

AN EXAMINATION OF MIGRATION TRENDS OUT OF  
AFRICA THROUGH THE LENS OF AFRICAN  
IMMIGRANTS IN PIERCE COUNTY, WASHINGTON

Jereme Hawkins  
Law and Policy  
May 2025

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Vanessa de Veritch Woodside

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
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**An Examination of Migration Trends out of Africa  
through the Lens of African Immigrants in Pierce County Washington.**

Abstract

Each year over a million immigrants from all over the world enter the United States to pursue opportunities for education, employment, and to escape oppressive regimes to start a new life. Recent federal Executive Orders, and legislative attempts to remove immigrants have renewed public interest on the topic. Much of this attention on immigration is on our southern border and the effects of U.S. policy and practice on Latino/Latinx individuals, despite similar impacts on African immigrant communities in the U.S. This paper turns attention to the forces that are contributing to migration out of Africa, such as climate change, terrorism, poor economic opportunities, and poorly managed governments. It also aims to explore the experiences of African immigrants in Washington state and, more specifically, to determine if there are institutional systems that are failing or missing in Pierce County, Washington. Grounded in broader research related to African migration trends, this paper describes results from a mixed-method study that analyzes data from demographic surveys and oral interviews with African immigrants in Pierce County, Washington, to better understand the experience African immigrants have when they reach the U.S. and explores how to address a lack of programs and resources to support local African immigrant communities.

## Introduction

Africa went through a period of decolonization between 1940 and 1970 during which 45 African countries gained independence. This sudden freedom from colonial Britain, France, Spain, and the rest of Europe meant that there would be a new group of immigrants coming to America's shores (Boddy-Evans 2024). African people weren't under the control of colonial powers. Shortly afterwards, the United States began passing a series of legislations to address immigration in the nation. The Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished national origin quotas which previously barred many Africans from immigrating to the United States (Tichenor 2016, pg. 691). The Refugee Act of 1980 helped resettle thousands of African refugees (Thomas-Greenfield 2001, pg. 67). The Immigration Act of 1990 would make it easier for non-Europeans to enter the country under diversity visa lotteries. These lotteries admit over 50,000 immigrants from "underrepresented" countries into the United States (Law 2002, pg. 17). Over the past half-century, migrants from all over Africa have poured into the United States. However, in the past decade, especially during President Trump's first administration, there has been an effort to limit immigration from so-called "shit hole" countries through visa bans (Griffiths et. al., 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the value and expertise that African immigrants bring to our country and to highlight the many struggles they face before, during, and after the journey to the U.S. Scholarly and government sources primarily examine the factors driving migration within and from Africa, as well as the demographics of the migrants that are making these journeys, often focusing on broader analyses of themes rather than revealing specific experiences and perspectives of the migrants themselves. The mixed-method study describes in this paper was intended to fill that gap by providing a means by which African immigrants currently living in Washington State may share their stories and thus provide not only a better

understanding of these experiences in a localized context but also reveal effective ways to better support these individuals as they establish their lives in Pierce County.

### **Migration Factors**

Over the past 20 years, cross-border migration within Africa has been steadily increasing. It's estimated that between 11 to 12 million migrants will have migrated within Africa by the end of 2025. Migration also occurs within Africa with nearly as many people moving between nations each year as those who flee Africa entirely (Williams, 2024 pg. 1). An intersection of influential conditions forces African migrants to leave their homelands. Most African countries have a low GDP, often earning less than 2,000 U.S. dollars a year. These poor economies create conditions for extremely low employment rates. With limited jobs and ever-increasing populations across Africa, the people of the region are experiencing food scarcity. This is further exacerbated by climate change, which is destroying once fertile farmland, thus forcing people into urban areas and, in many cases, outside of Africa.

The United Nations currently recognizes 54 countries in Africa, which contain over 1 billion people. Centuries of slavery and natural resource extraction by colonial powers during the Industrial Revolution left Africa far behind the rest of the world economically. As a result, Africa has suffered from poverty and a low GDP per capita. Data obtained from the World Bank paints a grim picture for Africa. The average GDP PPP per capita, or purchasing power amongst its population, in current international dollars for all of Africa is \$7,237.42. The 10 poorest countries in Africa include Burundi with a GDP PPP per capita of \$919.90, South Sudan at \$1,154.90, Central African Republic at \$1,259.80, Somalia at \$1,556.50, Democratic Republic of Congo at \$1,615.80, Mozambique at \$1,677.70, Eritrea at \$1,742.50, Liberia at \$1,794.50, Madagascar at \$1,823.80, and Malawi at \$1,829.50. The GDP PPP per capita in the United States is 82,769.41,

many times higher than in Africa (World Bank). The people in these countries often survive on less than 50 U.S. dollars a week. In addition to low GDP per capita, much of Africa also suffers from high rates of unemployment.

