

Immigration

Part of the “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders” Series

By Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad April 23, 2014

Asian Americans have the greatest proportion of immigrants of any U.S. racial group

Immigration is an issue that is particularly relevant to Asian Americans, especially considering that it is the racial group comprised of the greatest proportion of foreign-born residents in the United States. This pattern is due to changes in our nation’s immigration policies over the past 150 years. The first set of national immigration control laws targeted the exclusion of migrants from China and other Asian countries, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and continuing through the creation of the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, and further restrictions in 1924.

This ensured that the Asian immigrant population in the United States would remain small relative to migration from Europe. In 1965, however, the United States eliminated its restrictive national origin quotas and adopted the current system that favors family reunification and employment-based preferences.¹ Consequently, the number of immigrants from Asia soared, contributing to an Asian American population that is still predominantly foreign born, as shown in Table 2.1. Looking at just the Asian population, about two-thirds of residents, or 66 percent, are foreign born, compared to 37 percent among Latinos; 16 percent among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, or NHPs; 8 percent among African Americans; and 8 percent among whites. Importantly, the nativity figures are slightly lower for the “Asian alone or in combination with other races” population because this larger population includes individuals who identify as multiracial, who are much more likely to be born in the United States than in Asia. Finally, the proportion of those who are foreign born is even higher when we look at the adult Asian American population, with immigrants accounting for nearly four in five adult residents, or 79 percent.

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TABLE 2.1

Proportion of foreign born as a proportion of residents, adults, and adult citizens

Foreign-born population as a proportion of residents, adults, and adult citizens

	All residents	All adults	Adult citizens
White	8%	10%	5%
Hispanic	37%	52%	25%
African American	8%	11%	6%
Asian alone	66%	79%	69%
Asian alone or in combination	59%	74%	63%
American Indian	5%	7%	3%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	16%	23%	12%

Source: Authors analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "2008–2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/2012_release/ (last accessed March 2014).

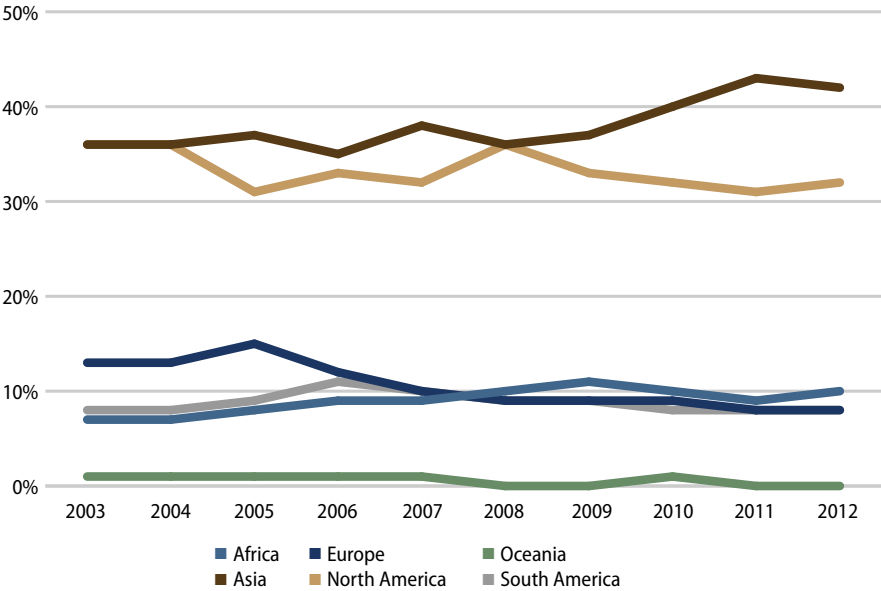
More immigrants now come from Asia than from any other region

An important development in the past decade is that there are more immigrants coming from Asia than from any other region in the world, including Latin America. This has not always been the case. Prior to 2007, the majority of foreign-born persons residing in the United States came from Latin America, but after 2008, this share fell to 41 percent.² On the other hand, the number of foreign-born people originally from Asian countries grew and eventually ballooned to more than 40 percent of the foreign-born population from 2008 onward, with Indian and Chinese immigrants accounting for an increasing share of the newly arrived, foreign-born residents. In fact, the composition of the foreign-born population who receive legal permanent resident status through green cards has also changed dramatically in recent years with the number of green card recipients from North America decreasing and recipients from Asia increasing. Figure 2.1 shows that beginning in 2010, a significant increase of the share of legal permanent resident admissions from Asian countries occurred from 37 percent in 2009 to 40 percent in 2010 to 43 percent in 2011.³

