

Rallies shove aside concerns of nation's blacks; IMMIGRATION'S EFFECTS FELT BY LESS-SKILLED AMERICANS

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Body

Najee Ali, an African-American activist, tries to turn out for as many civil rights rallies as he can. But on the day that hundreds of thousands of Latinos marched through downtown Los Angeles for immigrants rights, he had no idea it was happening until he turned on the TV.

“They didn't call us; they didn't need to call us,” Ali said of march organizers during a recent dialogue between blacks and Latinos about illegal immigration. “Once I saw the half million, I felt fear, in a sense,” that blacks “might be marginalized in the future when it comes to jobs and political empowerment.”

Ali's fears underscore the complex sentiments many blacks feel about the surging number of immigrants who have transformed their neighborhoods and schools, the workplace and the political arena.

So far, African-American voices have not been featured in the national debate about immigration reform, even though some believe they have the most at stake.

“In this era of mass immigration, no group has benefited less or been harmed more than the African-American population,” said Vernon Briggs, a Cornell University labor economist who has studied the effect of immigration on blacks for more than three decades.

In a 2004 book, “The Impact of Immigration on African Americans,” Briggs and other scholars charted myriad effects, including lower wages for less-skilled and less-educated blacks and their substantial displacement from the job market, with many dropping out of the labor pool entirely. In education, they found that providing remedial resources for immigrant students cut into resources for native-born students and modestly displaced blacks from affirmative action programs.

But they also found some positive effects: The larger number of low-skilled workers, for instance, helped push better-educated blacks up the occupational ladder, enhancing their managerial opportunities.

Briggs said the effect is strong because blacks and Latinos tend to cluster in the same urban areas and lower-skilled labor markets.

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The transformation of Central Los Angeles neighborhoods from majority **black** to majority Latino has stirred complex feelings of pride for Randy Jurado Ertll, 33, a Latino educational consultant, and a sense of pain and loss for Kimela Santifer-Berry, 48, a **black** woman studying for a license as a real estate agent.

Ertll, a U.**S.** citizen of Salvadoran descent, moved into the largely **black** area in 1978 and recalls **black** gang members robbing immigrant children, including himself, of their lunch money and bus passes. By third grade, however, Ertll's best friend was **black**, as were most of the customers at his aunt's market and mother's beauty salon.

Today, the neighborhood has become dominated by Salvadorans and other Central **Americans**, and Ertll said he wants to bridge the gap between Latinos and **blacks** and to encourage "power sharing."

"I think the lack of jobs is what creates so much despair and hopelessness," he said. "Elected officials have to find a way to create jobs for both African-**Americans** and Latinos in South-Central L.A."

Santifer-Berry, who voted for Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, says she also would like to see reduced tension between the two groups. But she said it bothers her that so many of her neighbors cannot speak English. In her job last year at an import-export firm, she said, most of the drivers who picked up and delivered goods spoke only Spanish.

"Why should we have to learn Spanish when this is America?" she asked.

Santifer-Berry agrees with Ertll that jobs are a major flash point. To illustrate, she recently took a visitor through her neighborhood, stopping at one restaurant and retail outlet after another to count the number of **black** employees.

"Five customers, all **black**. Four workers, all Latino," she said at one fried chicken restaurant. "Now, is that right?"

Research backs up suspicions that mass **immigration** has made their lives tougher.

The book on **immigration** and **blacks**, for instance, features studies by Briggs and others who argue that **blacks** have historically enjoyed greater economic opportunities when **immigration** was restricted, causing employers to hire more women, elderly and young people. Growing immigrant labor pools have allowed employers to drive down wages for **blacks** and have correlated with **black** withdrawal from the labor market, the researchers found.

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer Sandy Banks contributed to this report.

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