

Issue Brief: Disabled Asian Americans

Key Words

Asian Americans, social and cultural barriers, participation, model minority, Americans with Disabilities Act

Description

This issue brief works to shed light on the different social, cultural and political factors that work to affect the experience of disabled Asian Americans. It also discusses the extent to which disabled Asian Americans are discriminated or limited against when it comes to accessing the potential resources that may generally exist for them.

Issue Brief

Throughout the United States as a whole, ethnic minority groups all experience unique struggles in relevance to their social, educational and capital success. Although the story of Asian Americans as a whole is very distinct and complex, a quite understudied and under-acknowledged in the realm of academia is the subset of Asian Americans who are disabled. In addition to the obstacles that they may already face, disabled Asian Americans are faced by separate factors that heavily affect their labor, rehabilitation, educational, and cultural participation rates in ways that are separate from the adversities that other ethnic groups may potentially encounter. Mainstream views and model minority paradigms also work to propose distinct challenges to the achievement of disabled Asian Americans.

The first predominant force that limits the participation of disabled Asian Americans in the labor market and public services is cultural and social barriers concerning disability within the family. Within many Asian cultures, different moralistic and religious views are associated with guilt, shame, misconduct and bad karma. Disability is seen as abnormal and unhealthy and therefore, there are certain cultural

stigmas revolving around family members who have a disability. Because of these negative stigmas, households with disabled family members are reluctant to seek help and often isolate the family member at home—with no help for skill building, education, networking or program opportunities that would work for the bettering of the person’s life.



There is definitely a lack of participation of this community in terms of connecting and using the resources that do exist. Dr. Lusa Lo, well renown for her research pertaining to disabled Asian Americans, says that there is “dearth in special ed research of minority students and their families, particularly among Chinese- and Asian-Americans”. For example, in Massachusetts, the Asians represent 5% of public school enrollment, but less than 3% of special education enrollment—presenting the possibility that students are possibly not getting the services they need (Lydia Lum). Bridging it away from the scope of education, a survey found that 83% of disabled Asian Americans

in the county of Temple City in Los Angeles remain sheltered with their families and are not using public services (Iris Yokoi).

Looking at a specific category within disabled Asian Americans, Chinese-Americans have been historically slower to seek services compared to White counterparts. Due to linguistic differences, they are often times mistaken to lag behind because of language difficulties rather than mental disabilities. Within Chinese culture, teachers are highly respected—causing families to fear a loss of face when they reach out and ask for help when a member of the family does have a disability. Grace Tsao in “Growing up Asian American with a Disability” does an eloquent job in explicating the cultural struggle of being an Asian American woman who has muscular dystrophy. Through her own personal endeavors and journey, she emphasizes how traditional Asian cultures regard disabled people as incapable of being educated and be functioning members of society. Overcoming these barriers in order to get disabled Asian Americans to partake in the resources around is extremely difficult but definitely rewarding.

Another major force that Asian Americans with disabilities face is mainstream views that exist of Asian Americans. Existing stereotypes and perceptions of the ethnic group produce even further challenges. In regards to agencies that work to increase labor participation for disabled people, Asian Americans tend to get lost in the shuffle of different service agencies. They are reluctant to hire people with limited English-speaking skills on top disabilities. 50% of disabled cases for Asian Americans within these agencies are terminated, due to “status of failure to cooperate”, “unable to locate” or “handicapped too severe” (*Asian Americans*). Also, Asian Americans are affected by a

paradigm that other ethnic groups are not—the model minority stereotype. Model minority refers to “some minority ethnic, racial or religious group whose members are most often perceived to achieve a higher degree of success than the population average” (*Model Minority*). In the United States, this term tends to refer to Asian Americans as ethnic minorities who are successful regardless of the barriers they face. In relation to disabled Asian Americans, there exists the stigma that disabled Asian American individuals also do not need assistance—causing an overall lack of research, policy focus and debate and funding allocation for those with disabilities.



Tying disabled Asian Americans back to the larger conversation, there are many legal provisions in place in order to help prevent all disabled Americans from being discriminated against: regardless of their ethnic background. The Americans with

Disabilities Act of 1990 is a major civil rights law that works to protect against discrimination based on equality. More specifically, Title I of this act “prohibits private employers, state and local governments, employment agencies and labor unions from discriminating against qualified individuals with disabilities in job application procedures, hiring, firing, advancement, compensation, job training, and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment” (*The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*). Not only outlining the specific conditions under which a person is considered to be disabled and the extent to which employers must accommodate them, it works to ensure basic civil rights for a very large range of people. However, what a further point of exploration could be is how effective this piece of legislation actually is—specifically when analyzing disabled Asian Americans as a sub-group. How do cultural barriers, economic obstacles, reluctance to find resource and mainstream perceptions work to hinder Asian Americans from utilizing this piece of legislation to begin with? Although the legal provisions definitely exist for Asian Americans as a whole, it is evident that there are many other factors at work that hinder their ability to acquire fundamental civil rights as disabled Americans.

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Image 1:

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Image 2:

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