All of these data point to a consistent picture: Asian migration is getting more important, whether measured by the total population of foreign-born immigrants entering the country or specifically by legal permanent resident admissions. One big reason for the growing importance of Asian migration to the United States is the development of net-zero migration from Mexico in the past

several years due to changes in the U.S. economy, immigration enforcement, and changes in fertility and society in Mexico.⁴ The growing importance of Asia is also attributable to migration from a handful of countries. In the past decade, China, India, and the Philippines have consistently ranked among the top five countries of origin among those obtaining lawful permanent resident, or LPR visas, which are also known colloquially as green cards. In 2012, the most recent year for which data are publicly available, about 146,000 green cards were issued to nationals from Mexico, followed by 82,000 from China, 66,000 from India, and 57,000 from the Philippines.⁵

FIGURE 2.1
Share of legal permanent resident admissions by region

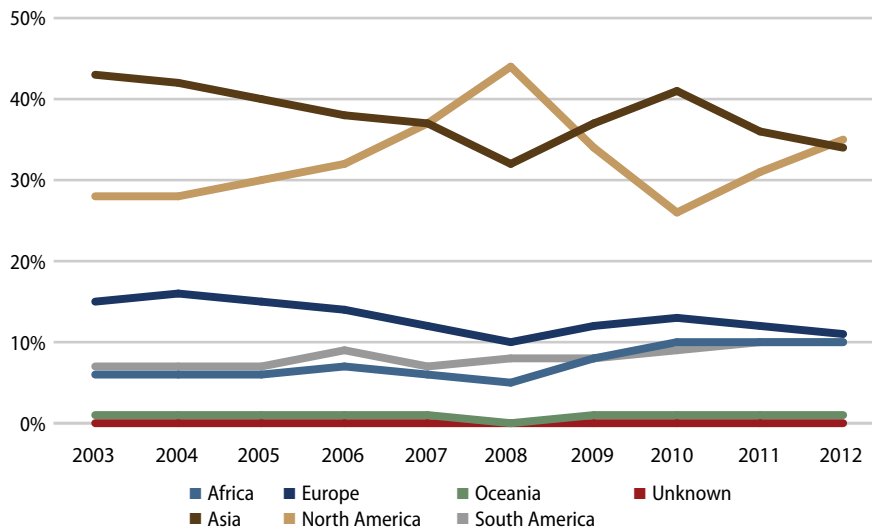


Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012," available at <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-legal-permanent-residents> (last accessed March 2014).

Naturalizations are highest among Asian immigrants in past decade

Along with the allocation of green cards for Asian immigrants, the share of naturalizations has also increased. In the past decade, naturalizations of Asian immigrants have outnumbered naturalizations of immigrants from North America every year, except for 2008 and 2012. During this time period, India, the Philippines, and China have consistently ranked among the top five countries of origin among those obtaining naturalization. In 2012, the most recent year for which public data are available, Mexico was the largest country of origin among those obtaining U.S. citizenship with 102,000 immigrants, followed by the Philippines with 45,000, India with 43,000, the Dominican Republic with 33,000, and China with 32,000.⁶

FIGURE 2.2
Share of naturalized citizens by region of birth



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012," available at <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-naturalizations> (last accessed March 2014).

