



THE STATE OF BLACK IMMIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA

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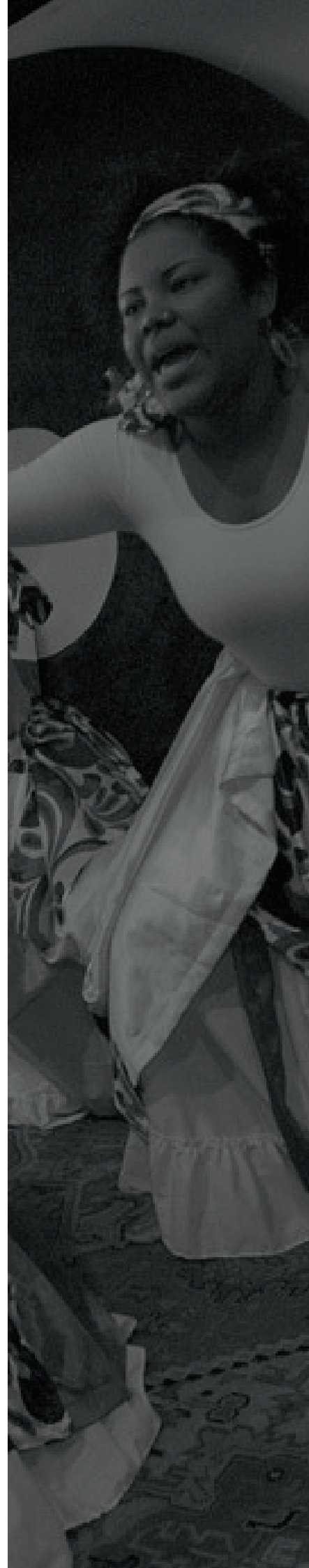
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**BAJI**  
**BAJI**  
BLACK ALLIANCE  
FOR JUST IMMIGRATION

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# PROLOGUE

There is a broad consensus amongst the left that January 21, 2017 signified the beginning of a new political era marked by attacks on immigrants, Black people, women, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) communities, and countless others. In the midst of this crisis, California has arguably served as a beacon of hope for those facing marginalization. Both locally and statewide, California has introduced some of the nation's most progressive policies – particularly in the immigration arena – that have expanded protections and allowed for millions of immigrants to integrate into society.

Some examples of this progressive turn include legislation providing health care for undocumented immigrants and children, expanded programs assisting immigrant youth, the provision of driver's licenses to undocumented residents, the erosion of collaboration between Immigration and Customs Enforcement and police, and the decriminalization of certain criminal offenses. Furthermore, the mayors of Los Angeles and San Francisco have re-committed to remaining "sanctuary cities" for immigrants and the state as a whole now largely prohibits sharing information with federal immigration authorities unless the individuals in question have been convicted of what is deemed a serious crime.

Black immigrants in California played a significant role in each of the aforementioned victories. They have been steadfast fighters for immigrant rights and racial justice in the state for over a decade. Indeed, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) was founded in Oakland over 11 years ago by Black immigrants and African-American leaders who recognized and drew the historical connection between the Civil Rights movement and the newly emerging immigrant rights struggle and has maintained a presence in California ever since. Yet despite their contributions, Black immigrants remain invisible in California. As a result, their particular needs remain unaddressed and their unique role in the movement often goes uncelebrated.

This report pointedly raises the challenges and opportunities faced by Black non-citizens in regard to immigrant integration. Our community continues to lack critical resources, including language access, legal services, adequate healthcare, educational opportunities, and good jobs. African, Caribbean, and Afro-Latino immigrants have reported challenges to obtaining state driver's licenses. Every year, thousands of Black immigrants face detention or deportation resulting from criminalization. Many more have their applications for legal status (such as a green card, work authorization, or citizenship) rejected.

But even if those basic needs are met and deportations are halted, integration will remain a challenge. So long as anti-Blackness and white supremacy remain the foundation of an "American Dream," which serves as an aspiration for many non-Black immigrants and a marker for success in a society Black immigrants will never be able to fully integrate into.

It is in this context that we present *The State of Black Immigrants in California*. With this report, we hope not only to shed light on California's vibrant Black immigrant population and their challenges, but also to lay the groundwork for movement building opportunities among immigrant rights and racial justice leaders that honor inclusivity, solidarity, and the self-determination of Black immigrants and all oppressed communities in California.



When civic leaders and policymakers think about the nature of the immigrant experience in California, there is often one important immigrant group left out of the popular imagination: Black immigrants. This report seeks to address that gap by lifting up, centering, and contextualizing the Black immigrant experience in the Golden State within the broader immigration story. To do this, we provide data on Black immigrant demographics in California, consider key dimensions affecting Black immigrant life chances both state- and nation-wide, and draw some general lessons for movement building. We also highlight the specific and important role that organizations like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) have played in helping to strengthen and elevate the Black immigrant voice.

This report uses existing data to paint a statistical portrait of the growing Black immigrant population in California, and we attempt to complete the story with information from semi-structured interviews of practitioners and movement actors. Both the quantitative and qualitative examination reveal a tremendous need, but they also suggest a tremendous opportunity for the immigrant rights movement: becoming more inclusive of the plights and experiences of the Black immigrant community will strengthen overall efforts for immigrant integration. This will require a nuanced and focused strategy that acknowledges the threads of anti-Blackness that still exist today (both in society in general and in social movements themselves), the disproportionate impact of certain policies on Black immigrants, and the need for a broader frame of Civil Rights that includes the intricacies of immigrant rights.

Why study the Black immigrant community? Of course, the topic is interesting in its own right and, as we have noted, can go under-reported: because of their smaller share of the foreign-born population, Black immigrants are frequently overshadowed by larger and more established immigrant communities in California. But a people cannot be reduced to simple numbers, and this report seeks to show the human element that is often lost in charts and figures. Additionally, as some of our interviewees noted, the Black immigrant community may be key to building bridges between African-American and other immigrant communities on broad issues of social justice: their experience reveals the precarity of *both* the immigrant and Black experiences in the U.S. In this sense, Black immigrants are not only important but pivotal to linking the work of the immigrant rights and racial justice movements in a fuller and more inclusive manner—and we hope that this report contributes to an understanding that addressing the specificities of the Black immigrant population is necessary in order to truly make progress for all.





# ROAD MAP AND METHODOLOGY

This report combines a broad literature review; quantitative economic and social data; and semi-structured interviews with researchers, activists, community providers, and organizers working with and for Black immigrant communities.

The quantitative data presented in this report are generally calculated by the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII), a partner institution of the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), and are most often based on a pooled sample of 2010-2014 American Community Survey (ACS) microdata from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample.<sup>1</sup> In one limited analysis of the children of immigrants, we use a similarly pooled version of the Current Population Survey (CPS). (We explain later why we use that far smaller data set for certain key variables.) The qualitative or interview data were drawn from 10 interviews, which were then analyzed to look for common themes and to draw lessons and implications. Qualitative data helps to fill in gaps left by the quantitative data: for example, ACS and CPS data do not provide information about refugees, but interviewees do.

The report begins with a statistical profile based largely on the quantitative work, a useful first step since our review of the existing literature suggested that very few reports and articles provided in-depth disaggregated data for Black immigrants nationally, let alone at the state level for California. We then follow with a discussion of certain themes mostly drawn from the interviews as well as from the literature that does exist. These themes include the ways in which Black immigrants (including refugees) are often invisible from political and policy discussions and the ways in which relationships between U.S.-born Blacks (African Americans) and Black immigrants are evolving over time. We close the report by discussing how the concerns of Black immigrants might be more effectively addressed, including through community empowerment, and suggest why this would enhance the reach and power of the immigrant rights movement in general.



**"OUR ROSTER OF CAMPAIGNS HAVE  
GARNERED AWARDS IN LOCAL AND  
INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS."**

While we neatly partition the quantitative and qualitative analyses in the paragraphs above, they were very much intertwined in the research process itself: the issues raised in our interviews helped to structure some of the quantitative data we collected and the quantitative analysis we conducted helped to inform some of the questions we brought to the interviews in the field. However, because the quantitative analysis required some important methodological considerations to obtain a more representative profile of Black immigrants, we take some time here to describe the data sources, research methods, and analytical choices in that work.

First, why did we choose to calculate all variables from a pooled sample that included the years 2010 to 2014? There are some downsides to taking a multi-year approach, as we do not limit ourselves to the most recently available data. Some variables, like the level of unemployment, could be overstated since the earlier years of the sample were more likely to be impacted by the Great Recession. However, the recency of the data vintage is only important for the very few “fast-moving” variables like employment; it is less important for “slow-moving” variables like education, in which a pooled data set is likely representative of contemporary conditions.

More important, what we sacrifice in terms of recency of the data, we gain in terms of a larger sample size that allows us to paint a fuller picture of Black immigrants, and thus both draw more accurate contrasts with other populations (like U.S.-born Black people) and can better disaggregate the Black immigrant population itself by immigration status, region of origin, and other characteristics. To create a reliable sample size, we grouped immigrants’ countries of origin into seven groups using pre-established IPUMS categories.<sup>2</sup> The seven categories include: Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, West Africa, East Africa, the rest of Africa (including Northern, Central, and Southern,) and other (including Europe, South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands).

Second, how did we choose which variables to examine? As noted, we conducted a broad literature review, including both academic articles and research papers centered on the conditions, opportunities, and obstacles that Black immigrants have faced in recent decades upon migrating to the United States. Additionally, our interviews also guided our data analysis, as we looked to provide data that would be most useful to practitioners and advocates “on the ground.” Interviewees stressed the need for more data on Black immigrants across a variety of categories, including demographic growth, economic conditions, and changes in migration and settlement patterns. As such, much of our data analysis contextualizes the current situations of Black immigrants and provides an overview that captures the complexity of a community that is often ignored or underplayed in immigration research.

Third, how did we define Black immigrants? Generally, PERE/CSII reports categorize people based on their individual responses to the American Community Survey using six mutually exclusive racial/ethnic groups. In accordance with standard practice, we classify any person as “Latino” who identifies as Hispanic in their response, regardless of racial identification; “white” then refers to non-Hispanic whites, while “Black” and “African American” refer to all people who identify as Black or African American alone and do not identify as being of Hispanic origin. Just as important, non-Latinos who mark mixed on the Census form generally comprise a “mixed-race” or “other” category.

For this report, we took a different approach. We expanded the definition for Black immigrants to include all combinations of responses (including mixed or multi-racial) that included “Black” in the answer to the Census question on racial identity. Additionally, we also included all respondents regardless of whether they identified as Hispanic, to ensure that we captured Black Latino immigrants. We recognize that no classification system is without drawbacks and that the complexity of racial identity and experience cannot be fully captured in numerical data. However, this more inclusive Black category squares with information and perspectives gleaned from our interviewees and the research literature; both sources noted that race and Blackness can be defined differently across the diaspora, and oftentimes immigrants come from a context that does not align with how race is perceived in the United States.

Fourth, were we able to account for the legal status of Black immigrants? Fortunately, we have generated a series of efforts aimed at estimating the number of undocumented immigrants and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) that together make up the non-citizen immigrant population. The method, explained in detail in Pastor and Scoggins’ report,<sup>3</sup> essentially combines information on known status from the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation with conditional information to construct a model of the probability of being undocumented. We then apply that model to the pooled sample of 2010-2014 IPUMS data, with constraints for national aggregate estimates for the undocumented by country of origin derived from other sources, and generate estimates for California. While any method of estimating the undocumented is bound to have its errors, our results from this process are generally consistent with the results yielded by other researchers, such as those at the Migration Policy Institute.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Census data is reported in a way that does not allow us to identify those immigrants who are refugees.