Research on unemployment rates in Africa between 1991 and 2017 has shown some small improvement. The average unemployment rate among 42 nations in Africa was 10.2 percent in 1991. By 2017, the rate of unemployment had dropped to 9.8 percent. For comparison, the unemployment in the United States is around 4 percent. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are especially hit hard by unemployment though. In 2023, the average unemployment rate in Africa for all youths was 14.5 percent (World Bank). Many of the poorest countries are also the ones hit hardest by unemployment. According to the World Bank, South Sudan whose GDP per capita is only \$1,154.90, also suffers from an 18.5 percent unemployment rate. Somalia with a GDP per capita of \$1,556.50 has an unemployment rate of 33.8 percent. Low GDP per capita and high rates of employment, when combined with food insecurity and rising populations, create dire circumstances.

Currently, Africa has a population of around 1.2 billion people and that's expected to double by 2050 (Williams 2024, pg. 4). Moreover, it is estimated that half of the people born worldwide from now until 2050 will be born in Africa. In addition to a rising population, life spans are expected to rise dramatically over the next 75 years. By 2050 the average person in Africa will live 70 years, and 78 by the year 2100. It's also expected that many of Africa's poorest countries will be hit the hardest by population growth. Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia are all expected to see five times the population they have now by the year 2100 (Hall et al. 2017, pg. 125). While a low GDP, high rates of unemployment, and population growth are putting pressure

on African economies, climate change and food scarcity will make it even more difficult for countries, from feeding their populations, which are increasing and living longer.

Of all the developing regions in the world, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to suffer the worst from climate change. These regions historically have had an agricultural system highly dependent on naturally occurring rain. Only 5 percent of cultivated land in Africa is aided by irrigation, whereas other regions such as Latin America and Asia receive 14 and 37 percent of their water through irrigation respectively. The reliance on natural rainfall will quickly become a major problem for much of Africa. It's predicted that between 2080 and 2099, annual rainfall will drop by 20 percent along the Mediterranean coast, affecting much of northern Africa (Hall et al. 2017 pg. 125). The combination of population growth, high rates of unemployment, poor economies, and climate change represent difficult and complex challenges for the African governments to manage.

Compounding the limited economic and professional opportunities, conflicts and civil wars in Africa have created Protracted Refugee Situations in which large refugee populations numbering over 25 thousand have been stateless for more than 5 years. Many of these refugees come from Africa. A 2004 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report listed 10 countries in Africa with the largest numbers of refugees; Angola with 280,000, Burundi with 490,000, Chad with 39,000, the Democratic Republic of the Congo with 284,000, Eritrea with 110,000, Liberia with 266,000, Western Sahara with 165,000, Sierra Leone with 25,000, Somalia with 234,000, and Sudan with 549,000 (Derouen and Barutciski, 2007, pg. 215). Many of these countries have suffered from internal conflicts for decades, created by a vicious cycle of armed violence, displacement and civil wars.

### **Travel Routes out of Africa**

The African Center for Strategic Studies identifies three routes used by migrants to escape. The Eastern Route originates in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia toward the Gulf States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Southern Route stretches along the east coast of Africa down toward South Africa via Kenya and Tanzania. Lastly, migrants from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Algeria often follow the Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes into Europe. All these routes are fraught with danger. Migrants often face dehydration, drowning, death in shipping containers, and persecution by the countries that are receiving them (Willams 2024, pg. 7).

The Eastern Route is considered one of the busiest migration corridors in the world. In 2023, Djibouti and Somalia received nearly 300,000 migrants from Ethiopia and over 93,500 migrants left the Somali Peninsula in East Africa for Yemen. Not all countries in the Gulf States are friendly towards migrants though. Between March 2022 and June 2023, hundreds of migrants were killed by Saudi border guards at the Yemen border. The Human Rights Watch reported that migrants who had just been released from a Saudi detention center were fired upon by explosive weapons while fleeing back to Yemen. A young girl named Hamdiya describes their attempt to escape, "We were fired on repeatedly. I saw people killed in a way I never imagined. I saw 30 people killed on the spot. I pushed myself under a rock and slept there. I could feel people sleeping around me. I realized what I thought were people sleeping around me were actually dead bodies. I woke up and I was alone" (Hardman 2024). The Human Rights Watch has called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to monitor the situation; however, no formal investigation has been carried out by the U.N. to date.

