the exceptions are women from Muslim countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, and Sudan.

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*Black Africans are among the fastest-growing groups of US immigrants.*

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Black African immigrants' earnings are on par with other immigrants and lag those of natives, despite their higher levels of human capital and their strong English skills. The underemployment of highly skilled African immigrants has been documented, and may be explained by factors such as a recent date of arrival, difficulty in transferring home-country credentials, and labor market discrimination. Cape Verde has the longest history of any African nation in sending migrants to the United States, almost all of whom enter through family reunification channels, but educational attainment, employment, and earnings are the lowest for immigrants from Cape Verde as well as several refugee-source countries — most notably Somalia. Refugees from Somalia have among the lowest levels of formal education and most difficulties integrating of any US immigrant group. Other African nations send more immigrants through the diversity visa lottery, are screened for their educational attainment.

As the wealth gaps between the United States and Africa continue, the projected doubling of Africa's working-age population may increase African immigrant flows. But a number of possible policy changes could reduce the current stream of African immigrants, including a decline in refugee flows, proposed reductions in family-based admission, and elimination of the diversity visa lottery. Meanwhile, improvements in the training and credentialing of underemployed, foreign-educated professionals could lead to the fuller, more rapid integration of many African immigrants into the US labor market.



## I. Introduction: A Long History of Black African Migration

Black African migration to North America dates back to the earliest days of European colonization. The first recorded passage of slaves from Africa to this region occurred in 1519, to Puerto Rico — now a US territory. Between 1519 and 1867, when the slave trade ended, an estimated 10 million African slaves were taken from Africa to the Western Hemisphere; 360,000 landed in what today is the United States.<sup>1</sup> Thus, forced African migration preceded the formation and independence of the United States, and the country has always had a significant Black population. In the 2010 census, 38.9 million US Blacks comprised 12.6 percent of the country's total population, up slightly from 12.3 percent in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

Large-scale voluntary migration from Africa to the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon. The earliest recorded voluntary Black migration from Africa originated from Cape Verde in the early 1800s and was associated with commercial whaling.<sup>3</sup> With the ending of slavery and the slave trade in the late 1800s and subsequent severe restrictions on flows from Africa (along with restrictions on Southern European and Asian flows), there was very little immigration from Africa to the United States until the end of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> The 1965 reforms to US immigration law removed national origin quotas that placed very low caps on migration from outside Northern Europe, and created the current system in which most legal immigrants come through family reunification channels.<sup>5</sup>

## II. A Small But Rapidly Rising New Immigrant Population

In 2009 African immigrants of all races numbered about 1.5 million, or 4 percent of the nation's total of 38 million immigrants,<sup>6</sup> and were far outnumbered by immigrants of Latin American, Asian, or European descent. Rapid immigration has fueled a dramatic rise in the US Hispanic population (that is, of Latin American origin), which now exceeds the US Black population.

Seventy-four percent of African immigrants (1.1 million) identified themselves as Black in 2009.<sup>7</sup> Black African immigrants comprised just 3 percent of all immigrants and a similar share of the total US Black population of 39 million.

Though currently small in number, Black Africans are among the fastest-growing immigrant populations in the United States. In 1980 the total Black foreign-born population was 816,000, only 64,000 of whom had been born in Africa (see Table 1). By 2009 the total Black immigrant population had quadrupled to 3.3 million, while the African Black immigrant population had risen by a factor of 16, to 1.1 million. About half of this increase occurred within the past decade, as there were only 574,000 Black immigrants of

1 David Ettis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 17–46.

2 Karen R. Hughes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," *2010 Census Briefs* C2010BR-02 (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2011), [www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf).

3 Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

4 Kevin J. A. Thomas, "What Explains the Increasing Trend in African Emigration to the U.S.?" *International Migration Review* 45, no. 1 (2011): 3–28.

5 The *1965 Immigration and Nationality Act*, US Public Law 89-236.

6 Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this report are based on Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the decennial US Census of Population for 1980, 1990, and 2000, and the 2008 and 2009 American Community Surveys (ACS), pooled.

7 Throughout the report, except where noted, Black immigrants are those who responded "Black" either alone or in combination with any other race to the race question in the Census or ACS.





African origin in 2000.

Black immigrants from Africa are outnumbered by their counterparts from Caribbean countries (1.1 versus 1.7 million in 2009), but Caribbean migration to the United States has slowed considerably in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Between 2000 and 2009, the Black African immigrant population grew by 92 percent, while the Black Caribbean immigrant population rose by only 19 percent. If the trends of the past decade continue, by 2020 Africa will likely replace the Caribbean as the major source region for the US Black immigrant population.

**Table 1. Black Immigrants\* by Region of Origin, United States, 1980 to 2008-09**

	1980 (thousands)	1990 (thousands)	% Change 1980 to 1990	2000 (thousands)	% Change 1990 to 2000	2008-09 (thousands)	% Change 2000 to 2008-09
<i>All immigrants</i>	14,079	19,682	40	31,133	58	38,234	23
<i>All Black immigrants</i>	816	1,447	77	2,435	68	3,267	34
Black African immigrants	64	184	188	574	212	1,081	88
Black Caribbean immigrants	453	897	98	1,428	59	1,701	19
Black immigrants from other regions	299	366	22	433	18	485	12

*Note:* \* Black immigrants are those who responded “Black” either alone or in combination with any other race to the survey’s race question in 2000 and 2008-09. In 1980 and 1990, respondents were not given multiple race options, and so the responses for these years are for the Black race only.

*Source:* MPI analysis of data from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 US Census of Population and Housing (census); 2008-09 American Community Surveys (ACS), pooled.

The United States has rapidly become one of the major destinations for African migrants, even though it receives much larger flows from other world regions. In 2010, according to World Bank estimates, the United States was the destination for an estimated 4 percent of all African migrants, ranking it fifth behind France, Côte D’Ivoire, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia — and just ahead of the United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy.<sup>9</sup> Remove the Ivory Coast and South Africa from the list, and the United States ranks third among destinations outside the African continent. Moreover, France and Saudi Arabia primarily receive Arab migrants from North African countries, while nearly three-quarters of US African immigrants are Blacks from sub-Saharan countries. Though the World Bank data do not further disaggregate African migrants by race, it is likely that the United States has become — or will soon become — the destination for the largest number of sub-Saharan African migrants outside the continent.

<sup>8</sup> In 2009 there were 485,000 Black immigrants from regions besides Africa or the Caribbean; most were from Central and South America.