Fifth, are there any challenges with regard to data reliability? To understand why we raise this question, note that the major contribution of the quantitative analysis presented in this report is the level of disaggregation: beyond simply considering whether individuals are Black and immigrants, we also disaggregate by age and gender as well as by general region of birth, more detailed ancestry groups, and metropolitan region of residence in California. This does lead to an important caveat: due to the relatively small sample size of the Black immigrant population in California, the more data is drilled down geographically and/or disaggregated for this group, the less reliable it becomes. This is one of the reasons qualitative data is so important; it helps complete the picture of the Black diaspora. In general, our review suggests the need to collect more data about Black immigrant communities, including with community-based surveys.

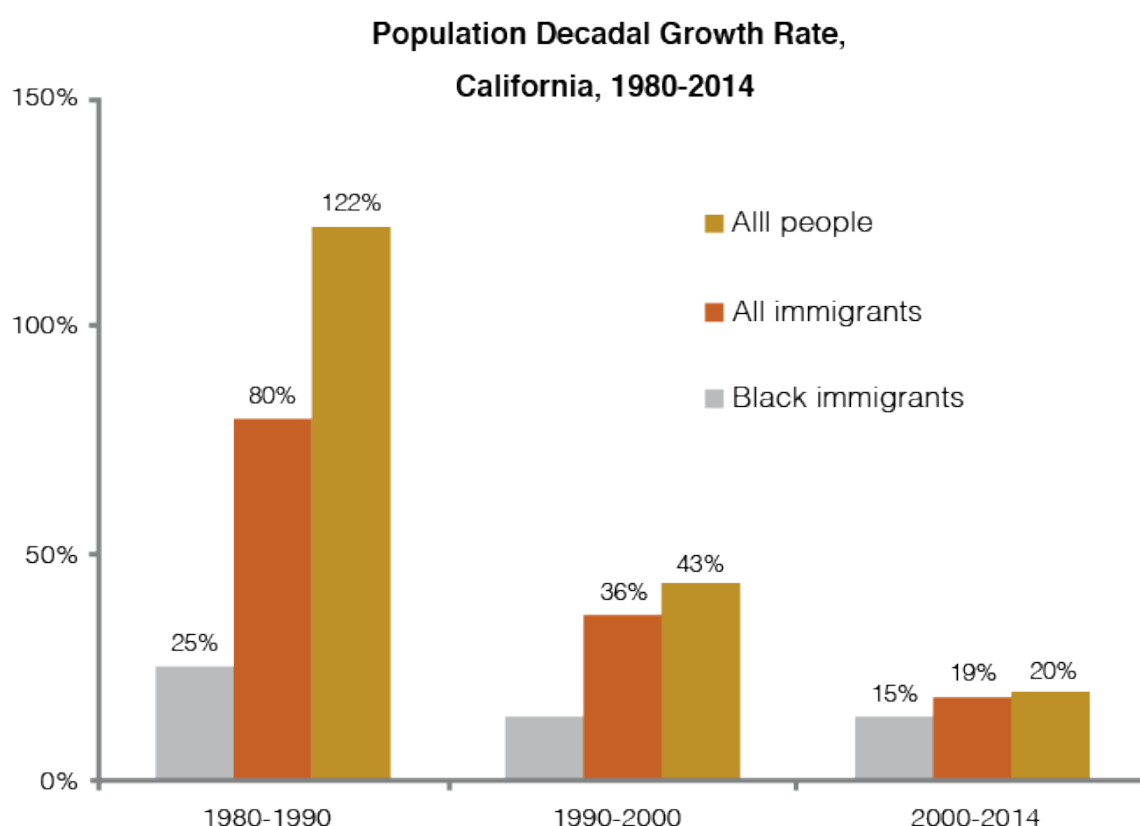
For the qualitative analysis, we conducted interviews with several advocates, organizers, and researchers from Black immigrant-serving organizations in order to learn more about the multifaceted Black immigrant experience. In total, we conducted 10 interviews between the fall of 2016 and early 2018. Interviewees were asked about the landscape and context of Black immigrant organizing and advocacy, the challenges to immigrant integration, emerging support networks and strategies for Black immigrants, and how the immigrant rights movement can become more representative and inclusive.



# Demographic Overview: Current State of Black Immigrants in California

## Transformations Over Time: Growth and Diversity

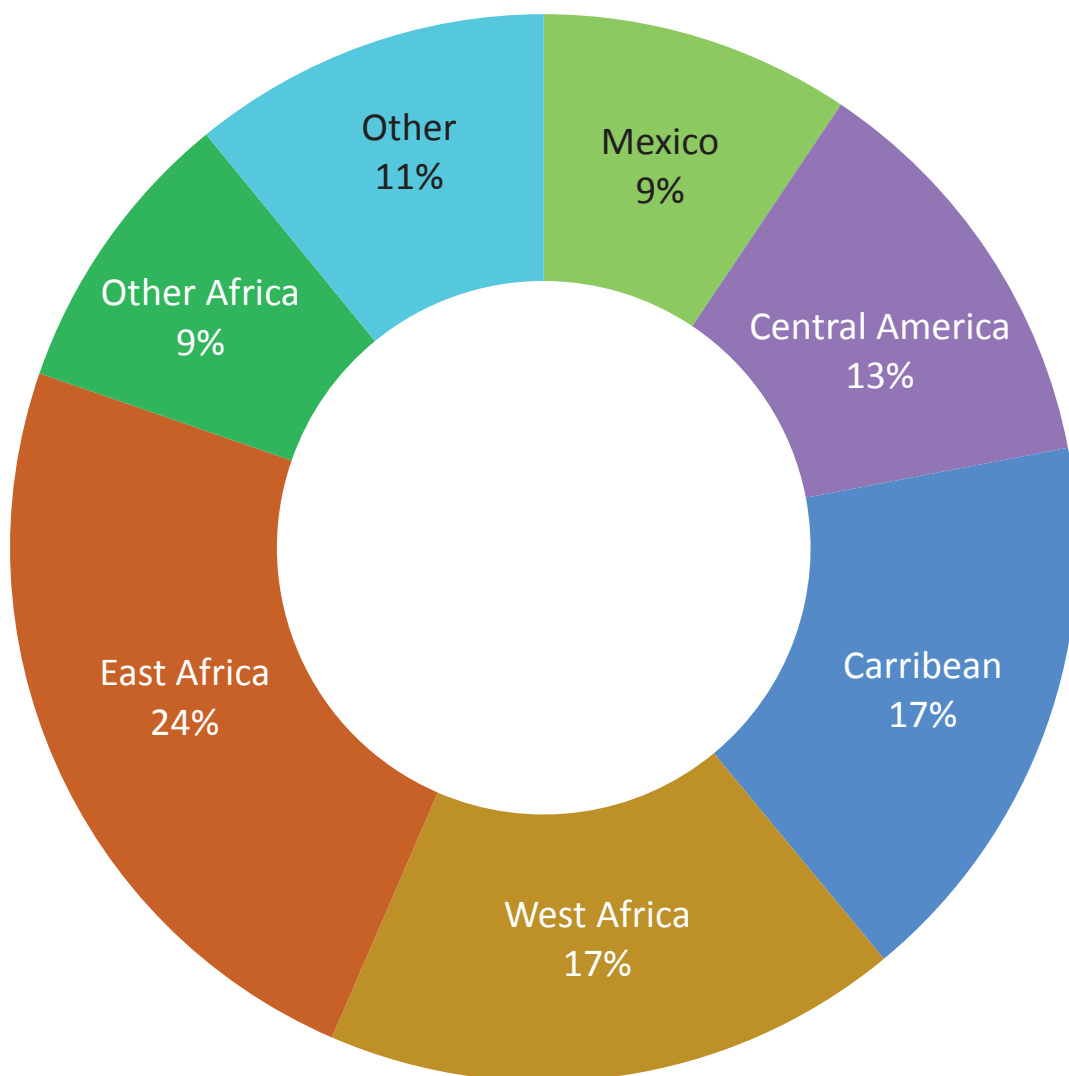
Though California has the highest share of the foreign-born population in the country, Black immigrants are often left out of the immigration discussion. To contextualize the current conditions of Black immigrants in the state, the following is an analysis of the transformations over time that have taken place, exemplified by demographic growth and changing immigration patterns. We then highlight indicators that demonstrate how Black immigrants are becoming integrated (or not) and establishing roots in the state. Finally, we parse out the implications for the future of this population and immigrant integration more broadly in the state, looking at emerging opportunities and challenges reflected in the data.



Black immigrants are a growing share of the population in California. From 1980 to 1990, the Black immigrant population more than doubled, and the growth rate has consistently outpaced the overall population growth rates in the state over the past 30 years<sup>5</sup>. Currently, there are about 178,000 Black immigrants in the state. Looked at another way, this amounts to about 6.5 percent of the overall Black population in California—and since most immigrants are adults, a perhaps better figure is that over 8 percent of all Black adults in California are foreign-born, up from around 3 percent in 1980.

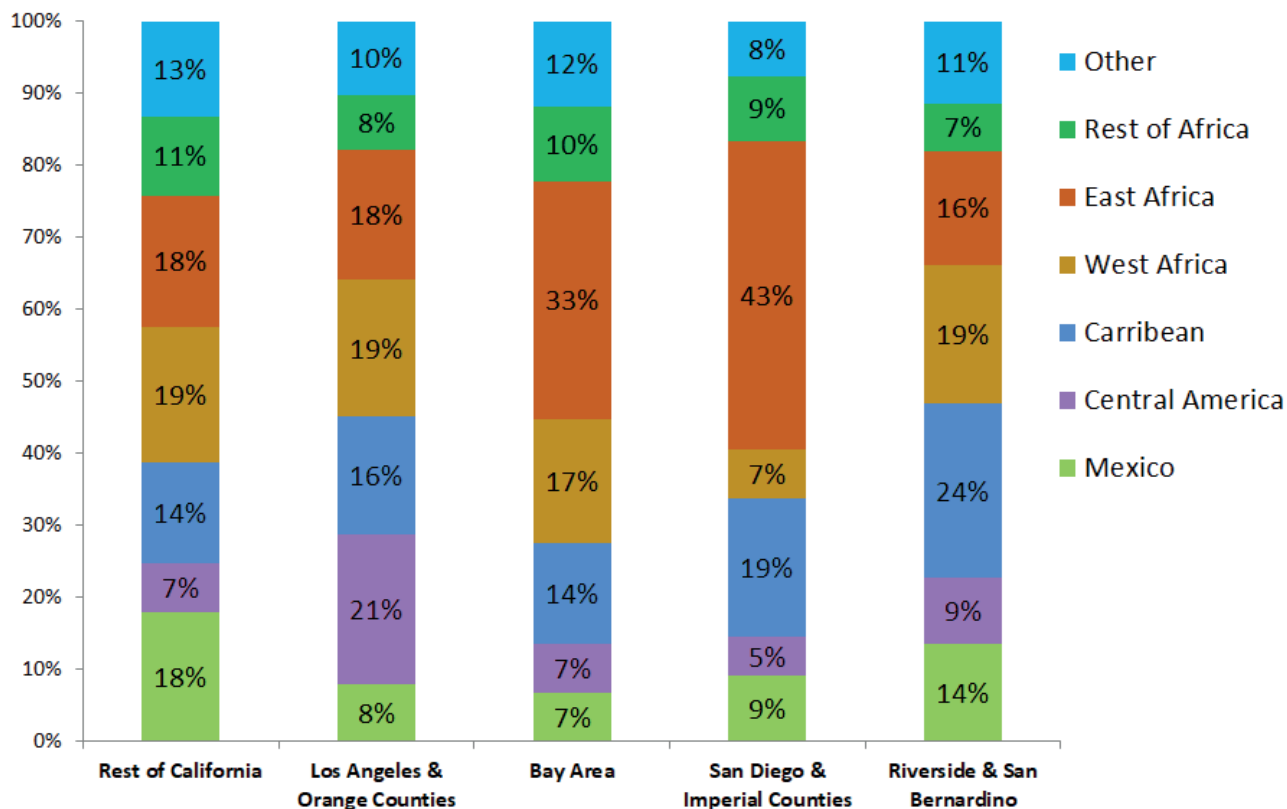


Region of Origin for Black Immigrants  
In California, 2010-2014



Black immigrants are a diverse group, hailing from over 100 different countries throughout the world. Most Black immigrants hail from Africa, notably Eastern and Western African countries like Ethiopia and Nigeria, respectively. However, many Black immigrants also come from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America, with nearly one in ten Black immigrants coming from Mexico alone and even larger shares from Central America and the Caribbean.

