

Afro-Venezuelans

Profile

Because Venezuela has not collected data on its black population since 1920, estimates range 7-60 per cent of the total population. Afro-Venezuelans have traditionally lived in the rural coastal zones of the country, but have begun to migrate to urban centres like Caracas in large numbers.

Although Afro-Venezuelans have contributed to and are largely assimilated into mainstream Venezuelan or Creole culture, this population has still retained some of its own cultural heritage. The use of traditional drums in Afro-Venezuelan music, as well as dance and African-based spirituality demonstrate this.

Historical context

Enslaved Africans were transported to Venezuela mostly in the eighteenth century to work on the numerous cocoa plantations. Despite proposals by Simón Bolívar, 'The Liberator', slavery was not abolished upon independence in 1811, but rather some forty years later with the Law of Abolition of Slavery of 1854. By that time the enslaved population had substantially declined due both to economic factors and the common practice of manumission.

Current issues

Historically, urban and rural Afro-Venezuelans have not identified themselves in racial terms, but rather according to their class and geographic position. This may be due to a general lack of consciousness, but may also be explicit denial of blackness because it is devalued in this society. Due to increased mobilization by local NGOs, Afro-Venezuelans, and youth in particular, are beginning to reaffirm their identity and culture.

Despite the existence of some notable Afro-Venezuelans in high-level positions in the government and private sector, Afro-Venezuelans continue to be the victims of discrimination and racial prejudice. This discrimination can be especially violent in poorer areas where police forces still often act with impunity and racial profiling is rampant. Moreover, nearly 40 per cent of Venezuelans live under the poverty line and the concentration of people of African descent in poorer regions and neighbourhoods suggest that poverty rates are higher among this population.

In March of 2004, in a trip organized by TransAfrica Forum, a high-level delegation of African Americans met with government officials in Venezuela. Generating some negative and arguably racist commentary, the visit ultimately brought the situation of Afro-Venezuelans to the centre of public debate.

In 2005 the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations pressured the Chavez government to collect data on Afro-Venezuelans in the next census and to reform the constitution so that it recognizes their rights as an ethnic group. Although Chavez has not responded to either of these demands, in May of 2005 he did announce the creation of a new commission aimed at preventing and eliminating racial discrimination in the education system in Venezuela.