

Civic participation of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic: An urban-rural/peri-urban comparison

Karie Jo Peralta

The University of Toledo

Shahna Arps

The University of Toledo

Abstract

Using data on 91 respondents from a 2017 household survey, this study examines the civic participation of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic. We analysed self-reported attendance at voluntary association meetings (labour, community improvement, sports/recreation, religious, and parent-teacher). The purpose was to identify the extent to which respondents engaged in civic life and to determine whether there were significant urban-rural/peri-urban differences in attendance, in order to shed light on if the location of residence may or may not shape participant involvement. The results revealed that participation was highest in parent-teacher meetings (78%) and lowest in labour meetings (18%). Across all five meeting types, there was a higher percentage of attendance by rural/peri-urban than urban participants. The differences between urban and rural/peri-urban participant attendance were significant for all of the association meeting types, except for parent-teacher meetings. This research is important for appreciating the previously under-examined issue of civic engagement of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic with special attention given to geographic variation.

Key words: civic participation, immigration, urban-rural difference, Dominican Republic.

Introduction

Researchers, journalists, and third sector workers have documented extensively the social and political consequences of the Dominican Republic's 2013 Constitutional Court ruling that retroactively revoked citizenship from thousands of individuals of Haitian descent (for examples, see Garcia, 2015; Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, 2014; Hannam, 2014). In particular, significant attention has been given to the statelessness of large numbers of Dominico-Haitians (Mejia, 2015). To address the situation and respond to international pressure, the Dominican government created a regularisation plan, which provided pathways

Corresponding author: Karie Jo Peralta (Karie.Peralta@UToledo.edu)

for persons, who met certain criteria, to regularise their status. Sectors of civil society and the international community condemned the ruling and asserted that the plan was imbued with racism and discrimination, and on-the-ground reports characterised the plan's implementation as inefficient (Amnesty International, 2015).

The social challenges experienced by the Haitian immigrant community during this time are part of a larger historical process of marginalisation. The role of U.S. imperialism on the island of Hispaniola is particularly important in the history of the oppression of Haitians (Farmer, 2006; Atkins, 1998). In the Dominican Republic, blacks, who were predominantly Haitian, were exploited as labourers in the sugar industry that was owned early on by American companies (García-Peña, 2016). Around the mid-1900s, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930–1961 controlled the industry (Moya Pons, 1998). From 1952 to 1986, the Dominican government entered into contractual agreements with the Haitian government to employ Haitians as agricultural workers for five-year periods. Before and after this time, the sugar companies contracted their own workers. To accommodate the Haitian labourers and their families, migrant camps, locally known as *bateyes*, were established. These sites were geographically isolated and lacked access to health care and basic services such as water and electricity (Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). In addition to the everyday struggles that Haitian immigrants and their children faced, due to their poor living conditions, they also endured workers' rights violations (Martínez, 1995; Bernier, 2003).

In the late 1980s, sugar production drastically decreased, in large part due to economic restructuring and trade agreements with the United States. As a result, the demand for low-paid labourers shifted to the construction and service sectors; and today, more jobs in these areas can be found closer to cities (Jayaram, 2010; Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004). While early-settled *bateyes* continue to be inhabited by the descendants of the original agricultural workers, increasing numbers of Haitian immigrants and their children move to urban centers to take advantage of the economic opportunities there (Petrozziello, 2012; United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2005). In order to increase their life chances, many Haitian immigrants pursue work in the Dominican Republic knowing the hardships that they will likely have to manage and overcome (Wooding & Moseley-Williams, 2004).

Much of the social research on Haitian immigrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic has focused on the marginalisation of this group and its effects on members' educational opportunities (Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, 2014), health and access to medical care (Suiter, 2017; Keys, Kaiser, Foster, Burgos Minaya, & Kohrt, 2015; Lund et al., 2015), and employment experiences (Petrozziello, 2012). What is less studied is the resistance of Haitian immigrants against social exclusion in the Dominican Republic and the mechanisms that they use to influence their social realities. Therefore, there is a need to examine their engagement in civic life. Insight into the civic participation of persons with Haitian heritage, who reside in the Dominican Republic, is necessary for promoting a deeper understanding of this group's resilience and involvement in their communities.

