

## African Immigrants in the United States: Implications for Affirmative Action

Abdi M. Kusow

Department of Sociology, African and African American Studies Program,  
Iowa State University, Ames, USA  
Email: [kusow@iastate.edu](mailto:kusow@iastate.edu)

Received September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013; revised November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013; accepted December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Copyright © 2014 Abdi M. Kusow. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. In accordance of the Creative Commons Attribution License all Copyrights © 2014 are reserved for SCIRP and the owner of the intellectual property Abdi M. Kusow. All Copyright © 2014 are guarded by law and by SCIRP as a guardian.

For more than half a century, an extensive literature has consistently reported that first- and second-generation black immigrants are more educated and economically successful than African Americans. This literature has also suggested that black immigrants are benefiting from affirmative action more so than African Americans without having been the direct objects of slavery and historical discrimination. An important shortcoming of this literature, however, is that it presumes an undifferentiated black immigrant success story and obscures important differences across black immigrants from different countries of origin. Using data from the three census years (1980, 1990, and 2000), I examine the extent to which the black immigrant success story is directly relevant to African immigrants from different countries of origin in the United States. The findings of the study reveal that African immigrants are represented in the entire continuum of the American class structure, and therefore, any representation of a uniform experience is not empirically defensible. Empirical and theoretical implications of affirmative action are also discussed.

**Keywords:** African Immigrant Diversity; Black Immigrant Success; Affirmative Action

### Introduction

For more than half a century, an extensive literature has consistently reported that first- and second-generation black immigrants are more educated and economically successful than African Americans (Reid, 1939; Sowell, 1978; Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Moynihan, 1965). In his classic publication, *The Negro Immigrant: His Background Characteristics and Social Adjustment*, 1899-1937, the late Ira Reid made the seminal observation that “high schools and colleges in New York City have an unusually high foreign-born Negro (sic) representation” (1937: p. 416), and that nearly one third of New York’s black professionals, including physicians and lawyers, are foreign-born. More than three decades later, Thomas Sowell (1978) confirmed Reid’s observation and concluded that Caribbean immigrants outperform African Americans in almost all indicators of socio-economic achievement (Moynihan, 1965; Glazer & Moynihan, 1963).

The most recent and widely reported finding regarding the achievement of black immigrants was provided by Logan and Deane (2003; see also Kent, 2007). In a report titled, “Black Diversity in Metropolitan America,” Logan and Deane compared socio-economic attainment levels among African immigrants, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans with a comparative sample of major US ethnic groups. According to Logan and Deane, median household income for Afro-Caribbean immigrants and African immigrants was \$43,650, and \$42,900, respectively, compared with \$33,700 for African Americans. Moreover, the average number of years of education completed

by African immigrants (14) is higher than not only African Americans (12.4) and Afro-Caribbeans (12.6) but also that of whites (13.5) and Asian Americans (13.9) as well.

The higher-than-average socioeconomic and educational attainment of black immigrants has been extended to the observation that first- and second-generation black immigrants are overrepresented in Ivy League colleges and universities as well. In an article, “Top Colleges Take More Blacks, But Which Ones?” *The New York Times* reported a discussion that took place at a gathering of Harvard University’s alumni where two prominent African American scholars, Henry Louis Gates and Lani Guinier, noted that more than half of the black students at Harvard are of first- and second-generation West Indian and African immigrant families, or children of multi-racial couples (Rimer & Arenson, 2004; see also Banerji, 2007; Glenn, 2007; Johnson, 2005).

Empirically, much of the Ivy League overrepresentation argument is informed by the results of two sociological studies. The first, Haynie (2002), on Harvard’s black student population and, despite its limited scope, provided an important insight into the ethnic background of black students at Harvard. Based on a sample of 170 students, Haynie found those who identified as African or Afro-Caribbean made up nearly one third of the student population. When the multi-racial category was included in the figures, the number jumped to more than two thirds of the black student population. Comparing the ethnic background of Harvard’s black student population as a proportion of the total US black population, she found that while first-, second-

and third-generation black immigrants represented only 10 percent of the total US black population, they accounted for more than 55 percent of Harvard's black student body. In contrast, fourth (and plus) generation African Americans who represented nearly 90 percent of the total population accounted for only 45 percent of Harvard's black student body.

The second and perhaps most important sociological study on this topic was that of Douglas Massey and his colleagues (2006). Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), they examined the extent to which first- and second-generation black immigrants are overrepresented in selective colleges and universities as compared with African Americans. They found that black immigrants are overrepresented throughout elite academia and that this overrepresentation was the greatest in the most exclusive colleges and universities. According to the authors, students of immigrant background made up 41 percent of entering black freshmen in Ivy League institutions. Despite this immigrant overrepresentation, however, the authors found very few differences between immigrant and African-American students, except that fathers of black immigrant freshmen were more likely to be college graduates and hold advanced degrees than those of African-American students.

