



State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series

A Multifaceted Portrait of a Growing Population

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Introduction and summary

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, or AAPIs, are the two fastest-growing populations in the United States, growing by an average of 46 percent and 40 percent, respectively, between 2000 and 2010, compared with the nationwide average growth of 10 percent during the same time period.¹ The rapid growth of AAPIs, propelled in large part by immigration, is one of the demographic shifts currently changing the face of the United States. The majority of the United States is projected to be people of color by 2043,² and it is imperative that we understand the diversity among these communities. Yet despite the remarkable growth of AAPIs, there is a significant gap in what is known about these communities. Part of this gap is due to the lack of centralized and accessible data across outcomes, rendering it difficult to make comprehensive sense of policy-relevant data.

In this series, the Center for American Progress and AAPI Data bring together the most salient data points on AAPIs in 10 reports on a range of topics, including public opinion, civic participation, immigration, language needs, labor-market outcomes, and consumer and business activity. In doing so, we provide comparisons between AAPIs and other racial groups in the United States, as well as comparisons within the AAPI community by detailed origin—ranging from Chinese Americans and Bangladeshi Americans to Native Hawaiians and Tongan Americans.

When understanding outcomes among AAPIs, both racial categories and categories of detailed origin are important. As detailed in the “Demographics” report, racial categories—such as Asian and Pacific Islander—are official government classifications that are based on key and salient commonalities in the history of how different groups have been incorporated into American society. These racial classifications inform the collection of government data by various federal, state, and local agencies.

At the same time, many Asian Americans—particularly first-generation immigrants—still identify primarily with their national origin,³ and the AAPI community varies considerably by national origin on outcomes such as educational attainment and income. Despite these differences, there is also significant convergence in the policy attitudes of AAPIs, with relatively high levels of support for policies such as universal health care, immigrant legalization, higher taxes, and preservation of the social safety net.⁴

In summary, AAPIs are a significant and rapidly growing part of the United States. In order to have an accurate sense of our country’s economic, social, and political future, it is critical to have a current and detailed understanding of the AAPI population and its outcomes and trajectories on key policy dimensions. In this series of reports, we cover essential findings on the following key dimensions.

Demographics

AAPIs are concentrated in a few states, though there has been rapid growth in new regions during the past decade. More than half of the Asian American population—56 percent—lives in five states: California, Washington, Texas, New Jersey, and Hawaii. Two-thirds of the Pacific Islander population—67 percent—live in five states: Hawaii, California, Washington, Texas, and Utah.⁵ This level of state residential concentration is comparable to Latinos—with 66 percent of residence concentrated in five states—but is much higher when compared with whites and blacks, where the top five states account for about 35 percent and 37 percent, respectively, of the national population of each group.⁶ The top states of origin vary across detailed origin groups, with groups such as Filipino Americans and Taiwanese Americans concentrated in California, Bangladeshi Americans concentrated in New York, and Indian Americans dispersed across various states when compared with most other Asian groups.⁷ States with high AAPI concentrations are not the states with the fastest-growing AAPI populations. In fact, New York and California have the slowest population growth of Asian Americans, while other states such as Nevada, Arizona, and North Dakota have the fastest-growing Asian American populations.⁸

Immigration

Immigration is particularly relevant to Asian Americans, considering that the Asian American population includes the highest proportion of immigrants compared with other racial and ethnic groups whether measured in terms of residents, adult citizens, or voters.⁹ Among immigrants, Asian immigrants have consistently been among the fastest to naturalize, waiting an average of five to eight years, compared with a decade or more for immigrants from North America.¹⁰ In addition, since 2008, there have been more immigrants coming from Asia than from any other region in the world, including Latin America.¹¹ A significant number of Asian immigrants are undocumented: 1.3 million were undocumented in 2011, or one in every eight of the 10 million foreign-born Asian Americans living in the United States that year.¹² Viewed another way, Asian Americans account for about one in every nine of the total unauthorized immigrant population in the United States.¹³

