

Issue Brief: Asian American Immigration Status

Keywords: Panethnicity, Naturalization, Immigration and Nationality Act, Model Minority, Asian American

Description: Asian Americans are the second largest immigrant group in the United States and are tied for the fastest growing ethnoracial minority. This brief will begin to look at immigration issues for the ethnoracial group as a whole, as well as where these greater issues fail to be accurate generalizations.

Key Points:

- Asian Americans are collectively the second largest immigrant group in the country and one of the United States' fastest growing minority groups.
- The term Asian American is "panethnic" and applies to many disparate ethnicities that may not necessarily identify with one another.
- Asian Americans are often called the "model minority" due to the high level of achievement within both the ethnicity and immigrant group as a whole. This stereotype does not apply to all ethnicities within the broader Asian American group.
- Differences in socioeconomic levels and education within the larger Asian American group result in significantly different immigration experiences amongst different Asian ethnicities, especially in the process of naturalization.

Issue Brief

As of the 2000 US Census, the population of the United States was shown to be 281.4 million, and of this, 11.9 million, or 4.2 percent, reported their race as Asian. Nearly two thirds of Asian Americans are foreign-born, and about 1.2 million are undocumented. Asian Americans are the second largest immigrant group in the country, at 25.9% out of 28,910,800 individuals, and are, with Latinos, the nation's fastest growing ethnoracial minority.

Asian Americans are often racialized as a panethnicity, represented as such in the ethnoracial pentagon, thus ignoring their ethnic diversity. In considering Asian American immigrants, it is therefore essential to distinguish between these different ethnicities. Yet, because of its brevity, this brief will focus primarily on the panethnicity, acknowledging that these generalities present limitations to analysis of the topic.

The collective history of Asian immigration to the United States is by and large one of discrimination and difficulty. In particular, East Asian ethnicities take deeper root in the legal history of migration to the U.S., subjected throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to legal and social prejudice, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which suspended Chinese immigration in reaction to the large influx of Chinese workers, or the Japanese internment camps of the mid twentieth century.

Despite discrimination, on the whole, Asian immigration began an upward trend in the 1960's and 70's, due in large part to congressional actions in 1965 that got rid of national

quotas limiting immigrants from certain areas. The Asian American population continues to increase today.

According to the most current data put forth by the United States Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, of the 1,046,539 persons naturalized in 2008, 323,792—or 30.9 percent—were born in Asia. Within the total number of immigrants nationalized, leading countries of origin from the category of those who identified with Asian race were India (6.3%), the Philippines (5.6%), and the People’s Republic of China (3.8%).

Naturalization refers to the process by which a foreign individual gains U.S. citizenship after fulfilling the requirements set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952. Also known as the McCarran-Walter Act, the INA requires an applicant for citizenship to, among other provisions, be at least 18 years of age, have resided in the country for at least 5 years, and speak English. A “good moral character” is also written into the law.

This clause is, of course, antiquated but in a way also sheds light on the types of people able to come to the US and naturalize. Asian Americans are often referred to as the “model minority,” because of the general high achievement levels. On the whole, Asian Americans have higher levels of advanced degrees and high skill occupations. Additionally, they have the highest median family income. But, here it is possible to see the implications of the panethnicity.¹

While the “model minority” stereotype may apply to certain groups—in particular Indians, who in many cases come to the U.S. fluent in English and educated—other Asian immigrants do not perform at nearly the same levels. According the 2000 census, Cambodians, Hmong and Laotians, and Vietnamese, have some of the highest rates of receiving public assistance, at 9.9 and 4.8 percents respectively, while Asian Indians and Japanese have the lowest (both less than one percent). Filipinos share similar success to these latter groups. Incidentally, many of the poorest Asian American immigrant groups are not proficient in English.

These disparities within the Asian American group become especially problematic in the political realm. Deemed successful as a complete group, the national immigration debate often leaves out Asians focusing instead on South America primarily. Furthermore, a failed attempt to naturalize can actually result in deportation. Because fluency in English is one of the criteria for naturalization, certain ethnicities within the panethnic Asian American immigrant identity are more strongly affected than others. But Asians are noticeably absent from the immigration debate, according to public radio reports. Many fear deportation if they advertise their illegal status.

