

GROWING ATTACKS ON IMMIGRANTS HAVE REAL IMPLICATIONS FOR BLACK AMERICA



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THIS ESSAY IS THE THIRD IN A SERIES ON RACE AND IMMIGRATION

I'm African-American and my family relocated to California nearly 100 years ago after a lynching took place outside their community in Kentucky.

I'm also undocumented or in the current anti-immigrant vernacular, "illegal." I don't have access to the documents needed to prove my identity and citizenship. Within four years, I will not be able to vote, access social services, or receive state identification to travel.

Let's start from the beginning. In May 2006, I lost my passport and Social Security card at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (I don't have a driver's license because of a visual disability). I returned home to Chicago where I learned that, in order to receive a state identification card, I would first need to obtain a certified copy of my birth certificate which would allow me to apply for a Social Security card to replace my passport.

Later in the week, I contacted the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder and was told that, in order to receive my birth certificate, I would need to present a copy of my passport or driver's license to verify I was, in actuality, Eric K.

Ward. Since it was obvious after 20 minutes of discussion that I possessed neither of these required documents, I was told that, as an alternative, I could fill out the proper forms in front of a notary public in Chicago. I quickly opened the phone book and had a co-worker drive me to a notary public where I discovered just as quickly I would need to be in possession of a passport, Social Security card or driver's license to receive the official notary seal that I needed.

But clippings of newspaper articles from my community organizing days, complete with photos, helped convince the somewhat dubious notary public of my identity. Before anyone could change their minds, I walked next door to a post office and happily mailed my documents to the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder and went on with my life.

Four weeks later, my birth certificate arrived at a post office in Chicago! Rushing there to sign for my birth certificate, I found myself being asked to produce a passport, driver's license and, most ironically, a copy of my birth certificate. After an hour of waiting, two supervisors and another 20 minutes of pleading, I'm proud to say that I now possess a very official and very certified birth certificate!

I wish I could tell you that, from this point on, everything went smoothly, but the adventure had only begun. A few days later saw me heading to the Social Security Administration to obtain a replacement Social Security card. I was informed by the Social Security Administration that I would first need a passport, driver's license or state identification card. I was told to head across town to the Illinois Secretary of State's office where I was quickly informed that I would need to first obtain my Social Security card.

I have but given up all hope of being able to re-establish my identity and prove my citizenship. I'm stuck in a catch-22, and I'm not alone in this predicament. Currently in the United States, 8.9 percent of African-Americans (18 or older) have no means of documenting their citizenship, according to a national survey conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation in 2006. In addition, a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report that same year found that:

- Roughly 2 million African-Americans lack the required identity documents.
- 11 million native-born citizens currently lack the required documents.



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- Low-income people are nearly twice as likely to lack these documents as people with higher incomes.

Not having the “required” documents means that a large portion of U.S. citizens will be denied access to social services and the right to vote in federal elections. However, it is not just at the federal level that citizens will face these obstacles but also at the state and local level. In Arizona, where voters in 2004 passed Proposition 200 (an anti-immigrant initiative requiring people to show a driver’s license or two others forms of identification before being able to register to vote or cast a ballot), Maricopa County officials reported that 17 percent (4,903 people) of 2006 voter registrations were rejected because individuals lacked proper identification to prove their citizenship (this is down from 35 percent in 2005). In newspaper articles Arizona officials readily admit that the vast majority of individuals are citizens who simply do not have proper identification.

In Colorado, where Democrats and Republicans joined forces to pass what was called the “nation’s most stringent anti-illegal immigration law” in reality has served only to deny state services to individuals, the vast majority of whom are citizens. Georgia has passed similar legislation, and Nevada and Texas are considering comparable legislative bills.

Why is this happening? Because our nation’s political leadership, from the local to the federal level, have refused to move forward policies that strengthen immigrant integration. This has resulted in an increase of public policy attacks on immigrants and refugees. At the federal level, the most recent of these anti-immigrant schemes are known as the Draft Reduction Act of 2005, REAL ID Act of 2005, and the Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006.

The Draft Reduction Act of 2005 requires those who apply or reapply for Medicaid show proof of citizenship with “required” documents. The REAL ID Act of 2006 prohibits federal agencies from accepting state-issued driver’s licenses or identification cards unless such documents are determined by the Secretary of Homeland Security to meet minimum security requirements. The Federal Election Integrity Act of 2006 would, by 2010, efficiently disallow U.S. citizens the right to vote if unable to produce the “required” documents. What are these required documents and minimum security requirements? You guessed it: a passport, birth certificate, or proof of naturalization.

Those who support these public policy initiatives say they want to prevent fraudulent access to social services, the right to travel, and the right to vote by undocumented immigrants. The results of these anti-immigrant policies, however, reveal disturbing implications for African-Americans, the poor, and the elderly among us.

Just what is the potential impact on the African-American community? In a case study conducted in 1950 for the journal *Population Studies*, Sam Shapiro, now emeritus professor of Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health found that an estimated one-fifth of African-Americans born between the years 1939 and 1940 were never issued birth certificates mainly due to segregation barring black children from being born in white hospitals. Applying Shapiro’s estimate to 2000 U.S. Census data reveals that, by 2010, nearly 500,000 elderly African-Americans born before 1941 will become further disenfranchised from the vote and access to federal services. Remember: This figure reflects African-Americans born in 1939 and 1940! In a more recently released study, Rutgers University professor Tim Vercelloti found that African-Americans were 5.7% less likely to vote in states that require voter identification.

As African-Americans, we should be deeply concerned about the ongoing attack on immigrants and refugees—an attack that is increasingly fueled by bigotry and opportunism. Why? Because we have always demanded and fought for the rights of all individuals to be treated with respect and dignity. Because of the negative impact anti-immigrant policies will have on the African-American community. And because we know what it means to be made second class citizens—and it’s about to happen again.

Opportunities for Foundations

To help African-Americans and immigrants build a shared agenda, foundations can support efforts that:

- Build relationships between African-American and immigrant leaders and organizations to respond jointly to anti-immigrant activity that affect both communities.
- Engage African-American and immigrant leaders and organizations in addressing the intersection of poverty, civil rights, and immigrant integration.
- Document and publicize the impact of anti-immigrant public policy on African Americans, the elderly, and the poor.

About the Author

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