

West Indian Americans

Significance: The success of black West Indian Americans has drawn the attention of sociologists and other scholars and created some conflict with other African Americans.

Black West Indian immigrants and their descendants, a small group among the African American population, have achieved considerable economic, educational, and political success in the United States relative to native African Americans. Notable conservatives such as economist Thomas Sowell of Stanford's Hoover Institution and author Dinesh D'Souza contend that this group's relative success in part demonstrates the error in attributing the economic and social plight of some African Americans exclusively to racism. The group's exceptionalism has also been noted by sociologists such as Stephen Steinberg in *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America* (1981) and Reynolds Farley and Walter Allen in *The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America* (1989).

The portrayal of exceptionalism is only part of this group's profile. Structural shifts in the U.S. economy mean that segments of this community will face severe sociopsychological adjustments to migration, coupled with constricted assimilation to American society. Pressures against full assimilation are greater for lower-class West Indians. Typically, middle- and upper-class professionals alternate between a more inclusive West Indian American or particularistic African American identity, and the lower-working class chooses a more ethnically focused, West Indian identity.

West Indian Americans are immigrants from the former British West Indian Islands, Belize and Guyana, and their U.S.-born descendants. Most of the West Indian immigrants arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1924, restrictive immigration legislation effectively halted immigration from the islands. Most of the immigrants settled in the Northeast, creating urban ethnic communities in Miami, Boston, Newark (New Jersey), Hartford (Connecticut), and New York City; they settled in Brooklyn and formed ethnic enclaves in East Flatbush, Flatbush, Crown Heights, Canarsie, and Midwood districts.

West Indian Exceptionalism

Generally, West Indian immigrants have been perceived as models of achievement for their frugality, emphasis on education, and ownership of homes and small businesses. Economist Sowell argued that the group's successes, including those of famous members such as General Colin Powell, derived from a distinctive cultural