An estimated 65,000 migrants passed through the Southern Route in 2023, many from Ethiopia and Somalia. This route runs along the east coast of Africa and down towards South

Africa. Most of the migrants that travel this route are young Ethiopian and Somali men traveling to South Africa in search of jobs to support families in their home countries, which are often households of 7 or more. The gendered disparity is due to differential access to jobs in South Africa. Simply put, the jobs available in South Africa are physically laborious, and typically occupied by men, as opposed, domestic work in Saudi Arabia which is often performed by women (IOM 2023, pg. 48). Like the Eastern Route, the journey along the Southern Route is filled with hazards. Migrants' transverse this route outside of established channels, often by vehicle, boat, or walking extreme distances. There is little food, and few resources to meet the basic needs of the migrants making this journey, with 98 percent of migrants indicating they had insufficient access to food, water, and sanitation during the trip (IOM, 2023 pg. 57). There is also an overwhelming amount of abuse and violence that take place during migration. Research determined that nearly 68 percent of migrants taking this route faced some sort of sexual violence, torture, or physical assault. In some cases, migrants were simply abandoned by their smugglers and left with no supplies for survival (IOM 2023, pg. 58).

Most migrants are intercepted along the Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes into Europe, with the border patrol of the European Union estimating that nearly 91,000 migrants are intercepted crossing through the Mediterranean each year. Many North African countries in agreement with the European Union are attempting to relocate migrants away from coastal cities. In some instances, these attempts have led to the deaths of migrants. In July 2023, Tunisian authorities abandoned hundreds of migrants at the Libyan border (Williams 2024, pg. 7). A 2023 United Nations report accuses the Libyan Special Naval Forces of sinking a fishing boat carrying several hundred migrants from Tubruq heading towards Italy near the Greece border. Greek authorities managed to rescue an estimated 100 people while hundreds more were declared

missing (United Nations 2023, pg. 9). After examining the routes migrants must take to leave Africa, it's easy to conclude that the Africans that reach the U.S. will have likely experienced violence, hunger, and many other hardships enroute to the United States that compounds what they had experienced prior to leaving their homeland. Once they reach the United States, they face a new set of challenges, assimilating and adapting into their new country.

### **Presence of African Immigrants in the United States**

The number of African immigrants in the United States has steadily been rising over the past 75 years. In 1960, African immigrants represented only 0.40 percent of the 9.7 million immigrants in the U.S. By 2010, Africans represented 4 percent of our nation's immigrants. The percentages of African migrants in the U.S. vary greatly in terms of their origin. In 2010, nearly two-thirds of the African immigrants in the United States were born in either Eastern or Western Africa. Data from the Migration Policy Institute indicate that 36.6% were born in Western Africa and 28.4% were born in Eastern Africa. Other regions of origin included Northern Africa (17.7%), Southern Africa (5.7%), and Middle Africa (4.4%). More specifically, most African migrants are coming from five countries: Nigeria (219,309), Ethiopia (173,592), Egypt (137,799), Ghana (124,696), and Kenya (88,519). The destination states for most African migrants are California (158,953), New York (158,878), Texas (136,112), Maryland (125,470) and Virginia (89,290). Most African immigrants also live in populated urban cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Seattle. Nearly half (46%) of the African immigrants in the U.S. have come from either Diversity Programs (green card lottery) or refugees and asylum seekers (Nyamwange 2014, pg. 44-45). While President Trump has controversially labeled these countries as "shit holes," disregarding the

value of the countries and their people alike, African immigrants are some of the most educated and hard-working population living in the United States.

African immigrants living in the United States report high levels of educational attainment and make up one of the most educated groups of immigrants living in the U.S. The 2010 Census reports that 40.1 percent of African-born immigrants had a minimum of a bachelor's degree, while only 27 percent of immigrants nationwide reported having a bachelor's degree. In the United States, the percentage of people with a bachelor's degree was only 28.4 percent (Nyamwange 2014, pg. 46). African-born immigrants also excel at English, with more than 70 percent reporting that they spoke English "very well." High levels of educational attainment and proficiency in English have resulted in high labor force participation for African immigrants. Data obtained in 2007 showed that 71 percent of all US adults between the age of 18 and 64 were employed. Black African immigrant adults of the same age group had an employment rating of 75 percent. The top 10 African immigrant populations with the highest employment rates were from Sierra Leone (82%), Uganda (81%), Kenya (80%), Ghana (79%), Zimbabwe (78%), Nigeria (78%) Senegal (77%), South Africa (77%), Ethiopia (76%), and Liberia (76%). A breakdown of the types of jobs held by African immigrants revealed that nearly 33.3% of their positions were professional jobs and 37.7% had jobs in management, business, and science. The service industry accounted for 24.8% of the jobs, and sales and office positions accounted for 19.8% of all jobs for African immigrants (Nyamwange 2014, pg. 46). Despite high levels of education, many African immigrants do not earn higher than average wages. In 2007, the average annual earnings for civilian workers aged 16 and older in the U.S. was \$32,000. Only two populations of African immigrants were able to surpass an average annual income of \$32,000: those from Nigeria (\$36,000) and those from Egypt (\$35,000). All

other populations of African immigrants had average annual earnings below the national average (Nyamwange 2014, pg. 48).