A body of social science literature that largely attends to the discrimination and abuses that Haitian immigrants and their families suffer in the Dominican Republic and gives little consideration to their human agency and local participation, runs the risk of contributing to the construction of an inaccurate portrayal of this group as powerless, weak, and passive. This image is particularly problematic, given the history of Haitians as a revolutionary people. A broader perspective that pays attention to their involvement in community life is especially important, because many Haitian immigrants and their families have established roots in the Dominican Republic and have lived there for decades (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2013). This study considers both the agency of Haitian and Dominico-Haitian families in terms of the ways that they participate in their communities as well as potential structural barriers to their engagement by focusing on how geographic variation may be a factor. This research advances

an appreciation of the social participation of people of Haitian descent across rural/peri-urban and urban communities that represent both traditional and new settlements of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic. Taking into account urban and rural/peri-urban differences in participation brings into perspective whether or not participants may experience geographic-related, structural obstacles that may limit opportunities to be engaged civically and/or restrict access to community groups, thereby indicating where local organisations may need to focus their efforts to increase involvement.

Our research questions are the following:

1. To what extent are Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic participating in the civic life of their communities?
2. Are there significant differences between urban and rural/peri-urban residents' civic participation?

We examine 91 (61 urban and 30 rural/peri-urban) respondents' self-reported attendance at religious, school, community, labour, and sports and recreation group meetings. We gathered the data through a household survey of Haitian and Dominico-Haitian families that were affiliated with a grassroots organisation, which we will not identify for confidentiality reasons. In order to offer a more nuanced analysis of community participation, we compare the levels of involvement in community meetings across urban and rural/peri-urban participants. To the best of our knowledge, there are no other studies, at least in English, that examine the civic engagement of individuals of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic and urban and rural/peri-urban differences in their local participation.

Literature review

Immigrant civic engagement

Research on immigrant community participation recognises the need to conceptualise civic engagement in broad terms. In this way, the local involvement of undocumented community members, who are unable to participate in formal political activities, may be considered (Jensen & Flanagan, 2008; Dixon, Bessaha, & Post, 2018). We adhere, therefore, to the understanding that civic engagement concerns "people's connections with the life of their community, not merely with politics" (Putnam, 1995, p. 665). Specifically, we define civic engagement as "involvement in communal activities that have some purpose or benefit beyond a single individual or family's self-interest – either for a community organisation, social group, or the general public" (Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad, 2008, p. 16).

Examining immigrant involvement in voluntary associations is thus one important way to study civic engagement. These organisations help immigrants, including those with an irregular status, receive social support (Jensen, 2008), engage in local politics (DeSipio, 2011), and build social capital (Brettell, 2005). According to Massey, Alarcón, Durand, and González (1987), community-based organisations offer "institutional mechanisms that facilitate the formation and maintenance of social ties" (p. 145). Ethnic organisations, in particular, provide significant opportunities for immigrants to build community (Zhou & Lee, 2013). They allow individuals to network for economic and political purposes (Portes, Escobar, & Arana, 2008) and mobilise around community issues that are relevant to their lives in their home and host countries (Jensen, 2008). They also serve to ease the process of adaptation, while sustaining immigrants' connections with their country of origin (Portes et al., 2008).

There are a number of factors that influence and motivate immigrants to be civically engaged, which range from personal to contextual. For example, Jensen (2008) found that the civic engagement of immigrants from India and El Salvador had cultural underpinnings. Her study's

participants explained, in particular, how their religious traditions involved a commitment to service. Ebert and Okamoto's (2013) study revealed that there is increased civic engagement among immigrants in American cities with higher percentages of foreign-born people. Additionally, their research implies that the more threatening a city is in terms of anti-immigrant legislation, the less likely immigrants are to be civically engaged.

Stepick, Stepick, and Kretsedemas (2001) found low levels of civic engagement of Haitian immigrants in South Florida, where most Haitian immigrants live in the United States. They identified the lack of Haitian solidarity, intergenerational communication, free time, and language skills, as well as perceived discrimination, as inhibitors of their participation. When members of this group do participate in communal life, church is where they can most likely be found. In fact, in comparison with other immigrant groups, Haitian immigrants in South Florida were found to have the largest number of church attendees, as well as highest level of church attendance (Stepick & Portes, 1986). Participation in church, along with other cultural organisations, buffers the continual discrimination that this population faces and helps to promote Haitian culture (Stepick, 1998). While past studies provide insight into the civic engagement of Haitian immigrants in the United States, a gap remains in understanding this issue in the Dominican Republic.