Place of Origin for Black Immigrants by Region,  
California, 2010-2014



Along with the overall growth of the Black immigrant population in California in recent decades, the migration patterns and countries of origin have changed. While over 60 percent of Black immigrants who are long-term residents (those that migrated at least 30 years ago to the country) are from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean—with 28 percent coming from the Caribbean alone—that share has decreased within the cohort of recent arrivals, even as overall immigration levels increased in the past 20 years. Instead, most Black immigrants who are recent arrivals (those migrating within the last decade) come from East and West Africa—55 percent, to be exact. This growth is even more pronounced in absolute terms, going from about 8,500 long-term immigrants to 27,000 more recent arrivals from East and West Africa.

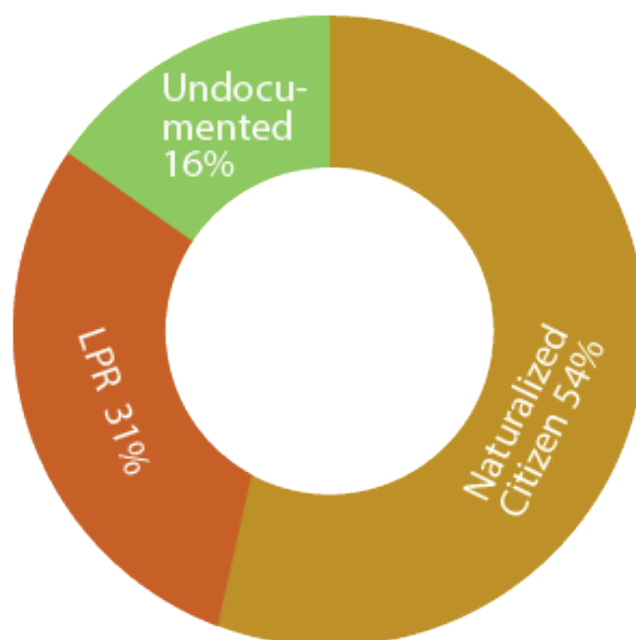
Finally, the geography of Black immigrants is a bit paradoxical: they are both concentrated in certain regions and dispersed within those regions. Black immigrants tend to be located in the three major coastal metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and San Diego, yet are often dispersed across neighborhoods within those metro areas. While Los Angeles has the largest overall number of Black immigrants, with more than 73,000 residents, San Diego (defined as San Diego and Imperial Counties) has the highest immigrant share of its Black population, with nearly 9 percent of all Black San Diegans being immigrants.

However, the more significant geographic variation that is evident by regions in California is the regional distribution of Black immigrants by place of origin. The most notable example of this is in the Bay Area and San Diego regions, where 33 percent and 43 percent of Black immigrants are East African, respectively. San Diego, in particular, has the highest share of East African Black immigrants of any region in the state, which reflects the large refugee population that has settled in communities like City Heights. Additional examples of specific settlement patterns are evident in Los Angeles, which has a high share of Black Central American immigrants (but perhaps surprisingly, one of the lowest shares of Black immigrants from Mexico), and the Inland Empire, which has the relatively largest Caribbean population in the state.



# INTEGRATION OR EXCLUSION? BLACK IMMIGRANT PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN CALIFORNIA

Citizenship and Immigration Status  
of Black Immigrants in California.  
2010-2014



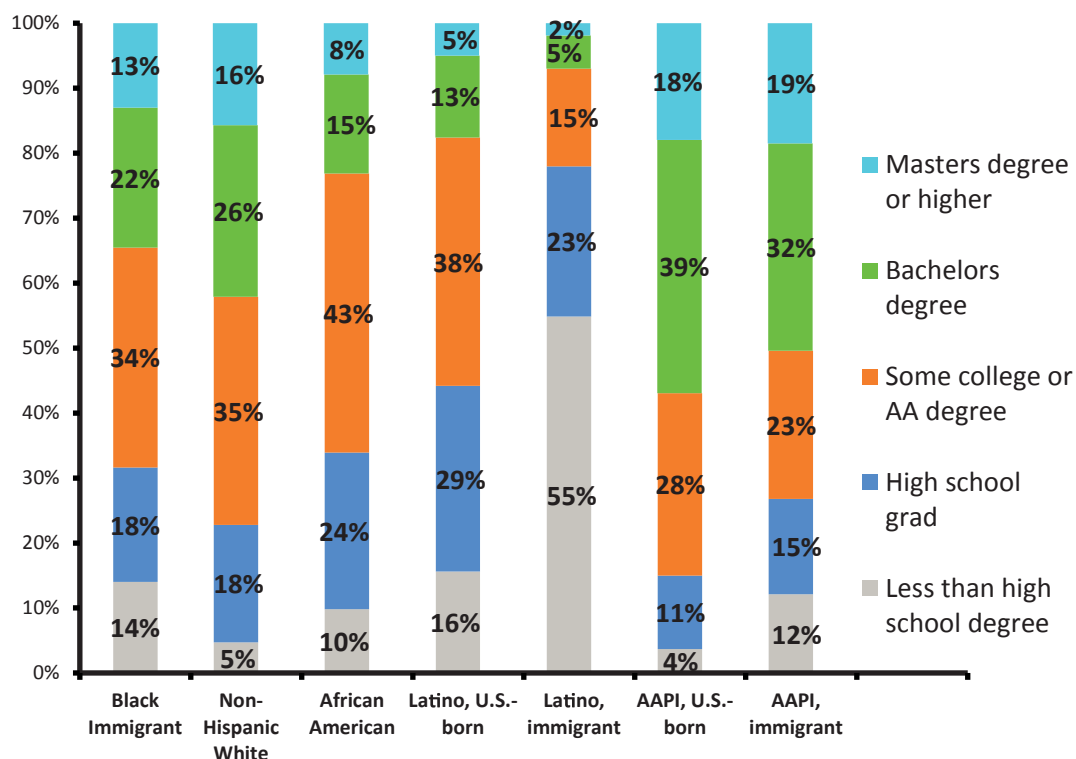
As the Black immigrant population continues to increase in the state, it is important to gauge the degree to which these communities are becoming integrated into civic and social life. A significant determinant of integration is one's immigration status, which often can dictate the degree of economic and social mobility for entire households. Looking at Black immigrants, over half of those residing in California are naturalized citizens and about 16 percent are undocumented. Both of these figures fall in between the rates for Latino and Asian-American and Pacific-Islander (AAPI) immigrants in the state.<sup>6</sup> About two-fifths of Latino immigrants are undocumented, while only 31 percent are naturalized citizens. In contrast, 64 percent of AAPI immigrants are naturalized and 12 percent are undocumented. Thus, a sizeable share of Black immigrants have established permanency in the country via their citizenship status, though there is still a significant minority that would benefit from a pathway to legalization and also a large group that may be eligible to naturalize and could be encouraged to do so.



Black immigrants are excelling on certain measures of integration; Black immigrants have higher rates of English proficiency, for example, when compared to Latino and AAPI immigrants, though this may be partly due to some immigrants coming from English-speaking countries. Nearly nine in ten Black immigrants can speak English well or better, compared to three-quarters of AAPI and slightly more than half of Latino immigrants. However, there is one significant divergence within Black immigrants by region of origin, as Black Mexicans have an English proficiency rate of 44 percent, about half of that for Black immigrants of all other regions.

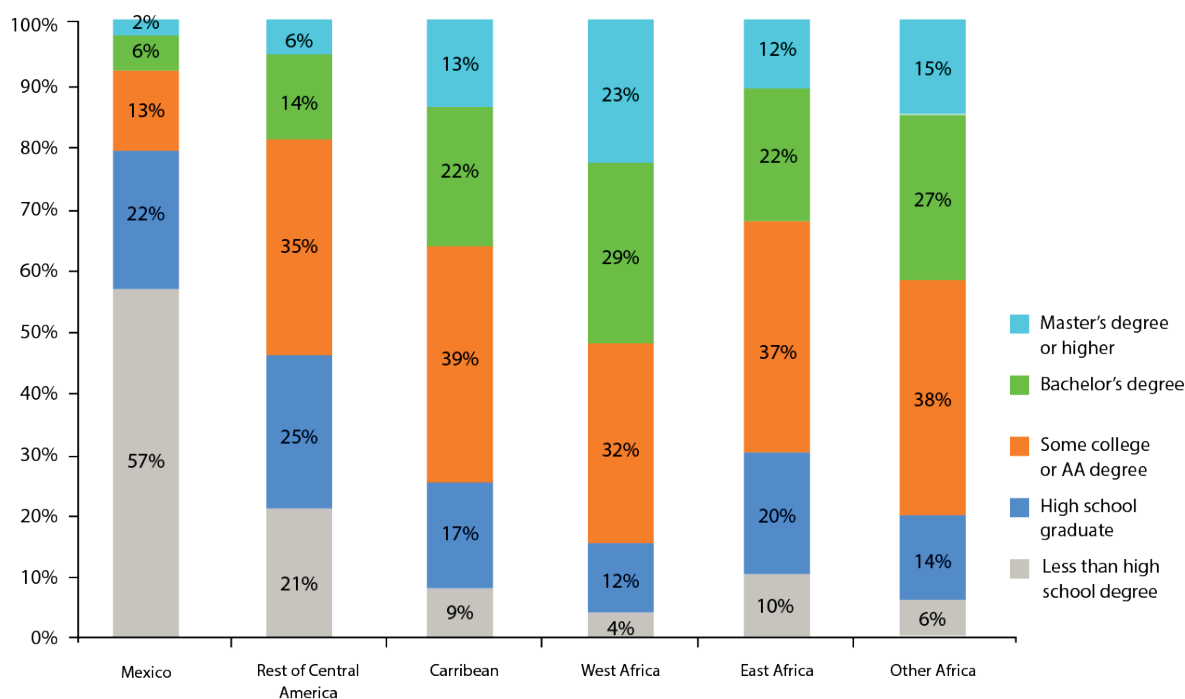
Similarly, Black immigrants are relatively highly educated, with 35 percent of all those aged 25 to 64 (what is generally considered the prime working-age population) having a bachelor's degree or higher and over two-thirds having at least some college education. Indeed, the share of Black immigrants with a postgraduate degree is much closer to non-Hispanic whites than to Black people born in the U.S. (African Americans) or all Latinos. The distinction between Black immigrants and native-born African Americans contributes to some tensions, which we explore below.

**Educational Attainment (ages 25-64) by Race, Ethnicity, and Nativity, California, 2010-2014**



Educational attainment is also stratified by region of origin among Black immigrants. While a full 23 percent of West African immigrants have a post-graduate degree (that is, a master's level degree or higher)—an attainment rate that outpaces, for example, AAPI immigrants—only 8 percent of Mexican Black immigrants even have a B.A. or higher. Central American immigrants fare somewhat better, but still lag significantly behind Caribbean and African immigrants. This may be due to the differences in migration patterns and trajectories, as Mexican and Central American immigrants are more similar to other Latino immigrants than to non-Latino Black immigrants in terms of both educational attainment and English ability.