The black immigrant success story, particularly of those immigrants from the African continent, has figured in one of America's longest-standing issues, race, and intelligence. On one hand, the educational achievement of black immigrants has been used as an indication that racialized stereotypes regarding blacks in general are not based on solid empirical grounds. Using census data gleaned from both the United Kingdom and the United States, the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* recently reported "*The powerful performance of Britain's African blacks puts a solid nail into the coffin of scientific racism*" (1996: p. 29, emphasis added), and in the case of America, the journal reported, "*and their educational attainment appears to drive another nail in the coffin of scientific racists who consistently hold the position that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites*" (1996: p. 61, emphasis added). The most revealing example of the celebration of the African immigrant educational achievement is found in a *Chicago Tribune* article by Clarence Page (2007), one of the most famous African American editorial writers, when he asked, "*Do African immigrants make the smartest Americans?*" The African immigrant success story, according to Page, "*defies the usual stereotypes of Asian Americans as the only 'model minority,'*" and that "*the traditional American narrative has rendered the high achievement of black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean invisible, as if it were a taboo*" (2007: p. 4, emphasis added). Similar comments and discussions have been carried in public radio stations, local newspapers, not to mention the blogosphere. On the other hand, the undifferentiated black immigrant success story, particularly the group's supposed overrepresentation in Ivy League colleges, has been used to suggest that the current application of affirmative action is inconsistent with its original target group, African Americans whose experience has been punctuated by a long history of slavery, on one hand, and Jim Crow segregation, on the other. In fact, the discussion that black immigrants are benefiting from affirmative action more so than African Americans without having been the direct objects of slavery and historical discrimination has recently led to an increasing number of legal scholarships attempting to rewrite affirmative action policies.

The two most important and comprehensive legal notes re-

garding the African American disadvantage in affirmative action proceedings due to the overrepresentation of black immigrants in Ivy League colleges are provided by Onwuachi-Willig (2007), and Brown and Bell (2008). Kevin Brown and Jeannine Bell defined affirmative action as primarily historical and resulting from the "*struggle undertaken by the black community to overcome racial oppression in the United States,*" and is, "*therefore, a part of the strategy for the uplift of the black community in the United States*" (2008: p. 1231, emphasis added). Consequently, Brown and Bell divided the contemporary black community in the United States into three groups: multi-racial individuals, black immigrants, and ascendants. The authors define multiracial individuals as those born after the Supreme Court opinion in *Loving v Virginia* in 1967. Black immigrants are defined as individuals who entered the United States after 1968, the effective date of the 1965 Immigration Act; while ascendants are defined as the rest of the black population in the United States. Given that a very small number of black immigrants entered the United States before 1968; and that the multi-racial population was very small before *Loving v Virginia*, the authors exclude all black individuals except those the authors defined as ascendants in their definition of blackness, and therefore, from participating in affirmative action programs. Moreover, the authors suggested a new race question for the college application form. Unlike the current form, which does not distinguish one black group from another, the authors suggested a question that asks black applicants to specify the country of birth of the father and/or mother not born in the United States; and in the case of multi-racial individuals, a question that asks applicants to specify ancestry of the nonblack mother or father.

Onwuachi-Willig (2007) takes a more nuanced approach, one that argues affirmative action policies should incorporate ways of increasing participation of African Americans, or "legacy blacks," as she refers to them, in more selective colleges and institutions without disadvantaging first- and second-generation black immigrants at the same time so as to satisfy both diversity and social justice aspects of affirmative action.

An important question that has never been particularly explored in this literature is the extent to which the perceived higher socioeconomic achievement levels of black immigrants is applicable to immigrants from different African regions and countries of origin. One exception is the work of Kusow (2006). Using country of origin-based census data from 1980 to 2000, he compared immigrants from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan and found significant socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differences. He specifically found immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda to have much higher socioeconomic achievement levels than those from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. The author's work, however, was geographically limited to the East African region and therefore does not capture achievement patterns of immigrants from western and Southern Africa, which collectively contribute to more than two thirds of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States.

By using a direct intra-African immigrant comparison derived from a sample of 15 African countries of origin selected from the three main sub-Saharan African regions, Eastern, Western, and Southern Africa, my primary objective in this study is to examine the extent to which the black immigrant success story is applicable to African immigrants across different countries of origin. Such a comparison represents an important theoretical and methodological caution against the undifferen-

tiated black immigrant success story. Theoretically, it builds on Suzanne Model's (2008: p. 12) suggestion that one way to circumvent these difficulties is to undertake an intra-African comparison (see also Kim & Kemeque, 2007). Empirically, it provides *preliminary descriptive* examination of the nature of socioeconomic, ethnic, and immigration status diversity among African immigrants across different countries of origin. The emphasis on the exploratory and descriptive is extremely important in that the primary purpose of the present study is to start the conversation about black immigrants and affirmative action by providing descriptive analyses of the socioeconomic, ethnic, linguistic, and immigration status among African immigrants across different countries of origin. African immigrants are represented in the entire continuum of the American class structure, and therefore, any representation of uniform experience is not empirically defensible. Consequently, the assumption that black immigrants are uniformly benefiting from affirmative action more so than African Americans is not defensible either.

The first part of the paper will provide brief history of African emigration to the United States and population numbers. The second part will examine variations in socioeconomic achievement across different countries of origin within each region and across the different regions, Eastern, Western, and Southern Africa, overtime. The third section will follow the same organizational structure and compare ethnic and racial variations among immigrants from different African countries of origin and within and across different regions of Africa. In the fourth section, I will discuss the theoretical implications of the findings on affirmative action.

### Method

Data for this study were derived from the 5 percent Public Use Micro Samples of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 US Censuses. African immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 who were identified as being born in any of the selected African countries as listed in the census are included. In other words, the data do not include second- and later-generation African immigrants. For purposes of regional comparison, 15 countries were divided into the following regional clusters: East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa were included in the study. These countries were selected due to several methodological reasons. The sample represents the countries with the largest immigrant population in the United States. This is because the 5 percent PUMS cannot capture countries of origins with less 1000 individuals, and therefore, those countries with less than 1000 individuals in any of the census periods are not included in the analysis.