Urban/rural differences in civic engagement

Many studies that explore immigrant community participation do not make urban/rural comparisons. Prior research thus provides limited insight for the present study. As a result, we rely on existing studies that examine urban/rural differences of the civic engagement of general populations to inform our research. A common finding in this literature is a positive relationship between rural residence and civic engagement, which is consistent in studies conducted around the world (For examples, see Compion, 2017; Oliver, 2000; Putnam, 2001; Taniguchi & Aldikacti Marshall, 2016; Xu, Perkins, & Chun-Chung Chow, 2010).

One of the most influential studies was published by Putnam (2001), who found that individuals who live in rural settings in the United States are more likely than those who live in metropolitan areas to be civically engaged. He examined participation in community and religious organisations and attendance at public and club meetings, while controlling for a range of individual factors such as education, gender, age, race, and economic conditions among several others. However, immigration status was not one of them.

Using data from the 2008–2009 Afrobarometer surveys of twenty African countries, Compion's (2017) study with a sample size of 26,105 individuals found there to be greater likelihood of rural than urban residents to be a member of a voluntary group. Taniguchi and Aldikacti Marshall (2016) examined data from the 2010 Japanese General Social Survey with 2,411 respondents in their sample and found geographic residence to be a predictor of participation in neighborhood associations. Once again, respondents residing in rural areas were more likely to be civically engaged than urbanites. However, Turcotte (2005) found that membership of rural residents in community and social clubs and organisations was only slightly higher than membership of urban dwellers in Canada.

Although the significant positive relationship between rural residence and civic engagement is widely found, there is some inconsistency with regard to the particular measure of political participation. For example, Xu et al. (2010) found that rural residents are more likely than urban residents to vote in local elections in China. In contrast, Oliver's (2000) study of civic involvement in the United States found supporting evidence that participation in civic activities decreases as city population size increases, except with respect to voting.

Important to note are the different ways that civic participation has been operationalised. For example, Compion (2017) explored membership in voluntary associations, while Taniguchi and Aldikacti Marshall (2016) operationally defined civic engagement as the frequency of participation in neighbourhood association activities on a weekly basis. Oliver (2000) examined engagement more extensively by looking at whether or not participants contacted locally elected officials or attended meetings of community boards and voluntary organisations over the previous year. He also considered voting in local elections. Like Putnam (2001) and Oliver (2000), we examined meeting attendance levels at various community-oriented organisations and clubs. While this literature may offer insight into place-based understandings of civic participation, there is a lack of research that gives particular attention to immigrants. The present study helps to fill this gap by exploring the community participation of immigrants of Haitian ethnicity across urban and rural/peri-urban settings.

Theoretical framework

Previous research shows that inclusive policies and organisational opportunities to participate in community affairs are influential factors in immigrant civic engagement (Aleksynska, 2011; Mora, 2013). Simply put, context matters for civic participation. While it is important to recognise the influence of larger social structures on civic participation, an interpretive perspective brings into view the “active immigrant” by taking into account both the social context and the agency of immigrants (Zapata-Barrero & Gropas, 2012). The active immigrant is a participating and contributing member of society, or societies, if they choose to be involved in both the sending and receiving countries (Gabielli, Gsir, & Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

With regard to the present study, we understand members of the Haitian immigrant community to have the capacity to be active citizens and construct their social worlds (Zapata-Barrero & Gropas, 2012). In the agricultural fields in the Dominican Republic, for example, Haitian workers have a history of activism and political resistance against sugar companies (LeGrand, 2014). Given the decreasing need for agricultural labourers and increasing demand for construction and service workers, many individuals of Haitian descent are moving to the metropolitan areas of the Dominican Republic (Petrozziello, 2012; UNDP, 2005). Yet, in applying the active immigrant perspective, we assume that they do not merely respond to these contextual factors nor simply adjust to the established conditions of city living. They create their urban social environments and shape communal life, despite possibly having limited opportunities to influence public policy decisions.

