Issue Brief: Asian Americans and Immigration

Key Words
- Pull Factor
- Foreign Minor Tax
- Ethnic Enclaves (Chinatowns and Koreantowns)
- Model Minority
- It’s Our Issue, Too

Description
This issue brief will succinctly discuss the history of the first Asian Americans and their isolation into “Chinatowns and Koreantowns.” It will then consider how the “model minority” is a misrepresentation of Asian Americans. Lastly, it will demonstrate that “illegal immigration” is an issue concerning Asians and not just Latinos.

Key Points
- Chinatowns and Koreantowns were formed to escape exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination
- Discrimination through legal means such as the Foreign Minor Tax
- The “model minority” misrepresents Asian Americans
- People of Asian descent comprise 5% of the nations foreign-born population and 11% of all illegal immigrants.
- One out of five Koreans in this country are illegal
- The nations immigration debate is decidedly Latino- not Asian
Many Asian Americans are working to gain more attention in the immigration battle

**Issue Brief**

In 1840, fewer slaves were coming from Africa. To make up for this shortage, the British and Spanish brought slaves from China, India, and the Philippines. A large scale of Asian immigrants will not arrive in the United States until 1848. That year gold was discovered in America. The Gold Rush was one of the pull factors that led many Chinese to come to the United States. The Chinese would soon experience discrimination in the form of the Foreign Miner Tax. This tax required a payment of three dollars each month at a time when Chinese miners were making approximately six dollars a month. Tax collectors could legally take and sell the property of those miners who refused or could not pay the tax. After the Gold Rush, the Chinese Exclusion Act was soon passed. An act that excluded Chinese “skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining” from entering the country for ten years under penalty of imprisonment and deportation. Other laws that were passed to discriminate against Asians were laws that forbid intermarriage with whites, and work in many occupations. Discrimination like this resulted in Asians resigning into their own isolated communities—“Chinatowns and Koreatowns.”
Here is a Chinatown in New York City that has become a center for commerce and tourism.

Despite experiencing institutional prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination, Asian Americans have managed to do very well socially and economically. According to statistics, they have high college degree attainment rates, and advanced degrees. They have done so well that they are now referred to as the “model minority.” A name that suggests they no longer experience discrimination, no longer need public services such as bilingual education, welfare, and affirmative action. However, Southeast Asians have the highest high school dropout rate in the country and Vietnamese Americans only have a college degree attainment rate of 20%. Additionally, in California almost 40% of all Vietnamese refugees are on public assistance. These statistics confirms that the name “model minority” is not an accurate representation of Asian Americans. It confirms that not all Asians can conform to the unrealistic expectation of being a “model minority.”

Perhaps, most Americans believe Asian Americans represent the “model minority” and therefore conclude that Asians face no challenges. To the contrary, a pertinent issue that Asian Americans face is in the immigration battle. Asian Americans
are often not included in this topic because the focus has been on Hispanic/Latino immigration. More specifically, the issue decidedly focuses on Mexican’s crossing across the Mexican Border. The reality is that immigration laws have an effect on Asian immigrants and their families.

An example of how the media portrays Asian Americans as the “model minority.”

People of Asian descent comprise 5% of the nations foreign-born population and 11% of all illegal immigrants. It is estimated there is 11 million-plus undocumented immigrants in the United States; about 1.2 million are of Asian descent. Additionally, one of five Koreans in the United States are here illegally. Because Asian Americans are
perceived as the “model minority” statistics like these are ignored. Tired of being left out of the immigration battle, some Asian Americans have turned to campaigns to draw attention to the immigration policies that impact them. The best example is the campaign called “It’s Our Issue, Too” which was created by an Asian Pacific Islander group in Seattle. The Asian Pacific Islander community is one of the largest and fastest growing racial minority communities in Washington State, and the largest and fastest growing in Seattle. The group works to bring attention to the immigrants and refugees who comprise approximately two-thirds of the Asian Pacific Islander community. Over two million Asian Pacific Islander family members wait for years in the visa backlogs to reunify with their families in the United States. “One million Asian Pacific Islander undocumented immigrants live in the shadows, while several thousand await deportation.” The It’s Our Issue, Too campaign stands against the current tides of anti-immigrant sentiment and asks for federal leadership on the issue.

Another medium Asian groups have used to bring attention to their role in the immigration battle is the Internet. Most recently, an immigration blog displays the
complaints voiced by South-Asian’s who worry “about the proposal to put 21 million illegal immigrants who are overwhelming Hispanic on a path to citizenship.” Bloggers stated, “Indians generally arrive on temporary work permits after being hired by U.S. employers, and then get in a line for employment-based immigration visas that are available to workers with higher degrees and advanced skills.” As we can see Indians who comprise a considerable amount of the Asian Population also want to provide assistance to their families. When asking what is the best way the United States should reform immigration it is vital that all immigrants are considered. Immigrants like Indians want to obtain visas for themselves and family members just as much as many Mexicans.

Asian Americans have suffered from discrimination through legal means such as the Foreign Minor Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, many Asian Americans have done well socially and economically. They have done so well that they have acquired the name “Model Minority” a label that has made it difficult for Asian Americans to have a voice in the immigration battle. The campaign called “It’s Our Issue, Too” and the immigration bloggers are just two examples of how Asian Americans voice their concern about the immigration policies that significantly affect them and their family. As we can see the immigration battle affects Asian Americans just as much as it does Latinos.
Asians Have the Highest Incomes of Any Race/Ethnic Group

Distribution of Household Income by Race and Ethnicity

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
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