<sup>9</sup> Dilip Ratha, Sanket Mohapatra, Caglar Ozden, Sonia Plaza, William Shaw, and Abebe Shimeles, *Leveraging Migration for Africa: Remittances, Skills, and Investments* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011), <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTDECPROSPECTS/Resources/476882-1157133580628/AfricaStudyEntireBook.pdf>.



### III. Increasingly Diverse Origins

Historically, Black African immigrants to the United States have had their origins in West Africa and in Anglophone countries. In 2009 the Anglophone countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone together accounted for 46 percent of all Black African immigrants (see Table 2), whereas in 1980 they had accounted for 62 percent. In 1980 Nigeria alone accounted for 37 percent of all Black African immigrants; by 2009, Nigeria's share had fallen to 19 percent. Today, no single country predominates as a source for Black African immigrants.

Most but not all African immigrants in the United States identify themselves on government surveys as Black (see Table 3). The share of Black immigrants from most Sub-Saharan African countries exceeded three-quarters, with the most notable exception being South Africa, which has sent predominantly white immigrants to the United States. North African countries generally have smaller Black populations and very few of their immigrants to the United States are Black. In contrast with Europe, the United States receives relatively few immigrants from North Africa, so the Black share of African immigrants to the United States is much higher than that of Europe.

**Table 2. Black African Immigrants by Country of Origin, United States, 1980 to 2008-09**

		Number of Immigrants (thousands)				Percent of Black African Immigrants			
		1980	1990	2000	2008-09	1980	1990	2000	2008-09
<i>Black African immigrants</i>		64	184	574	1,081	100	100	100	100
Country of Origin	Nigeria	24	56	133	201	37	30	23	19
	Ethiopia	5	34	66	143	9	18	12	13
	Ghana	8	20	65	110	12	11	11	10
	Kenya	2	6	29	68	3	4	5	6
	Somalia	0	1	35	67	0	1	6	6
	Liberia	3	10	39	64	5	6	7	6
	Sudan	0	3	13	34	1	2	2	3
	Sierra Leone	2	6	20	34	3	3	3	3
	Cameroon	1	3	12	30	2	2	2	3
	Cape Verde	2	4	10	22	3	2	2	2
	Eritrea*	0	0	17	22	0	0	3	2
	Senegal	0	2	9	16	0	1	2	1
	Uganda	1	4	7	14	2	2	1	1
	South Africa	1	3	5	11	1	2	1	1
	Guinea	0	1	0	11	0	0	0	1
	Zimbabwe	1	1	6	11	2	1	1	1
	Tanzania	1	1	4	10	1	1	1	1
	Egypt	0	0	4	7	0	0	1	1
	Morocco	0	0	2	5	0	0	0	0
	Other West Africa	1	3	0	52	1	1	0	5
Other East Africa	0	0	0	22	0	0	0	2	
Other African countries	6	13	97	127	9	7	17	12	

*Note:* \* Before the 2000 census, Eritreans were classified as Ethiopians, because Eritrea did not gain independence from Ethiopia until 1993.

*Source:* MPI analysis of 1980, 1990, and 2000 census; 2008-09 ACS.




**Table 3. Black Immigrants as Share of All US Immigrants and Immigrants from African Origins, 2008-09**

	Total Immigrants	Black Immigrants	Percent Black	
<i>All US immigrants</i>	38,234	3,267	9	
<i>African immigrants</i>	1,457	1,081	74	
Country of Origin	Cameroon	31	30	99
	Ghana	111	110	99
	Somalia	68	67	99
	Nigeria	204	201	99
	Ethiopia	146	143	98
	Eritrea	23	22	98
	Liberia	66	64	97
	Guinea	11	11	97
	Sierra Leone	36	34	95
	Senegal	16	16	95
	Other West Africa	55	52	95
	Other African countries	145	124	86
	Sudan	40	34	86
	Kenya	82	68	83
	Uganda	19	14	75
	Other East Africa	33	22	67
	Zimbabwe	17	11	64
	Cape Verde	36	22	63
	Tanzania	18	10	53
	Other North Africa	15	2	15
South Africa	82	11	14	
Morocco	53	5	9	
Egypt	135	7	5	
Algeria	16	1	3	

Source: MPI analysis of 1980, 1990, and 2000 census; 2008-09 ACS.

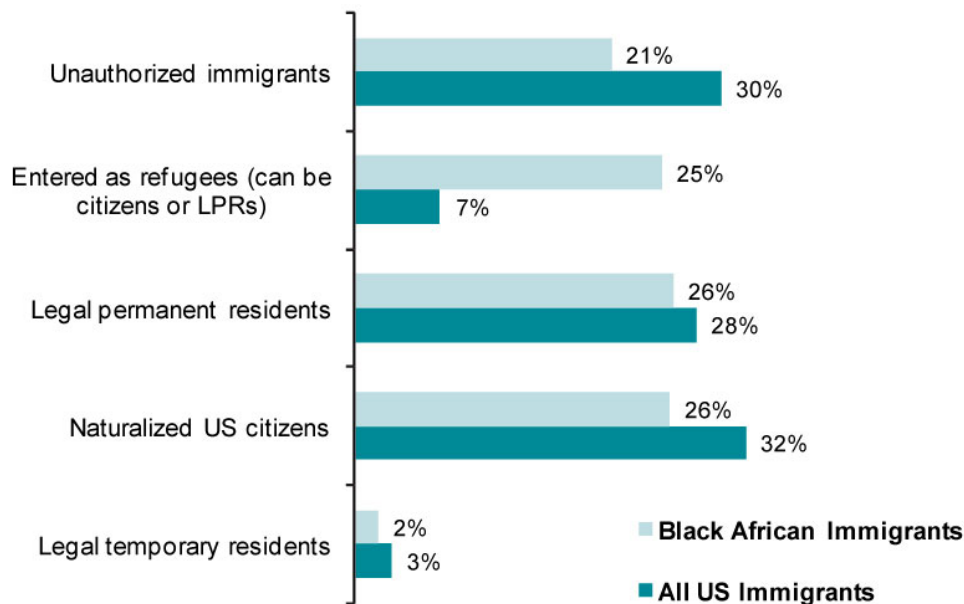


## IV. Diverse Modes of Entry and Legal Statuses

Black African immigrants also have diverse modes of entry into the United States, and various statuses once they are here. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that in 2007, 30 percent of all immigrants in the United States were unauthorized: they had either entered the United States illegally (usually across the border with Mexico) or overstayed a valid visa.<sup>10</sup> Among Black African immigrants, the estimated unauthorized share is somewhat lower: 21 percent (see Figure 1). Pew’s estimates suggest that there are only about 200,000 unauthorized Black Africans in the United States, out of a total unauthorized population of 11 million or more. Illegal migration in the United States is highly controversial and is closely associated with Latino immigrants — especially those from Mexico and Central America — but not with Black immigrants. Unauthorized immigrants are generally barred from major government benefits and services, and have been increasingly subject to immigration raids or arrests by the police as well as the risk of deportation. A lack of legal status is also associated, generally, with more precarious employment, lower wages, and lack of private health insurance coverage. Thus the lower percentage of the unauthorized among Black African immigrants means that they generally have better prospects for integration than other groups (such as Mexicans) with a more precarious status.