In light of changing patterns of residence, examining differences in civic engagement between rural/peri-urban and urban residents is important for understanding long-term trends in participation. For instance, if urban residents have higher rates of participation, we would expect opportunities for engagement to increase over time as urbanisation proceeds. However, if rural residents have higher rates of involvement, less civic participation of the Haitian immigrant community and their descendants, overall, could be a consequence of urbanisation. For organisations that serve Haitian and Dominico-Haitian families, these results have practical implications, in terms of determining programs, locations, and funding priorities for improving access to civic participation opportunities.

Our study contributes to the literature on immigrant civic engagement by exploring the local participation of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic, whose involvement in civic life is currently understudied. We look specifically at the attendance of participants in meetings of voluntary associations to determine the extent of their engagement. Then, we consider the differences in participation among rural/peri-urban and urban residents. Based on the literature, we expect that there is higher civic engagement among rural/peri-urban than urban participants and that this difference is significant.

Methods

This study is based on household survey data that we collected over two weeks in July 2017 with the support of nine student investigators, five local interpreters, and three community guides. Our survey research team collaborated with a non-governmental organisation that provided access to our “hard-to-reach” population, guides to identify the participants’ homes, and interpreters, who could communicate with participants in Haitian Creole and/or Spanish. Before beginning the research, we received approval for our study from the University of Toledo’s Institutional Review Board (Protocol #202100). Our partner organisation did not have a mechanism for conducting an ethics review. However, the organisation’s director approved the methods and survey questions that we used to conduct this research.

Population

The population of interest are individuals of Haitian ancestry who were affiliated with our local partner organisation that runs two bilingual Haitian Creole-Spanish schools in the Dominican Republic, one rural/peri-urban and the other urban. The grassroots schools were founded by Haitian immigrants who voluntarily taught the community’s children, since they did not have access to public schools. Our partner organisation has been fundraising for and providing leadership to the schools for more than a decade.

In the 2016–2017 academic year, the rural campus served approximately 50 children and offered pre-school through fifth grade. The urban campus had about 150 children enrolled in pre-school through eighth grade. The organisation lacked information about the children’s families, including basic household characteristics and access to resources. Therefore, the motivation for surveying this particular population was to obtain information that could be useful for informing current organisational initiatives and developing future programs and services.

The organisation’s director made the students’ parents aware of the survey several weeks in advance at an end-of-the-school year meeting. We also obtained informed consent from each participant prior to administering the survey, which we conducted in or around the exterior of the participant’s home. The goal was to obtain data on every household that had a child (or multiple children) enrolled in the schools.

Sample

Our partner organisation did not have a complete list of students nor family addresses on file. Therefore, we used a non-probability sampling technique. To locate the households, we depended on the local knowledge of community guides, who were familiar with the students’ families. The rural school’s principal simultaneously served as a guide and interpreter. To identify the urban households, we relied on the school’s doorman and an older student, who were members of the community. Based on the guides’ knowledge, we surveyed every household. Since we did not have a master list, however, we cannot be sure that we reached every family. However, the total number of students accounted for in the survey matches closely with the number of students that the organisation reported to be enrolled in the schools.

A representative from each household, generally a parent or guardian of children enrolled in our partner organisation’s school, answered survey questions. We did not ask to survey a particular representative. Rather, we interviewed whoever was home at the time of our visit, lived in the home, was 18 years of age or older, and was willing to participate. When researching a hard-to-reach and socioeconomically vulnerable population with limited time and resources, this type of non-probability sampling method may be the only way to obtain household data in an ethical manner.

Measures

The survey included questions about the family's sociodemographic background, living conditions, household items, health care use, perspective on community issues, and civic participation. We adopted survey questions and their Haitian Creole translations from the 2014 AmericasBarometer survey and USAID's 2015 survey entitled, "Baseline Study of the Title II Development Food Assistance Program in Haiti," given that these instruments had already been tested for reliability and validity. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the variables relating to sociodemographic background and participation in community activities. The civic engagement questions were adopted specifically from the 2014 America Barometers survey, which was administered across 28 countries in the Americas.