Asian immigrants are among the quickest to naturalize

Another important aspect about naturalization is that Asian immigrants have consistently been among the fastest to naturalize. As Table 2.2 shows, the median years in legal permanent resident status for persons naturalized is also markedly different: Those from North American countries have waited a decade or more, while those from Asian countries have waited five to eight years.⁷ There are a variety of factors that contribute to the speed at which a person is naturalized and may explain why many individuals from Asian countries are naturalizing almost twice as fast as those from North American countries. These factors include country of origin characteristics such as gross domestic product, or GDP; distance from the United States; and personal characteristics such as income and education.⁸

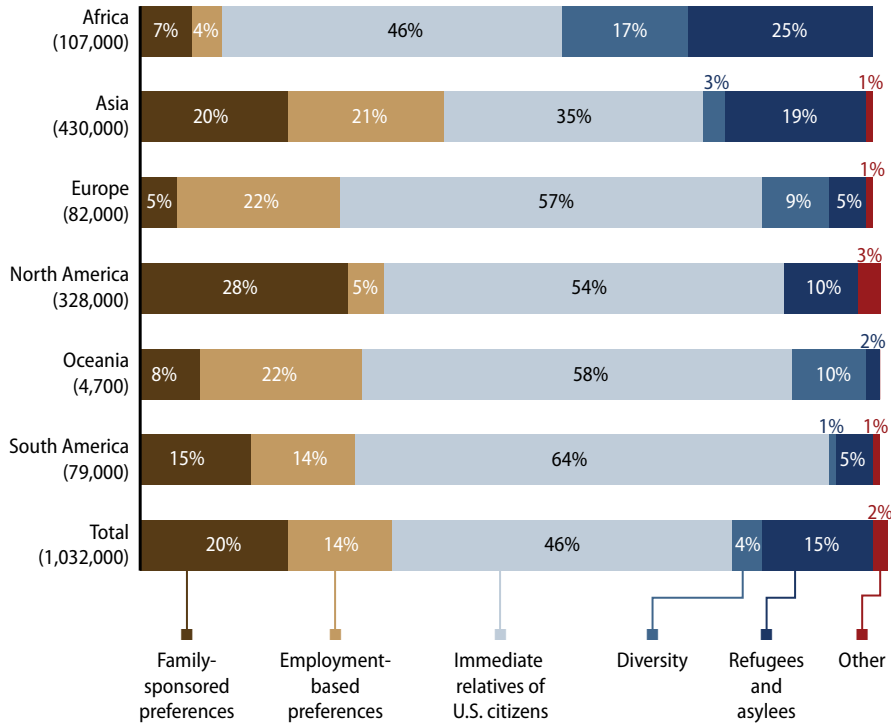
TABLE 2.2
Median years to naturalization by region of birth

	2012	2010	2000	1990	1980
Total	7	6	9	8	8
Africa	5	5	7	7	7
Asia	6	5	8	7	7
Europe	7	6	7	10	10
North America	10	10	11	11	11
Oceania	8	7	11	10	8
South America	6	5	10	9	9

Source: James Lee, "Annual Flow Report—U.S. Naturalizations: 2012" (Washington: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2013), Table 7, available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_natz_fr_2012.pdf.

The reasons for immigration to the United States have a large impact on the economic status of individuals once they arrive. Immigrants come to the United States for a myriad of reasons, including reuniting with their family, furthering their education, accepting employment, making investments, and escaping oppressive home countries. The largest share of Asian immigrants arrive in the United States on family-sponsored visas for immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. In fiscal year 2012, 35 percent of green cards issued to Asian immigrants were immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, and an additional 20 percent were issued to those who arrived on other family-sponsored preferences. As figure 2.3 indicates, this compares to 21 percent who arrived on employment-based preferences and 19 percent as refugees and asylees.

FIGURE 2.3
People obtaining legal permanent resident status
by broad class of admission and region of birth



Note: Totals from each region in 2012 in parentheses.
 Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012," available at <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-legal-permanent-residents> (last accessed March 2014).

Notably, the proportion of Asian immigrants attaining legal permanent status through employment-based preferences, tallying in at 21 percent, is significantly higher than the average of 14 percent for all countries of origin.⁹ Also notable is the total number of employment-based visas issued to immigrants from Asia, which account for 64 percent of all such cases, compared to 13 percent for Europe, 12 percent for North America, and 8 percent for South America.¹⁰

While education, employment, and wealth have brought many middle- and upper-class Asian immigrants to the United States, there is another important component to the Asian immigration story that is to the contrary. A significant share of Asian immigrants come to the United States as refugees. More than 47 percent of the 582,000 refugee arrivals in the United States between 2001 and 2010 were born in Asian countries—with large shares from Burma, Bhutan, and Vietnam.¹¹ Furthermore, during that same time period, 43.2 percent of asylum

grantees in the United States were from Asian countries—more than half of whom were Chinese nationals.¹² Refugees often have little wealth and education upon arrival in the United States, and they provide an important counterpoint in our understanding of educational attainment and income from those arriving on employment-based preferences.