### **Present Study**

The process of surveying African communities in Pierce County involved canvassing 5 locally owned African businesses and visiting 4 known African households. This resulted in contacting 30 African immigrants from Lakewood, Tacoma, and Spanaway, Washington. From the 30 African immigrants contacted, 15 agreed to complete a survey. Eleven of those returned the completed survey, and five of those individuals also agreed to an interview. This study is limited however, by the number of immigrants that were contacted in Pierce County. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Pierce County Washington has approximately 6,691 African immigrants in its population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). This limited sample size may be contributed to the current rhetoric used by our federal government towards immigrants, or other outside factors that are discouraging people from speaking about their experiences immigrating to Pierce County Washington. Further investigation, surveys, and interviews would be needed to capture a more robust experience of the immigrants in Pierce County.

### **Survey Results**

Participant current ages ranged from one between the ages of 18 and 24, one between the age of 25 and 34, one between the ages of 35 and 44, five between the ages of 45 and 54, and one above the age of 65. Two people chose not to include their current age in the survey. The age of participants from when they migrated to the U.S. was also captured. Participant migration ages ranged from two between the age of 18 and 24, four between the age of 25 and 34, two between the ages of 35 and 44, and one above the age of 65. One participant chose not to

disclose their age at the time of immigration. Gender identification is also an important factor to capture as many migrants are persecuted due to their gender. Survey results revealed that three participants identified as cisgender male and nine as cisgender female, no participants chose to identify as transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, or gender fluid. Nearly every participant had some level of educational attainment before immigrating to the United States. One participant had completed only primary school. Four participants had at least a high school diploma. Three participants had an associate's degree, two participants had a bachelor's degree, and one participant had a master's degree. Current education levels showed a general desire to obtain education in nearly all participants. Three participants had no educational attainment since arriving in the U.S., one completed a high school diploma, one participant with a high school diploma went on to complete a trade school, and one participant completed their bachelor's degree.

The participants came from a wide variety of countries. One participant came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, two came from Tanzania, two came from Kenya, and six came from Nigeria. The marital status of each participant was also captured in the surveys. Of the eleven participants, five were married when they migrated to the United States, six were single, and none of them had domestic partners. Many of the participants surveys were member of family units that traveled together to the United States, consisting of four family units.

All of the participants were asked if they wanted to share their immigration status, seven chose to respond. One arrived as a refugee, five had obtained naturalized citizenship, and one is a permanent resident (i.e. had a green card). Four of the participants chose not to disclose their immigration status. The chart below outlines the demographic statistics in the surveys.

Home Country	Gender	Age range at Immigration	Current Age Range	Educational Obtainment	Immigration Status	Marriage Status
Congo	Female	18-24	45-54	High school	Naturalized	Single
Tanzania	Female	25-34	45-54	High school	Refugee	Single
Tanzania	Female	18-24	25-34	High school	Not Reported	Single
Kenya	Male	35-44	n/a	College	Not Reported	Married
Kenya	Female	n/a	n/a	Bachelors	Not Reported	Married
Nigeria	Male	25-34	45-54	Associates	Naturalized	Married
Nigeria	Female	35-44	45-54	Bachelors	Naturalized	Single
Nigeria	Female	25-34	35-44	Associates	Not Reported	Single
Nigeria	Female	25-34	45-54	Masters	Naturalized	Married
Nigeria	Female	65+	65+	Primary	Green card	Married
Nigeria	Male	18-24	18-24	Trade School	Naturalized	Single

To help determine what resources African immigrants may need from Pierce County, the participants were asked what agencies, programs, and resources were made available to them when they arrived. Responses largely indicated that participants were not aware of many of the resources available to them. One participant from Nigeria stated, “I have lived in about 2 different states without any resources. After about 3 years I was able to connect with an attorney in Seattle, and I used to stay in Federal Way at that time. An immigrant without a car, not easy going to Seattle.” Other responses included, “I did not have access to any resources. No services actually, because I went to Chicago where I know nobody due to this reason, I wasn’t open to information nor receiving any resources.” Some participants did state that they had help using job seeking resources. Overall, the surveys indicated that most of the participants from African communities contacted in Pierce County had little knowledge of the resources available to them here and while residing in other states. Additionally, many were hesitant to disclose their immigration status out of fear of deportation.