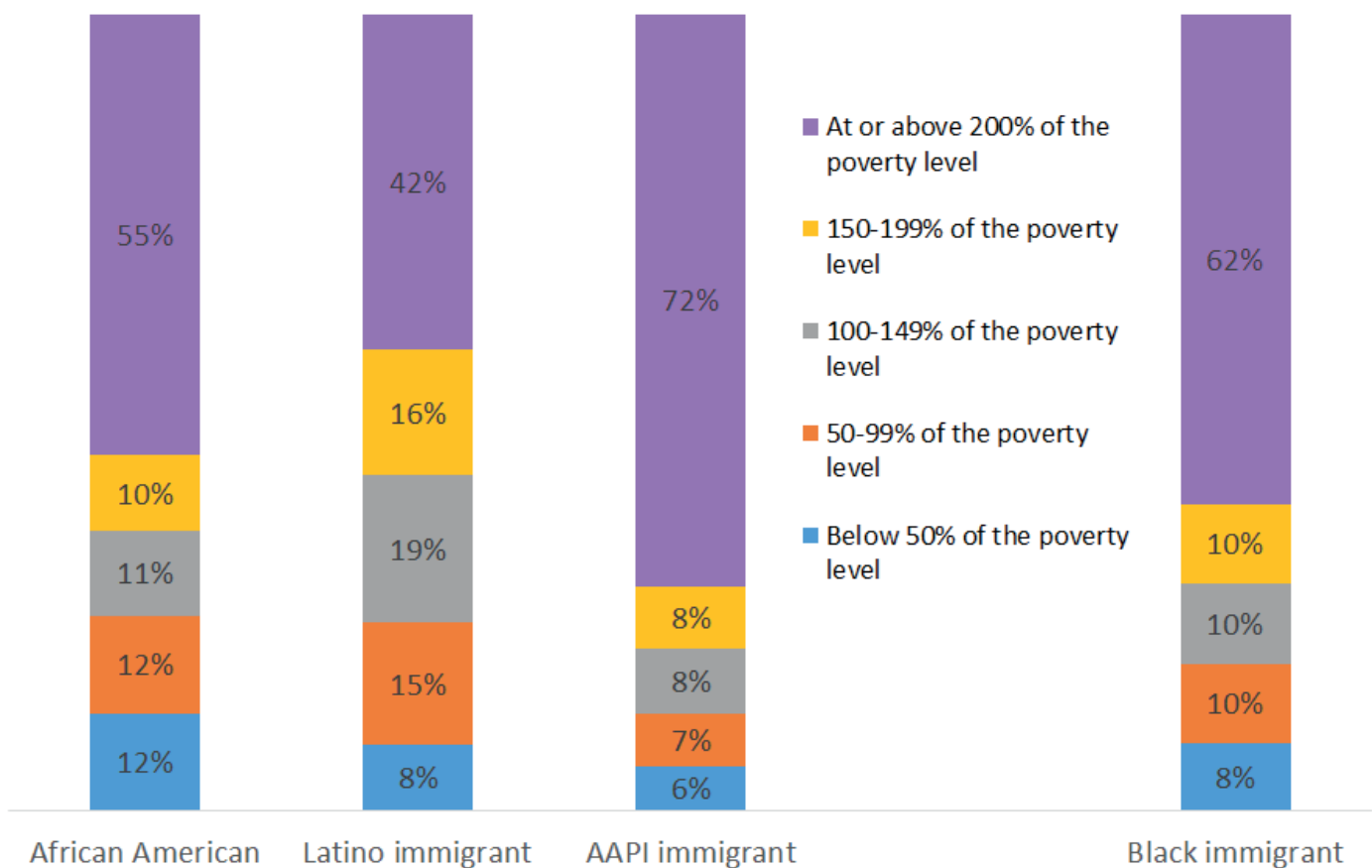
**Educational Attainment (ages 25-64) for Black Immigrants  
By Region of Origin, California, 2010-2014**



However, on some economic measures of integration, all Black immigrants fare less well compared to other immigrant groups and instead seem to face similar hurdles as African Americans. Among those aged 25 to 64, the unemployment rate for Black immigrants in California averaged over the 2010-2014 period stood at nearly 12 percent. While the five-year average likely overstates the current rate, as noted in the methodology discussion above, it provides more reliability when comparing the employment experience to other groups by race, ethnicity, and nativity. When we do that, we find that only African Americans have a higher unemployment rate than Black immigrants. Interestingly, the gendered nature of unemployment differs between Black immigrants and African Americans: Black immigrant women have higher unemployment rates compared to men, while the opposite is true with African Americans. Additionally, Black immigrants from certain regions face higher burdens to employment—African immigrants that migrate from outside East Africa have single-digit unemployment (over the five-year pool), while immigrants from nearly every other region hover closer to 13 percent unemployment.

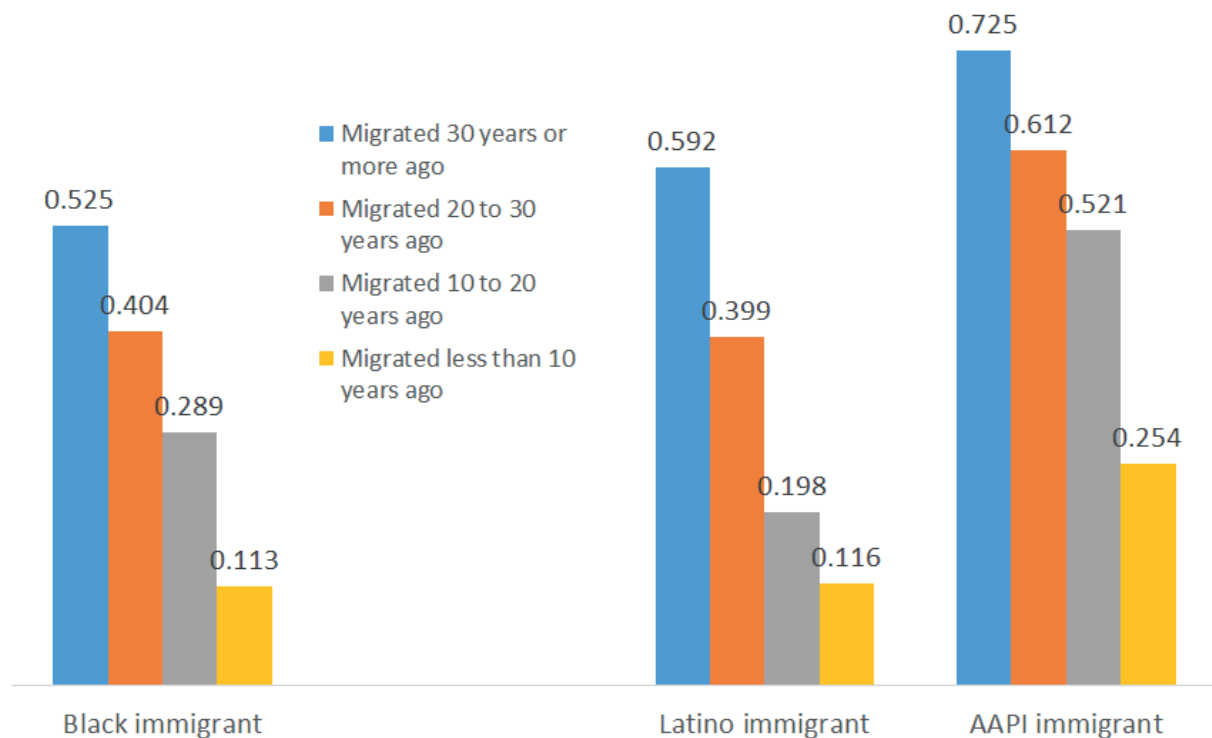


Ratio of Income to Poverty for Immigrants by Race/Ethnicity,  
California, 2010-2014



Similarly, the poverty rate for Black immigrants, which stands at nearly 19 percent (again, pooled over the 2010-2014 period to allow for disaggregation), is closer to African Americans and Latino immigrants than to AAPI immigrants; poverty rates for the former two groups hover around 25 percent, while for the latter it is closer to 12 percent. Again, there is regional variation in poverty rates among Black immigrants: Mexican immigrants actually have a 30 percent poverty rate, contrasted with a rate of 13 percent for Caribbean and West African immigrants. And if we expand the scope of poverty to include those at the margins, we see there are some additional differences from other immigrant groups. Looking at other ratios of income to poverty, Black immigrants have a profile more similar to African Americans than to Latino or AAPI immigrants; Latinos have a much higher share of people at the fringes of poverty (below 200 percent of the poverty line), while over 70 percent of AAPI immigrants are above the 200 percent poverty threshold. For Black immigrants, like African Americans, the majority of the population is above the threshold, and the share of those below is distributed relatively evenly across the spectrum of poverty.

Homeownership Rate of Immigrants (ages 25+) by Race/Ethnicity, California, 2010-2014

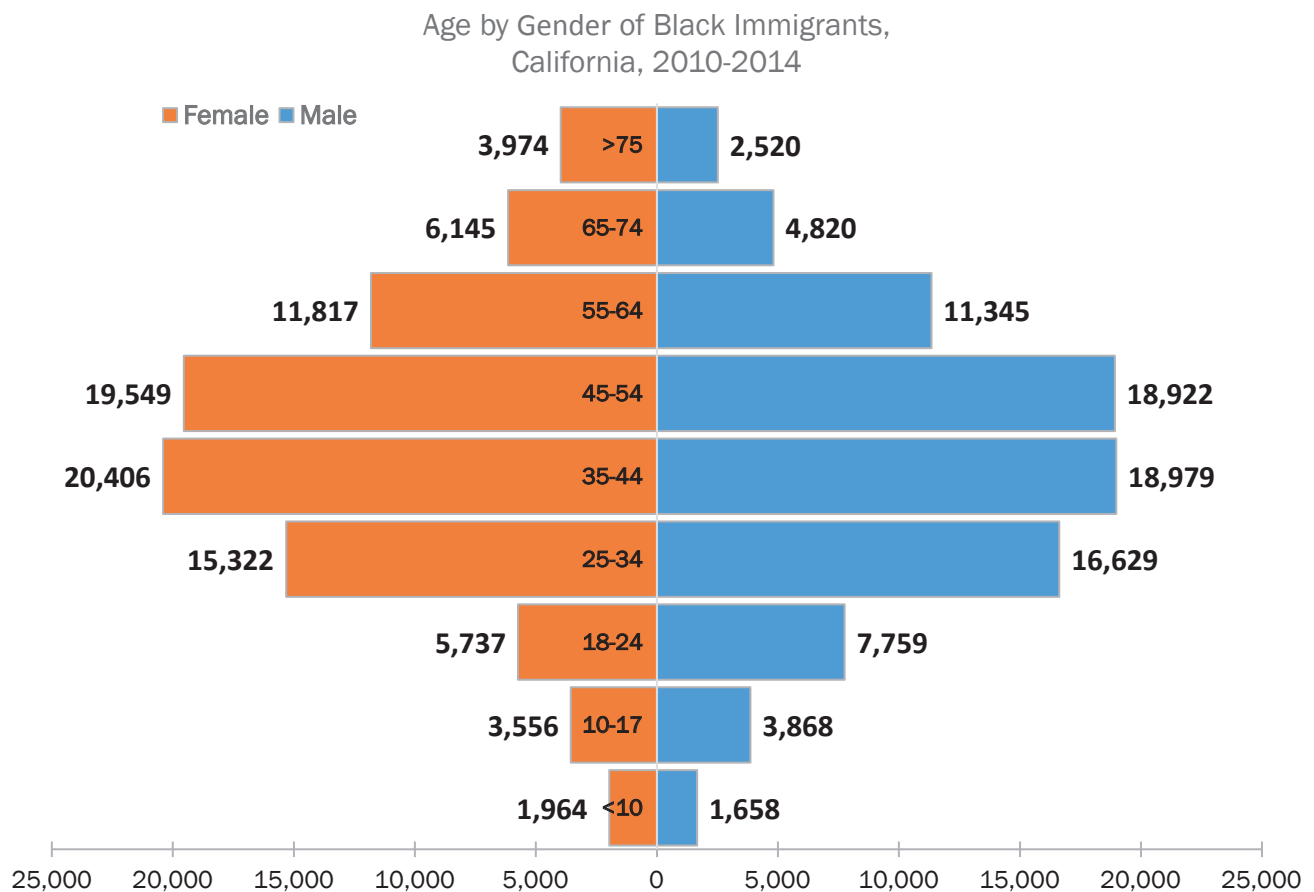


Finally, homeownership is often seen as a measure of both economic stability and rootedness in place. Black immigrants and African Americans have low homeownership rates compared to other groups: both are at 37 percent among adult household heads aged 25 and over, compared to 41 percent for Latino immigrants, 57 percent for AAPI immigrants, and 65 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Yet when we look at homeownership rates by migration cohort, we see that Black immigrants follow the same trend as other immigrants in terms of rising rates of homeownership over time in the United States, albeit at a slower pace. Though this should signal encouragement for economic mobility over time, it is important to remember that, as 56 percent of Black immigrants have migrated within the last two decades, the pathways to homeownership that have historically been available to immigrants in California may no longer be there as housing prices across the state continue to outpace the country.

