

AFRICAN AMERICAN

History

Immigration

The African American society like most other societies in human history, have a migration story and can trace their origins to one or more migration experiences. The arrival of a Dutch ship with what was claimed to carry the first slaves to the shores of North America (Jamestown, Virginia) in 1619, was not really the origin of the existence of African Americans in the United States as is commonly believed. Instead, almost a century earlier in the 1500s, African Americans came from Mexico and the Caribbean to the Spanish territories of Florida and Texas and other parts of the South.¹

Time Line of African American history, 1501-2000

1501 - 1518 - King Charles I of Spain allowed enslaved African American into the Americas.

1565 - African farmers and artisans under Spanish rule established the community of St Augustine, Florida.

1619 - First 20 African slaves brought by the English to the North American colonies settled in Jamestown, VA

1645 - A merchant ship from Barbados arrived in Boston to trade enslaved Africans for sugar and tobacco.

1708 - African Americans outnumbered American Europeans in South Carolina making it the first colony with a black majority.

1774 - A group of blacks petition the Massachusetts court insisting they too have a right to their freedom.

1899 - The Negro National Anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* written by James Weldon Johnson³

1900 -The beginning of a significant West Indian immigration to the United States.

1915 - The great migration of African Americans from the South to northern cities; beginning of the longest occupation of Haiti (19 years).

1964 -The Civil Rights Act -bans discrimination in all public places and by all employers. The Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) was established to monitor compliance with the law.⁴

The origin of the name African American

The term "African American" refers to people of African descent living in the United States. The tumult of the late 1960's and the early 1970's aggravated the term "Negro" and brought awareness causing it to become inappropriate in the black community. Meanwhile, many young American of African ancestry were eager and passionate about retracing their roots and connecting with Africa, their motherland. The term "Black" was chosen to identify people of darker skin, especially by the Black Power movement. This term was rejected in the past for its negative projection. Another group came up with "Afro-American." Most of the Americans of African origin

opted for the term “African American” by following the pattern of the other ethnic groups such as Italian-American.

The term “African-American” has a great meaning to the vast majority of its people. It does not only describe the group’s culture and roots, but bring them a sense of belonging to their motherland “Africa”. One could go deeper and ask the reason for looking for identifier among many groups of Americans.

Culture

- African American history places the Caribbean, and contemporary African Americans in the fabric of the society even if they came from Saint Domingue 1791 to Louisiana or from the Bahamas in the nineteenth century to Miami and Key West Florida, or more recently from Nigeria to Texas. Whatever it may be, they too with their specificities are part of the African America experience.
- African Americans are the offspring of diverse ethnicities and therefore they represent the most diverse population in the United States. They include in their genetic makeup Europeans, Native Americans, and Asians.
- These varied backgrounds and migratory experiences have produced a unique population whose music, food, style of clothes, arts and sense of identity all reflect the diversity brought about by centuries of migrations. 2

Geography

According to the 2006 US Census there are approximately 38 million African Americans residing in the United States. Below are the eight states with the largest African America population. Also included is information for Massachusetts.⁵

District of Columbia	55.4 %
Mississippi	37.4
Louisiana	31.6
Georgia	29.8
Maryland	28.9
South Carolina	28.6
Alabama	26.3
North Carolina	21.4
Massachusetts	6.1

Socio-Economic Advancement

- In 2006 black households had the lowest median income among racial and ethnic groups in the United States.⁶