Black African immigrants are much more likely than other immigrants to have entered the United States as refugees or gained asylum after coming to the country.<sup>11</sup> Since 1980, the United States has recognized the international definition of refugees as fleeing “persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.”<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1. 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.

10 US population surveys such as the census, ACS, and Current Population Survey (CPS) ask respondents about their citizenship, country of origin, and year of arrival in the United States. The surveys do not inquire about the legal status for noncitizens or refugee entrant status. The Pew Hispanic Center has developed methods to assign legal status to noncitizens in the CPS based on country of origin, year of US arrival, and other characteristics. Here we pool three years of CPS data, 2006-08, because of the smaller sample size in the CPS than the ACS.

11 Refugees are so designated abroad, by the US Department of State, and enter the United States with that designation. Asylees may declare their intention to seek asylum when they arrive at a port of entry; others spend some time in unauthorized status before seeking asylum.

12 US Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), *Who We Serve* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, ORR), [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/whoweserve.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/whoweserve.htm).



Within the past three decades, instability within several African countries has led to the recognition of many immigrants from these sources as refugees — a designation allowing them to receive resettlement services and public benefits immediately upon their arrival and for a period of several months or years afterward (depending on the type of service or benefit). In 2007 about a quarter of all Black African immigrants in the United States had entered as refugees or received asylum (though many had since become permanent residents or citizens), versus 7 percent of all US immigrants. Five refugee source countries — Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia, Sudan, and Eritrea — together accounted for 30 percent of all Black African immigrants in 2009.<sup>13</sup>

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Another quarter of Black African immigrants are legal permanent residents (LPRs) who did not come as refugees. These immigrants primarily entered the United States through one of three types of visa programs: family reunification, employment, or diversity.

While many earlier African immigrants have become US citizens, in particular those from Anglophone countries, the overall citizenship rate among the Black African population is relatively low. In 2007, 26 percent of Black African immigrants had naturalized, below the average of 32 percent for all immigrants. In most cases, LPRs must wait five years before they can apply to take the US citizenship test.<sup>14</sup> A relatively small share of Black African immigrants have met the five-year requirement: in 2009, 22 percent of Black African immigrants had arrived in 2005 or later, versus just 13 percent for immigrants overall. The highest shares of these post-2005 arrivals were found among immigrants from Cameroon, Kenya, and Zimbabwe (28 percent); Tanzania (27 percent); and Somalia (26 percent).

A small share of Black African immigrants have been admitted as temporary immigrants, including students and those with temporary work permits. In 2007 about 2 percent of Black African immigrants held these types of temporary visas, close to the average of 3 percent for all immigrants.

Finally, there are small groups of African immigrants that are allowed to stay in the United States temporarily due to political conflicts or natural disasters in their home countries. The US Congress has designated two types of temporary legal status — Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) — on a country-by-country basis for short periods (usually 18 months to two years at a time), although the Congress often extends these designations for many years. TPS and DED allow immigrants to work in the United States and protect them from deportation. These statuses do not, however, put immigrants on a path to permanent residency, nor do they confer eligibility for major public benefit programs. In March 2011 approximately 4,000 immigrants from Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan had TPS or DED status and a much larger group from Central American countries (300,000–400,000).<sup>15</sup>

The annual flow of legal immigrants to the United States is about 1 million, with approximately 10 percent (100,000) coming from Africa. Family reunification is the most common mode of legal admission to the United States, including people who enter through marriage or who are sponsored to immigrate by their parents, siblings, or adult children. In fiscal year (FY) 2010, two-thirds of the approximately 1 million immigrants legally admitted to the United States were admitted through family provisions (either

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<sup>13</sup> Some immigrants from these countries immigrated through employment, family reunification, or other provisions of US immigration law, but the majority came as refugees.

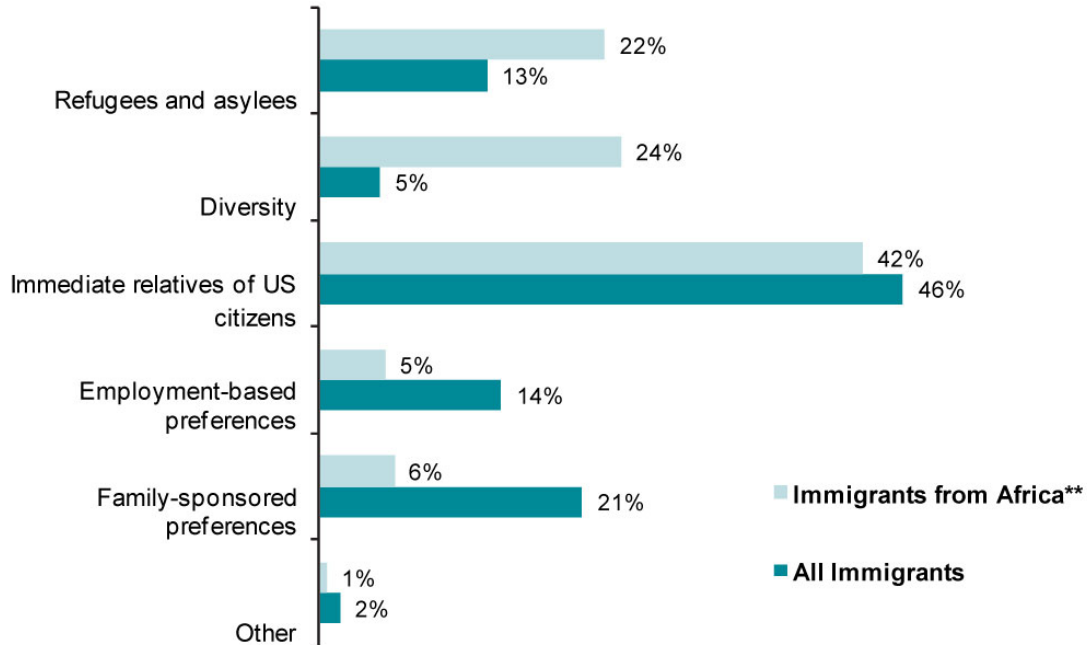
<sup>14</sup> The waiting period is three years for legal permanent residents (LPRs) who have married US citizens.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Ellen Wasem and Karma Ester, *Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010), [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/homesec/RS20844.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/homesec/RS20844.pdf).



as immediate relatives of US citizens or through other family preferences).<sup>16</sup> Another 14 percent were admitted for employment (or as spouses or children of those admitted for employment), and 13 percent were admitted as refugees (see Figure 2). Five percent were admitted through the diversity visa program, which was started in 1995 to increase representation from source countries with small numbers in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 2. Legal Admissions\* by Class for All US Immigrants and African Immigrants, FY 2010**



*Note:* \* Legal admissions include both immigrants obtaining permanent residency upon arrival in the United States as well as those who apply for and receive LPR status after substantial periods of residency in the country without such status.