## Interviews

Participants were given the option of sitting for a 10-minute interview following the survey to offer more in-depth responses to related questions. They were each assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality in the study. Participants were asked several questions which they were given time to elaborate on. What were their reasons for leaving their home country? What types of educational and employment opportunities were available in their home country? Did they experience any forms of discrimination in their home country or here in the United States? Did they experience periods of food scarcity? Did they have family / friends that helped them when they arrived in the U.S.? What government resources, nonprofits, religious organizations, school programs did they use to help establish their lives here? Interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

### **Reasons for Leaving Africa.**

Given the range of reasons why millions of migrants flee Africa every year, it was important to capture the participants' reasons for leaving. Participants were asked their main reasons for leaving their country to move to the United States? Iyabo, a 45-year-old woman from Nigeria who entered the U.S. at the age of 31 stated, "I will say the situation of the country, was the government actually, from my country and I actually had my license as a registered nurse. So, after graduating, it is not easy generally for someone to get a job and with the situation with the corruption of the Nigerian government, that's why I left." Kunle (pseudonym), a 47-year-old male from Nigeria responded,

"Um, better opportunities. My dad was a professor sitting at the University of New York and my sister was here too, and that point in time and so I lost my mom in 85, 40 years ago, so it was more of opportunities to advance career wise and um to have an environment where my kids could be raised um with all the opportunities they could um

get to without me being so rich like you'll have to be in my own country. It's just for you to be hard working and for you be ready to and to put in the work, to be in the middle class that level out that playing field for everyone.”

Ola (pseudonym), a 35-year-old woman from Nigeria, also emphasized the possibility of opportunities as well as a focus on security and safety, explaining she left Africa for the U.S. “For new opportunities and more civilization.” Some interview participants fled violence and instability in Africa. For example, Lily, 47-year-old-woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo explained, “My main reason was my country have a war, like a civil war, so because of that, that’s when I decided to come to the United States, to flee my country and come to the United States.” As the participants indicate, they largely migrated because of the lack of opportunities that stem from governmental corruption and lack of economic and political stability.

### **What Factor Does Employment Play in a Person’s Decision to Leave Africa?**

Based on awareness of the GDP of many of Africa’s poorest economies, the interviewer asked participants to describe employment opportunities, or lack thereof, in their home countries as a factor for migration. Ola, commented, “Since I was in Nigeria I didn’t work, so I can’t really say.” Majorie a 48-year-old woman from Nigeria explained, “With Nigeria, you need to know someone to get to, you know, most of the time you have to know someone to get a job.” Kunle further identified some of the limitations in finding employment,

“Um, unfortunately, it's um it wasn't more of a vibrant private sector. You had private sector, you had government jobs, but it wasn't vibrant. You didn’t have much of manufacturing base. You had some manufacturing. So, the opportunities were, you work

in the private or in the financial sector or as a banker, as the financial services or you work in the oil industry, which is around petroleum, exporting crude oil, so exploration and processing of crude oil, you had oil companies. So those are the jobs that you seek out as a graduate. I mean, lucrative jobs, you say, where they require you to have a degree, you are most times, you require you knowing someone that could give you a link sort of more like a connection-based kind of job.”

Many of the responses indicate that finding employment in Africa is challenging, which is supported by extant literature, and contributed to their decisions to leave the region.

### **What Education Opportunities are Available in Africa?**

Most of the interview participants confirmed what the scholarly literature describes: African immigrants value education which serves as an additional motivation for migrants to travel to the U.S. Iyabo stated, “We actually have basically what the United States have, but different is here in the United States, you can get like a student loan, back in Nigeria, we do not have anything like student loan parents have to pay out of pocket for their children to go to school otherwise you won't be able to get education.” Lily from the Democratic Republic of Congo remarked, “All the education from primary to university, but I came I was younger, so I just finished high school.” Kunle from Nigeria said,

“You have um primary education, which you call elementary here. you have secondary, what you call high school. you have universities in colleges, but not as much as you have in United States, so you have a population of um I'm not sure what the current is. It's like 20 million now, I would say, that has maybe it's increased now with the advent of private schools, but in my own time when I was growing up, maybe you had uh 50 colleges of

education, opportunities, I mean higher learning colleges in universities, so it was um a little bit stiff competition getting admission to push you an higher degree in the university or college.”

These answers reflect African immigrants rate of educational attainment, while highlighting the difficulty in obtaining that education. According to participants, Africans place a lot of value in education, even if their governments struggle to create jobs or strengthen their economies.

