

Asian American Communities and Issues of Criminal Justice

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Understanding of issues related to criminal justice within the Asian American community can only be achieved by breaking down the analysis into the individual ethnic communities composing the larger group.

- The Asian American community is composed of distinct ethnic communities
- These individual ethnic communities have distinct and divergent migrant experiences
- The distinct migrant experiences prove to be formidable influences over the development of communities and lead to unique growth among them
- The general term *Asian Americans*, the group's reputation as a model minority, along with the socio-economic and crime statistics associated with it can inadvertently mislead decision makers and obscure the serious problems with crime and violence being faced by specific communities that don't conform to the expected standard

There is an undeniable and well documented relationship between poverty, income inequality, and issues of crime within communities. Asian American communities show much of the same patterns of behavior as other immigrant groups in the nation in this regard but are often in a disadvantaged position when it comes to allocation of resources to manage issues of crime within the community. Much of this is due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the true composition of the category of Asian Americans and the significant socio-economic and cultural differences between the subcategories that are joined to make up the larger group.

A term commonly associated with Asian Americans is 'model minority'. This is understood to mean that Asian Americans on average achieve a higher degree of success than the general population. The US Census Bureau's *American Community Survey Report* supports the notion of a model minority by asserting that Asian Americans have a "larger proportion of college graduates and higher median incomes" when compared to the majority population of non-Hispanic whites. According to this study Asian Americans are also employed in management and professional positions in a larger proportion than the rest of the country. Yet, only a few pages further into the report, we see that several ethnic groups that

fall under the umbrella classification of Asian American have poverty rates that are as much as double that of the general population. This illustrates the fundamental problem in analyzing the far-reaching category of Asian Americans.

In a similar fashion to the example above, understanding the relationship between issues of criminal justice and Asian Americans requires a breakdown of the particular circumstances of the ethnic groups making up this larger group. While as a category Asian Americans are less prone to being victims of violent crime, several ethnic groups composing the category have seen a rise in crime and gang activity. In order to better handle this situation there has been a recent push in the field of Criminal Justice for disaggregation of statistics reflecting these trends as well as better training for members of the law enforcement community in differentiating between the different groups making up this community. A leading law enforcement training manual to deal with Asian American crime goes as far as asserting that one of the principal tasks of officers regularly working in these communities is being able to quickly distinguish between ethnic groups in order to make more accurate assessments of situations.

On the other hand, one characteristic that all Asian American groups have working in their favor is that while some of the sub-groups do experience more problems with crime and violence than others, the overall trends point towards the fact that most immigrant minorities seem to do better for themselves than non-immigrants in comparable socio-economic environments. The book Immigration and Crime: Race, Ethnicity, and Violence gives evidence of how, contrary to what might seem intuitive, immigrant groups around the nation seem to be in better environments in terms of crime and violence when compared to the general population. Nevertheless, the research presented emphasizes the importance of considering “within group differences over time and across social space” which suggest that differences must be understood in their local social contexts.

Related research on the topic of assimilation of Asian communities into American culture points to this as being another possible cause of friction that can lead to violence and crime. The unique migrant experiences of different ethnic groups can have much influence on the life paths taken by members

of the community. As is to be expected based on the evidence shown above, some ethnic groups are characterized by educated, middle class families while other groups are predominantly composed of uneducated and working class individuals. When communities of transient or temporary workers are added into the mix it is abundantly clear that trying to create one overarching definition of a typical Asian American is impossible.

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Asian Boyz (Asian Gang) Hand Sign

The V-Boys (Asian Gang) Tattoo

Source for Images: U.S. Department of Justice-*Gang Prosecution Manual*