Language diversity and English proficiency

Asian Americans are among those most likely to be Limited English Proficient—defined as those who speak English “less than very well”—at a rate of 35 percent, identical to the Latino rate.¹⁴ The Asian American population also has the highest proportion of residents who speak a language other than English at home, at a rate of 77 percent.¹⁵ There is considerable variation in English proficiency by detailed origin, with Native Hawaiians, Indian Americans, and Filipino Americans possessing very high rates of proficiency and Vietnamese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Korean Americans possessing relatively low rates of proficiency.¹⁶ Many of these groups face barriers to voting because of inadequate language assistance; this is true even in jurisdictions that are mandated to provide it.¹⁷ These patterns in language use are also important to understand media consumption among Asian Americans, many of whom rely on ethnic media for their news on public affairs.¹⁸

Education

High levels of educational attainment among AAPIs mask significant differences across detailed origins. Many Pacific Islander groups and certain Asian American groups—including Vietnamese Americans, Cambodian Americans, Laotian Americans, and Hmong Americans—have lower educational attainment levels

than the national average, similar to African Americans and Latinos.¹⁹ Conversely, Asian American groups with a high proportion of employment-based immigrants—including Indian Americans and Chinese Americans—tend to have the highest levels of educational attainment among all Americans.²⁰

Public opinion

AAPIs' relatively high levels of support for progressive policies reveal a preference for an activist government and more public services, rather than smaller government and tax cuts.²¹ AAPIs also generally express support for policies such as environmental protection, issues related to educational access and affordability, universal health care, and a pathway to citizenship for immigrants.²² Additionally, recent survey data indicate that AAPIs view racial diversity positively and believe that increased racial diversity will bring increased opportunities for all.²³

Civic participation and democracy

AAPI voters are growing rapidly nationwide and are a significant share of the electorate in many states and metropolitan areas. In the past decade, the number of AAPI voters has nearly doubled, from more than 2 million voters across the country in 2000 to 3.9 million voters in 2012.²⁴ Still, nationwide, AAPIs only account for about 3 percent of all voters.²⁵ At the same time, AAPIs tend to be concentrated in certain areas and therefore make up a significant share of the electorate in those places. For example, during the 2012 presidential election, AAPIs made up 50 percent of voters in Hawaii, 10 percent of voters in California, and 5 percent or more of voters in Nevada, Washington, and New Jersey.²⁶ Despite their growing presence, Asian Americans' voting participation is relatively low, likely due to the Asian American population possessing a large proportion of foreign-born residents, as well as low citizenship rates.²⁷ Pacific Islanders also have lower rates of voter registration, though registration and turnout rates vary greatly by detailed origin.²⁸ In terms of political affiliations, AAPIs do not overwhelmingly identify with a political party, but those who do tend to favor the Democratic Party—and in the 2012 presidential election, President Barack Obama won every major subgroup of AAPI voters.²⁹

Labor-market outcomes

Asian Americans are the most rapidly growing segment of the U.S. labor force, with considerable occupational diversity across groups.³⁰ Labor-force participation among AAPIs is higher than the national average, particularly for Asian American men and Pacific Islander women.³¹ Between 2010 and 2013, the Asian American labor force grew by 18 percent, faster than that of any other racial group.³² Asian Americans also had the lowest rates of unemployment in recent years, but unemployed Asian Americans are among those with the longest duration of unemployment.³³ Finally, there is considerable occupational diversity across detailed origin: Indian Americans, Sri Lankan Americans, and Chinese Americans rank among the highest in terms of concentration in management and professional occupations, while Vietnamese Americans and Thai Americans are disproportionately more likely to work in service occupations.³⁴ Similar variations exist across Pacific Islander groups as well, pointing to the need for timely, disaggregated data on labor-market outcomes.³⁵

Income and poverty

AAPIs have the highest average household incomes, but there is considerable internal group variation. For median household income, Asian Americans rank highest among all racial groups, and the level for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, or NHPs, is on par with the national average.³⁶ However, these averages mask significant variations across detailed origin groups, with Indian Americans, Filipino Americans, and Japanese Americans among the highest earners, and Samoan Americans, Cambodian Americans, Hmong Americans, and Bangladeshi Americans among the lowest.³⁷ Importantly, per-capita income among Asian Americans is much closer to whites, since the latter have smaller household sizes.³⁸ However, Asian Americans are much more likely than whites to be concentrated in states and metropolitan areas with the highest costs of living, meaning that their per-capita income is likely much lower when accounting for cost of living.³⁹ Finally, Asian American poverty rates are generally low but have been growing rapidly among native-born Asian Americans and are relatively high for seniors and members of particular ethnic groups such as Hmong Americans, Bangladeshi Americans, Samoan Americans, and Tongan Americans.⁴⁰