During the survey interview, we listed the following five different groups/organisations: 1) religious organisations; 2) parent's association; 3) community improvement committee or association; 4) association of professionals, merchants, manufacturers or farmers; and 5) sports and recreation groups. Then, we asked the household representative to tell us if he/she "attends meetings of these organisations at least once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, or never." "Don't know" was also an unstated possible response option. We collapsed the response categories to create a dichotomous variable for civic participation, with "at least once a week," "once or twice a month," and "once or twice a year" coded as 1 and "never" coded as 0. To be clear, the civic engagement questions measured the civic participation of the key respondent for the family during the household survey.

Participant residence (urban or rural/peri-urban) was determined by the location of the participant's home, which corresponded with the location of the school where the children in the household attended. The families with children, who attended the rural/peri-urban school, lived in a rural/peri-urban area, while the families with children, who attended the urban school, resided in the city. Participants lived in one of six urban neighborhoods or in the rural/peri-urban community. We coded urban residence as 1 and rural/peri-urban residence as 0. The urban school is within the limits of a city that is among one of the largest in the country in population size. The school is located in a densely populated neighbourhood with Dominican and Haitian immigrant families. The rural/peri-urban school is a little over six kilometers away from the urban school and in an area that was once largely filled with sugar cane. Although the local economy no longer relies on agriculture, the community is still characterised by many typical rural traits. In fact, the rural/peri-urban school is not far from the organisation's educational farm where students learn to care for livestock and garden. The zone includes three *bateyes* with primarily residents of Haitian background, but they are surrounded by Dominican neighbours. The closely compacted homes in the *bateyes* lends an urban feel despite being in the midst of open fields. Although there are many dirt roads, there is a paved main street that gives access to work opportunities in the city and tourist-filled resort towns.

Analysis

We calculated descriptive statistics for each variable, including the count and proportion. We used two proportion Z-tests to test our null hypothesis that the two populations, urban and rural/peri-urban participants, do not differ significantly with respect to the five types of civic engagement. We utilised the following formula to calculate the Z-values:

$$Z = \frac{(\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2) - 0}{\sqrt{\hat{p}(1 - \hat{p}) \left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} \right)}}$$

Where \hat{p}_1 is the sample proportion from population 1, \hat{p}_2 is the sample proportion from population 2, n_1 is the size of sample 1, n_2 is the size of sample 2, and \hat{p} is the pooled sample proportion.

Results

The 91 households that we surveyed included 454 individuals. Our sample for the community participation variables consists of the 91 key respondents (61 urban and 30 rural/peri-urban) from each household surveyed. The larger number of urban respondents is reflective of how the urban school's student enrollment was three times the total number of students in the rural/peri-urban school. Table 1 lists survey respondent characteristics and their descriptive statistics. There were more women (80.3% urban, 93.3% rural/peri-urban) than men survey respondents across both sites, and the average age at the time of the survey was in the early to mid-thirties (mean age of respondent = 35 years for urban households, 32 years for rural/peri-urban households). There were comparable low levels of education between the two groups with the majority of the participants having completed some middle school or less. However, there was a notable higher percentage of rural/peri-urban (20.0%) than urban (8.8%) participants with at least some high school education. Regarding household income, the urban participants had a higher household income in the week previous to being surveyed than the rural/peri-urban participants. While 27.5% of urban households made \$71 dollars or more in the previous week, there were no rural/peri-urban families who earned that much. Among rural/peri-urban participants, 60.8% made \$20 or less in contrast to only 15.7% of urban participants. While income figures varied between rural/peri-urban and urban families, the statistics indicate that the participants from both areas have put down roots in their communities as the majority of respondents had resided in their communities for 6 or more years (65.6% urban, 76.7% rural/peri-urban).