- While technological changes such as the increased use of computer based technologies are producing more jobs, other jobs such as manufacturing jobs are becoming obsolete. This shift has affected the lower skilled African American worker who is now faced with the threat of job displacement.⁷
- The economic situation of lower skilled, less educated African Americans appears worse because they tend to reside in communities that have higher jobless rates, lower employment growth, and they lack access to areas of higher employment, and employment growth.⁸ Furthermore, the more highly educated and thoroughly trained men and women are more in demand. For example, black and white women who have completed a high school diploma earned about 50% more in 1998 than those who did not.⁹
- Racial inequalities continue to be an important factor that aggravates black employment problems. In 1998 African American male college graduates earned 72 cents for every dollar earned by comparable whites.¹⁰
- The Civil Rights Act of 1964 that established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to monitor compliance with discrimination was important in creating the current growth of the black middle class we see today.¹¹
- Black businesses have broaden to not only include beauty parlors, barbershops, and funeral parlors but they also include car dealerships, construction companies, beverage distributors, small manufacturing companies, technology companies, fast food franchises, insurance companies, and black owned banks. However, today black owned banks and insurance companies are now in competition with the larger white owned companies.¹²
- Education has always been a force in narrowing the gap between African Americans and the white middle class. In order for this to continue, black education initiatives and public policy will continue to be essential to the preservation of the black middle class.¹³
- In 2001, approximately 30.2% African American and Hispanic children were poor compared to 13.4% of white children.¹⁴

Religion

- Prior to the American Revolution, very few slaves were Christian. Most planters feared that Christianity would provide the slaves with the notion of equality and freedom.
- Today religion plays a significant role in the African American culture. Seven historically black dominate denominations which comprise what is known as the "historic black church" See table 2. ¹⁵

Table: 2 Traditional Black Churches

The Church of God in Christ
The African Methodist Episcopal Church
The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
The National Baptist Convention USA
The Progressive Baptist Convention of America

- Although, many African Americans belong to one of the traditionally black churches mentioned above, a significant amount of African Americans also belong to predominantly white denominations such as Methodists, Baptists, and Roman Catholics.¹⁶
- Many African Americans are converting to Islam; about 20 percent of all American Muslims are African Americans.¹⁷

Health Beliefs, Practices, and Concerns:

- Health beliefs include religious orientation, social support networks, and informal health care systems.¹⁸
- A common method of treating health concerns within the family and community is through prayer.¹⁹
- Support systems that provide health advice include mothers, sisters, partners, friends, neighbors and extended family members. They play a significant role and are used in times of stressful situations.²⁰
- Discrimination, cultural barriers and lack of access to health care have been identified as factors contributing to poor health outcomes among African Americans.²¹
- Life expectancy in 1999 for the average African American was 73.1 years, compared to 77.8 years for the average American.²²
- The 10 leading causes of death for African Americans are (in order: heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, unintentional injuries, homicide, nephritis/nephritic syndrome/nephrosis; chronic lower respiratory disease; HIV/AIDS, and septicemia.²³
- Additionally, African Americans have disproportionately high prevalence of hypertension, infant mortality, and tuberculosis.²⁴
- Health conditions among African Americans related to dietary patterns include obesity, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.
 - African Americans are 1.6 times more likely to have diabetes than non-Latino whites; 25% of African Americans between the ages of 65 and 74 have diabetes; one in four African American women over 55 years of age has diabetes; Diabetes is commonly known as 'having sugar.'

- Over 40% of African Americans have hypertension.
- Typically, African Americans rely on the public and private health care systems for care, however non-traditional remedies may also be used.²⁵

