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Race & Ethnicity in American Politics

Socioeconomic Status/Class and Asian Americans

Key words: Asian American, academics, income, immigration, education

Description: This brief discusses the recent influx of immigrants from Asia and broad spectrum of individuals that are included in the ethnoracial grouping “Asian American”. It also looks at income data and polls reporting on satisfaction with economic status. There are many factors that come factor into the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans including but not limited to: level of education, job type, and ethnic background.

Key points:

Growing Asian population in the United States
Invalid to draw conclusions about SES across entire Asian population
Incomes and percents of home ownership on average similar to those of white Americans
The importance of academic achievement and educational attainment

Relevant websites:

<https://www.census.gov/about/partners/cic/resources/data-links/asian.html>
<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/asianamericans-graphics/>

Issue brief:

The topic of Asian Americans and socioeconomic status provides an interesting case for analysis. Asian American as a racial category constitutes a diverse range of linguistic, cultural, and national differences, and today, this group is the fastest growing demographic in the United States. By 2013, immigrants from Asia accounted for 47.2% total immigrants, while immigrants from Latin America comprised only 29.5% of the total. Asian Americans within the context of the United States are often pigeonholed a wide variety of roles ranging from economic rivals to members of the “necessarily racialized labor force (intellectually, manually, and otherwise).” (Lam) This dichotomy represents the rather wide scope of roles that Asian Americans fill in society, but both ends of the spectrum lend themselves to the “model minority” myth.

The modern conception of the model minority arose in the 1950s with sociologists attempting to explain “low levels of delinquency among Chinese and Japanese Americans.” (Lam) The generalization of Asian Americans as the “good” minority, compared to Black or Hispanic Americans is often generally cited as an explanation for the perceived relative ease in social mobility enjoyed by Asian Americans. Though in reality the relationship between these two factors is not causal, there is no question that the concept of the model minority reinforces socioeconomic stereotypes about Asian Americans. Low levels of delinquency and socioeconomic mobility are loosely related, yet the American public tends to conflate the two and use this as an explanation for the relative success that some Asian American groups have achieved.

According to the United States census, Asian Americans do boast a relatively high median income of \$72,472 compared to \$51,861 for non-Hispanic whites. Within the Asian Population, Asian Indians had a median income of \$100,547, while for Bangladeshi it was \$51,331 in 2013 (Census). Federal reports suggest that 12% of Asian American families live below the poverty line, which is similar to rates among non-Hispanic whites (Kiang). The variability of median income among various sub-groups that are categorized as Asian American shows that like many other ethn racial minorities, the group is socioeconomically heterogeneous. Therefore, like every other ethn racial minority group, broad generalizations regarding socioeconomic status cannot be drawn across the entire Asian American community.

The acknowledgement that a pan-ethnic Asian identity is difficult to formulate for such a large accounts for some of the diversity that exists in country of origin. In one Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Indian (Asian A) immigrants average significantly higher socioeconomic status than Koreans, Vietnamese, (Asian B) and other groups (Flippen). Asian Americans of Chinese,

Filipino, Japanese, and Indian decent also make up the majority of the Asian population in the United States. Figure 1 provides descriptive characteristics that compare the socioeconomic

Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables by Metro Typology, National Origin Group, and Sex

	Asian A			Asian B			White		
	Traditional	New	Other	Traditional	New	Other	Traditional	New	Other
Men									
Income (mean)	\$76,270	\$79,468	\$76,550	\$60,597	\$52,765	\$49,121	\$84,772	\$70,913	\$62,801
SEI (mean)	54.0	59.0	58.5	48.4	44.4	42.5	50.4	49.6	46.7
N	39,599	9,928	3,589	16,597	6,058	1,970	307,632	293,871	205,242
Women									
Income (mean)	\$56,531	\$53,132	\$50,644	\$45,195	\$36,363	\$34,591	\$53,813	\$44,863	\$39,824
SEI (mean)	53.2	54.3	53.6	47.3	40.7	39.5	54.2	53.1	51.4
N	38,249	8,920	3,330	15,371	5,796	1,928	261,464	259,438	182,629
Household heads									
Own home (%)	67.2	69.8	67.9	58.7	68.7	66.7	69.0	75.9	76.5
N	46,437	11,797	4,240	20,141	7,419	2,394	402,303	403,104	285,118

NOTE: Asian A refers to Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Filipino origins; Asian B refers to Korean, Vietnamese, and other Asian origin groups.