Consumer power and business ownership

The Asian American consumer market is the fastest-growing market among all racial and ethnic groups and is heavily concentrated in urban areas.⁴¹ AAPIs are among those with the fastest-growing buying power in the United States, given their rapid population growth and their high level of representation among high-skilled immigrants.⁴² At \$713 billion today, the AAPI market outshines the economies of all but 22 countries in the world—and the buying power of AAPIs is projected to grow to nearly \$1 trillion by 2018.⁴³ The Asian American consumer market is distinctive in some key respects: It is more concentrated,⁴⁴ online,⁴⁵ and focused in certain areas of spending—such as housing, education, and transportation—than all other groups.⁴⁶

Health care

Health insurance coverage for AAPIs has significantly improved, but barriers to care and health disparities remain. Before the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, lack of health insurance was a significant problem for many AAPIs, with uninsurance rates of 15 percent for Asian Americans⁴⁷ and 18 percent for Pacific Islanders.⁴⁸ Although there are no data on AAPI rates of uninsurance after the ACA, Asian Americans were disproportionately more likely than other groups to enroll in health insurance plans in the ACA's initial enrollment period.⁴⁹ Beyond the area of health insurance, however, other significant barriers to health care access remain, particularly those that relate to language barriers and insufficient provision of culturally competent health care.⁵⁰ In addition, there are serious disparities in health outcomes for particular groups on medical conditions such as Hepatitis B,⁵¹ liver cancer,⁵² diabetes,⁵³ and heart disease.⁵⁴

Recommendations

The analysis and findings in the “State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders” report series serve as an introduction to the vast array of policy data and research that exist on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Each report provides references to additional resources in the relevant issue area, including those that will continue to be updated on the AAPI Data website.⁵⁵

But there are limitations with the data that currently exist on AAPIs. For many of the outcomes, disaggregated data by national origin do not exist or are made possible only by combining several years of data, rendering them less current and less comparable to data available for the rest of the U.S. population. For others, there is no good systematic data available even at the aggregated level of racial group. This is true, for instance, with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, issues; hate crimes; and other civil rights violations. While there are good, qualitative studies on these issues—particularly as they affect Muslims, Sikhs, and other South Asian groups—greater efforts are needed to make these data collections more comprehensive.

There have been notable improvements in the collection of disaggregated data on AAPIs, particularly with respect to Census data and health data. But persistent problems remain in the collection, standardization, and dissemination of disaggregated data on education, particularly at the institutional level for K-12 and higher education across states. In order to address this, there need to be improvements in the collection of government data along key dimensions such as detailed origin and race. Surveys also need to provide adequate language support and oversample respondents from subpopulations that are smaller or that are more likely to be undercounted.

The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is engaged in a multistakeholder effort with the U.S. Department of Education, state education agencies, and various community organizations to improve the collection and dissemination of disaggregated data on educational attainment among AAPIs. The success of this effort—dubbed iCount—will depend on the ability of these various stakeholders to overcome the technical challenges of upgrading legacy systems, as well as political challenges to making data collection and dissemination a higher priority across various states and their systems of K-12 and public higher education. More generally, the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is working with various federal agencies to meet benchmarks related to Executive Order 13515, which requires “improved data collection, analysis, and dissemination of AAPI-specific information” as part of a multipronged agency effort to increase access and participation of AAPIs in federal programs and services.⁵⁶

Instituting these reforms will allow the federal government to collect more comprehensive data on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders and will also allow for cross-racial comparisons using the same datasets. As the United States becomes a nation where the majority of people are people of color, the future of sound policymaking that pays attention to group inequalities depends on comparable, timely, and readily accessible data.

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