\*\* Includes African immigrants of all races; the legal admissions data disaggregate admissions by country of origin and not by race.

*Source:* US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "Table 10: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Broad Class of Admission and Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Year 2010," in *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2010, revised March 30, 2011), [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR10.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR10.shtm).

African immigrants are much more likely to have been admitted through the diversity program or as refugees than immigrants from most other world regions. In FY 2010 almost half of the African immigrants (46 percent) were in these two admissions classes, versus just 18 percent of all immigrants (see Table 4).<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, relatively low shares of African immigrants were in the family reunification and employment classes. It is not surprising that African immigrants are overrepresented in the diversity program, given that they are underrepresented in the general immigrant population and the program is designed to promote pluralism in immigration flows.<sup>19</sup> While Africans comprised 10 percent of all legal admissions, they accounted for 48 percent of diversity immigrants in FY 2010 — a share that was up substantially from 32 percent in FY 1999. The overrepresentation of African immigrants among US refugees (17 percent) owes to several factors, including the large number of conflicts on the continent that have displaced refugees and the policies of public and private institutions that carry out resettlement in the United States and internationally.

<sup>16</sup> The US federal government's fiscal year (FY) 2010 ran from September 30, 2009, through October 1, 2010. The legal admissions data used here include both immigrants who were legally admitted upon their arrival in the United States as well as those who applied and had their status adjusted to LPR while already living in the country.

<sup>17</sup> The diversity program was enacted by the *Immigration Act of 1990* (US Public Law 101-649), but the first diversity immigrant did not arrive until 1995.

<sup>18</sup> The legal admissions data do not identify the race of immigrants, and so African immigrants here include Black immigrants alongside those of other races. Overall, about one-quarter of African immigrants are not Black, and this share has been declining over time.

<sup>19</sup> The diversity program allots 50,000 visas each year to countries with admissions of less than 50,000 over the prior five-year period. See Ruth Ellen Wasem, *Diversity Immigrant Visa Lottery Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41747.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41747.pdf).


**Table 4. Legal Admissions,\* by Class, for African Immigrants and Sub-Saharan Origin Countries, FY 2010**

	Total Admissions	Family Preferences (US citizens and others) (%)	Refugees and Asylees (%)	Diversity (%)	Employment and Other (%)	
<i>All immigrants</i>	1,042,625	66	13	5	16	
<i>All immigrants from Africa**</i>	101,355	48	22	24	6	
Country of Origin	Cape Verde	1,668	98	-	0	1
	Malawi	164	79	2	7	13
	Senegal	1,285	73	7	11	9
	Gambia	859	70	17	3	9
	Nigeria	13,376	70	1	22	7
	Ghana	7,429	66	2	28	4
	Angola	148	61	20	9	9
	Mali	528	60	19	5	16
	Burkina Faso	377	57	14	24	5
	Ethiopia	14,266	52	19	28	1
	Uganda	1,085	52	27	12	9
	Sierra Leone	2,011	51	24	21	4
	South Africa	2,758	49	0	10	41
	Kenya	7,421	44	19	31	6
	Togo	1,563	44	24	30	2
	Benin	486	37	13	46	5
	Zimbabwe	1,274	36	43	5	17
	Côte D'Ivoire	1,621	35	41	17	7
	Sudan	2,397	35	44	20	2
	Tanzania	1,850	33	56	4	7
	Guinea	1,379	30	56	8	6
	Cameroon	4,161	28	32	37	2
	Liberia	4,837	28	55	16	1
	Eritrea	1,656	27	47	23	3
	Congo, Republic	968	21	53	23	4
	Rwanda	489	18	70	9	3
	Somalia	4,558	17	82	1	1
Congo, Democratic Republic	1,764	9	59	31	2	
Burundi	841	3	91	4	2	
(Includes North Africa)						
Balance of Africa	18,136	50	8	34	8	

Note: \* Legal admissions include immigrants obtaining permanent residency upon arrival in the United States as well as those who apply for and receive LPR status after substantial periods of residency in the country without such status.

\*\* Includes African immigrants of all races; the legal admissions data disaggregate by country of origin and not by race.

Source: DHS, "Table 10: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Broad Class of Admission and Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Year 2010."



The refugee and diversity programs have expanded the diversity of the African immigrant population in recent years. During previous decades, large Anglophone nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia dominated African immigration flows to the United States. But the list of countries sending significant numbers of immigrants to the United States has grown over time, with the diversity and refugee programs contributing increasing numbers, especially from non-English-speaking countries.<sup>20</sup> In FY 2010, the shares of immigrants admitted through family reunification channels were highest for African nations with the longest history of emigration to the United States, led by Cape Verde — the oldest source country (98 percent) — and followed by Malawi, Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, and Ghana (all at two-thirds or more, see Table 4). All of these countries except for Malawi are in West Africa.

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*The refugee and diversity programs have expanded the diversity of the African immigrant population in recent years.*

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Countries with lower shares of family-based admissions are located across the continent. Shares of family admissions are lowest in countries where refugees comprise the largest class of admissions, most notably Zimbabwe, Côte D'Ivoire, Sudan, Tanzania, Liberia, Eritrea, Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, and Burundi. Diversity admission shares are highest for some small countries (such as Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso) but also for the larger countries of Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ghana. The diversity program has been drawing larger numbers of immigrants from East Africa in recent years.

It is striking that immigration flows from some African countries — including major sending countries such as Ethiopia — are composed of high shares of family, refugee, and diversity immigrants.