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for self-reported meeting attendance and the results of the Z-test that compares urban and rural/peri-urban participants' civic engagement across five measures. Overall, most respondents reported attending at least one of the five types of meetings. Attendance was highest for school-related parent-teacher meetings (78%) and lowest for professional association labour meetings (18%). For the urban group specifically, parent-teacher meetings had the highest percentage of attendance (75%), followed by religious meetings (54%). Labour meetings had the lowest percentage (11%) of attendance. With respect to the rural/peri-urban group, the highest percentage of attendance (90%) was at religious meetings. The second highest was parent-teacher meetings (83%). Labour meetings also had the lowest percentage of attendance (31%) by rural/peri-urban participants. Across all five types of association meetings, there was a higher percentage of attendance by rural/peri-urban than urban participants. The differences between urban and rural/peri-urban participant attendance are significant for all the association meeting types, except for parent-teacher meetings. Therefore, the results are consistent with our expectation that there is a significant difference between urban and rural/peri-urban participants' civic engagement except with regard to self-reported attendance at parent-teacher meetings.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Survey Respondents

	Urban (n = 61) %	Rural/Peri-Urban (n = 30) %	Total (n=91) %
Gender (woman)	80.3	93.3	84.6
Age (mean, SD)	35 (8.29)	32 (9.55)	34 (8.78)
Education			
No education	22.8	23.3	23.0
Some elementary (grades 1-4)	26.3	23.3	25.3
Elementary completed (grade 5)	8.8	3.3	6.9
Some middle school (grades 6-7)	24.5	13.3	20.7
Middle School completed (grade 8)	3.5	13.3	6.9
Some high school (grades 9-11)	8.8	20.0	12.6
High school completed (grade 12)	5.3	3.3	4.6
Income			
<\$10	5.9	30.4	13.5
\$11-20	9.8	30.4	16.2
\$21-30	3.9	8.7	5.4
\$31-40	11.8	4.3	9.5
\$41-50	11.8	8.7	10.8
\$51-60	15.7	13.0	14.9
\$61-70	13.7	4.3	10.8
\$71<	27.5	0	18.9
Years Residing in Community			
<1	8.2	3.3	6.6
1-5	26.2	20.0	24.1
6-10	29.5	30.0	29.7
11-15	16.4	10.0	14.3
16-20	13.1	10.0	12.1
21<	6.6	26.7	13.2

Table 2. Results of Z-test Comparing Urban and Rural Participants on Civic Engagement

Type of Association Meetings Attended	Urban		Rural/ Peri-Urban		Total		Z-statistic
	Frequency(%)	n	Frequency(%)	n	Frequency(%)	n	
Labour	7(11)	61	9(31)	29	16(18)	29	-2.268*
Community	8(13)	61	14(48)	29	22(24)	29	-3.627*
Sports/Recreational	12(20)	61	16(53)	29	28(31)	29	-3.399*
Religious	33(54)	61	27(90)	30	60(66)	30	-3.397*
Parent-Teacher	46(75)	61	25(83)	30	71(78)	30	-0.858

*P<.05 level

Discussion

While the social challenges and human rights violations that Haitian and Dominico-Haitians experience in the Dominican Republic are well-documented (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2015; Keys et al., 2015; Mejia, 2015; Petrozziello, 2012), much of the past research overlooks the efforts of people of Haitian descent in resisting the dehumanisation that they often face. The present study expands the literature on immigrant civic engagement by showing how Haitian people in the Dominican Republic are “active immigrants” (Zapata-Barrero & Gropas, 2012), who are involved in their communities, at least to some extent. Specifically, out of five types of meetings, the highest levels of overall self-reported attendance were school-related (78%) and religious (66%) meetings.

These results suggest that schools and churches are important institutions for providing Haitian immigrants mechanisms for developing communal ties (Massey et al., 1987). However, important to note is that these findings were likely shaped by the high number of women respondents. Because we conducted the survey on weekday afternoons, men may have been less available, due to work outside the home. The fact that the majority of the respondents were women may have particularly influenced the high rate of participation in parent-teacher meetings. Studies have shown that in intact households, mothers are often more likely than fathers to be engaged in school-related activities (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Valdés Cuervo, Martín Pavón, & Sánchez Escobedo, 2009). In line with past literature, churches are significant for facilitating immigrant community participation (Mora, 2013), particularly for Haitians (Stepick et al., 2001; Stepick & Portes, 1986).

A clear distinction in previous research, however, relates to parent-teacher meetings. In comparison with our study’s results, Stepick et al. (2001) found a low level of such involvement of Haitian immigrants in South Florida. What is likely behind this difference is the issue of language. Specifically, our partner organisation communicates with parents in Haitian Creole. According to Stepick et al.’s (2001) participants, the lack of their English language skills and translators were the main reasons for not attending these meetings.