More alarmingly, when looking solely at those aged 25 and older with at least a postgraduate degree, Black immigrants have the lowest homeownership rate out of any group. Thus it appears that educational attainment does not pay the same dividends for Black immigrants as it does for other populations, regardless of nativity. Some of this may be a well-known “credentialing” problem in which education attained outside the United States is not recognized in U.S. labor markets—but it is also consistent with discrimination against Blacks, including African Americans as well as Black immigrants, in those very same job markets. Thus, when thinking about future opportunities for Black immigrants as the population continues to grow, it is important to consider the ways in which they are able to realize (or not) the full value of their “human capital” (e.g., education) and to access (or not) pipelines to build economic wealth and stability.



# BLACK IMMIGRANTS: AGE, GENDER, AND THE FUTURE



There is a clear gender difference in the age makeup of Black immigrants. Men outnumber women among young adult immigrants aged 18 to 34, providing evidence that immigration patterns are similar to other groups and young men are often the first movers to the country. However, this gender distribution flips when looking at working-age adults aged 35 to 54, and is unsurprisingly more pronounced among seniors over the age of 65, where women outnumber men by 38 percent. Additionally, when looking at the gender makeup of immigrants by region of origin, there are other differences that again point to migration patterns; immigrants from West Africa and Mexico are mostly men, while immigrants from East Africa and Central America are mostly women. While the reasons for this are not immediately clear, it is important to keep these and other gendered differences in mind when thinking about pathways to integration and relationship-building.

Another key part of relationship-building is language—and Black immigrants exhibit a diversity in language that parallels their diversity in origins. There are over 60 languages spoken at home by Black immigrants in California. While English is the most-spoken language in Black immigrant households, 18 percent of Black immigrants speak Spanish at home, which points to the high share of Afro-Latinos in the state. The next most spoken languages are Amharic and Kru, which exemplify the high levels of East and West African migration that has occurred in recent decades. Other top languages spoken include French, Swahili, Somali, French Creole, and Arabic, which again point to the many countries and cultures from which Black immigrants emigrate.

Looking forward, the role of Black immigrants may be even more significant when we incorporate their U.S.-born children—what is frequently called the “second generation”—into the analysis. Unfortunately, this is not easy to do with the major data source used here, the American Community Survey (ACS): a child’s parents are identified in that survey only if they are living in the same household as the child. Using that measure will only tell who in the second generation, mostly children and young adults, actually share a domicile: by that standard, there are 138,000 individuals living with at least one parent who fits our classification of Black immigrants.

Interestingly for those children living with Black immigrant parents, Spanish is again the most highly spoken language after English, with almost 15 percent of this group speaking Spanish. However, there is a significant drop in the number of people that speak other languages, as exemplified by the fact that only 5 and 3 percent of these individuals speak Amharic and Kru, respectively. It may be that non-Western languages are harder to retain across generations, especially compared to Spanish; or this may be unique to California, where there are millions of Spanish speakers throughout the state and African immigrant enclaves are not as established as in East Coast cities like New York.

However, it is important to recognize that the more standard definition of “second generation” does not require that U.S.-born individuals live with their immigrant parents—they may have formed their own families and households. While we cannot flag that in the ACS data, one alternative data set, the Current Population Survey (CPS), does indicate the nativity of the respondent as well as the country of origin of one’s parents, even if they do not live with the respondent. Unfortunately, the data do not indicate the race of the parent—and the CPS is also a much smaller sample and so does not allow for all the interesting disaggregations conducted above. It does, however, allow us to apply a more traditional definition of the second generation to Black immigrants.

Given the data limitations in the CPS, we define the second-generation, or children of Black immigrants, as all U.S.-born residents who self-identify as Black and have at least one parent who is an immigrant, or who self-identify by any racial category and have an immigrant parent from either a majority Black African country (namely outside of North Africa) or certain majority-Black Caribbean countries. The former group—those who self-identify as Black—accounts for nearly 90 percent of the identified second generation. The latter includes individuals who do not identify as Black but have a parent from a Black-identified country. While this could overstate the size of the second generation by, for example, including the children of white South Africans, this makes up for a possible undercount of those second-generation individuals who, say, hail from Latin America, have a Black immigrant parent, but do not mark Black on the Census.

In any case, using that more appropriate designation, the number of children of Black immigrants is slightly over 305,000<sup>8</sup>. This represents more than 10 percent of all those who are U.S.-born and identify as Black in California. This group exhibits different patterns than Black Californians with U.S.-born parents. For example, about 26 percent of the children of Black immigrants between the ages of 25 and 45 have a high school degree or less while nearly 39 percent have a B.A. or better. The figures for Black people with U.S. parents are basically reversed, with around 35 percent of those in the same age cohort having a high school degree or less and about 27 percent having a B.A. or better. The college completion rate for the children of Black immigrants also tops that for second-generation Latinos and Latinos with U.S.-born parents, who graduate at rates of around 20 percent and 19 percent, respectively; the children of AAPI immigrants have a nearly 60 percent college completion rate in that same age cohort<sup>9</sup>.

The richness in language, culture, and experiences that is reflected in the demographic data on Black immigrants and the second generation demonstrates the importance of digging deeper to shine a light on the context that Black immigrants and their children face. At the same time, there is a need for more (and better) data to more accurately capture the lived experiences of Black immigrant and second-generation communities and better understand the challenges and opportunities ahead. But quantitative data alone rarely captures the full picture—and it is particularly limited in terms of fully accounting for the second-generation experience. For this, we need to tap into the insights gleaned from interviews with organizers, researchers, and practitioners, as well as knowledge gathered in existing research and studies.

## INVISIBILITY AND HYPERVISIBILITY: LIFE AT THE INTERSECTION OF ANTI-BLACKNESS AND XENOPHOBIA

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While the data provide us a new glimpse of the Black immigrant population, it does not provide a full view of the context. The Black immigrant experience is defined in part by the challenges of navigating both anti-Blackness in a country steeped in racism and anti-immigrant sentiments and policy structures in a time of heightened xenophobia. This section explores how being at this intersection affects Black immigrant communities and the lessons found at those unique crossroads.

# GOING UNSEEN:

## BLACK IMMIGRANTS IN THE LARGER IMMIGRANT NARRATIVE



For Black people who are native-born, the lived reality of discrimination and anti-Blackness has manifested itself both physically and psychologically for decades. While the institutional discrimination and societal isolation anti-Blackness manifests are well known the actual Black people who live through these realities have become invisible.<sup>10</sup> These narratives have become embedded in our society and its institutions, leading to the casting of blackness as illicit or criminal!<sup>11</sup> These threads of anti-Blackness run deep, having different impacts and implications for Black immigrants. At the intersection of anti-Blackness and xenophobia, Black immigrants face many of the same challenges African Americans do, while also suffering from unique circumstances due to their immigration status. At issue, however, is the invisibility of these circumstances, and how that is manifested in different spaces.



When speaking about the issue of immigration generally, our interviewees noted how Black immigrant issues become secondary to what is most often seen as primarily a Latino/Mexican (and sometimes secondarily an Asian-American and Pacific-Islander) issue<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the sentiment is that because of the small and spread out population numbers of Black immigrants in California—and the nation for that matter—there is not a critical mass to garner enough attention on Black immigrant issues<sup>13</sup>.

Because of this, there is a feeling of neglect when it comes to Black immigrants—manifested in phenomena such as inadequate funding and other resources for direct service provision<sup>14</sup>. Even within mainstream immigrant-serving organizations, gaps exist in terms of cultural competency and language accessibility aimed at the Black immigrant population. And despite the fact that Black immigrants are a small share of the undocumented population—about 1 percent in California—they do still exist and are particularly vulnerable because of the overlapping impact of anti-Black racism. Indeed, interviewees explained that because of accessibility issues, many (if not most) Black immigrants do not seek out services or organizing spaces over fear of future repercussions on their status<sup>16</sup>.

Some interviewees also noted how Black immigrants remain underserved on the national level—often being left out of the conversation on mainstream immigrant issues<sup>17</sup>. Referencing the last big fight for immigration reform, interviewees pointed out how key issues impacting the Black immigrant community were traded away during negotiations<sup>18</sup>. Some of these issues included forced family preferences, diversity visa lottery, and temporary protected status, which all disproportionately affect Black immigrants<sup>19</sup>. Focusing on a strategy that excludes the interests of the Black immigrant community renders them largely invisible<sup>20</sup>. As interviewees noted, a new approach is needed: a kind of politics that genuinely pushes for policies that benefit *all* immigrants<sup>21</sup>.







# GETTING SEEN

## THE NEED TO CHALLENGE ANTI-BLACKNESS

To really push for *all* immigrants, our interviewees suggested that immigrant organizations and advocates will need to grapple more directly with the anti-Blackness often embedded in movement spaces. This is not a problem confined to immigrant organizations and certainly not to just movement organizations; anti-Blackness is part of the backdrop of American daily life. Moreover, some of what may come across as ignoring or erasing Black immigrants is part of the challenges inherent when a certain group is a relatively small share of the population in question. But as we have noted, although Black immigrants are small in number, they are in a pivotal position to influence, impact, and lead a broad intersectional movement for immigrant rights.

Given these issues, as one interviewee put it, movements should tackle anti-Blackness head on, looking critically at which immigrants become the focus of the story and campaign, and how that choice uplifts certain experiences over others.<sup>22</sup> Because it is so rare that Black immigrant stories are uplifted, typical immigration narratives play into the misperception that “black people can’t be immigrants,” further isolating the Black experience from the immigrant experience.<sup>23</sup> And due to the rampant criminalization of Blackness in America, Black immigrants get caught between the good immigrant and bad immigrant binary (if not automatically labeled as the latter). Their stories, as one interviewee put it, “are seen as not enough to change the hearts and minds.”<sup>24</sup> Because of race, poverty and class assumptions, Black immigrants’ lived experiences get inserted into paternalistic “charity” narratives—such as with Haiti—or folded into the realities of Black America.<sup>25</sup>

Although Black immigrants share some common narratives and experiences with other immigrants (e.g., language barriers, cultural challenges, and navigating institutions), Black immigrants, alongside African Americans, must also confront the reality of anti-Blackness. One of those realities faced is the assault and killing of innocent unarmed members of their community at the hands of police. Three prominent cases stand out as examples of how the Black immigrant community is directly impacted by police brutality: Charly “Africa” Leundeou Keunang, Amadou Diallo, and Alfred Olango.

