

PORTLANDIA: A city with much progress yet to be made

New report on African immigrants and refugees sheds light on the Rose City

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For the majority population in the Portland area and for many around the country, Portland is known as a progressive hub for artists, avid bike riders, vegans and environmentalists.

Bumper stickers bearing the slogan "Keep Portland Weird" can be seen around the city, and even popular culture has caught wind of Portland's reputation.

"Portlandia," a satirical sketch comedy television series, has popularized the image of Portland as an "artsy" and liberal city. In a popular line from the show, one of the main characters describes Portland, albeit with sarcasm, as the city "where young people go to retire." There is truth in the parody of Portland as a place for young, carefree and

Alpha Tessema works with IRCO/Africa House.

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However, there is a lesser-known truth about a community that has sought refuge in Portland long before "Portlandia" was conceived — an unsettling truth about a community whose precarious existence has not been glamorized by popular culture; a community facing discrimination and extreme inequities; a community whose needs and identity have yet to be recognized by policy-makers in Multnomah County.

I am referring to the community of roughly 25,000 African immigrants and refugees living in Oregon.

The Coalition of Communities of Color recently released a report titled, "The African



Formed in 2001, the Coalition of Communities of Color (CCC) is an alliance of culturally specific community-based organizations with representatives from six communities of color: African, African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino, Native American and Slavic. Representation on the CCC is determined by individual communities, and all decisions are based on consensus.

Immigrant and Refugee Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile".

The report contained data on the nature of racial disparities faced by the community in the areas of household income, child poverty, employment, language barriers, health insurance and homeownership.

Many of these inequities stem from a lack of support beyond the first eight months of their resettlement in Multnomah County. Government and local charities focus much of their resources on helping community members gain self-sufficiency in the first eight months following their arrival; however it is simply not enough for long-term stability.

Nearly 50 percent of the community is composed of refugees or former refugees who carry traumatic experiences of displacement. Many of these individuals are highly educated and have extensive work experience. Unfortunately, their credentials are not recognized when they seek employment in the United States. Policies that require African immigrants and refugees to take the first job offered continue to limit career opportunities and disregard previous skills or expertise they possess.

African immigrants and refugees bring with them rich cultures and legacies that represent the 54 countries in the continent, however, data on African experiences in the United States is extremely insufficient.

Conventional databases subsume African identity within that of the African American

community, which disregards issues with language barriers, settlement, health issues related to refugee traumas, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, the lack of knowledge of American society and the lack of community-based culturally-specific organizations.

Researchers must disaggregate the racial grouping of "black" in order to understand the collective experience of African immigrants and refugees.

This report marks the first ever collection of data specifically for the African community of immigrants and refugees in Multnomah County. And as such, the report is unsettling for those of us within the community.

I can imagine it will be unsettling for the majority white population as well.

Several racial disparities among many others are listed below:

- Average household income stands at \$28,888 per year for Africans, compared to an average of \$45,087 per year for whites.
- Child poverty rates for Africans are the highest in the region—66.6 percent.
- The Unemployment rate for Africans is 60% higher than for whites, at 13.5 percent compared to 7.5 percent.
- The portion of Africans unable to afford health insurance is also 60% higher than that of Whites, at 13.5 percent compared to 7.5 percent.
- Thirty-eight percent of Africans are able to purchase their own homes, compared to 62 percent of whites.

These findings compelled the Coalition of Communities of Color to draft a set of 19 African-specific policy recommendations that would give members of our community the chance to live dignified lives in Multnomah County. The policy recommendations span categories of education reform, employment, remittances, housing and health and human Services.

As a member of the African Community in Portland, I am inspired by the progress symbolized by this report.

If implemented, the recommendations put forth will put us on the road to creating a more equitable and just society—not only for young, carefree, and affluent whites, but for all residents of Multnomah County.



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