



# Caribbean Immigrants in New York City and the Rise of a Black Middle Class in Southeast Queens

On the island of Jamaica, in the West Indies, the potential emigrant never states the specific place of his or her place of abode, but the departure from Jamaica in popular parlance is referred to as “him a go foreign.” Even before the twentieth century, Caribbean people have been trekking the globe. Since investment capital only came to the Caribbean sparingly, Caribbean labor followed the flow of investment capital. When the Americans assumed control of the Panama Canal project, West Indians migrated in droves to sell their labor to American construction firms. When the United Fruit Company expanded production of bananas in Central America, Caribbean workers seized the opportunity to work for wages that were better than what was available on their respective islands. When World War I erupted and European labor could no longer supply the factories in the north with unskilled labor, black labor from the southern United States and Caribbean workers moved to fill that vacuum in the proletarian ranks.

Immediately after World War II, Britain experienced a shortage of labor in particular areas of its economy and Caribbean workers migrated to fill that void. The civil rights movement precipitated a change in American immigration policy. The 1965 Immigration Act completely changed the complexion of American immigration and allowed an influx of Caribbean workers to seek occupational upliftment in a highly industrialized America. This paper assesses how Caribbean workers have fared since those immigration changes in 1965 and particularly examines the rise of a Caribbean working class and middle class in New York City.

## THE CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANT IN NEW YORK CITY

New York City remains the mecca of immigrants to the United States. In the post-civil rights period, since 1965 when the immigration laws were changed, the complexion of the immigrant stream changed dramatically. European immigrants have become a minority and the majority of immigrants, legal and illegal, originate from Mexico and other parts of Central America. As a nation, as is the case in Europe, the United States is having difficulty in adjusting to the new demographic dynamics. That is certainly the case in the west and southwest regions of the country. The immigrant population on the East Coast has a lower concentration of Mexicans than the West does. In the East, Caribbean immigrants, particularly when Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean are included, constitute a plurality of the mass influx.<sup>1</sup>

In the 2000 Census, 11.1 percent of the United States population was foreign-born. For New York City, the foreign-born population was 35.9 percent (Lobo and Salvo 2004). The immigrant population has mushroomed since the 1990s. During the decade of the 1990s, the last decade of the twentieth century, the foreign-born population of New York City spiraled to 2.9 million, an increase for the decade of 788,000.

The non-Hispanic Caribbean foreign-born population amounts to 5.3 percent of the United States population, according to data from the 2000 Census. When those macro-data are disaggregated and New York City is isolated, the Caribbean foreign-born compose 20.8 percent of that population. That figure supersedes the figure of European foreign-born, at 19.4 percent. Both in the nation and in New York City, the Latin American foreign-born predominate. Nationwide, their percentage is 46.6 percent and for New York City, it is 32 percent.

Dominicans from the Dominican Republic constitute the largest immigrant group in the last decade. The 2000 Census signified that there were 369,000 Dominicans residing in New York City. In the decade from 1990 to 2000, Jamaican immigrants stood at 178,922, Guyanese at 130,648, Haitians at 114,000, and there were 88,000 immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago (Lobo and Salvo 2004).

How has the Caribbean population fared in material terms in highly competitive and technologically advanced New York City? One way of assessing the efficacy of the Caribbean adaptation to American society is to examine the structure of the family. Throughout the United States,

there is a strong correlation between families living in poverty and single-parent families, particularly female-headed families. Other criteria included in the New York City Department of Planning document are home ownership, median household income, percentage living below the poverty line, and gender income disparities.

The Caribbean population, when assessed in accordance with the mentioned criteria, has not done badly, although other immigrant groups have outperformed them.

Of the Jamaican population in New York City, 33.1 percent of households are female-headed. Among the Guyanese population, it is 21.9 percent; among the Haitian population, 30.7 percent; among those from Trinidad and Tobago, 31.6 percent; and among Dominicans, 38.6 percent. In contrast, among Chinese immigrants, only 9 percent of households are female-headed, and among immigrants from the Philippines, 15.9 percent (Lobo and Salvo 2004).

For the entire city of New York, female-headed households amounted to 18.8 percent of all households. Caribbean immigrants superseded that threshold. Despite the shakiness of the family structure, Caribbean immigrants have managed to accumulate capital and acquire homes. In 2000, 36.9 percent of Jamaicans lived in their own homes. For those immigrants from Trinidad and Tobago, it was 32.3 percent, and in the Guyanese community, it was an impressive 48.5 percent. In the Haitian community, 30.2 percent of households were owner-occupied.

There were some immigrant groups, including Greeks, Italians, and Filipinos, whose home ownership exceeded that of Caribbean immigrants, but the Caribbean English-speaking immigrant has had a profound impact on home ownership in New York City.

New York City, despite its opulence, has been plagued with a high poverty rate far in excess of the national poverty figures. The poverty rate in New York City for most of the twenty-first century has hovered around 20 percent, while the national poverty rate fluctuates around 12 percent. The disparity in wealth possession is staggering in what is regarded as the financial capital of the world, particularly in Manhattan. The Dominican community is heavily concentrated in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in Manhattan, and the poverty rate among that Spanish-speaking community exceeds the norm for New York City. Poverty in that community in 2000 was estimated at 30.9 percent. In the Chinese community, it was 21.7 percent. Poverty among Russian

immigrants was a sizeable 22.2 percent; among Ukrainians, it was 20.8 percent; and for Pakistani immigrants, it was 26.1 percent.