In 2015, Charly “Africa” Leundeou Keunang, a 43-year-old Cameroonian national, was beaten and killed by the LAPD. His death, and the bystander video that captured it, sparked rallies in Los Angeles and outrage against police brutality and racist policing. Charly was a homeless immigrant who had been staying outside of a Union Rescue Mission, Los Angeles’s Skid Row. The Los Angeles County District Attorney determined that the shooting was justified. Sixteen years earlier in the Bronx, a 22-year-old Guinean immigrant named Amadou Diallo was shot and killed by four New York City police officers. The officers fired 41 bullets into Diallo while he was standing in the vestibule of his apartment building; the officers later claimed they thought he was armed (he was not) because he was reaching into his jacket to grab his wallet, presumably to identify himself.<sup>28</sup>

*“For new Africans in the US, the challenges of navigating life are no different than what millions of migrants face daily: managing employment, school, housing, health care etc. What is special is the ‘double jeopardy’ they face in being Black and immigrant, where few institutions understand the combined challenges let alone provide support and services when they are racially profiled by law enforcement and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).”*

**–Nunu Kidane**

**Source:** Nunu Kidane, *“The Importance and Power of Unity With Black Lives From the African Diaspora,”* Huffington Post, February 18, 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nunu-kidane/the-importance-and-power-\\_b\\_6706294.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nunu-kidane/the-importance-and-power-_b_6706294.html).

In 2016, police officers near San Diego shot and killed Alfred Olango, a 38-year-old mentally ill Ugandan refugee. Olango was shot and killed after his sister had phoned authorities asking for their assistance after he began acting strangely.<sup>29</sup>

The cases of Keunang, Diallo, and Olango illustrate the severity of the criminalization of Black migrants. Brutality against Diallo occurred in New York City, where the community-advocacy infrastructure is established enough to cause disruption around racial injustice and police brutality. On the other hand, Olango was killed in the historically white and conservative city of El Cajon, California, which is experiencing dramatic demographic change and is now home to many refugees and immigrants.<sup>30</sup> Olango's murder (and others in places with less significant advocacy infrastructure) have not garnered national attention or outrage.<sup>31</sup>

The policing of Black bodies is nothing new: while the incarceration data is not generally broken down by immigration status, we know that Blacks are far more likely to be imprisoned than other racial groups, and Black men are disproportionately impacted.<sup>32</sup> Black immigrants are more susceptible to interactions with police because of institutionalized racism and law enforcement officers' implicit biases about race.<sup>33</sup> This criminalization also extends to youth in schools, as well, with Black boys three times more likely—and Black girls six times more likely—to be suspended than their white peers.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, interviewees point out that Black immigrants are “doubly criminalized” because of racial profiling and immigration status.<sup>35</sup> Black immigrants are more likely to be detained and deported for criminal convictions than the rest of the immigrant population.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Black immigrants make up 7 percent of the total immigrant population (roughly 3.4 million people) but comprised 10.6 percent of all immigrants in removal proceedings between 2003 and 2015.<sup>37</sup> In the 2016 fiscal year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported 2,091 African immigrants.<sup>38</sup>

For Black Muslim immigrants, anti-Blackness combined with Islamophobia results in a triple criminalization. According to interviewees, as Black people, immigrants face disproportionate racial profiling by police, and as Muslims, they face religious hatred and violence and heightened surveillance by the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI.<sup>39</sup> As Ahlaam Ibraahim, a Somali-American university student, explained in an interview with NPR, “As a black woman, I'm scared of the police because I see people that look like me killed simply for being black. As a Muslim woman, I'm scared of being attacked and killed...Do they notice I'm a Muslim because of my hijab and my blackness because of my melanin?”<sup>40</sup> Without adequate resources or spaces, Black immigrant communities will remain vulnerable to interaction with the criminal justice system.

LGBTQ Black immigrants also face threats of violence. Interviewees noted that as countries on the African continent pass increasingly more draconian and oppressive anti-gay laws, new waves of migration by queer immigrants will intensify, lending another layer of vulnerability for Black immigrants.<sup>41</sup> Coupled with intense criminalization, queer immigrants and non-immigrants face what one interviewee refers to as a third layer of interface with law enforcement: “walking while trans.”<sup>42</sup> The risks are not just from law enforcement: 27 trans people were murdered in 2016, nearly all of whom were transgender women of color.<sup>43</sup> And despite all this U.S.-based violence, many queer immigrants are also worried that the current wave of deportations will place them back in home countries that remain hostile to LGBTQ individuals and communities.



Federal immigration policies and procedures also reflect structural and systemic anti-Black racism. For example, U.S. immigration policy has continually and willfully failed to recognize the plight of Haitian migrants. Following the devastating 2010 earthquake that killed between 220,000 and 316,000 Haitians, the U.S. suspended deportations, citing the need to allow recovery efforts to stabilize the country.<sup>44</sup> This allowed Haitians to enter the United States via “humanitarian parole” and await the opportunity to apply for asylum or receive Temporary Protective Status (TPS), something that 58,706 Haitians currently are beneficiaries of.<sup>45</sup> From October 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017, 9,163 Haitians had arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border, with an additional 4,000-6,000 believed to have made their way to the border from Brazil after having migrated there after the earthquake for work.<sup>46</sup> This prompted the Obama administration to ramp up deportation efforts of those not having Temporary Protected Status (TPS) using expedited removal in November of 2016.<sup>47</sup> Of the 41,000 currently in ICE custody, 10 percent are Haitian immigrants.<sup>48</sup>

To make matters worse, the Trump administration then set its sight on those Haitians here via TPS by announcing that Haitians no longer qualified for protective status and will lose TPS by July 2019.<sup>49</sup> The announcement sets the stage for the deportation of nearly 60,000 Haitian immigrants back to Haiti.<sup>50</sup> Members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other allies have taken issue with this stance, as they fear those impacted would be thwarted back into poverty, and into a home country that is wrought with issues related to food insecurity, infrastructure, and disease—for example, a cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2016 cost the lives of more than 10,000 people.<sup>51</sup> In January 2017, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund legally challenged the Department of Homeland Security’s decision, claiming that ending TPS for Haitian immigrants was influenced by the administration’s “public hostility towards immigrants of color” and that the administration was “infected by racial discrimination.”<sup>52</sup>



# BLACK LIKE WHO?

## **Building Community in the Diaspora**

It is clear that anti-Blackness affects both Black immigrants (and their children) and African Americans. However, both the data and our interviewees pointed to the need to parse out the distinctions and commonalities between the two to accurately contextualize the lived realities of the former group. This section looks at divergences in the Black experience in California, both between Black immigrants and African Americans as well as within different Black immigrant groups.



# DIVERGENCE IN BLACKNESS: THE CULTURE WARS

Racial constructs and the meanings attached to them vary from country to country.<sup>53</sup> For Black immigrants living in the U.S., integration requires learning what Blackness means in a uniquely American social and political context. Newly-arrived Black immigrants typically identify more with their national origin than as part of the larger Black community.<sup>54</sup> The reluctance to assimilate into a larger Black community is based on both prejudice and confusion.<sup>55</sup> Immigrants originating from majority-Black nations often experience a different racialization process. Afro-Latino immigrants for example may have faced discrimination in their home country but still may identify more with a *mestizo/mestiço*-based national identity.<sup>56</sup>

Transnational Black social movements of the past allowed Black people from different ethnicities to understand each other and translate their unique histories and cultures to each other and to ultimately arrive at an identity of Black solidarity that was transnational. Without these past movements, Black immigrants and African-Americans have found difficulty in bridging gaps of difference, opening the door to conflict and political disunity. As a result, Black immigrants often need time to fully understand how race is defined in the United States and what that definition means for their lives. Due to anti-Blackness in the United States, recent migrants may also intentionally avoid identifying as part of the broader Black racial minority.<sup>57</sup> By stressing their nationality, ethnicity, or language, Black migrants may try to disassociate from other Black people in an attempt to evade the racism directed at African Americans.<sup>58</sup>

This can lead to tensions with African Americans, who see new immigrants adopting misguided stereotypes of Black people in America and so fueling tensions between ethnic groups in the diaspora.<sup>59</sup> This can also feed into a “model minority” characterization of Black immigrants, distinguishing them from African Americans “culturally” or “ethnically.”<sup>60</sup> These identification patterns change with later generations, however, as second-generation Black youth show a disposition more likely to embrace multiple racial and ethnic identities.<sup>61</sup> This brings up new challenges for youth, however, as they have to navigate the divide between African-American and Black immigrant communities in addition to the xenophobia directed at the immigrant community.<sup>62</sup>

For the children of immigrants or immigrants who arrive as children or teenagers, these patterns are most evident at school. One of our interviewees described an experience attending high school in North Carolina and feeling a sense of isolation and confusion due to not knowing where to fit in.<sup>63</sup> They recalled, “High School was brutal because everything about me was different...I had no one to relate to. Nowadays there is so much more for young people to keep up with, the stakes are higher and I don’t know what resources exist, especially for second-generation youth.”<sup>64</sup> The siloing of groups has made bridge-building within the broader Black community important for moving forward.<sup>65</sup>

One point of tension, however, involves access to higher education. One influential study revealed that while immigrant-origin youth were only about 13 percent of Blacks aged 18-19 in 1999, they were 27 percent of Black students entering 28 selective colleges and universities that year—and were a startling 36 percent of those entering the 10 most selective higher education institutions. This phenomenon—in which high shares of Black students accepted and attending prominent institutions of higher education are from immigrant backgrounds—have led some to question whether or not those particular students are unfairly benefitting from Civil Rights policies that were meant to address discrimination against native-born Black people.

This sort of analysis sets up a divide, pitting the success of Black immigrants against that of Black native-born students and vice versa—which has caused tension between communities. Yet this is a false dichotomy: as we have seen above, Black immigrants, despite their high levels of educational attainment, face high unemployment rates, poverty, and adverse outcomes in the criminal law systems, a plight shared with many African Americans. Still, public discourse helps to create wedges: Black immigrant students are portrayed as “...not typical African-American kids.” The challenge is how to facilitate collective political understanding among Black immigrant and native-born communities about the dividends yielded by Civil Rights organizing (such as affirmative action), to recognize the common challenges posed by the phenomenon of anti-Blackness, and to develop a discourse that builds greater solidarity to confront imposed social divisions and media stereotypes.

Interviewees suggested that one of the ways to craft a new and more inclusive narrative is to work with existing racial justice and Civil Rights networks and organizations to create space for Black immigrants. This, in turn, requires a shared analysis for the community, a multidimensional frame for the Black diaspora today that can build on the legacy of the work done by African Americans while extending it to include new and different experiences. Another way to build the narrative involves the creation of additional pathways for engagement of Black immigrant communities more directly. BAJI and members of the Black Immigration Network (BIN; see box), have led the charge to create space, dialogue, and grassroots organizing opportunities that foster a second-generation/millennial-inspired Black understanding of race, Blackness, and commonality under the diaspora.

### **The Black Immigration Network (BIN)**

**BIN is a national network of people and organizations serving Black immigrant and African-American communities. It works to unite people of African descent by focusing on racial justice and migrant rights. By developing a shared analysis of race and immigration that centers on social, economic, and political power, BIN fosters solidarity across national, ethnic, religious, and generational divides.**

Source: The Black Immigration Network, “About,” <https://www.blackimmigration.net/about>.