## **V. Geographic Settlement Patterns Similar to US-Born Blacks**

Black African immigrants are heavily concentrated in a handful of states, and their distribution largely reflects the pattern for the total Black population, with two notable exceptions. African immigrants, like US blacks generally, are most heavily concentrated in New York, Texas, California, Florida, and Illinois — the five states with the largest overall populations. Substantial African immigrant and total Black populations also overlap in the southeastern states of Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina and the northeastern states of Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (see Figures 3 and 4 for comparison). Unlike the Black population, however, large numbers of Black African immigrants have settled in Minnesota and Washington, while few African immigrants live in the five comparatively rural southeastern states (Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and South Carolina) that have substantial US-born Black populations.

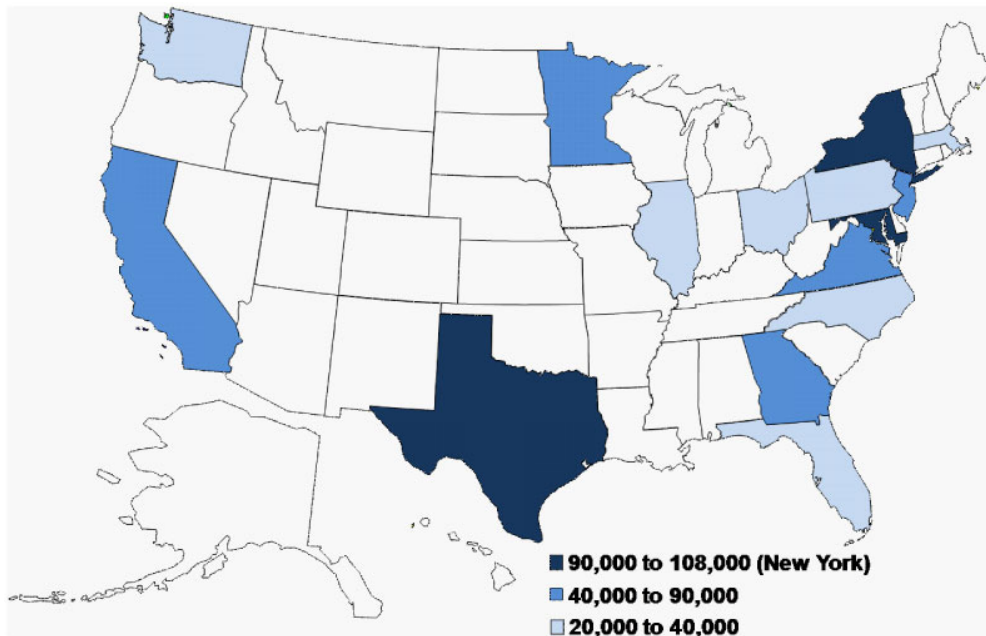
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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *What Explains the Increasing Trend*.



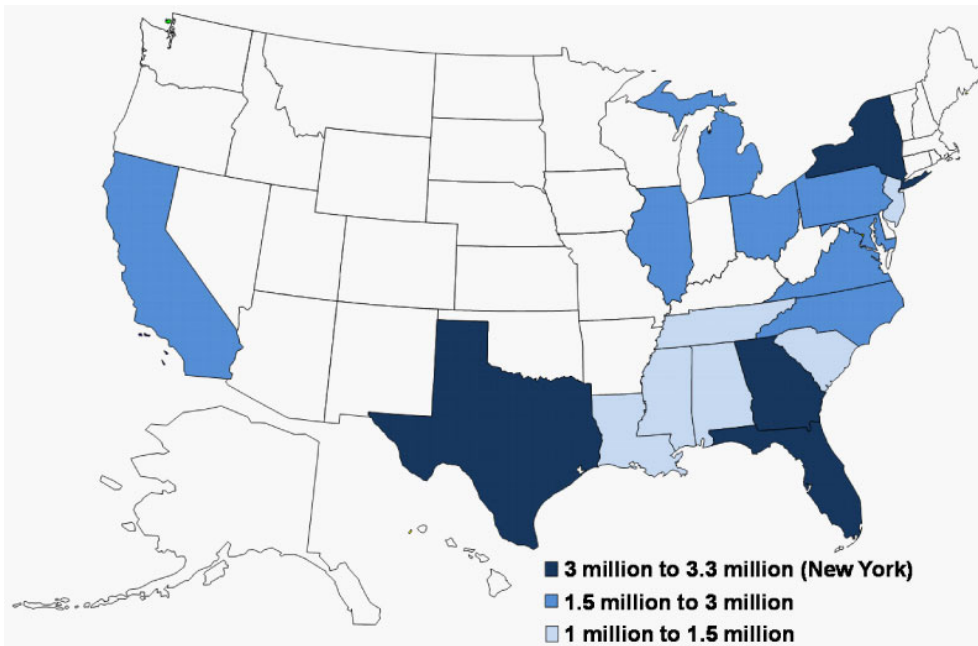


**Figure 3. Black African Immigrant Population, by State, 2006-08**



Source: MPI analysis of 2006-08 ACS.

**Figure 4. Total Black Population,\* by State, 2010**



Note: \* Total Black population includes those answering the census that they were Black alone or Black in combination with any other race.

Source: US Census Bureau, "Table P-1: Race, 2010 Census National Summary File of Redistricting Data," <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.



## VI. More Human Capital than Other US Immigrants

Black African immigrants are among the best-educated US immigrants. African immigrants are disproportionately admitted through the diversity program — which requires immigrants to have at least a high school degree or two years of experience in an occupation that requires at least two years of training to perform.<sup>21</sup> High travel costs could partially explain the relatively high share of skilled Africans among US immigrants. Relatively few Africans come to the country as unauthorized migrants (see Figure 1), and the unauthorized tend to be less well educated.

The United States benefits from this disproportionately high-skilled African migration. In 2000, according to data from the World Bank's Global Skilled Migration Database, the United States was the destination for 37 percent of all African skilled migrants to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, versus 15 percent of all migrants.<sup>22</sup> Canada and Australia similarly attracted a much higher share of high-skilled than low-skilled African migrants; by contrast, the United Kingdom, France, and other European countries were destinations for a greater share of low-skilled African migrants.

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*The refugee and diversity programs have expanded the diversity of the African immigrant population in recent years.*

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The overrepresentation of the highly skilled among US immigrants is particularly striking for several of Africa's largest source countries. The United States was the destination for 59 percent of Nigeria's high-skilled immigrants along with 47 percent of those from Ghana and 29 percent from Kenya.<sup>23</sup> For all three countries, the US share of skilled migrants exceeded its share of all migrants and appears to have come at the expense of the United Kingdom, which disproportionately received low-skilled migrants from these three Anglophone countries.