### **Did Food Scarcity Influence the Decision to Leave Africa?**

To assess whether study participants’ experiences aligned with the literature related to issues of food scarcity in Africa, they were asked whether they had experienced food scarcity in their home country. Iyabo responded,

“What I know about that is that food that kind of expensive and if you are not from a wealthy family, you might be struggling to be able to purchase food. Um but common man, we have some common man food that kind of cheap just um example is like beans. We can easily buy beans and eat but um food is not scarce you just have to be able to have money to be able to buy, but then if you don't have a good job, you may not be able to provide to be able to buy the products if that makes sense.”

Kunle similarly described the food situation in his country as not food scarcity per se, highlighting the restrictions on food purchases due to economic conditions:

“Um, not necessarily food scarcity, but wasn't like, um I had surplus of food, so my dad was a professor, like I said, I lost my mom when I was barely eight. So just one income for a family and my dad and my mom had five kids. So, when she passed away, he had five kids to take care of by himself. So, while not food scarcity, but I mean, you didn't

have the luxury of having any choices of what you want to eat, you ate what was cooked, and it's really for the same for everybody.”

While the participants that were interviewed were not directly impacted by food scarcity, they did have knowledge of what was occurring in their countries, many pointing out the importance of employment in the context of being able to afford food.

### **What was the immigration process like for the participants?**

Interview participants were next asked to recount the process they went through to immigrate to the United States. Majorie from Nigeria stated,

“Honestly, I don't know how it works, but I can just give you what I think I know because I didn't think that we'd be winning it (visa lottery). You know, we just tried. We just, you know, kind of like winged it and we just qualified all some sort. So, you kind of like put your name, age, job, whatever, in the system and people are randomly selected, so that's I think we got selected to come up here. And the process wasn't, I mean, I took a while for us to realize I was selected. It took maybe between six months to one year. And afterwards, you know, um it was one thing or the other. For example, you have to do some medicals to make sure that you're fit and all that stuff and then go for interviews and, yeah, and that's how we came.”

Kunle similarly benefited from the Diversity Visa Lottery program, describing his immigration process as, “It was skilled immigrant visa and that was I remember during the Clinton era. So, it was a diversity immigration visa that was open to countries that had low immigration status to the United States, so it's more like a lottery system. You play it and if you're fortunate enough to be chosen then you are given the opportunity to apply for a green card to come to the United States”

### **Experiences with Discrimination and Prejudice?**

When asked if, in the U.S., they had experienced any forms of discrimination or prejudice based on their immigration status, nearly every participant agreed that they. Lily described an experience she had while looking for a job in the United States. “I was living in South Dakota. So, it was very hard because um there weren’t many, like black people, Africans, you know. So, it was hard to find a job. A lot of times, you apply for a job and when they see you, and they don't want to hire you.” While many of the interview participants had experienced discrimination, they did feel safe in their current location.

### **What Resources are Available to Immigrants in Pierce?**

Zeroing in on the needs of African immigrants in Pierce County and how to best address them, participants were asked what resources they used to establish their life in the U.S. This included resources, services, connections provided by churches, government organizations, non-profits. Many participants had limited knowledge of resources and supports when they arrived in the United States. Lily stated, “I didn't really know anything about that the only help I received it from social services, but besides that I didn't know many, nobody told me about anything, and I didn't know.” Iyabo recalled, “They took me to some churches, that they were kind of giving food, so I was able to get some food at that time. It took me a while before I can get [to] some organization there in Seattle. They helped me to start my immigration process, because of the way they are doing it, is kind of free service, so it's a very long wait period, if that makes sense to the extent, I was unable to achieve anything because of the waiting time.”

### **What Resources or Programs Could Better Support African Immigrants in Pierce County, Washington?**

Participants gave a variety of answers regarding what programs need to be established or expanded in Washington and, more specifically, Pierce County. Kunle stated, “So, I think for most of it, most immigrants just would want an environment where they could get a job to work and make a decent income. So, availability of that information, it could be a staffing agency, if you don't know nobody, a staff agency, that could connect you with that information.” The responses to this question revealed an interesting consequence of obtaining citizenship though, apathy. Some of the participants explained that they do not know what programs are needed, because immigration isn't a priority for them anymore. Lily stated, “I don't know much because I'm a citizen now, so I don't know um what people go through because I see there are so many immigrants. They are afraid and all these two. I don't know exactly what they're going through because I'm not immigrant. I'm not, I'm a citizen now so I don't know much about what's going on right now.” Majorie expressed her distance from these topics, responding,

“I have no idea. To be honest, I don't know. um because I'm not kind of like in that I don't know, I'm not in that circle anymore, you know, to want to know what social problems are missing or anything. I just, you know, I have a kind of solid job, which I feel like you know so I don't if I were looking, you know, or if I just got here and I was still in the work source, maybe I would know, you know, like to reach the gap or anything, but now I don't know.”