# DISCONNECTED DIASPORAS: FINDING COMMON GROUND



These spaces of commonality are, however, hard to come by. The Black immigrant community in California is dispersed throughout the state (including within major metropolitan regions). There is significant diversity within these communities that makes the experience of Black immigrants unique, and in some respects, prone to being separated from the rest of the Black diaspora. These points of separation largely revolve around place, language, culture, and religion.

For instance, where Black immigrants live plays a role in disconnection. Being that Black immigrants, regardless of origin, often integrate into Black communities, one might think that a main point of civic engagement might be African-American organizations and institutions. However, such traditional Black groups can have a difficult time reaching out to immigrants.<sup>72</sup> Language is a great challenge that many well-established organizations cannot easily overcome; as we detailed before, there are over 60 languages spoken by Black immigrants.

African immigrants also identify with diverse faith traditions. For example, many Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants attend churches rooted in Eastern Christianity, like Orthodox Tewahedo or Coptic Orthodox. North African, Somalian, and Sudanese immigrants, on the other hand, are often Muslim and may identify more closely with Black American Muslims or other Muslim immigrants from the Middle-East or South and Southeast Asia. Understanding the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of Black immigrants is critical when providing services, conducting outreach, and building bridges between different communities.

In addition to religious diversity, Black immigrants in California are also diverse in national origin. Black immigrants come from over 100 countries, and even immigrants from the same country may be part of completely different tribal or ethnic affiliations. As most Black immigrants in California have migrated to the United States within the last 20 years (with nearly 50,000 coming in the last decade alone), they likely have strong political and social bonds tied back to home countries. As with Central American migrants that came to California in the 1980s, the context back home can be a determinant in levels of engagement within the U.S. For example, for Black immigrants from Africa, conflicts and tensions in the homeland often are transferred upon migration to the United States.<sup>73</sup>

While the challenge of finding commonality is a shared experience for Black immigrants across the U.S., California may be unique because of the way Black immigration is contextualized here, as compared to the East Coast.<sup>74</sup> In California, our interviewees note, there is less of an acknowledgment of people of African descent within the immigrant community.<sup>75</sup> This can partly be traced to the differences in population density. The East Coast can often be more segregated by national origin, with a greater concentration of Black immigrants, which can make integration into local diasporas easier.<sup>76</sup> That contrasts with the California context, where population density is lower and there are fewer local diasporas and networks for Black immigrants to integrate into.<sup>77</sup> Another program, the Diaspora Dialogues (described later in this report), helps to bring together Black immigrants across race, space, and place.

As Black immigrants migrate to the United States, they deal with a certain set of struggles that can help them overcome differences as they seek protection and empowerment in community spaces.<sup>78</sup>

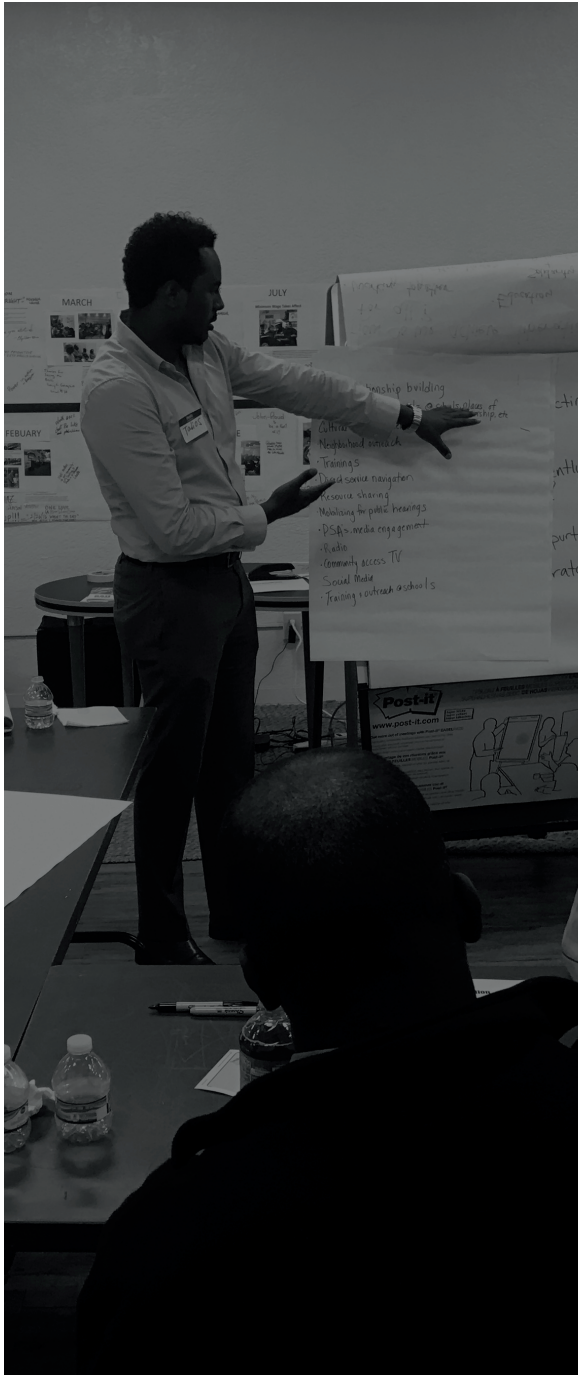
Looking at the landscape in California, the San Diego Taxi Workers (SDTW) are an example of how Black or African immigrant-led organizations and spaces can usher in a sense of unity that can cut across tribal or ethnic rivalries.<sup>79</sup> Mikail Hussein of the SDTW explained, “The beauty of the taxi workers... [is that it’s] the only local organization where people across the board can come together despite any home conflicts.”

Hometown associations also provide a way for immigrants to come together and support their communities of origin. These associations also help immigrants adjust to the United States by providing culturally and linguistically familiar networks. For example, the United Eritrean Association (UAE) of Los Angeles County and Surrounding Areas was created to preserve Eritrean culture, language, and traditions; develop community among Eritreans; organize community events; and provide financial support to Eritrea during natural and manmade disasters.<sup>81</sup> The association supports a youth soccer program, which participates in national competitions organized by the Eritrean Sports Federation in North America (ERSFNA). In addition, UAE’s bilingual English-Tigrigna website provides resources on health, education, and upcoming community events. These kinds of networks exist throughout the country; according to a 2008 survey, 57 percent of Ethiopians, 23 percent of Ghanaians, and 22 percent of Nigerians in the United States participate in a hometown association.<sup>82</sup>



# A SPECIAL DISCONNECT

## SHIFTING AFRO-LATINO IDENTITIES IN CALIFORNIA



One particular complexity in developing a collective identity as Black immigrants is the role of Afro-Latinos. As mentioned earlier, racial constructs vary by place and over time and in the absence of a transnational Black movement it is difficult to create a transnational identity. Unlike Caribbean and African immigrants who come from majority Black nations, Afro-Latinos are considered “minorities” in their home countries, often face “colorism” (or a preference for whiteness) at home, and, as one interviewee noted, may attempt to distance themselves from a construct of Blackness.<sup>83</sup>

As a recent Pew report showed, “When asked directly about their race, only 18% of self-identified Afro-Latinos living in the United States identified their race or one of their races as Black. In fact, higher shares of Afro-Latinos identified as white alone or white in combination with another race (39%) or volunteered that their race or one of their races was Hispanic (24%). Only 9% identified as mixed race.”<sup>84</sup> In a state like California, where a high share of Black immigrants are Afro-Latino and Latinos are the largest population, a lack of Black identification may be even more prominent: there is a larger *Latinidad* in which to integrate and so marginalization and separation from other Black immigrants becomes even more possible.





The pressure to assimilate into a *Latinidad* or mestizo identity not only occurs in the United States but also in immigrants' countries of origin. Most Latin American countries emphasized *mestizo/mestiço*-identities in attempts to construct post-colonial national identities. This focus on mixed-race nationals was ostensibly aimed at reducing ethnic or racial tensions, but it also minimized Blackness and indigeneity in favor of a more European ideal.<sup>85</sup> The focus on a European-mestizo ideal normalized and institutionalized anti-Blackness while eroding racial consciousness in favor of a unifying national identity. In spite of this, some interviewees pointed to a shift that is emerging in recent years, especially in the wake of Black liberation movements, like Black Lives Matter or Latin American efforts, gaining prominence and adopting global perspectives. Interviewees noted how, more recently, a growing segment of Afro-Latinos have begun to challenge the erasure of Blackness within Latino communities.<sup>86</sup> Emerging activists see it as their responsibility not only to challenge racism within community spaces, but more importantly, to "Blackify" the immigrant rights movement to create a stronger support system for all communities. In the words of UndocuBlack organizer Fatima Murrieta, "We need to have a movement that actively engages impacted people, and that includes Black immigrants."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Pablo Blanco, founder of Garifuna Nation, notes, "All of us have to work with each other because we are all fighting for the same dreams."<sup>88</sup>

# COMING TOGETHER: A NEW POLITICS OF UNITY?

What does it mean to come together to fight for the same dreams and how can Black immigrants work with others to advance a new politics of unity? Organizations like the Priority Africa Network and BAJI have developed innovative programs, coalitions, and campaigns that provide a vision of how to unite racial justice and immigrant advocacy in new and transformative ways.

In 2005, the Priority Africa Network organized The African Diaspora Dialogues with the intention of creating a safe space for African immigrants. The Dialogues particularly sought to support young immigrants and the second generation, who had a different outlook than their parents or elders and often experienced marginalization from both immigrant and African-American communities. In this safe space, participants began talking more about racism as a common experience that they shared regardless of national origin, religion, or language. In time, they developed or deepened Pan-African identities inclusive of African Americans, African immigrants, and Afro-Latinos. As noted by Gerald Lenoir, the founding Executive Director of BAJI, the Dialogues created the foundation for BAJI's work, both in terms of developing a strong network of members as well as by informing its policy and other work. "It's really exhilarating [work], people really bare their souls...reveal their pain and process historical hurts. In some ways it's like a mass therapy session, but then we discuss the political and social implications," Lenoir said.<sup>89</sup>

Freedom Cities, a multicultural coalition of organizations fighting for the rights of workers, immigrants, and people of color is another example of how intentionality and inclusion can broaden the immigrant rights movement. The coalition, which was launched in 2016, has the goals of ending criminalization, advancing economic justice and workers' rights, directing investment toward community need, and linking national struggles for liberation with global freedom movements.<sup>90</sup> The broad platform, which BAJI helped develop as a convener, has allowed for immigrants, Civil Rights organizations, labor justice groups, and other equity advocates across the nation to come together around a shared political analysis and concrete local victories.

Ultimately, building solidarity in the immigrant rights movement requires more integrated leadership as well as a celebration of the different experiences, cultures, and circumstances of Black immigrants.

# FROM SERVICE TO ENGAGEMENT

## THE NEED FOR INDEPENDENT BLACK IMMIGRANT SPACE

The existing channels for Black immigrant engagement are largely within direct service work. The focus on economic development or direct services is a critical part of the successful integration of Black immigrants. Still, even in the arena of service delivery, Black immigrants remain underserved by mainstream immigrant-serving organizations.<sup>91</sup>

Although the need for direct service work is clear, it is also the case that there is limited capacity for moving Black immigrants to action around broader issues impacting their community.<sup>92</sup> The need for space, and for Black immigrant-run organizations leading on Black immigrant issues, spawned the creation of organizations engaged in strategic power-building organizing.<sup>93</sup> In some instances, organizational growth started out in incubator form, as part of larger mainstream organizations, like the African Advocacy Network (AAN). Started within the predominantly Latino-focused Dolores Street Community Services, AAN has expanded from one program area to several (legal services, education, translation, employment, and arts/culture).



