Recent Non-Hispanic Immigration From the Caribbean

We discussed immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean in Chapter 8. The groups we discussed in that chapter were Hispanic, but there are several other traditions represented in the region, and in this chapter, we discuss two prominent non-Latino Caribbean groups: Haitians and Jamaicans. Haiti and Jamaica are economically much less developed than the United States, and this is reflected in the educational and occupational characteristics of their immigrants. A statistical profile of both groups is presented in Exhibit 10.3, along with non-Hispanic whites for purposes of comparison.

Haitians. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and most of the population relies on small-scale subsistence agriculture for survival. Estimates are that 80% of the population lives below the poverty line, and fewer than one third of adults hold formal jobs. Only about half the population is literate, and Haitians average less than 3 years of formal education (“Literacy, Total Population,” n.d.).

Haitian immigration was virtually nonexistent until the 1970s and 1980s, when thousands began to flee the brutal political repression of the Duvalier dictatorship, which—counting both father (“Papa Doc”) and son (“Baby Doc”)—lasted until the mid-1980s. In stark contrast to the treatment of Cuban immigrants (see Chapter 8), however, the United States government defined Haitians as economic refugees ineligible for asylum, and an intense campaign has been conducted to keep Haitians out of the United States. Thousands have been returned to Haiti, some to face political persecution, prison, and even death. Others have been incarcerated in the United States, and in the view of some, “During the 1970s and 1980s, no other immigrant group suffered more U.S. government prejudice and discrimination than Haitians” (Stepick, Stepick, Eugene, Teed, & Labissiere, 2001, p. 236).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent Foreign-Born</th>
<th>% Speak English “Less Than Very Well”</th>
<th>% High School Degree or More</th>
<th>% College Degree or More</th>
<th>% of Families in Poverty</th>
<th>% in Managerial or Professional Occupations</th>
<th>Median Household Income (U.S. Dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Whites</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>52,375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>910,979</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>47,106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>762,925</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>41,666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


CHALLENGES FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE
What accounts for this cold, negative reception? Some reasons are not hard to identify. The first Haitian immigrants to come brought low levels of human capital and education. This created concerns about their ability to support themselves in the United States and also meant that they had relatively few resources with which to defend their self-interests. In addition, Haitians speak Creole, a language spoken by almost no one else, and a high percentage of Haitian immigrants spoke English poorly or not at all. Perhaps the most important reason for the rejection, however, is that Haitians are black and must cope with the centuries-old traditions of rejection, racism, and prejudice that are such an integral part of American culture (Stepick et al., 2001).

Haitian Americans today are still mostly first generation, and roughly a third of the group arrived after 1990. Overall, they are comparable to Hispanic Americans in terms of such measures of equality as level of education, income, and poverty. Still, research shows that some Haitians continue to face the exclusion and discrimination long associated with nonwhite ancestry. One important study of Haitians in South Florida found that a combination of

Exhibit 10.4  Map of Caribbean Showing Haiti and Jamaica

North Atlantic Ocean
Caribbean Sea
Haiti
Jamaica
CENTRAL AMERICA
SOUTH AMERICA
Gulf of Mexico
North Atlantic Ocean

New Americans, Assimilation, and Old Challenge
factors—their hostile reception, their poverty and lack of education, and their racial background—combined to lead the Haitian second generation (the children of the immigrants) to a relatively low level of academic achievement and a tendency to identify with the African American community. “Haitians are becoming American but in a specifically black ethnic fashion” (Stepick et al., 2001, p. 261).

The ultimate path of Haitian assimilation will unfold in the future, but these tendencies—particularly Haitians’ low levels of academic achievement—suggest that some of the second generation are unlikely to move into the middle class and that their assimilation will be segmented (Stepick et al., 2001, p. 261).

Jamaicans. The Jamaican economy is more developed than Haiti’s, and this is reflected in the higher levels of education of Jamaican immigrants (see Exhibit 10.3). However, as is true throughout the less developed world, the Jamaican economy has faltered in recent decades, and the island nation has been unable to provide full employment opportunities to its population. Jamaica is a former British colony, and immigrants have journeyed to the United Kingdom in addition to the United States. In both cases, the immigrant stream tends to be more skilled and educated and represents something of a “brain drain,” a pattern we have seen with other groups, including Asian Indians. Needless to say, the loss of the more-educated Jamaicans to immigration exacerbates problems of development and growth on the island.

Jamaicans typically settle on the East Coast, particularly in the New York City area. Because they come from a former British colony, they have the advantage of speaking English as their native tongue. On the other hand, they are black, and like Haitians, they must face the barriers of discrimination and racism faced by all nonwhite groups in the United States. On the average, they are significantly higher than Haitians (and native-born African Americans) in socioeconomic standing, but poverty and institutionalized discrimination limit the mobility of a segment of the group. Like all other groups of color in the United States, they face a danger of segmented assimilation and permanent exclusion from the economic mainstream that is very real.

Middle Eastern and Arab Americans

Immigration from the Middle East and the Arab world began in the 19th century but has never been particularly large. The earliest immigrants tended to be merchants and traders, and the Middle Eastern community in the United States has been constructed around an ethnic, small-business enclave. The number of Arab Americans and Middle Easterners has grown rapidly over the past several decades but still remains a tiny percentage of the total