

# OPINION

## Developing a Just Immigration Policy

### Black immigrants will play prominent role

BY DEDRICK MUHAMMAD

The term "African American" has become a catchall to describe black Americans in the United States. But it obscures the more nuanced realities of black immigration to the United States.

Black immigrants, whether they hail from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the African mainland, often come to the America to escape poor conditions and find economic opportunity. As this nation struggles with immigration reform, the black immigrant community will play a prominent role in developing a socially just immigration policy.

About eight percent of black immigrants are Afro-Latino, or Black Latino. Many Spanish-speaking countries have massive Afro-Latino populations, includ-



ing Brazil, Columbia, Haiti, Dominican Republic and Cuba. These Latinos are diverse not only in their history and background but also in their struggles, so their reasons for migrating to the United States are many. However, the majority make the move to seek better economic opportunities for themselves and for their families.

Afro-Caribbeans also immigrate to the United States to seek expanded opportunity. The term applies to people with African ancestry whose native countries are located in the Caribbean. The first wave of Afro-Caribbean voluntary migration to the U.S. began in the 1930's and has continued to this day.

According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, this growth can be attributed to "the increasing economic hardship and disenchantment in the British West Indies and the simultaneous expansion of the U.S. economy with its relatively high wages and growing employment opportunities."

Finally, the rate of African immigration to the U. S. has steadily increased.

According to figures from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the number of African immigrants to the United States more than quadrupled in recent years, from just over 100,000 in the 1960's and 1970's to over 500,000 in the 1980's and 1990's.

Today's African migrants are increasingly interested in establishing permanent residency in the United States, a stark contrast to immigrants from the 60's and 70's who often intended to return home and contribute to nation-building efforts after acquiring an American education.

It is no coincidence that black immigration to the United States greatly increased after the 1960's, whether from the Caribbean, Latin America, or Africa. Just as outright racially discriminatory laws in the United States limited the progress of African Americans throughout the history of the U.S., outright racially discriminatory immigration policies limited the numbers of people of color who could legally immigrate to the United States.

The great influx of black immigrants in

the latter half of the twentieth century is largely attributed to the liberalizing of immigration policies that occurred during the height of the civil rights movement. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, one of the lesser known civil rights bills from that era, ended the national origins quota system and opened the door for large-scale Asian, African and Latin American immigration.

Over the last 50 years the children of black immigrants have become a growing part of the African American population. This can be seen in the election of the first African American president, himself the son of an African immigrant.

The diversity of the black community will continue to grow in 21 Century America. As we continue to make advances against racial inequality in the United States, the connection between today's black freedom struggles will necessarily be connected to immigration and immigration policy.

*Dedrick Muhammad is senior director of the NAACP Economic Department.*

## Making Progress on Living Longer

### Racial gap narrows to all-time low

BY MARC H. MORIAL

In recent weeks, we've shared with you the news that the birth-rate for people of color now exceeds the rate for whites, and that African American deaths from prostate cancer are declining. Now we have more good news about the health status of African Americans as the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that the racial gap in life expectancy has narrowed to an all-time low.

According to a new study, led by Dr. Sam Harper of Montreal's McGill University, "Between 2003 and 2008, life expectancy at birth increased from 75.3 to 76.2 years among non-Hispanic white men and from 68.8 to 70.8 years among non-Hispanic black men, whereas for

women the changes were from 80.3 to 81.2 years for whites and 75.7 to 77.5 for blacks.

These changes reduced the racial gap from 6.5 to 5.4 years among men and from 4.6 to 3.7 years among women." While still too wide, the gap in life expectancy between blacks and whites in America is now the smallest on record.

But even more interesting than the raw numbers are some of the reasons behind them. The study reveals, for example, that after years of devastation in the black community, we appear to be making progress in the fights against AIDS and heart disease.

As reported in the New York Times, Dr. Harper's study calculated that 15 percent of the change in life expectancy between black and white men was due to faster declines in the rate that black men are dying from HIV compared to white men. Another 15 percent was due

to improvements in preventing and treating heart disease among black men.

A similar pattern in HIV death rates contributed to 8 percent of the change in the life expectancy gap between black and white women. Declines in mortality rates for heart disease contributed to 29 percent of the change among women.

Let me be clear: Heart disease and HIV infection remain major causes of early death in Black America. African Americans are still 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease than whites. And blacks account for more new HIV infections and HIV-related deaths than any other racial group in the country. But the narrowing life-expectancy gap shows that targeted prevention and treatment efforts in African American communities are making a difference.

The National Urban League has been involved in the fight against AIDS

for more than two decades. Together with our affiliates across the country, we continue to stress the importance of HIV prevention in communities of color, promote greater access to care and influence national AIDS policy. Since 2009, we have been a partner organization in the Centers for Disease Control's Act Against AIDS Leadership Initiative, a federally-funded outreach effort that is harnessing the collective strength of some of the nation's leading organizations to fight HIV among hard hit populations.

While it is good news that the life expectancy gap between whites and blacks in America has narrowed to an historic low, we will continue our work to ensure that African Americans are not only living longer, but also aging healthier.

*Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.*

The Portland Observer Established 1970

USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PUBLISHER: Charles H. Washington

EDITOR: Michael Leighton

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Mark Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

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