Another important dimension of the visa process for Asian Americans is the long backlogs that many individuals face in sponsoring their family members to come to the United States. This is because the Immigration and Nationality Act does not permit any country to have more than 7 percent of the annual visas issued, which means a cap of about 26,000 visas in 2014.¹³ As a consequence, applicants from countries with the most family visa applications, such as Mexico, the Philippines, and India, have to wait many years before being reunited with their families. Indeed, the longest wait times are for those in the Philippines who are brothers or sisters of adult U.S. citizens: They have to wait more than 23 years before being issued a green card.¹⁴ Overall, Asian countries account for 42 percent of the estimated 4.2 million individuals waiting abroad due to backlogs in issuing of family visas,¹⁵ and Asian countries constitute four of the top five countries of origin in the backlog—the Philippines, India, Vietnam, and China—with backlogs ranging from about 225,000 to 400,000 for each country, as Table 2.3 indicates. There is a much smaller number of individuals waiting on employer-based visas—112,000—and Asian countries account for 84 percent of this backlog.

TABLE 2.3
Countries with the longest waiting lists for family visas

Country	Number	Share of Total
Mexico	1,308,761.00	31%
Philippines	401,880	10%
India	295,167	7%
Vietnam	255,202	6%
China	224,598	5%
Dominican Republic	175,227	4%
Bangladesh	162,527	4%
Pakistan	110,968	3%
Other Asian countries	310,769	7%
Other countries	965,872	23%
Total	4,210,971	

Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2013* (U.S. Department of State, 2013), available at <http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingListItem.pdf>.

National origin is an important indicator of immigration

While the vast majority of Asian Americans are foreign born, there are significant variations across national origins as to the share of foreign born versus native born. Japanese Americans, for example, have the smallest immigrant share of any Asian origin group due to several factors, including the fact that this population has the oldest age structure and has the most established, multigenerational settlement pattern in the United States. Additionally, migration flows from Japan have been comparatively small in recent years. Similarly, the Hmong and Laotians have not had as much recent migration since their earlier refugee waves in the 1970s. And by contrast, South and Southeast Asian groups—Malaysian, Sri Lankan, Thai, Indonesian, and Bangladeshi—are among the most heavily foreign born, as Figure 2.4a illustrates. Indeed, immigrants who have come to the United States since 2000 account for a third or more of all Malaysian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and Indian Americans currently living in the United States and more than a quarter of all Pakistani and Thai residents, as shown in Figure 2.4b. Thus, we see significant variation in the extent to which immigration affects different Asian American nationalities, whether we measure differences by nativity or by recentness of migration.

FIGURE 2.4a
Proportion of residents who are foreign born

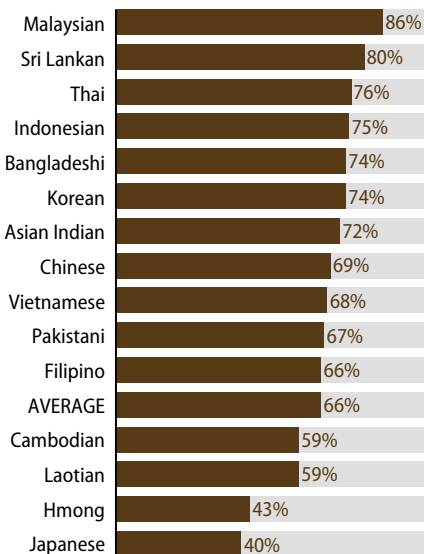
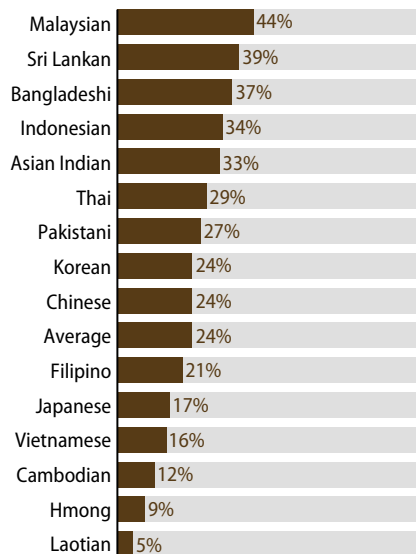


FIGURE 2.4b
Proportion of residents who are immigrants arriving within the past 10 years



Source: Authors analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "2008–2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/2012_release/ (last accessed March 2014).