All data were weighted, but the 1980 and 1990/2000 were weighted differently. The 1980 data were equally weighted by 20 since the data are based on the 5 percent sample. The 1990 and 2000 5 percent PUMS were pre-weighted both at the individual and household levels. Some variables such as household income and household linguistic isolation were weighted at the household level, and specific notes are made at the bottom of the tables. It is important to note also that some variables were calculated based on specific parameters as opposed to other variables. For example, the variable citizenship status was based on all persons in the sample. Other variables such as education were based on a sample of individuals from the ages of 25 to 64. The sample parameter of each variable will be

noted at the bottom of the table in which it appears.

### Background: African Immigration to the United States

The history of voluntary African emigration to the United States goes as far back as the Reconstruction Era when a small number of Cape Verdean immigrants settled in Massachusetts. About thirty Cape Verdean immigrants arrived each year from 1860 to 1876, and by the 1940s, more than 20,000 Cape Verdean immigrants settled in Bradford, Massachusetts (Halter, 1993). After the end of the Second World War, a small number of mostly young male African students enrolled in several predominantly black colleges and universities across the nation. For example, in the 1938-1939 school years, Lincoln University enrolled about 16 students from Africa. By 1958, estimated 1600 - 2000 African students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States. Most of these students were sponsored by the American government and other international organizations and planned to return home after finishing their studies to participate in the development of their soon-to become independent countries, which they did. A survey carried by the Phelps-Stokes Foundation found that out of the 173 students interviewed, 163 responded they intended to return home after completing their studies (Phelps-Stokes Fund, 1949). Thus, besides the Cape Verdean community in Massachusetts, and the relatively few students and later diplomats in the nation's capital, the history of voluntary African immigration is a very recent phenomenon.

As we can see from **Table 1**, over the past 30 years, African immigrants in the United States have experienced a dramatic growth rate. Except a few cases-Tanzania, Uganda, Cape Verde, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, the growth rate of immigrants from all countries of origin was more than 400 percent from the 1980 to 2000. The increase in the number of immigrants from some countries-Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone-was in the thousands. For example, immigrants from Somalia increased by more than 4000 percent from 1980 to 2000 while those from Senegal and Liberia increased by 1176 and 1055, respectively. This dramatic increase was confirmed by Kent (2007), who pointed out that, in fact, more African immigrants arrived in the United States during the six years from 2000 to 2005 than during the entire decade of 1990 to 1999. This was also confirmed by the fact that only four out of the fifteen countries shown in the table (Ethiopia, Cape Verde, Nigeria, and South Africa) had population of more than 10,000 in 1980. Immigrants from Senegal, Somalia, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone had 2000 or fewer individuals in 1980.

### Variations in Socio-Economic Achievement

**Table 2** presents variations in educational attainment, median household income, and poverty among African immigrant from different countries of origin in the United States. Besides the relatively recent history of immigration and demographic similarities, the level of structural assimilation patterns of African immigrants is as varied as the many countries and regions from which they came (see also, Dodoo, 1997; Dodoo & Takyi, 2002; James, 2002).

Starting with the 1980 figures, we see that immigrants from certain East African countries recorded high percentage of college graduates, Kenya: (55), Tanzania (54), Uganda (52), Sudan

**Table 1.**  
Percent population change: African immigrants, 1980-2000.

	1980	1990	2000	Percentage Population Growth		
	N	N	N	1980-1990	1990-2000	1980-2000
<b>East Africa</b>						
Ethiopia	10,460	38,577	71,254	268.8	84.7	581.2
Kenya	7380	15,473	43,799	109.7	182.9	493.2
Somalia	760	2070	36,595	172.4	1667.9	4715.1
Sudan	2920	5582	18,567	91.2	232.6	535.9
Tanzania	3380	6828	11,764	102.0	72.3	248.0
Uganda	3940	7891	12,214	100.3	54.8	210.0
<b>West Africa</b>						
Cameroon	1600	3699	12,827	131.2	246.8	701.1
Cape Verde	10,440	15,948	27,059	52.8	69.7	159.2
Ghana	8340	20,863	68,122	150.2	226.5	716.8
Liberia	3700	12,356	42,754	233.9	246.0	1055.5
Nigeria	27,000	60,423	140,929	123.8	133.2	422.0
Senegal	800	2426	10,215	203.3	321.1	1176.9
Sierra Leone	2100	7193	21,944	242.5	205.1	945.0
<b>Southern Africa</b>						
South Africa	18,180	37,713	67,733	107.4	79.6	272.6
Zimbabwe	3920	5222	12,148	33.2	132.6	209.0

Source: 2000 US Census, 5% IPUMS Sample, weighed data.

**Table 2.**  
Educational attainment, household income, and poverty rate: 1980-2000.

	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
	% College Graduate			Median Household Income (\$)			Percentage below Poverty Line		
<b>East Africa</b>									
Ethiopia	42.9	33.4	30.0	14,620	26,203	38,400	12.4	8.4	7.0
Kenya	55.2	53.8	51.4	22,495	41,291	43,600	6.4	5.3	7.0
Somalia	23.8	35.0	15.3	19,195	16,000	19,700	23.0	25.2	23.4
Sudan	51.1	53.1	41.1	7,4202	8000	27,600	20.6	5.6	20.8
Tanzania	54.4	50.7	53.5	23,365	42,000	60,800	6.8	1.6	7.3
Uganda	52.3	49.4	51.8	23,010	38,297	56,200	8.4	6.2	1.7
<b>West Africa</b>									
Cameroon	54.8	57.9	58.2	13,113	18,720	46,200	12.5	19.4	6.2
Cape Verde	11.1	5.9	7.8	15,195	32,732	41,200	6.3	5.5	7.9
Ghana	48.0	45.0	32.5	13,010	34,750	50,000	6.2	4.2	6.2
Liberia	31.5	39.0	34.6	12,900	29,066	46,500	10.5	5.3	5.1
Nigeria	62.4	63.8	58.4	8010	27,600	51,000	13.1	6.4	5.6
Senegal	44.4	28.7	30.8	18,865	35,000	38,000	14.2	5.6	6.5
Sierra Leone	50.0	47.7	31.3	14,010	32,000	48,100	11.9	5.5	5.3
<b>Southern Africa</b>									
South Africa	51.7	54.9	57.4	27,000	54,470	72,800	4.2	3.1	2.5
Zimbabwe	46.1	57.4	50.3	19,158	40,734	60,000	7.4	3.4	4.5