The overrepresentation of the highly skilled can be seen in the relatively high share of Black African immigrants with at least a four-year college degree. In 2007, 27 percent of the US population aged 25 and older had a four-year degree or more; 10 percent had a master's, doctorate, or professional degree (see Table 5).<sup>24</sup> Immigrants overall were just as likely as natives to hold a four-year degree, but the share of Black African immigrants with a college education was significantly higher (38 percent). Immigrants from several Anglophone African countries were among the best educated: a majority of Black immigrants from Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe had at least a four-year degree. Black immigrants from Egypt, where the official language is Arabic, were also among the best educated.

While Black immigrants from most African nations are better educated than the overall US population, immigrants from a few — mostly refugee — origin countries have far lower levels of formal schooling. Black immigrants from Eritrea, Liberia, Cape Verde, and Somalia are all less likely to have a college degree than the general US population, and more than half the immigrants from Cape Verde and Somalia have just a high school degree or even less education. Immigrants from Eritrea, Liberia, and Somalia are disproportionately refugees.

21 Because the diversity visa program requires only a high school education, it may be associated with the relatively low share of African immigrants without a high school degree, but it does not necessarily influence the share of African immigrants with a college degree.

22 The World Bank defines highly skilled migrants as those with a "tertiary" education, or those with a postsecondary degree. The World Bank report does not distinguish among African immigrants by race. See Ratha et al., *Leveraging Migration for Africa*.

23 Ibid.

24 The findings for the remainder of the paper are based on analyses of pooled ACS data for 2005 through 2009. Five years of data were pooled to produce adequate sample sizes for comparisons of indicators by country of origin.



**Table 5. Educational Attainment for Adults Aged 25 and over, Black Immigrants, and Black African Immigrants by Origin, 2007**

		Educational Attainment (%)					
		Less than High School	High School or Equivalent Only	Some College or 2-Year Degree	4-Year College Degree (bachelor's)	Masters, Doctorate, or Professional	
	Population (thousands)						
<i>All US adults 25 and older</i>		196,972	15	29	28	17	10
Native-born adults		165,754	12	31	30	18	10
Immigrant adults		31,218	32	23	18	16	11
<i>Black immigrants</i>		2,529	20	28	27	16	9
<i>Black African immigrants</i>		752	13	21	29	23	15
Country of Origin	Nigeria	151	4	11	23	35	27
	Cameroon	20	6	13	26	29	26
	Egypt	5	8	23	17	40	13
	Uganda	9	2	19	27	28	24
	Tanzania	7	7	12	31	27	24
	Zimbabwe	7	3	12	34	26	24
	Kenya	41	4	16	38	26	16
	South Africa	7	7	22	31	22	18
	Other West Africa	37	19	23	25	20	14
	Ghana	80	9	26	31	20	14
	Senegal	12	17	22	28	23	10
	Other East Africa	12	12	17	39	17	15
	Sierra Leone	24	13	21	34	19	13
	Sudan	23	20	21	27	23	9
	Morocco	5	18	26	27	27	3
	Other African countries	94	14	27	31	18	11
	Ethiopia	99	13	27	32	18	10
	Guinea	7	27	29	17	18	10
	Eritrea	17	25	23	26	18	8
	Liberia	43	13	24	38	18	7
Cape Verde	12	41	33	15	7	4	
Somalia	39	44	26	19	7	3	

Source: MPI analysis of 2005-09 ACS.



A similar pattern emerges for English proficiency among Black African immigrants, most of whom have strong English skills with a significant share being bilingual. Overall, 70 percent of Black African immigrants either speak English as their primary language or speak another language but are also fluent in English (see Table 6), substantially above the rate for all immigrants (48 percent). Yet, only 21 percent of Black African immigrants speak English as their primary language at home. A much larger share (49 percent) are bilingual: they speak another language but also speak English very well. Liberia and South Africa are the only two origin countries from which substantially more than a quarter of immigrants speak English as their primary language. For immigrants from other Anglophone African countries, English is generally not the primary language but a second, colonial language learned during formal schooling.

English proficiency rates are high for almost all African origin countries. Only two origin groups have proficiency rates below the average for all US immigrants (48 percent): Cape Verdeans (45 percent) and Somalis (42 percent). Immigrants from several other refugee countries have low proficiency rates, but are still above average for all US immigrants: Guinea (49 percent), Eritrea (54 percent), Sudan (54 percent), and Ethiopia (57 percent). Overall, Black African immigrants have a strong advantage in the US workforce due to their relatively high English language skills.

**Table 6. English Proficiency for Immigrants Aged 5 and over, Black Immigrants, and Black African Immigrants by Origin, 2007**

		Population (thousands)	Speak a Language other than English at Home (%)				
			Speak English at Home	Speak English Very Well	Speak English Well	Do Not Speak English Very Well	Do Not Speak English at All
<i>Immigrants age 5 and older</i>		37,255	16	32	21	20	11
<i>Black immigrants</i>		3,075	46	29	14	8	3
<i>Black African Immigrants</i>		991	21	49	20	8	2
Country of Origin	Zimbabwe	10	19	73	7	1	0
	South Africa	9	44	45	9	2	0
	Nigeria	185	26	62	10	2	1
	Liberia	64	66	21	9	4	0
	Uganda	12	23	60	15	1	1
	Kenya	62	18	63	15	3	1
	Sierra Leone	30	25	54	17	3	1
	Ghana	97	20	59	17	3	0
	Cameroon	26	26	50	18	6	1
	Other East Africa	18	27	46	15	10	2
	Tanzania	9	17	53	22	3	5
	Other African countries	127	24	42	21	11	2
	Ethiopia	124	9	49	31	9	2
	Senegal	14	11	46	31	11	1
	Sudan	33	10	44	29	15	2
	Other West Africa	48	11	43	29	15	2
	Eritrea	19	8	46	29	13	4
	Egypt	7	11	41	33	13	2
	Morocco	6	10	41	28	17	4
	Guinea	10	14	35	29	19	2
Cape Verde	15	7	38	28	18	9	
Somalia	64	6	35	25	23	10	

Source: MPI analysis of 2005-09 ACS.



## VII. High Employment Rates But Relatively Low Earnings

The relatively high educational attainment and English proficiency of Black African immigrants appears to translate into high labor force participation, though not necessarily high earnings. Employment rates for Black African immigrants are higher than for immigrants overall or for US-born adults. In 2007, 75 percent of Black African immigrants aged 18 to 64 were employed, versus 71 percent of immigrants overall and 72 percent of US-born adults (see Table 7). The employment rate was 70 percent or higher for Black immigrants from all African origins except Guinea, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Somalia — all five of which have relatively high shares of emigrants admitted as refugees.