This answer highlights a possible disconnect between individuals that immigrated more recently and those that have already obtained their citizenship.

### **What Advice Would an Immigrant Give Others Planning to Immigrate to the United States?**

Lastly, the interview gave participants an opportunity to offer any advice to others who may make similar journeys to the U.S. Ola's advice included, "diligent research of which state they want to go to, because sometimes when you go to a wrong state, it is going to be rough."

Kunle offers this advice,

"I would say it's worth it, but you want to go through a legal channel. When I mean legal channel, most people out of desperation would come on a visiting visa, and then once they get into the country, look for avenues to regularize their state to more permanent stay, which I understand you get you take where you get first and then try to negotiate for a better opportunity, but what you find out is a lot of people come with um an idea that is not based on reality. And then on getting on ground, the reality stairs them on the face. And if you came here alone as a man and you are expected to be able to go home back again and then your visa expires because you overstayed, and then you have to look for opportunities to legalize that visa, you must legally find a way to get it more permanent stay and it might take you the route of actually getting married to someone who's a citizen, they could petition for you. Now, the problem is that it takes, is the duration is not in your control and it might lead to you not being able to see your family for a better a long time. And eventually, when you do, you connect with your family, you've been away from them for a while, you might have had all the family here and you have to deal with the consequences of that. So, it's just saying, be patient and you come through a legal route that enables you to bring your family a year, that make a lot easier for all the be."

Much of the advice given focused on being knowledgeable about the place you are moving to and going through the correct processes of immigrating and not taking shortcuts.

## Discussion

The purpose of this project was to determine what resources Pierce County Washington needs to provide to better serve African immigrants in the region. The limited survey sample size and interviews all pointed to a problematic issue; awareness of resources is sparse and immigrants are afraid. They are afraid to look for resources, and afraid of being deported. There exists a possibility for many immigrants that by searching for resources and services, that the very service they are searching for could result in their deportation. The United States has declared war on immigrants with statements from Vice President JD Vance, “We need to deport every person who invaded our country illegally,” (Adeosun, 2024) comparing immigrants with foreign invaders. Statements from Trump’s border Czar Tom Hamon, “We are not stopping. I don’t care what the judges think. I don’t care what the left thinks. We’re coming” (Saric, 2025). Statements such as these reinforce the administrations attitude towards immigrants, leaving many wondering if an ICE raid will target them next.

This fear of deportation prevents immigrants from seeking out the resources they need. Additionally, there are cultural and health repercussions of living in fear as an immigrant which is exacerbated by the anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration. Fear of deportation prevents immigrants from seeking out resources, delays immigrant patients from obtaining healthcare, and effects their mental health. Fear of family separation through detention delays immigrants from getting care for their children (Stutz et al., 2019, pg. 1903). This fear coupled with stressors like corrupt governments, joblessness, food insecurity, and climate change in their home countries leave immigrants at high risk of mental health disorders when they reach the United States and are faced with discrimination and threats of deportation.

Washington State is trying though. Recently, Gov Bob Ferguson signed multiple bills into law with the purpose of assisting Washington States' immigrant population. House Bill 1232 established health and welfare standards for the Northwest Detention Center, which includes requirements for the Department of Health to be allowed access to inspect the center. Senate Bill 5104 provides protections for immigrants from workplace harassment. This bill also requires the Department of Labor to investigate complaints of abuse and impose stricter penalties for violations. Finally, Senate Bill 5714, which limits the cooperation between bails bond agents and ICE agents to prevent sharing of a suspect's immigration status (Romero 2025). Additionally, Washington state should continue to fight back against the oppressive and racist policies of the Trump administration. In 2019 the state passed the Keep Washington Working Act, which prevents state agencies from assisting federal agencies when they target Washington residents solely based on race, religion, immigration status, or citizenship (66<sup>th</sup> Legislator 2019, pg. 6).

