

Deportation stigma in Jamaica

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In Jamaica, deportation is a complex and emotionally charged issue that carries significant social and cultural consequences. Individuals deported to Jamaica, often from countries like the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom, face more than the immediate challenges of reintegration. They also grapple with a heavy stigma that can isolate them from their communities and families. Deportation stigma in Jamaica is deeply intertwined with societal perceptions of success, morality, and migration. For many Jamaicans, migration represents an opportunity to escape economic hardship, achieve upward mobility, and provide for their families. A return to Jamaica via deportation is often seen as a failure to fulfill these expectations. Deportees are frequently labeled as “bad people,” “criminals,” or “disgraces,” reflecting a broader assumption that they were removed for engaging in illegal or immoral activities, even when their deportation is the result of nonviolent offenses like visa overstays or minor infractions.

For example, I experienced the same in October of 2018. I was heading to the United States with a valid F1 visa to study nursing. I was late on arrival and did not know that there was a rule that once a student had not reported to the designated school 60 days after the start day of the school year, the SEVIS is cancelled. SEVIS is a document that renders an F1 visa valid. In my case, it had expired and hence my visa was cancelled, and I was deported back to Jamaica. I experienced stigma in a very strong way from the United States: my passport and papers were taken away, I was detained at the airport overnight under security, and the following evening I was escorted by officers to the plane. Upon arrival in Jamaica, I was accompanied by security all over as if I were a criminal until I was released after interrogation. Once again when I applied for a visa at the American embassy, I was asked with disdain why I was deported, and the entire crowd at the embassy looked at me as if I had killed someone. From there on, I have always been denied visas even from other countries because of that. This is to show how stigma can deeply affect individuals. I am a law-abiding citizen, and I am a God-fearing woman, but still that did not prevent me from experiencing the same.

This stigma is further fueled by media portrayals and political rhetoric, which often frame deportees as threats to national security and contributors to crime. Reports of some deportees being involved in criminal activities reinforce negative stereotypes, overshadowing the fact that many returnees are law-abiding individuals. Additionally, the association between deportation and certain socio-economic classes exacerbates

the stigma, as deportees are often viewed as coming from marginalized communities with fewer opportunities.

The stigma attached to deportation has far-reaching consequences for both deportees and Jamaican society. On an individual level, deportees often face rejection from their families and communities. Many are labeled as “foreign rejects,” a term that underscores their perceived failure to thrive abroad. This rejection can lead to feelings of shame, isolation, and depression.

Economically, deportees face significant barriers to employment and housing. The stigma surrounding their status often leads to discrimination, with potential employers or landlords wary of associating with someone labeled a deportee. This exclusion can push deportees toward poverty and, in some cases, illegal activities as a means of survival, further perpetuating the negative stereotypes associated with deportation. On a societal level, the stigma creates division and reinforces inequality. It contributes to the marginalization of deportees and exacerbates Jamaica’s broader socio-economic challenges. Family members of deportees may also experience secondary stigma, facing judgment from their communities for being associated with someone perceived as a failure or a criminal.

Deportation stigma in Jamaica is a multifaceted issue with profound implications for individuals, families, and society. Rooted in cultural expectations and reinforced by stereotypes, it isolates deportees and hinders their ability to reintegrate. However, by challenging negative perceptions, investing in reintegration programs, and fostering inclusive dialogue, Jamaica can work toward a society where deportees are not defined by their deportation but by their potential to contribute to their communities. Reducing deportation stigma is not only a moral imperative but also a step toward a more equitable and compassionate society.