Another example is the formation of the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA). Based in San Diego and grounded in City Heights, CA, PANA was created because of a lack of space for Black immigrant issue organizing that focuses primarily on refugee communities.<sup>94</sup> PANA's story is mirrored by other organizations who developed roots locally, including the African Communities Public Health Coalition in Los Angeles and taxi worker organizing on the East Coast and in San Diego.<sup>95</sup>

As more organizations have come online, their limited capacity has forced them to be innovative in their approaches to collaboration and network formation.<sup>96</sup> This includes strengthening connections between community organizing and direct service provision. In addition, burgeoning and established national networks, such as the Black Alliance for Justice Immigration (BAJI), have played critical roles in supporting and expanding Black immigrant organizing nationwide.<sup>97</sup>

BAJI's roots trace back to the 2006 immigrant rights marches against H.R. 4437, a bill passed by the House of Representatives which would have largely criminalized undocumented immigrants as well as those providing assistance to them.<sup>98</sup> As millions turned out to the marches, two Methodist pastors—Rev. Kelvin Sauls and Rev. Phil Lawson—brought together leaders in the Bay Area to discuss how the marches had no Black people visible in support of immigrant rights.<sup>99</sup> The goal that emerged was to lift up immigration as a racial justice issue and to lift up the role of the African-American community and Black immigrants in what they believed to be a continuation of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>100</sup>

BAJI's early work focused on faith communities, with small group sessions dedicated to establishing an analytical framework on the root causes of migration and its relevance to the Black community.<sup>101</sup> BAJI went on to create the Black Immigration Network (BIN) in 2009, a national network of African American- and Black immigrant-serving organizations focused on racial and migrant rights and justice.<sup>102</sup>

Although BAJI, members of BIN, and others have engaged both documented and undocumented Black immigrants that were never involved politically before, mass engagement is still a big challenge.<sup>103</sup> Much of the issue involves the geographic isolation of the Black immigrant community—something, as we have noted, that is not as much of a problem on the East Coast because of the higher density of immigrant groups.<sup>104</sup> Still, however, in California, the successful engagement of Black immigrants depends on closing gaps and addressing key needs. This will only occur, however, if the existing work of the organizations is made visible and is seen as a building block for the future.

# NEEDS AND GAPS: IMPROVING CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Engaging higher numbers of Black immigrants will require work to address key gaps. One area to address, in particular, is the still small number of Black-focused organizations with the capacity to engage the Black immigrant community. Existing smaller organizations lack the capacity to advance long-term change or to be part of larger alliances or networks.<sup>105</sup> Our interviewees note that services are overwhelmed and that resources are thin, limiting the kinds of endeavors in which organizations can engage.<sup>106</sup>

There is little doubt about the vibrancy of the organizations that have arisen to enact change for Black immigrant communities. However, interviewees note that in their experiences, most of these spaces are severely understaffed and underpowered.<sup>107</sup> This puts the permanency of these spaces at risk, which can make it difficult for community members to have a working knowledge of the resources or organizations available.<sup>108</sup> This further complicates Black immigrant organizers' ability to think critically about longer-term change, especially if the little capacity that does exist is focused primarily on providing services, and not on civic engagement.<sup>109</sup>

Some of our interviewees stressed that the biggest gaps in capacity are in the areas of organizing and civic engagement.<sup>110</sup> Very few organizations explicitly focus on building strategic power—especially with Black immigrant leadership.<sup>111</sup> This issue of grassroots leadership is important. As our interviewees noted, some projects or organizations can be offshoots of existing spaces but are not oriented or directed in the same way they would be with such leadership.<sup>112</sup>

Opportunities for engagement are low overall. For community members who do not engage through activism, relationships are limited and more social in nature and thus are not grounded in the intentionality that

would be found in organizing spaces.<sup>113</sup> More than one interviewee expressed that organizations are small and meet informally.<sup>114</sup> Because of this, it is difficult to establish a shared analysis of the root causes and problems facing Black immigrant communities.<sup>115</sup>

Relatedly, a universal theme expressed in our interviews was the tremendous need for ownership of Black immigrant spaces, in order to come together and strategize, to build power for the community, and participate more fully in national and regional conversations.<sup>116</sup> Black immigrant communities need the space to be able to engage in critical dialogue that will allow them to envision what a movement could look like with more capacity.<sup>117</sup> Significantly, it is important to not reduce this to the need for a singular space, which can often flatten the plethora of experiences and perspectives at work. As one interviewee expressed, "What does that look like with more capacity? We need to figure out our needs, at the very least know how many of us there are, and [what] resources [we need] to build many communities and a broader community."

Thus, there is an expressed desire to identify community needs and to better understand the community itself, both demographically and culturally.<sup>118</sup> There was also a desire to not just focus on the need for new space, but to also critically assess existing spaces and hold them to higher standards of inclusivity, especially for LGBTQ Black immigrants, so that those spaces can become safer and inviting for *all* Black immigrants.<sup>119</sup> For example, the 2016 BIN Kinship Assembly in Los Angeles had greater representation by transgender Black immigrants than ever before. Existing service providers also need to engage in more cultural competency, ensuring amenities and resources are provided in different languages and in ways that make sense for the various communities.<sup>120</sup>



Finally, there is a Black immigrant leadership development gap. The few such leaders that do exist would greatly benefit from added training, in order to help foster greater agency over the issues for which they are fighting.<sup>121</sup> Ultimately, this issue is also about resources—or the lack thereof.<sup>122</sup> As an example, most organizations that are focused on Black immigrants have annual budgets of less than \$500,000, with some even less than \$100,000.<sup>123</sup> Compared to many more prominent non-Black-serving immigrant organizations, the financial and funding gaps are significant.

# BUILDING TOGETHER: A STRONGER MOVEMENT FOR IMMIGRANT AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Despite the obstacles, the interviewees noted that there is a tremendous set of opportunities in the contemporary period. More traditional Civil Rights organizations and immigrant rights groups are open to building partnerships that enact grassroots strategies for the engagement of Black immigrants. Our interviewees say this is partly tied to the rise of #BlackLivesMatter and the Movement for Black Lives, a phenomenon which has led some groups to deal with the issue of race more directly, including the role of Black leadership within the immigrant rights movement.<sup>124</sup>

In order to build a more inclusive movement for immigrant and Civil Rights, our interviewees identified four key strategies that could be undertaken. The first involves *addressing anti-Blackness among immigrant-serving organizations*. This can include moving away from the good/bad immigrant binary, opening up spaces for Black immigrant-focused dialogue, and deliberately including issues important and central to the success of Black immigrant communities.<sup>125</sup> This also means the intentional uplifting of Black stories and struggles within immigrant rights narratives. Finally, interviewees suggested broadening the Civil Rights framework so as to allow immigrant rights to be situated in a way that builds bridges across traditionally marginalized communities, including Black immigrants.

A second strategy identified involved *addressing anti-Blackness leadership gap*. Interviewees note that there is a moral imperative in supporting the development of Black immigrant community leadership.<sup>126</sup> Respondents view the Black immigrant community as playing a critical bridge-building role in engaging with African Americans, decision makers, and other institutions.<sup>127</sup> That leadership development must be done in an intentional way, identifying gaps and opportunities that will attract diverse communities to the work.<sup>128</sup> It also means expanding leadership opportunities for Black immigrants within existing organizations.

Third, interviewees saw the Black immigrant agenda as part of a larger need to invest in Black *momentum, movements, and moments*. Resources are critical to ensuring the Black immigrant community can amass the capacity to address, empower, and organize on key issues. Interviewees point to the encouraging shift in foundation funds that are currently beginning to go toward Black-led and immigrant organizing.<sup>129</sup> More is needed to assist with the strategic capacity-building of existing organizations, as well as the exploration of what scaling up existing service-driven organizations in Black immigrant spaces can look like; this could be similar to the evolution of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA) and the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), both of which have leveraged service delivery to support organizing and civic engagement.

Fourth, the immigrant rights movement *needs broader policy agendas that address the needs of Black migrants*.<sup>130</sup> The immigrant rights movement can follow the lead of organizations like BAJI in identifying the shared industries, policies, and cultures that oppress Black and Brown bodies. This means linking immigrant detention and deportation with mass incarceration and opposing programs like Secure Communities that criminalize immigrants. It means strongly opposing any attempt at a Muslim ban, which would bar migrants from Libya, Chad, and Somalia; opposing visa sanctions or restrictions against countries like Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone; protecting Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for those from Haiti, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia and expanding it to include other African immigrants; and protecting and expanding diversity visas for African and Black immigrants. Closing the policy gap also involves improving workforce outcomes: improving wages to avoid working poverty, fighting discrimination and unemployment, and addressing the “credentialing” issue in which the educational achievements of Black immigrants are under-rewarded in the labor market. Black immigrants should be directly engaged in developing an updated policy agenda.



# CONCLUSION

This report has tried to couple quantitative and qualitative analyses to provide an in-depth picture of the Black immigrant community in California. The data suggest a population that is vibrant and often well-educated but facing significant challenges in terms of poverty, joblessness, wealth acquisition, and legal status. That these concerns are not often lifted up and addressed speaks to a particular invisibility in the broad immigrant rights movement. In a state in which the overwhelming majority of immigrants hail from Latin America or Asia, it can seem easy to ignore the relatively small population of Black immigrants.

But numbers alone do not capture the reality of people's lives or the pivotal nature of the Black immigrant experience. At the crossroads of xenophobia and anti-Blackness, the Black immigrant population is challenged by multiple systems of oppression. While finding commonality in that space can be challenging—Black immigrants are diverse by origin, location in the state, and many other dimensions—this experience at the intersection is key for building bridges between Civil Rights and immigrant rights organizations. Lifting up the experience and promoting the leadership of Black immigrants is therefore crucial to a healthier movement ecosystem for social justice.

Moving forward will require supporting the development of independent Black immigrant organizations—including the wide range of such organizations in California, some with national reach and presence, described in this report—and implementing their policy agendas. That, in turn, will require working to help groups often focused on service delivery to also include organizing and civic engagement work. Building that capacity will necessitate additional resources and capacity, including leadership and organizational development. All this should be done, interviewees noted, in collaboration with immigrant rights and Civil Rights organizations, helping to steer those groups to more effectively incorporate and center the experiences and needs of Black immigrants.

Indeed, interviewees stressed that new organizing models must be as intersectional as the lives of Black immigrants themselves. As noted, they stressed the need to create spaces and support work that builds across differences and understands what change looks like for Black immigrant communities. Aside from this notion of an independent voice, many had suggestions about how immigrant rights groups could better open their doors and incorporate Black immigrants as full partners. Finally, many stressed the need to view the work as part of a larger justice arc, one that includes the fight for Black immigrant rights as a continuation of the Black struggle for Civil Rights.

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*Titles and organizations reflect affiliations at the time of the interview*

Rufaro Gwarada, Interim Network Coordinator, Priority Africa Network

Mikaili Hussein, President and CEO, United Taxi Workers of San Diego

Amaha Kassa, Founder and Executive Director, African Communities Together

Nunu Kidane, Founder and Director, Priority Africa Network

Gerald Lenoir, Former Executive Director, Black Alliance for Just Immigration

Clementine Ntshaykolo, Program Coordinator, African Advocacy Network

Ola Osaze, National Organizer, Black LGBTQIA+Migrant Project (BLMP), Transgender Law Center

Adoubou Traore, Project Director, African Advocacy Network

Sharon Williams, Attorney and Director, JINA Immigration Legal Services

Zerihoun Yilma, Associate Director, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles



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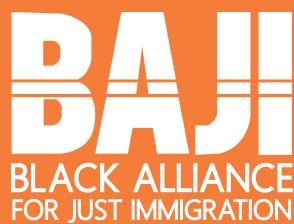
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