

Ethnic minorities in USA

Social and Economic Issues

There are four main ethnic minority groups in the United States:

- African Americans
- Hispanics
- Native Americans
- Asians and Pacific islanders

African Americans

The distribution of African Americans in the US was traditionally concentrated in the southern states. However, for a number of years in the latter part of the 20th century, large African American populations have developed in northern cities such as Chicago and New York. The capital, Washington DC, also has a particularly large African American community. In recent years many African Americans have returned to the southern states in a process known as **reverse migration**. This has been due to increasing unemployment in traditional industries in the north such as steel and car manufacturing and also to economic regeneration in the south.

Around 60% of African Americans live in inner-city ghettos. However, more recently, financially successful African Americans have started to buy properties in up-market 'gilded ghettos'.

Hispanics

Spanish speaking immigrants are the most numerous and rapidly increasing non-white group in the US. They include many illegal immigrants who are easily exploited as they do not have the same rights as US citizens.

Hispanics are mainly concentrated in the south and south western states, due to their proximity to Central America. The Cuban community is heavily concentrated in Florida, especially in Miami, as this is where most first arrive in the US.

93% of the Hispanic population in the United States live in urban areas though some find agricultural work on farms in states like California. Puerto Rico, in Central America, has a special status as a territory of the US and traditionally immigrants have moved from there to New York and New Jersey, attracted by job opportunities in these cities.

Native Americans

The original Americans are now a tiny minority within their own country. Small numbers of Native Americans have moved into cities such as New York to escape the limited opportunities in their traditional homelands. However many live in, or near, reservations in the western states of Oklahoma, Arizona, California and Alaska.

Asians and Pacific Islanders

The main factors that attract most Asians to the US are refuge from persecution at home and an opportunity to succeed economically. Nearly half of Asians and Pacific Islanders live in California, the nearest entry point in the US. California has a wide range of job opportunities.

Some groups such as the Chinese and Koreans concentrate in the major cities. They have been successful in providing retail services and supplies. Japanese Americans have been the most economically successful group in the US and have the highest average incomes in the country. Many other Asians have also succeeded. For example, there are many middle class Asians from the Indian sub-continent working in the medical profession.

Political progress

The US prides itself on being a democracy in which every citizen is equal. This is enshrined in the US Constitution: *all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*

However, not all groups within the USA participate equally in politics. All ethnic minorities are less likely to be involved in politics whether as voters, campaigners or as candidates, than white Americans.

In the USA you need to actively register before you can vote. As a result voter turnout is lower than in the UK. Over 60% of African Americans are registered compared to barely 40% of Hispanic Americans. African Americans used to be discouraged from voting by white extremists in the South. Laws passed in the 1960s changed this. Nowadays more Hispanics and African Americans turn out to vote. However, many African Americans still feel politics is irrelevant to their lives. Political participation tends to be higher in areas where African American candidates have a chance of winning - this has happened in a number of cities with large African American communities such as Washington DC where 60% of the population is African American; current and previous mayors have been African Americans. However, some cities where African Americans are in a minority eg Columbus, Ohio have recently elected African American mayors.

Barack Obama

In 2008, Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. Until then, African Americans had made little impact at national political level. There had never been an African American President or Vice President, while the official Democratic and Republican candidates for these offices had always been white.

Preceding the Obama Administration, George W Bush gave the Cabinet posts of Secretary of State to Colin Powell and National Security Advisor to Condoleezza Rice, both African Americans.

Approximately 9000 African Americans and 5000 Hispanics have been elected to official positions in the USA, mainly in Southern and Western states at local/city levels. Ray Nagin is the Mayor of the City of New Orleans. This African American politician became well known across America following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Several pressure groups have tried to involve minorities in politics, for example, through voter registration campaigns. Hispanics have been elected in areas such as Florida and California. The mayor of Los Angeles is Antonio Villaraigosa, a Hispanic. In contrast to their economic success few Asians have made political progress in the USA.

Native Americans have also made some political impact through pressure groups. They have campaigned over issues such as the return of traditional tribal lands and a share in profits where these areas have been exploited by mining companies. In 1992 Ben Nighthorse Campbell became the first Native American to be elected to the Senate (he served from 1992-2005).