Agriculture and Staple Foods

- “Soul Food” is a term used for an ethnic food cuisine traditionally prepared and eaten by African Americans of the southern United States, which originated during the period of American slavery. It also refers to soothing comfort foods that bring back memories of family dinners.
- African slaves originally had a better diet than slave owners, who ate mostly fatty foods, with little or no vegetables, lots of sweets, and alcohol that left them lethargic.²⁶ The slaves needed to be strong and energetic to work among the fields, so their diet was comprised of large vegetarian meals utilizing home grown vegetables. Drinking of alcohol was not the norm. Meat was used sparingly with seafood, okra, pepper and spices. This dish is today known as gumbo.
- As African slaves assimilated they learned to “make do” with ingredients at hand. They created meals from scrap tops of vegetables that the plantation owners would not use, along with weekly rations of cornmeal, a few pounds of scrap meats and black molasses. This led to the creation of dishes such as collards, kale, and mustard greens cooked with salted pork to flavor and tenderize. Cornmeal was often mixed with the molasses and spices for desserts.²⁷
- The slave’s diet began to evolve as the women entered the plantation homes as cooks which offered them new spices and methods for cooking. Fried chicken, candied sweet potatoes and fruit pies became the delectable dishes for the masters. However, opossum, squirrels, and raccoons were meats for the slaves since hunting was only done in the wee hours of the night when all chores were completed. Most of these meats were stewed in large pots because cooking methods were limited in the slave’s quarters.²⁸
- Soon the slave’s cuisines became known as “Good Times” food. This was the time after long hours of work in the field or the house when families could get together for an evening meal. The big pots of food became comfort for both the body and soul. This tradition of family meals still remains long after the freedom from slavery and became a custom to host large family gathering on Sundays to remember the stories and pass on traditions. The family gatherings were not always hosted by the family who had the most room, but more often by the cook who would prepare the traditional foods.²
- Since it was illegal for slaves to learn to read or write, the traditional food recipes were passed along orally. After slavery, the first soul food cook book

is attributed to Abby Fisher – *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking*, published in 1881. Many others were written during the late 1800's and early 1900's, trying to capture the traditional ingredients, however, most are lost.³⁰

- Today food is celebrated as a source of community and family pride. While certain foods are rarely given to children because of age or developmental abilities, food taboos as such are rare. Pica, the consumption of non-food items such as clay or dirt, has been described in rural African American communities. Corn starch consumption is not uncommon in both urban and rural settings. Accurate data on the prevalence of these two forms of pica are not available.
- Recent cookbooks and websites have highlighted southern Afro American dishes.

The Effects of African American Traditional Cuisine on Health

- Traditionally “Soul Food” is often high in fat and calories. Highly suited to the physically demanding lives of laborers, farmhands and rural lifestyles generally, it is now a contributing factor to obesity, heart disease, and diabetes in a population that has become increasingly sedentary and more urbanized.
- As a result of this more health-conscious African Americans are using alternative methods of preparation, eschewing trans fats in favor of natural vegetable oils and substituting smoked turkey for fatback and other, cured pork products. Limiting the amount of refined sugars used in desserts; and emphasizing the consumption of more fruits and vegetables than animal protein.³¹
- Studies have found that African American communities have higher concentrations of fast food restaurants than predominantly white neighborhoods. Fast food restaurants typically serve foods higher in calories and fats and have larger portion sizes than foods typically eaten at home or in some sit-down restaurants. A concern is that the increased accessibility of high calorie fast foods may encourage overeating and result in increased obesity rates. Predominantly black neighborhoods have 2.4 fast-food restaurants per square mile compared to 1.5 restaurants in predominantly white neighborhoods.³²
- Studies are showing that low-income women who participate in the federally funded - Women Infants and Children (WIC) program have better knowledge and higher nutrient intake than higher-income women who select more convenient or prepare food products to reduce food preparation time.³³

Major African-American Celebrations

- Besides the major holidays observed by the majority of Americans, African Americans have some that are specific to them.
- Juneteenth is considered the oldest nationwide celebration of the commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States. The observance of June 19th as the African American Emancipation Day started in Texas in 1865. Nowadays Juneteenth celebrates African-American freedom with accents on education and achievement. The length of the celebration varies from place to place; it can go from a day to a month marked with family gathering, presentations etc. It is a time of joy and reflection.
- Black History Month is the celebration of African- American contributions to the world. Originally it was started by a black fraternity and was called "Negro History Week". With the help of Carter Woodson it gained more popularity and became a month of celebration.
- Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26th to January 1st. It is a holiday with an emphasis on improving family, community and cultural life. Kwanzaa was created by Dr Maulana Karenga in 1966; today it is observed by people of African descent throughout the world. The feast also brings a mixture of different kinds of cuisines from the African Diaspora.
- Additionally there are regional celebrations (Mardi Gras), celebrations of musical traditions (jazz and gospel festivals) and special Caribbean festivals (carnival and independence days).