To improve the outcomes of African immigrants living in Pierce County, this study makes two recommendations based on the survey data and interviews. First, access to immigration attorneys needs to be widely available. Some participants had to wait as long as three years before speaking to an attorney. Immigrants that had attorney representation in courts were four times as likely to receive favorable actions from the courts. It is also important to point out that immigration law has extremely complex rules that can often change (Stutz et al., 2019, pg. 1904), reinforcing the need for more immigration specialists in Pierce County. Second, there needs to be more "Know Your Rights" materials throughout transportation facilities that immigrants often enter the state through. Sterile walls at the international arrival's terminal at SEATAC International Airport point to a problem with the state providing information on resources to incoming immigrants. Information on the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project,

Food Banks, Community Houses, Pierce County Human Services, Tacoma Education Association, Tacoma Rescue Mission, and emergency numbers should be readily available to immigrants as they arrive to Washington state. Supportive state policies that provide some sanctuary for African immigrants, combined with more attorneys and “know your rights” material may help counter the fear that African immigrant communities are feeling. This could lay the groundwork for future studies like this one, where we can capture the voices and experiences of other immigrant populations in Pierce County, Washington.

## **Conclusion**

African immigrants face several challenges in their home countries, from poorly producing economies, high unemployment rates, growing populations, food scarcity, and climate change. These offer challenging problems for African countries, which many governments are unprepared to solve, thus causing waves of migration out of Africa. Once immigrants arrive in the United States, they face new challenges. Our governments aggressive stance on deportation and the lack of knowledge on where to find resources leaves many African immigrants in fear. This paper captured the experiences of African immigrants in Pierce County, Washington through surveys and interviews, and it is through these voices that we can see the struggles that immigrants face. Recommendations for Pierce County include more specialized legal support to represent immigrants and the placement of “Know Your Rights” material in important locations where immigrants first reach Washington State. These locations would include the international arrivals terminal at SEATAC International Airport and public transportation facilities. Additionally, Washington state must continue to resist the aggressive policies of the Trump administration and protect its immigrant populations. Through these actions we can hope to

create a place where immigrants can feel safe. Safe enough to seek the help and the resources they need to lead successful lives here in Pierce County.

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# **W** University of Washington Tacoma Consent Form

## Global Honors Program

### Migration Trends out of Africa

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#### **Mission Statement**

I am asking you to participate in a research study about immigrants and their experiences in their countries of origin, during migration, and/or in the United States post-migration. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you need to help you decide if you want to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what I would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a participant, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When I have answered all of your questions, you can decide if you want to participate in the study. This process is called “informed consent.” I will give you a copy of this form for your records.

#### **Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this research study is to draw attention to factors influencing migration in and from Africa, such as climate change, conflict, food insecurity, and government instability. We also hope to learn about ways to improve and expand the immigration services available here in Washington State. This study is being conducted through the Global Honors Program at the University of Washington Tacoma as part of a senior research project.

#### **Study Procedures**

I will ask you to complete a brief demographic survey and potentially participate in a 30-minute audio-recorded interview in which you will be asked about your experiences leaving Africa and arriving in the United States. In the interview, you will be asked questions such as, “What were some reasons you decided to migrate?” You can choose at any time to stop the interview, and you are not required to disclose your name in the interview. The survey and audio recording will not be used for any purpose outside the research being conducted for this study. Both the survey and audio recording will be anonymous, with no identifying information being recorded.

#### **Risks, Stress, or Discomfort**

Associated risks with this study may include feelings of sadness, frustration, and/or anxiety when reflecting on your experiences of your home country and experiences with immigration. If you

experience stress or anxiety, you can stop the interview at any time and the interviewer can provide additional resources to help.

**Benefits of Study**

The information gained from this study will be used to advocate for immigration reform and additional local services for immigrants from Africa.

**Confidentiality of Research Information**

All data will be confidential; your interviews will be stored in a password-protected computer and a pseudonym will be used instead of your full name. At the conclusion of this study, all identifiers collected (such as contact information) will be destroyed.

Please sign below if you are willing to complete a survey and/or have this interview audio recorded. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

**Subject's Statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098 or call collect at (206) 221-5940. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Full  
Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_





# University of Washington, Tacoma Demographic Survey

What was your marital status when you immigrated to the United States? With whom did you travel with?

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What services did you find useful when you arrived in the United States? How did you find out about these resources?

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If there is any additional information you would like me to know about you that isn't included in this survey, you may write it below.



## Immigrant Interview

Pseudonym:

Current Age:

Home Country:

Age at Immigration:

- 1) What were your main reasons for leaving your country to move to the United States?
  
- 2) What types of educational opportunities were available in your home country?
  
- 3) What types of employment opportunities were available in your home country?
  
- 4) Did you experience any periods of food scarcity in your country?
  
- 5) Did you move to the United States directly from your home country or did you live elsewhere before immigrating? Why?
  
- 6) How would you describe your immigration process?
  
- 7) Have you experienced any discrimination or prejudice here in the United States based on your immigration status?
  
- 8) Do you feel safe where you live now? Why (not)?