Source: 1980, 1990, 2000 US Census, 5% IPUMS Sample, weighted data. (a) basic education distribution, persons ages 25 - 64; (b) median household income in 1999, all households; (c) poverty status distribution, all persons.

(51), and Ethiopia (42). The lowest percentage of college graduates (23) is observed for Somali immigrants. Looking at the 2000 census figures, however, we see that immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda maintained the same level of educational achievement: 51, 53, and 51 percent, respectively. However, the percent of college graduates among immigrants from Sudan decreased from 51 to 41, and that of Ethiopian immigrants from 43 to 30 percent from 1980 to 2000. The percent of college graduates among Somali immigrants decreased from 23 to 15 percent during the same time period. Data for median family in-come show a similar pattern, in which immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda recorded higher median family income than did those from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. In 1980, for example, median family income for immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda were roughly \$22,000, \$23,000, and \$23,000, respectively. Conversely, median family income for Ethiopian and Somali immigrants was \$14,000 and \$19,000, respectively. Immigrants from Sudan recorded the lowest median household income, \$7000 in 1980. For the 2000 figures, we see again that median family income for immigrants from Kenya (\$43,000), Tanzania (\$60,000) and Uganda (\$56,000) was much higher than those from Ethiopia (\$27,000), Sudan (\$38,000), and Somalia (\$19,000). It is also clear that immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda had lower poverty rates than did immigrants from Somalia and Sudan. The poverty rates for immigrants from Somalia and Sudan were 23 and 21 percent, respectively, in 1980; and again 23 and 20 percent in 2000, respectively. Conversely, the poverty rate for immigrants from Uganda was 8.4 percent in 1980 and 1.7 percent in 2000.

The general trend is that, for the East African region, immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda significantly and consistently scored higher on all indicators of socioeconomic status than those from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. It is, therefore, clear that country of origin is an important factor for the observed socioeconomic differences between immigrants among different countries within the East African region (see also Kusow, 2006).

A slightly less diverse but equally important socioeconomic achievement variation exists within immigrants from the West African region. Among West African immigrants, Nigerian immigrants posted the highest percentage of college graduates, median household, and the percentage of people below poverty across time, while immigrants from Cape Verde recorded the lowest overall socioeconomic achievement levels over time. The overall picture, however, shows that immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon had higher levels of socioeconomic achievement than did those from Liberia, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

Immigrants from South Africa, and Zimbabwe, report the highest level of socioeconomic achievement compared to the rest of the African immigrant groups. Except in the case of Nigeria, immigrants from South Africa and Zimbabwe have the highest median family income, \$70,000 and \$60,000, respectively; the highest percentage of college graduates, 57 and 50, respectively; and lowest percentage of people below the poverty level over time. In fact, the median income for immigrants from South Africa and Zimbabwe was arguably the highest in the nation in 2000 (Logan & Dean, 2003).

### Variations in Language and Citizenship Acquisition

Another important measure of assimilation is language and

citizenship acquisition. US citizenship is derived from the census question, "Is this person a naturalized citizen of the United States?" The 1980 census allowed three options, "Yes, a naturalized citizen," "No, not a naturalized citizen," and "Born abroad of American parents." The 1990 and the 2000 questionnaires read, "Is this person a citizen of the United States?" and expanded the option to include, "Yes, a naturalized citizen" and "Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the US Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas." The data for this paper were derived from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 mean of those who selected the "naturalized citizen" option.

Linguistic isolation is derived from the 1990 and 2000 census question, "How well does this person speak English?" Both the 1990 and 2000 census questionnaires use the same question and provide four options, "very well," "well," "not very well," and "not at all." According the census, linguistic isolation is a measure of English-speaking ability in a household. A linguistically isolated household is one in which no person age 14 or over speaks English at least "very well." That is, no person age 14 or over speaks only English at home, or speaks another language at home and speaks English "very well". A linguistically isolated person is anyone living in a linguistically isolated household (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/about/faqs.htm>).

As shown in **Table 3**, immigrants from the Southern African region, South Africa, and Zimbabwe had the lowest percentage of linguistically isolated individuals in the entire sample. The percent of linguistically isolated among South African immigrants was 1.6 in 1990 and 1.4 in 2000, while that of immigrants from Zimbabwe was 6 and 2.5 percent in 1990 and 2000, respectively. Among those from the East African region, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda also had very low levels of linguistically isolated individuals, while those from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan had the highest levels of linguistic isolation. The percent of linguistically isolated among, for example, Ugandan immigrants was 10 and 6.9 percent in 1990 and 2000, respectively, while that of Somali immigrants was 18 and 45 percent in 1990 and 2000, respectively. In the case of West Africa, those from Cape Verde and Senegal have high levels of linguistically isolated individuals followed by those from Cameroon, while those from Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone have very low percentage of linguistically isolated immigrants. Even though the percentage of African immigrants who are citizens is comparatively low, there are still observable variations across country of origin. An important note is that immigrants from Somalia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Cameroon have low levels of citizenship compared to other immigrant groups.