The social and economic position of minorities

It is important not to stereotype minorities. On average, many minorities do less well socially and economically than white Americans. However, there are considerable differences between and within all the minorities. At one time, the only prominent African Americans were sports stars, musicians or entertainers. More recently, there has been a rise in the number of successful African Americans - and other minorities - in professional jobs. Notable examples of successful non-white Americans in all areas of public life today include Eva Longoria, Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice and Barack Obama.

The key factors in the social and economic position of ethnic minorities in the US are:

- families
- education
- housing
- health
- employment and welfare
- crime and the law

Families

Family life is very much part of the traditional image of life in the US. As in other western countries, family breakdown, divorce and illegitimacy have increased. However, among the African American population in the USA, there has been a greater breakdown of family structure; over 70% of children are born into single parent families.

As the single parent is usually the mother, children grow up without an adult male as a role model. This can be particularly serious for boys who tend to follow older boys in their neighbourhood, often getting involved in anti-social behaviour which leads to arrest by the police and dropping out of school.

Education

The proportion of African Americans who drop out of school is very high. The record for completing high school within the Hispanic population is worse still, and relatively few go on to achieve a university degree. A lack of qualifications leads to poorer job opportunities.

Housing

The houses in ghettos where poorer ethnic groups live are usually of low quality, with few basic amenities. These ghettos are often still effectively segregated from the white majority. Partly due to poverty and partly to cultural factors, immigrants tend to settle together in low cost areas which become noticeably different. For example, in many parts of Los Angeles the language of the streets is Spanish.

A far lower proportion of African Americans and Hispanics can afford to own their own homes and may find it hard to get mortgages.

Health

Unlike the UK, in the US there is no effective national health service. This means that only a proportion of healthcare is covered for those on welfare. Nearly a third of ethnic minority families in the US do not have health insurance which results in more health problems than in other groups in society. Life expectancy is lower and infant mortality higher than average. Illegal immigrants cannot claim welfare benefits and are easily exploited by unscrupulous employers.

Employment and welfare

African Americans and Hispanics are less likely than whites or Asians to hold professional or managerial positions. Statistically they are more likely to be unemployed or in poorly paid unskilled work. This means that a high proportion of minorities are likely to rely on welfare or state benefits, or earn low incomes.

In the US, individuals expect to provide for their families through savings and insurance. Welfare provision exists but it varies from city to city and state to state as only some benefits are provided by the Federal Government.

The effects of welfare are controversial. Recent years have seen an increase in concern that welfare creates a 'dependency culture' which discourages individuals from looking for work and taking responsibility. Some African Americans and Hispanic community leaders agree with this diagnosis.

Crime and law

Although African Americans make up only 12% of the US population, more than half of all convicted criminals and victims of crime are African Americans. There is particular concern about violent crime in African American communities, often linked to gangs and illegal drugs. The easy availability of guns means that disputes and crimes are more likely to lead to fatalities than in the UK. Gang violence linked to control of certain neighbourhoods and the drug trade often involves fighting within non-white communities or between them; for example between Hispanics and African Americans in parts of Los Angeles.

Police forces throughout the US have tried to recruit from within ethnic minorities but there is still evidence of racism among some white police officers. One notorious example was when, in

1991, members of the Los Angeles Police Department were filmed beating Rodney King. This led to riots and racial unrest.

Affirmative action and positive discrimination

'Affirmative action' aims to improve the educational and employment opportunities of members of ethnic minority groups. Government legislation requires employers and officials to aim for racially balanced workforces. These procedures are designed to give members of ethnic minority groups an equal chance of success and to make up for past discrimination when unfair laws prevented ethnic minorities from attending universities or getting good jobs.

Many employers tried to achieve a racial balance by imposing quotas. This is when the workforce of a company must employ a specific number of workers from ethnic minority groups. The same quota system would be used to decide which students would be accepted into university. This led to controversy when less well qualified non-white candidates were given places due to their background. The 1991 Civil Rights Act banned quotas as discriminating!

Supporters believe Affirmative Action is still needed to make sure all people have the same access to jobs and other opportunities. But there has been a backlash against Affirmative Action mainly from whites who feel they have lost out on jobs or university places to non-whites with poorer qualifications.