Labor force participation was especially high for Black African women, relative to other immigrant women. In 2007 Black African women had an employment rate of 68 percent, 8 points above the rate for all immigrant women. The employment rate for Black immigrant women was over 50 percent for all origin countries except Somalia, Egypt, Morocco, and Sudan — countries with large Muslim populations and with high shares of refugee admissions, as noted earlier.

**Table 7. Employment Rates for US Civilian Men and Women Aged 18 to 64,\* Black Immigrants, and Black African Immigrants by Origin, 2007**

	Population (thousands)			Employment Rate (%)			
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	
<i>All US adults ages 18 to 64</i>	187,610	93,114	94,496	71	76	67	
Native-born adults	157,467	77,617	79,850	72	75	68	
Immigrant adults	30,143	15,497	14,645	71	82	60	
<i>Black immigrants</i>	2,556	1,247	1,309	75	78	71	
<i>Black African immigrants</i>	847	459	388	75	80	68	
Country of Origin	Sierra Leone	26	12	13	82	83	80
	Uganda	10	5	5	81	78	83
	Kenya	48	25	23	80	83	76
	Ghana	87	49	38	79	84	73
	Zimbabwe	9	4	4	78	80	77
	Nigeria	161	93	69	78	82	73
	Senegal	13	9	4	77	85	60
	South Africa	8	4	4	77	82	72
	Ethiopia	109	55	54	76	83	70
	Liberia	52	26	26	76	78	74
	Cape Verde	13	6	6	74	72	77
	Cameroon	23	12	11	74	73	76
	Eritrea	17	9	8	74	81	67
	Other West Africa	42	26	16	74	81	62
	Tanzania	7	5	3	71	75	66
	Other African countries	110	60	50	71	77	64
	Other Eastern Africa	15	7	8	69	67	72
	Guinea	8	5	3	69	75	58
	Egypt	5	3	2	67	80	47
	Morocco	5	3	2	67	79	50
Sudan	28	17	11	67	77	50	
Somalia	50	24	26	54	66	44	

*Note:* \* Employment rates are for the civilian population only. Adults in the armed forces are excluded from the denominator.  
*Source:* MPI analysis of 2005-09 ACS.



Black African immigrants' earnings are surprisingly low, given their high levels of formal education and English proficiency. In 2007 median annual earnings for Black African immigrants were \$27,000, just above the median for all immigrants (\$26,000) and about 20 percent below the median for US-born workers (\$33,000, see Table 8). Recall that the educational attainment of Black African immigrants is substantially higher than that of either US-born workers or US immigrants overall, and that their English proficiency is also high relative to immigrants overall. Thus, lower human capital is not likely to explain Black Africans' relatively low earnings.

**Table 8. Median Annual Earnings for US Civilian Workers Aged 16 and Over,\* Black Immigrants and Black African Immigrants by Origin, 2007**

	Population (thousands)	Median Annual Earnings (US \$)	
<i>Employed civilian workers age 16 and older</i>	141,295	32,000	
All native-born adults	119,095	33,000	
All immigrants	22,200	26,000	
<i>All Black immigrants</i>	1,962	29,000	
<i>Black African immigrants</i>	639	27,000	
Country of Origin	Nigeria	128	36,000
	Egypt	4	35,000
	Uganda	8	34,000
	Sierra Leone	21	31,000
	Ghana	70	30,000
	Cameroon	17	30,000
	Zimbabwe	7	30,000
	Tanzania	5	30,000
	Kenya	39	28,000
	South Africa	6	26,000
	Other African countries	78	25,000
	Liberia	40	25,000
	Eritrea	13	25,000
	Cape Verde	10	25,000
	Senegal	10	25,000
	Ethiopia	84	24,000
	Other West Africa	31	24,000
	Other East Africa	11	24,000
	Sudan	19	21,000
	Guinea	6	20,000
Morocco	4	20,000	
Somalia	28	18,000	

Note: \* Median annual earnings are for civilian workers with nonzero earnings only. Adults in the armed forces and those with negative or zero earnings are excluded.

Source: MPI analysis of 2005-09 ACSs.



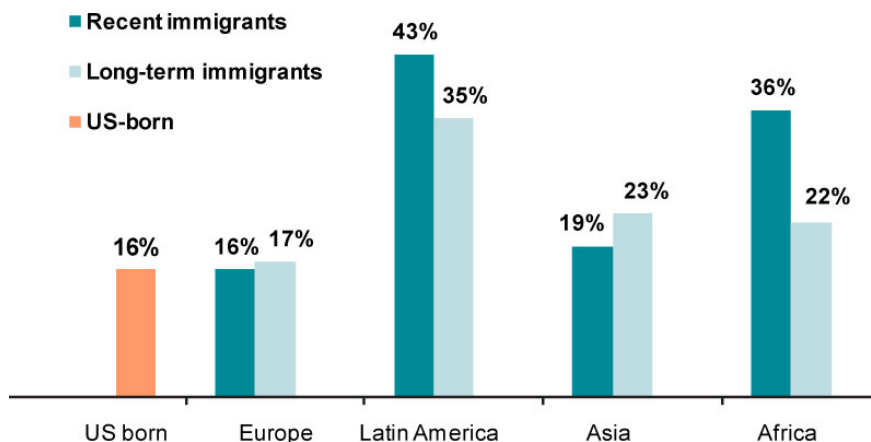


Black African immigrants may be disadvantaged by their recent date of arrival or because their degrees and credentials cannot be translated meaningfully into high-skilled jobs in the United States. A relatively low share of Black African immigrants have become US citizens, and lack of citizenship may somewhat reduce their access to the best jobs — especially government jobs. On the other hand, relatively few Black African immigrants are unauthorized, and so they are less likely than Latin American immigrants (who are much more likely to be unauthorized) to be subject to job exploitation at the lower end of the labor market.

## VIII. Underemployment of High-Skilled Africans in the US Workforce

Part of the explanation for African immigrants' low earnings may be underemployment among those that are highly skilled. In 2009 over a third of recent immigrants (those with fewer than ten years of US residency) who had a college degree or higher earned abroad were working in unskilled jobs (see Figure 5).<sup>25</sup> The employment of high-skilled African immigrants seems to improve alongside their years of residence in the United States: the share working in unskilled jobs drops to 22 percent after ten years in the United States, comparable to the level for Asian immigrants and substantially lower than those from Latin America.<sup>26</sup> However, immigrants from Asia and Latin America tend to have limited English proficiency, while those from Africa are disproportionately fluent in English — an attribute that should improve their opportunities for skilled employment. At the same time, though, difficulties with credentialing and racial discrimination in the US labor market are factors that potentially reduce Black Africans' opportunities for skilled employment.