The undocumented Asian immigrant population is growing, particularly for Indian immigrants

Finally, the issue of unauthorized immigration is significant for Asian Americans as an estimated 1.3 million of the unauthorized population in 2011 were from Asian countries.¹⁶ These constitute about one out of every nine of the unauthorized population in the United States, which totaled 11.5 million in 2011, and about 12 percent of the total Asian immigrant population of 10 million in 2011.¹⁷ As Table 2.4 indicates, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimates that about a quarter of a million each are from China, the Philippines, India, and the Koreans, and an additional 170,000 are from Vietnam. All of these groups have grown since 2000, with immigrants from India accounting for the fastest growth among the Asian unauthorized immigrant population.

TABLE 2.4
Country of birth for the unauthorized population

	2011	2000	2000–2011 percent change
Total	11,510,000	8,460,000	36
Mexico	6,800,000	4,680,000	45
El Salvador	660,000	430,000	55
Guatemala	520,000	290,000	82
Honduras	380,000	160,000	132
China	280,000	190,000	43
Philippines	270,000	200,000	35
India	240,000	120,000	94
Korea	230,000	180,000	31
Ecuador	210,000	110,000	83
Vietnam	170,000	160,000	10
Other countries	1,750,000	1,940,000	-10

Source: Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011" (Washington: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012), available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf.

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Newly released reports and infographics at <http://aapidata.com/policy/immigration/>.

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Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

- 1 These restrictions started to be loosened during World War II and its immediate aftermath; the Magnuson Act of 1943, sometimes known as the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act, allowed for a very limited flow of immigration from China—as many as 105 people per year—and the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 permitted as many as 100 Filipino and Indian immigrants to migrate every year. For the first time, both of these laws also allowed the relevant Asian, foreign-born populations to naturalize. See Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 2 Nathan P. Walters and Edward N. Trevelyan, “The Newly Arrived Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 2010” (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 2011), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-16.pdf>.
- 3 Office of Immigration Statistics, *Table 3: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Years 2003 to 2012* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012), available at <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2012/LPR/table3d.xls>.
- 4 Jeffrey S. Passel, D’vera Cohn, and Ana Gonzalez-Barre-ra, “Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and Perhaps Less” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2012), available at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/net-migration-from-mexico-falls-to-zero-and-perhaps-less/>.
- 5 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *2012 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 3. Personals Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident by Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Years 2003 to 2012, available at <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-legal-permanent-residents>
- 6 James Lee, “U.S. Naturalizations: 2012” (Washington: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2013), available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_nat_fr_2012.pdf.
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- 8 Garnet Pico and Feng Hou, “Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series: Divergent Trends in Citizenship Rates among Immigrants in Canada and the United States” (Ottawa, Canada: Statistics Canada, 2011), available at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2011338-eng.pdf>.
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- 10 Author’s calculations based on *ibid.*
- 11 Jeanne Batalova, “Asian Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, May 24, 2011, available at <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=841>; In 2011 and 2012, Asian countries accounted for more than half of refugee admissions, even after excluding countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, which have populations that are not traditionally seen as Asian American. See Office of Immigration Statistics, *Table 14, Refugee Arrivals by Region and Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2003 to 2012* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012), available at <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2012/RFA/table14d.xls>.
- 12 Batalova, “Asian Immigrants in the United States.”
- 13 Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2013* (U.S. Department of State, 2013), available at <http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingListItem.pdf>.
- 14 U.S. Department of State, “Immigrant Numbers for March 2014,” *Visa Bulletin* 66 (9) (2014): p. 1–8, available at http://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Bulletins/visabulletin_march2014.pdf.
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- 16 Michael Hoefler, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker, “Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012), available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf.
- 17 *Ibid.*