Communication Style and Assumptions

- Communication patterns differ within the African American culture from region to region or among ancestry.
- Many accounts of communication styles maybe considered assumptions rather than authentic depending on the group and like other Americans, African Americans communicate through emotion, touch, eye contact gestures verbal and nonverbal communication.
- An example of eye contact may explain the variations and interpretations observed among different groups. Direct eye contact for one could mean, that one is engaged in inappropriate behavior and it should be stopped immediately (a parent and child and/or caregiver).
- Another example of lack of direct eye contact may be viewed as disrespect between an elder and a younger person. When a person in authority speaks you must look steadfast in the eye as a sign of respect and acknowledgement.

Conclusion

The African American Diaspora is a very diverse group where many variations exist. When offering health services one must consider such entities as social club, fraternities, sororities, black professional groups, and churches. In the United States today, there are many people of African decent that come from the different corners of the world. Ethnic identity is still strongly maintained by these many groups coming from countries such as the Caribbean islands and African countries. An in-depth client interview and/or community needs assessment is necessary before providing nutrition education to this group.

Endnotes

1. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Retrieved from <http://www.blackpast.org/>
2. African American Perspectives: African American Pamphlets-Time Line Page One African Americans <http://www.blackpast.org/>
3. Newman, Richard. "Spirituals, African American. "Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience Second Edition, Oxford African American Studies Center. Retrieved www.oxfordaasc.com
4. Us Census Bureau. Income, Poverty, and Health Coverage in the United States:2006 Retrieved: from www.census.gov
5. United States and States R0202. Percent of the Total Population who are Black or African American Alone: 2006. Retrieve from www.factfinder.census.gov
6. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies: Data Bank Earning of African Americans. Retrieve from www.jointcenter.org.
7. Wilson, William Julius. "Work, African American and the Changing Nature of Africana" *The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* Second Edition, Oxford African American Studies Center. Retrieved www.oxfordaasc.com
8. See endnote 6. Joint Center: Data Bank
9. Robert L. Harris JR. Retrieve from The world and I Magazine www.worldandi.com
10. See endnote 9 Joint Center: Data Bank Children Living in Poverty
11. See endnote 9 Joint Center: Data Bank Children Living in Poverty
12. See endnote 9 Joint Center: Data Bank Children Living in Poverty
13. See endnote 9 Joint Center: Data Bank Children Living in Poverty
14. See endnote 9 Joint Center: Data Bank Children Living in Poverty
15. The Encyclopedia of Religion and Social Sciences: Retrieve from www.hirr.hartsem.edu
16. A guide to African American and Religion. Retrieve from www.religionlink.org

17. Sernett, Milton C. "African American Religion" *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, edited by Paul S. Boyer Oxford African American Studies Center. Retrieved www.oxfordaasc.com
18. Russell Kathleen, Jewell Nancy: The Cultural Impact of Health-Care Access: Challenges for improving the Health of African American. *The Journal of Community Health Nursing*. 1992
19. See endnote 18
20. See endnote 18
21. The Health Care challenge: Acknowledging Disparity, Confronting Discrimination, and Ensuring Equality. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, September 1999.
22. Centers for Disease Control and prevention
[www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/06.pdf#027](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/06.pdf#027)
23. National Center for Health Statistics: Health, United States, 2006, With Chart Book on Trends in the Health of Americans, Hyattsville, MD: 2006
24. See endnote 18
25. Becerra RM, Iglehart AP Folk Medicine Use: Diverse Populations in a Metropolitan Area, *Social Work in Health Care*, v2(4): 1995.
26. See endnote 25
27. See endnote 25
28. See endnote 25
29. See endnote 25
30. See endnote 25
31. See endnote 25
32. Block et al, *Am J Prev Med* 2004
33. Berkely *JADA* 2001

Written by: Tosha Baker, Sonia Carter, Kathy Cunningham, Marie Decatus, Vivien Morris, Sylvia Passley Harris, from the Boston Organization on Nutritionists and Dietitians of Color (BOND of Color) in agreement with the John Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition at Framingham State College, 2008