**Figure 5. Shares of High-Skilled US Immigrants Working in Unskilled Jobs, 2009**



Notes: “Unskilled occupations” require no more than modest on-the-job training (for example, construction laborers, drivers, and maids). “High-skilled immigrants” here include only those who earned their college degrees abroad; US-trained immigrants are excluded. “Europe” includes Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. “Recent” immigrants have been in the United States for ten years or less, while “long-term” immigrants have been in the country for at least ten years.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 ACS.

25 These data include only immigrants who have earned their college degrees abroad, not those who have earned degrees in the United States. African immigrants include all those with origins on the continent, and the figures are not disaggregated by race.

26 Jeanna Batalova and Michael Fix, *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2008), [www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BrainWasteOct08.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BrainWasteOct08.pdf).



Underemployment, however, varies considerably across countries of origin. Immigrants who hold a bachelor's or professional degree are more likely to hold skilled jobs if they come from Anglophone countries with a relatively long history of sending immigrants to the United States — for instance, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa.<sup>27</sup> African immigrants who have done their tertiary education in English or spent more time in the United States (where they may have upgraded their credentials and gained experience) find it easier transferring their credentials than immigrants who have not.

## IX. Conclusion: Prospects for Future African Immigration Flows

Demographic and economic trends should continue to increase emigration pressures in Africa. Currently, the migration rate from and within Africa is estimated at 2.5 percent of the continent's total population — significant, though below the worldwide rate of 3.1 percent and substantially below rates for Europe and Latin America.<sup>28</sup> Africa remains one of the poorest regions of the world, and economic pressures along with recurring political conflicts are likely to increase future migration. Additionally, due to high fertility rates, most African countries still have rapidly increasing young adult populations. It is projected that the African working-age population (15 to 64) could double and add 700 million more potential workers and emigrants between 2005 and 2050.<sup>29</sup> This increase, equivalent to more than twice the current total US population, could dramatically increase emigration pressures at a time when the labor forces of Europe, the United States, and other industrialized regions are in a decline due to the aging of these countries' native-born populations.

If the past is any guide, future flows from Africa are not likely to be heavily composed of unauthorized immigrants because of the distance and expense involved in making the journey. Expanded legal flows could be accommodated under current US immigration policies, and in particular by the family reunification system, as there are no numerical limitations on admission via marriage to US citizens, and the individual country caps of 20,000 in other family preference categories have yet to be met.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, a decline in refugee admissions or the elimination of the diversity program could reduce African migration.

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*Demographic and economic trends should continue  
to increase emigration pressures in Africa.*

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Despite the economic downturn that began in 2008, African migration to the United States has not subsided noticeably. The types of admission categories used by Africans are generally not closely tied to immediate economic conditions: for instance, only 2 percent of African immigrants have student visas or temporary work permits (see Figure 1), and only 5 percent of African LPRs are admitted directly for employment (see Table 4). While most African immigrants work, even if they have entered as refugees

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27 Aaditya Mattoo, Ileana Cristina Neagu, and Caglar Ozden, "Brain Waste? Educated Immigrants in the US Labor Market" (policy research working paper 3581, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2005).

28 Ratha et al., *Leveraging Migration for Africa*.

29 Ibid.

30 Currently, there are only individual country restrictions on family immigration from four countries that are overrepresented in US immigration flows: China, India, Mexico, and the Philippines. See US Department of State, *Visa Bulletin for June 2011*, IX, no. 33 (May 11, 2011), [http://travel.state.gov/visa/bulletin/bulletin\\_5452.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/bulletin/bulletin_5452.html).



or through family or diversity channels, it is not clear whether the current weak US labor market has substantially affected their employment prospects. Despite their relative underemployment, African immigrants may be at a long-term advantage in the US labor force because they are so well educated. Moreover, many have been employed in the health-care sector, which has been relatively immune to the recession. In 2007, 10 percent of Black African immigrant men and 33 percent of women worked in health-care occupations versus just 3 percent of all men and 13 percent of all women in the US labor force.

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*Certain proposed changes to US immigration laws that are likely to be raised in future debates could reduce flows from Africa.*

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Yet, many high-skilled African immigrants remain underemployed in the United States. There is evidence that, over time, a larger share of this group are obtaining jobs commensurate with their skill levels, and so this population may become better integrated and more prosperous. At the same time, refugee flows may increase the number of less-well-educated African immigrants, and as flows increase and diversify over time, populations from other African nations may see their average levels of formal schooling fall (if the experience of Cape Verdean immigrants is any guide).

Regardless of changing economic conditions, reforms to the US immigration system would likely alter future African immigration flows. In the past 15 years, African immigrants have benefitted from the diversity program, which has been among the bargaining chips in comprehensive immigration debates since 2006. These debates have centered on reducing overall legal immigration levels in exchange for legalizing some of the 11 million unauthorized immigrants already in the country. There have also been debates over shifting legal immigration criteria away from family reunification and diversity toward immigrants' skills and the demands of the US labor market. If some of the family preference classes (for instance, parents and adult siblings of permanent residents) are cut or curtailed, such a change could slow future African migration. On the other hand, if the United States were to adopt a point system or other mechanism to promote more high-skilled immigration, the shift could increase the flow of college-educated immigrants from Africa.

In sum, Black Africans are one of the fastest-growing groups of US immigrants, and their flows do not appear to have been affected by the recession. Most are admitted as refugees, to reunite with family members, or through the diversity program — and none of these channels are linked to economic conditions. Black African immigrants are highly concentrated in a few states that have large Black populations overall, and in a few others with significant refugee populations.

Black Africans are among the best educated of all immigrants in the United States, and this country attracts a greater share of well-educated Africans than does Europe. Finally, well-educated African immigrants are frequently employed in low-skilled jobs, and this underemployment lowers their wages relative to other well-educated US workers.

Certain proposed changes to US immigration laws that are likely to be raised in future debates could reduce flows from Africa, most notably the elimination of the diversity visa program. Congress has discussed eliminating diversity visas and limiting family-based admissions as part of reforming the US immigration system. Passage of comprehensive immigration reform legislation is unlikely in the near future, as it has failed several times in the past few years. In the meantime, African migration to the United States is likely to continue increasing under the current system.



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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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