### Racial and Ethnic Diversity

The most important piece of data regarding the heterogeneity of African immigrants in the United States is their ethnic and racial diversity.

**Tables 4** through **6** present variations in racial and ethnic diversity among African immigrants from different regions and countries of origin. Starting with the 1980 selection, we see that the entire immigrant population from South Africa selected one or another European-driven ethnic identity: 26 percent English, 7 percent German, 5 percent Dutch, 4 percent Scottish, and 23 percent South African. Both the 1990 and 2000 ancestry selection among South African immigrants shows a similar pattern. In 1990, 12 percent selected English, 6 percent selected German,

**Table 3.**  
Linguistic isolation: African immigrants in the United States: 1980-2000.

	Linguistically Isolated			Naturalized US Citizen		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
<b>East Africa</b>						
Ethiopia	-	22.6	20.8	21.2	20.3	31.6
Kenya	-	9.0	7.8	19.2	23.3	25.7
Somalia	-	18.9		42.1	24.3	11.8
Sudan	-	20.5	30.8	23.3	22.4	22.3
Tanzania	-	7.9	8.3	24.3	34.8	37.3
Uganda	-	10.0	6.9	23.4	27.9	36.0
<b>West Africa</b>						
Cameroo	-	16.7	10.0	17.5	15.1	21.6
Cape Verde	-	31.9	28.4	49.4	32.6	31.6
Ghana	-	6.2	8.3	14.9	24.8	30.8
Liberia	-	1.9	3.3	16.8	18.9	25.4
Nigeria	-	5.4	4.8	11.2	16.9	35.0
Senegal	-	31.3	21.2	20.0	20.3	19.4
Sierra Leone	-	4.9	6.2	6.7	12.4	28.5
<b>Southern Africa</b>						
South Africa	-	1.6	1.4	27.3	35.8	33.9
Zimbabwe	-	6.0	2.5	16.8	27.3	26.0

Source: 1980, 1990, 2000 US Census, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample, weighted data.

**Table 4.**  
Top 5 ancestry choices selected, 1980.

	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Choice 4	Choice 5
<b>East Africa</b>					
Ethiopia	Ethiopian (39.0)	African (8.8)	English (6.3)	Italian (5.5)	Eritrean (5.0)
Kenya	Asian Indian (43.6)	Kenyan (15.2)	African (12.2)	English (8.9)	Not Reported (1.9)
Somalia	African (23.7)	Somali (18.5)	Italian (13.2)	English (10.5)	America (7.5)
Sudan	Sudanese (44.5)	Greek (12.3)	Arabian (8.2)	Armenian (7.5)	African (7.5)
Tanzania	Asian Indian (55.0)	African (5.9)	Tanzanian (12.4)	American Indian (3.0)	English (2.4)
Uganda	Asian Indian (46.7)	Ugandan (23.4)	African (8.1)	English (4.6)	American Indian (3.6)
<b>West Africa</b>					
Cameroon	Cameroonian (35.1)	African (8.5)	Mexican (8.8)	Egyptian (6.3)	Afro-American (5.0)
Cape Verde	Cape Verdean (25.9)	Portuguese (25.9)	Polish (10.0)	Afro-American (7.7)	Not Reported (4.6)
Ghana	Ghanaian (56.6)	African (27.3)	Afro-American (3.4)	English (2.9)	Nigerian (2.2)
Liberia	Liberian (41.6)	African (20.0)	Afro-American (16.2)	English (3.2)	Not Reported (3.2)
Nigeria	Nigerian (72.6)	African (10.5)	Afro-American (3.9)	Not reported (1.9)	English (1.6)
Senegal	Cape Verdean (20.0)	Senegalese (17.5)	Lebanese (10.0)	English (7.5)	French (7.5)
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leonean (44.8)	African (32.4)	Lebanese (4.8)	English (3.8)	Afro-American (3.8)
<b>Southern Africa</b>					
South Africa	English (26.3)	South African (23.0)	German (6.8)	Dutch (5.1)	Scottish (3.9)
Zimbabwe	English (20.9)	African (19.4)	Rhodesian (17.9)	Irish (5.1)	Asian Indian (4.6)

Source: 1980 US Census, 5% IPUMS Sample, All persons. (a) Due to confidentiality constraints in the construction of the 5% IPUMS samples, any category representing fewer than 10,000 people was combined with a larger, more generalized category. One such category is "Uncodable" and another is "Uncoded", which includes various reported ancestries, such as Angolan, Burundian, Djibouti, Gambian, Ivory Coast, Senegalese Afrikaner, Nuer, etc.