Figure 1

outcomes of Asians originating from various countries with whites. Ultimately, though the group Asian B has lower mean incomes and percentages of homeownership than Asian A, they are not as markedly disadvantaged as other minority populations may be.

Considering the large populations of Asian Americans that are recent immigrants, many Asian youth are exposed to traditionally American cultural values as well as the cultural norms from their parents or grandparents’ cultural norms. One researcher came to the conclusion that children of immigrants from Asian countries “are often socialized to believe that education is a major key to economic mobility” (Kiang), which in turn leads to a strong emphasis on academic achievement. This observation may stem from the fact that 61% of recent Asian immigrants ages 25-64 hold a college degree (Pew). Furthermore, Asian immigrants make up 3/4ths of new H-1B, or highly skilled worker visas (Pew), which also points to high levels of education. For those subsets of the Asian American population that have previously had access to higher education, it is no surprise that they would want to continue legacies academic success in the United States.

Of course, for those Asian immigrants that are highly educated, it may be easier to integrate into the American socioeconomic hierarchy.

Level of education is only one component of socioeconomic wellbeing. In a poll conducted by the Pew Research center pictured in Figure 2, Asian American respondents to a self-ranking of their personal financial situation responded “Excellent” and “Good” at rates significantly higher than the general public. Here, of course, it is important to consider how different individuals may perceive their financial situation, in order to account for the differences between ethnoracial groups. Given the increasing percentage of the Asian American population are recent immigrants, there is also room for comparison to standards of living compared to their country of origin, also pictured in Figure 2. As expected, Asian Americans from different countries have different experiences when it comes to SES and standards of living in the United States.

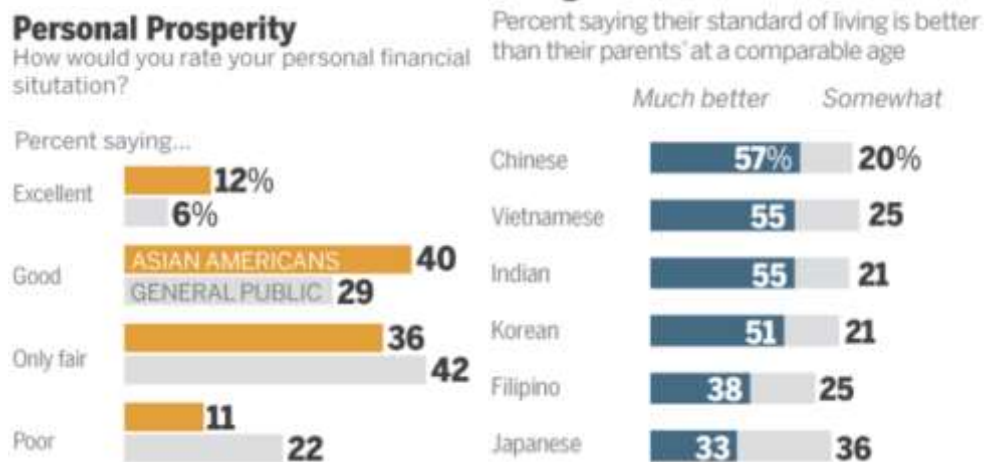


Figure 2

In conclusion, it is impossible to make an overarching statement regarding Asian Americans and socioeconomic status. This is due to the heterogeneity of the group that is defined as Asian American, and because of the constant influx of new Asian immigrants. There are significant differences in patterns of socioeconomic and class status between recent Asian immigrants and second-generation Asian immigrants and beyond. In order to get a more holistic

view of the cross-cutting cleavage of Asian Americans as an ethnoracial group and socioeconomic status, one might be best served by doing more research into specific patterns among less generalized groups, such as among people with a particular national background or with certain levels of education.

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