Of all the meetings examined, those related to labour were the least attended. What may explain this finding is the likely precarious nature of their work, the lack of labour organisations, and/or the high number of women respondents, who may be less likely to participate in labour organisations or more likely to hold jobs for which labour organisations do not exist. This result also may be indicative of a low level of organisation of workers, especially those in the construction industry that relies heavily on Haitian labour (Petrozziello, 2012).

The results are consistent with previous research that finds lower levels of civic engagement among urban than rural participants (Oliver, 2000; Putnam, 2001). Oliver (2000) attributes lower urban participation to different types of social relations and interactions in cities compared to smaller communities and argues that not only are urban residents less likely to be recruited for these types of activities, but they also are less interested in local civic participation. Previous research has also suggested that civic engagement levels are higher in rural than urban areas, because rural communities are more altruistic and trusting (Putnam, 2001).

The high level of attendance and lack of significant difference in parent-teacher meeting attendance between urban and rural/peri-urban respondents are important findings for our partner organisation. For an educational provider, parent engagement is crucial to children’s academic success and schools’ effectiveness in all types of communities (Sheldon & Turner-Vorbeck, 2019). As an organisation that also strives to promote community development, this finding suggests that school meetings may be key spaces for grassroots organising no matter where families live. This strategy may be particularly useful for unifying urban residents, given

the group's lower percentages of civic engagement in economic and community meetings. Furthermore, these results imply that school meetings offer potential opportunities to mobilise constituents across both urban and rural/peri-urban sites.

Therefore, our partner organisation could take advantage of school meetings to empower individuals to address local social and economic issues. The capacity of NGOs to advocate politically on behalf of the communities they serve, including those with undocumented members, is reason to recommend that our partner organisation use school meetings as a channel to learn about the abuses that parents may be facing in their daily lives, such as in the workplace, and then make public denouncements. These meetings may be also helpful for disseminating immigration policy information such as procedures for obtaining documentation.

Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which members of the Haitian immigrant community are civically engaged with specific attention to differences in involvement between urban and rural/peri-urban residents. We found the highest percentages of group attendance to be at religious and parent-teacher meetings. There were significant differences in urban and rural/peri-urban participants' attendance at voluntary organisation and community group meetings that were labour, community, sports/recreation, and religious in nature. However, there was no significant difference in attendance at parent-teacher meetings between the two groups.

At this point, there are some caveats to mention. One is that the survey participants may have over reported their attendance at school meetings, because they knew that the interviews were being conducted on behalf of their children's educational provider. Nevertheless, our research findings are consistent with our partner organisation's view that parents show significant interest in their children's education. Another caveat is that one of our translators was a school director and local pastor. Therefore, participants may have been influenced to overstate their attendance at religious meetings. Additionally, the research did not include a survey of existing community organisations, which limits our ability to know whether or not low participation was a function of there being a lack in opportunity. Lastly, due to our nonprobability sampling method, our findings cannot be generalised to the larger Haitian immigrant population in the Dominican Republic. However, the purpose of our survey was to learn about the families with children, who attend our partner organisation's schools. This research supported us in achieving this aim, and we are able to recommend that these meetings be considered an important opportunity for the organisation to further its community development goals.

In conclusion, this study was an important initial step in identifying and exploring civic participation among Haitian families that live in the Dominican Republic. Future research should examine individual and contextual factors that may explain differences in community participation across urban and rural areas. We expect that multiple, interacting factors influence civic participation. Qualitative research could complement quantitative survey research by further examining factors such as geography, length of residence in the community, neighbourhood/community composition, and access to resources. In light of current urbanisation trends and the lower rates of civic participation found among urban residents, further research is necessary to identify and overcome obstacles to political engagement for Dominico-Haitians and Haitian immigrants living in cities, in particular. Moreover, there is a need for studies that explore existing and potential mechanisms for the collective action of the Haitian immigrant community in the Dominican Republic.

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Biographical Notes

Karie Jo Peralta is an associate professor of sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at The University of Toledo.

Shahna Arps is an assistant professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at The University of Toledo.