**Table 5.**  
Top 5 ancestry choices selected, 1990.

	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Choice 4	Choice 5
<b>East Africa</b>					
Ethiopia	Ethiopian (70.3)	Central African (10.1)	Not Reported (4.3)	Afro-American (4.2)	German (1.3)
Kenya	Asian Indian (32.6)	Kenyan (25.0)	Central African (9.3)	American Indian (6.7)	Afro-American (5.3)
Somalia	Somali (58.5)	Central African (12.0)	Italian (10.9)	Samoan (8.3)	Not Reported (4.1)
Sudan	Sudanese (42.6)	Ethiopian (10.5)	Armenian (9.6)	Central African (9.4)	Greek (4.2)
Tanzania	Asian Indian (51.5)	American Indian (8.0)	Tanzanian (7.5)	Central African (7.2)	Not Reported (4.3)
Uganda	Asian Indian (32.2)	Ugandan (31.8)	Central African (13.0)	American Indian (8.2)	Afro-American (3.4)
<b>West Africa</b>					
Cameroon	Cameroonian (32.8)	Central African (28.4)	Afro-American (8.5)	Mexican (6.7)	Not Reported (5.7)
Cape Verde	Cape Verdean (77.2)	Portuguese (11.3)	Not Reported (9.1)	Afro-American (.9)	Mixed (.3)
Ghana	Ghanaian (64.2)	Central African (20.3)	Afro-American (6.7)	Not reported (3.8)	English (.8)
Liberia	Liberian (50.6)	Central African (19.8)	Afro-American (13.6)	Not Reported (4.3)	German (2.4)
Nigeria	Nigerian (77.9)	Central African (7.8)	Not Reported (5.4)	Afro-American (4.2)	English (.2)
Senegal	Central African (31.6)	Senegalese (23.6)	Not reported (12.2)	Lebanese (8.0)	French (6.9)
Sierra Leone	Central African (37.6)	Sierra Leonean (37.4)	Afro-American (8.9)	Not Reported (5.3)	Lebanese (2.7)
<b>Southern Africa</b>					
South Africa	South African (30.1)	English (12.3)	German (6.2)	British (6.0)	Not Reported (5.0)
Zimbabwe	English (15.6)	Zimbabwean (14.6)	British (12.3)	Central African (6.8)	Scottish (5.2)

Source: 1990 US Census, 5% IPUMS Sample, All persons. (a) Due to confidentiality constraints in the construction of the 5% IPUMS samples, any category representing fewer 10,000 people was combined with a larger, more generalized category. One such category is "Uncodable" and another is "Uncoded," which includes various reported ancestries, such as Angolan, Burundian, Djibouti, Gambian, Ivory Coast, Senegalese Afrikaner, Nuer, etc.

**Table 6.**  
Top 5 ancestry choices selected, 2000.

	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Choice 4	Choice 5
<b>East Africa</b>					
Ethiopia	Ethiopian (69.3)	African (9.2)	Not Reported (7.0)	Afro-American (4.0)	Eritrean (2.6)
Kenya	Kenyan (31.9)	Asian Indian (20.3)	African (20.0)	Not Reported (6.6)	Afro-American (5.3)
Somalia	Somali (74.7)	Not reported (9.7)	African (7.5)	African American (2.0)	Uncodable (1.1)
Sudan	Sudanese (43.6)	African (18.3)	Not Reported (9.8)	Arab (3.8)	Deferred (3.4)
Tanzania	Asian Indian (42.4)	African (17.5)	-	-	Afro-American (2.0)
Uganda	Asian Indian (31.2)	Deferred (26.0)	African (22.4)	Not reported (8.1)	Afro-American (2.4)
<b>West Africa</b>					
Cameroon	Not reported (52.3)	African (23.5)	Afro-American (8.6)	Not Reported (8.1)	Nigerian (1.3)
Cape Verde	Cape Verdean (84.5)	Not reported (9.4)	Portuguese (2.7)	African (1.1)	Afro-American (.7)
Ghana	Ghanaian (54.9)	African (24.3)	Not reported 8.2)	Afro-American (7.1)	Not reported (.9)
Liberia	Liberian (48.4)	African (27.4)	Not Reported (9.7)	Afro-America (7.5)	Afro-American (.7)
Nigeria	Nigerian (71.2)	African (10.6)	Not reported (7.7)	Afro-American (5.7)	Afro-American (1.0)
Senegal	Not Reported (38.1)	African (36.0)	Not reported (8.9)	Afro-American (4.4)	Cape Verdean (3.4)
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leonean (42.7)	African (28.6)	Not reported (7.9)	Afro-American (7.3)	Unreported (4.6)
<b>Southern Africa</b>					
South Africa	South African (48.4)	Not reported (6.8)	English (5.8)	Asian Indian (4.0)	German (3.3)
Zimbabwe	Not reported (32.8)	African (19.5)	English (7.6)	Not reported (7.2)	Asian Indian (4.7)

Source: 2000 US Census, 5% IPUMS Sample, All persons. (a) Due to confidentiality constraints in the construction of the 5% IPUMS samples, any category representing fewer 10,000 people was combined with a larger, more generalized category. One such category is "Uncodable" and another is "Uncoded", which includes various reported ancestries, such as Angolan, Burundian, Djibouti, Gambian, Ivory Coast, Senegalese Afrikaner, Nuer, etc.

6 percent selected British, and 30 percent selected South African. In 2000, 6 percent selected English, 4 percent Asian Indian, 3 percent German, and 48 percent South African. A similar racial demographic composition was observable among immigrants from Zimbabwe. In 1980, 20 percent selected English, 18 percent Rhodesian, 5 percent Irish, 4 percent Asian Indian, and 19 percent African. In 1990, 16 percent selected English, 12 percent British, 5 percent Scottish, and 15 percent Zimbabwean, and only 7 percent selected central African. In 2000, a significant proportion of the Zimbabwean immigrants declined to report their ancestry. Still, 8 percent selected English, 5 percent Asian Indian, and 19 percent African.