Despite the prevalence of female-headed families in the English-speaking Caribbean community, poverty in those communities, although not miniscule, falls below the norm for New York City. In the Jamaican community, the poverty rate is 14.6 percent. In the Guyanese community, 13.4 percent, and among the Trinidad and Tobago community, 16.5 percent lived below the official poverty line. In the Haitian community, 19.1 percent fell below the poverty line.

Caribbean immigrants fared fairly modestly in the measure of household income. Despite the increase in the rate of productivity, wages in New York City have been falling. That is also the case nationwide. The average annual household income in New York City was \$38,500. For the Guyanese immigrant, it was \$41,960. For those from the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago, the median household income in 2000 was \$36,300.

Other immigrant groups fell significantly below the city's median income. In the Dominican community, median income was \$25,310. In the Mexican community, it was \$32,000. In the Russian community it was \$28,000, and among the Ukrainians, it was \$23,100.

Caribbean women are heavily represented in the labor force and the differentiation between male and female income is quite miniscule. In the Jamaican community, the participation rate of women in the labor force was 64.7 percent, in contrast to their male counterparts, where the rate was 70 percent. The gender gap in the Guyanese community was much larger, as the participation rate of women was 60.7 percent while for men it was 72.9 percent. For the Trinidad and Tobago community, the male and female participation rates were 71.1 and 63.6, respectively. In stark contrast, only 22.2 percent of Pakistani women were in the labor force, 29.4 percent of Bangladeshi women, 46.4 percent of women from the Dominican Republic, and 39.2 percent of women from Mexico.

Workers from the Caribbean have competed fairly well in New York City. Their poverty rates are below the norm, their home ownership rates have become renowned, and their labor-force participation rate, particularly for women, is quite impressive and is a critical factor why Caribbean household income is slightly above, or hovers around, the

city's norm. However, even though Caribbean home ownership and household median income are higher than those of immigrant groups from Russia and China, that does not mean that the upward mobility of those groups will not be more accelerated than that of the Caribbean working-class immigrant.

A recent study of second-generation Americans conducted by John Mollenkopf, Philip Kasinitz, Mary Waters, and Jennifer Holdaway provides us with a wealth of data to assess the upward mobility of different immigrant groups. The authors published a paper, "Becoming American/Becoming New Yorkers: The Second Generation in a Majority-Minority City," in the online journal *Migration Information Source*. They examined the higher-education attainment of people twenty-five years and older from the second generation of the following groups: South Americans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, West Indians, African Americans, Chinese, Russians, and American whites.<sup>2</sup>

Mollenkopf et al. looked at high-school dropout rates and rates of obtaining an undergraduate degree. Despite the low median household income and relatively high rate of poverty among Chinese immigrants, their second generation's educational achievement is quite spectacular. They have the lowest high-school dropout rate of any of the groups under review and the highest completion rate at college. Only 1.1 percent of second-generation Chinese were classified as high-school dropouts and 73 percent completed an undergraduate degree.

The educational performance of second-generation Russians is equally impressive. A mere 2.4 percent of that second generation dropped out of high school and 61.2 percent acquired an undergraduate degree. The indigenous white population's educational achievements are also commendable. Their dropout rate was 5.2 percent and 63.6 percent completed college.

Among the various Latino groups, the South Americans, although falling below the educational achievements of those groups previously mentioned, performed above both Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. The dropout rate of the South American group was 11.9 percent and the college graduation rate was 30 percent. Of the Latino groups, Puerto Ricans achieved the least in educational achievement. The Puerto Rican dropout rate from high school was greater than their college graduation rate. The Puerto Rican college graduation rate was 13.2

percent, while the dropout rate was a disturbing 22.8 percent. The second generation of Dominicans had a dropout rate of 14.6 percent and a college graduation rate of 25 percent.

West Indian educational achievement is modest and falls far below that of the second generation of Chinese and Russians. The high-school dropout rate is placed at 5.6 percent, .04 percentage points above the native white population. Nonetheless, the white college graduation rate is 63.6 percent, and the West Indian college graduation rate is 32.7 percent. The indigenous black population falls below the other groups with the exception of the Puerto Ricans. The dropout rate of the black population is 16.3 percent, and 20.3 percent completed college.<sup>3</sup>

The educational performance measure is an accurate instrument to assess the extent of upward mobility that will take place in the second generation. Caribbean immigrants have paid less attention to educational achievement than the Chinese and the Russians. The high poverty rate in these communities and the modest household median income reflect language difficulties, but based on the educational achievements of the second generation, that language barrier has not been an impediment for the second generation of Chinese and Russian immigrants.

The educational achievement data reveal that some special intervention programs are needed for what are essentially indigenous groups. In the case of the African Americans, African-American females have made giant strides in increasing the number of African Americans who enter college. African-American females tend to have higher retention and graduation rates than their male counterparts.