Among East African immigrants, we see a significant percentage of those from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda as being of Asian Indian background. In 1980, nearly 44 percent of immigrants from Kenya selected Asian Indian as their primary ethnic identity and another 9 percent selected English. Only 15 percent selected Kenyan, and about 12 percent selected African. About 55 percent of immigrants from Tanzania selected Asian Indian, 3 percent American Indian, 3 percent English, 12 percent Tanzanian, and 6 percent African. Also, nearly 47 percent of Ugandan immigrants selected Asian Indian as their primary ethnic identity, 4 percent selected American Indian, and another 5 percent selected English, while 23 percent selected Ugandan, and only 8 percent selected African. This trend remained constant throughout the 1990 and 2000 censuses. In the case of Kenya, 32 percent in both 1990 and 2000 selected Asian Indian. The number for Tanzania remained roughly at 31 percent. The ethnic and racial demographic distribution among immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan was fundamentally different than those from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Aside from Sudan, where in 1980, about 10 percent selected Armenian and 4 percent Greek, in the case of Somalia, where about 13 selected Italian and 10 percent English, and about 6 percent Italian; and 6 percent English in the case of Ethiopia; the overwhelming majority of immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan selected African-derived ethnic identities. This trend continued into the 1990 census, but in the 2000 census almost all immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan selected African-derived ethnic identities.

The racial and ethnic distribution of West African immigrants is primarily African-derived ethnic identities. Aside from small percentages in certain countries (Cape Verde, Cameroon, & Sierra Leone) where some of the immigrants selected British, Portuguese, or Lebanese, the majority of the immigrants from West Africa selected African or nationality-driven ethnic identities. What is clear from the preceding discussion is that immigrants from the southern and southeastern African regions are racially diverse than those from the northeastern and western African regions. The data also show that the majority of African immigrants from the southern African region were primarily of European background, while those from the southeastern region were primarily of Asian Indian and European origin.

A number of interrelated factors accounted for the differences in the socioeconomic achievement levels between the different regions and countries. In the case of East Africa, for example, immigrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan emigrated from a context characterized by a permanent and acute political instability. Over the past 40 years, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan have been involved in either internal civil wars or cross-national conflicts with one neighbor or another. After thirty years of secessionist war, Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia

and became independent in 1993. Just five years later, Ethiopia and Eritrea started a border war that resulted in the death and displacement of thousands of innocent civilians. Ethiopia and Somalia fought each other at least three times officially since the 1960s. Since 1991, the Somali civil war has produced one of the worst human tragedies in the continent. Nearly 500,000, mostly women and children, died of human-induced starvation in the first three years of the conflict alone. Another several hundred thousand were forced to exile in neighboring countries and in several European countries, Canada, Australia, and the United States. Almost 20 years later, Somalia remains without a central government and the country is ruled by warlords who turned the country into a patchwork of fiefdoms. For more than 40 years, Sudan has been characterized by a combination of racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts, the most important of which is what has become generally known as the Arab Muslim versus African Christian or Animist dichotomy. The political instabilities in the Horn of Africa led to environmental problems and several major famines including the 1984-1985 Ethiopian famine, the 1986-1988 famine in Sudan, and the 1992 famine in Somalia. On the other hand, Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan, emigrated from a more politically and economically stable context and therefore did not produce the same type of political immigrants and refugees. Therefore, immigrants from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda can be characterized as economic immigrants, while those from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan are viewed as political immigrants.

Some of the observed variations may be language specific. Immigrants from the former British colonies—Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, in the East; and Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, in the West—where English is commonly spoken are better off than those of say, Ethiopia and Somalia, where it is not commonly spoken. Other scholars found that Portuguese speaking immigrants from Cape Verde recorded lower socioeconomic achievement levels than those from Senegal where French is spoken. Similar observation was made between Caribbean immigrants from English speaking countries with those from French or Spanish speaking countries (Kalmijn, 1996).

The most important finding from this study is that the African immigrant community in the United States is more culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse than the current literature acknowledges. As shown in the preceding data, African immigrants come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. An overwhelming majority of immigrants from the East African region are of Asian Indian background. Those from the Southern African region are primarily of European background. Consequently, the perceived universal success of black immigrants from Africa, and that they are particularly overrepresented in Ivy League colleges, is inconsistent with the data. Substantively, it glosses over the fact that black African immigrants are represented in the entire continuum of the American class structure, and therefore, any representation of a uniform experience is not empirically defensible. And in fact, this is consistent with Massey's finding that immigrants from two countries, Nigeria and Ghana, account for almost all the black African students enrolled in Ivy League colleges. This caution is specifically relevant in light of the increasing legal call to reform affirmative action (Onwuach-Willig, 2007; Brown & Bell, 2008), particularly when these assertions are based on only two sociological reports (Massey et al., 2006; Haynie, 2002) or on the casual observations of Henry Louis Gates and Lani Guineir at a Harvard University black alumni gathering.



Even more revealing is the finding of Massey and colleagues that, in fact, 38 percent of all first-and second-generation black immigrants attending selective colleges came from only two countries, Jamaica and Nigeria (Massey et al., 2006).

### Summary and Conclusion

Despite the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity among African immigrants, the assumption that black immigrants, particularly those from Africa, have some of the highest average educational achievement of any population group in the United States, and, that they are overrepresented in higher education, particularly in Ivy League institutions, has become one of the most hotly debated issues in the news media and among scholars of immigration and affirmative action (Haynie, 2002; Massey et al., 2006; Mederios-Kent, 2007; Model, 2008).

To speak of an undifferentiated African, immigrant group is, however, to ignore obvious variations within it. Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit both temporal and horizontal variations in socioeconomic achievement levels. The findings of this study will hopefully serve as an important theoretical and empirical caution against the undifferentiated black immigrant success story and the increasingly heated discussion about whether or not black immigrants disadvantage African Americans in issues concerning entitlement and affirmative action proceedings.

This intra-African comparison moves us away from the homogenizing effects that often accompany our understanding of Africa and African immigrants in general. By analyzing the socioeconomic with ethnic and with racial diversity among African immigrants across different countries of origin, we move beyond the uniform representation of all African immigrants as overrepresented in higher education as compared with African Americans, and that such overrepresentation undermines the ability of African Americans to benefit from affirmative action and gain access to elite education in the United States.

An important limitation of this study, however, is that a more comprehensive articulation of the implications of the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity on educational achievement among black immigrants requires a more robust data than I provide here. The census data from which my analysis is derived do not have enough properly designed variables to answer all the necessary questions to fully address the questions at hand. For example, the implication of black foreign-born immigration for affirmative action will require variables that are not readily available in the census. In order to address the implications of foreign-born black immigrants for affirmative action will require a mixed-method panel design that includes in-depth interviews, ethnographic methods, and survey research capable of measuring which black immigrant group from which countries are more likely to enroll in Ivy Leagues colleges.

More importantly, such an endeavor requires both historical and contextual variables that can address the different social and political contexts that inform emigration from Africa, and the context of reception in host communities. We know, for example, that the motives of immigration among Somali immigrants are fundamentally different from those of Ghanaian immigrants, political in the former, and economic in the latter, a context that has been shown to affect levels of assimilation among immigrants in the United States (Pedraza-Bailey, 1985). The degree of cultural and racial differences between the immigrant and host community is another factor that enters into how and to what extent immigrants successfully assimilate (see Aj-

rouch & Kusow, 2007). It is important to compare the implications of country of origin on assimilation experiences among immigrants who embrace religion similar to that of the host community, or speak English prior to emigration and those who do not. Such contextual variables may serve as important control variables so that the direct effects of context can be statistically ascertained. Despite such limitations, however, I believe findings presented in the current analysis further our understanding that African immigrants are represented in the entire continuum of the American class structure, and therefore, any representation of a uniform experience is not empirically defensible.

### REFERENCES

- Ajrouch, K., & Kusow, A. (2007). Racial and religious contexts: Situational identities among Lebanese and Somali Muslim immigrants. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 72-94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870601006553>
- Banerji, S. (2007). Black immigrant study puts spotlight back on affirmative action debate. *Diverse*, 2, 25-26.
- Brown, K., & Bell, J. (2008). Demise of the talented tenth: Affirmative action and the increasing under representation of ascendant blacks at selective higher educational institutions. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 69, 1229-1284.
- Dodoo, F. N. A., & Takyi, B. K. (2002). Africans in the diaspora: Black-white earnings differences among America's Africans. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25, 913-941. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0141987022000009377>
- Dodoo, F. N. A. (1997). Assimilation differences among Africans in America. *Social Forces*, 76, 527-546.
- Glazer, N., & Moynihan, D. (1963). *Beyond the melting pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York city*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Glenn, D. (2007). At selective colleges, more than a quarter of black students are immigrants, study finds. *Today's News*.
- Halter, M. (1993). *Between race and ethnicity: Cape verdean American immigrants, 1860-1965*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Haynie, A. C. (2002). Not "just black" policy considerations: The Influence of ethnicity on pathways to academic success among black undergraduates at Harvard University. *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 13, 40-62.
- James, W. (2002). Explaining Afro-Caribbean social mobility in the United States: Beyond the so well thesis. *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 44, 218-262.
- Johnson, J. B. (2005). Shades of gray in black enrollment immigrants' rising numbers a concern to some activities. *Sun Francisco Chronicle*.
- Kalmijn, M. (1966). The socioeconomic assimilation of Caribbean American Blacks. *Social Forces*, 74, 911-930.
- Kent, M. (2007). Immigration and Americas black population. *Population Bulletin*, 62, 1-16.
- Kim, J., & Kemeque, F. (2007). Addressing the low returns to education of African born immigrants in the United States. Economic Working Papers. <http://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/econwork/4>
- Kusow, Abdi (2007). Africa: East. In M. Waters, & R. Ueda (Eds.), *The New Americans: A guide to immigration since 1965* (pp. 295-306). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Logan, J. R., & Deane, G. (2003). *Black diversity in metropolitan areas*. Lewis Mumford Center for comparative urban and regional research. Albany: University of Albany.
- Massey, D., Mooney, M., Torres, K. C., & Charles, C. C. (2006). Black immigrants and black natives attending selective colleges and universities in the United States. *American Journal of Education*, 113, 243-270. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/510167>
- Mederios-Kent, M. (2007). Immigration and America's black population. *Population Bulletin*, 62, 1-16.
- Model, S. (2008). *West Indian immigrants: A black success story?* New

- York: Russell Sage.
- Moynihan, D. (1965). *The Negro family: The case for national action*. Washington DC: United States Department of Labor.
- Onwuachi-Willig, A. (2007). The admission of legacy blacks. *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 60, 1-82.
- Page, C. (2007). Black immigrants collect most degrees, but affirmative action is losing direction. Chicago Tribune, March 18.
- Pedraza-Bailey, S. (1985). *Political and economic migrants in America: Cubans and Mexicans*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Phelps-Stokes, F. (1949). *A survey of African students studying in the United States*. New York: The Fund.
- Reid, I. (1939). *The Negro immigrant: His background, characteristics and social adjustments, 1899-1937*. New York: AMS Press.
- Rimer, S., & Anderson, K. W. (2004). Top colleges take more blacks, but which ones? *The New York Times*.
- Roberts, S. (2005). More Africans enter US than in days of slavery. *The New York Times*.
- Sowell, T. (1978). *Three black histories in essays and data on American ethnic groups*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press.
- No Author (1996). African immigrants in the United States are the nation's most highly educated groups in the American society. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 13, 33-34.