¹ See figure 1

California has the largest Asian population in the United States, making it the most relevant state in which to begin to study the issues in Asian American immigration outlined in this brief.²

Figure 1

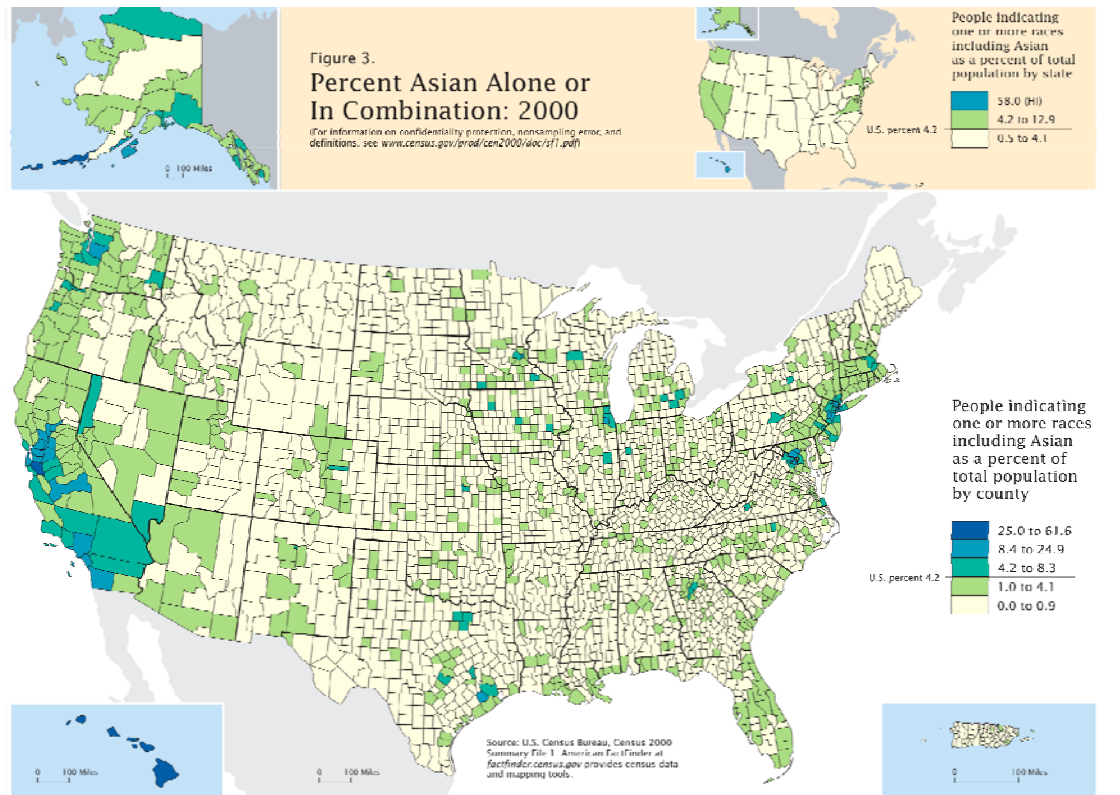
Socioeconomic Characteristics by Racial/Ethnic and Asian Ethnic Groups
Click on a column heading to sort up or down

	Not Proficient in English	Less Than High School	College Degree	Advanced Degree	High Skill Occupation	Married, Spouse Present	Homeowner	Median Personal Income	Median Family Income	Living in Poverty	Public Assistance
Whites	8.7	15.3	25.3	3.0	21.4	64.5	78.2	\$23,640	\$48,500	9.4	1.1
Blacks	10.8	29.1	13.6	1.2	12.3	38.0	54.4	\$16,300	\$33,300	24.9	4.5
Latinos/Hispanics	50.3	48.5	9.9	1.6	9.6	58.3	52.4	\$14,400	\$36,000	21.4	3.3
Native American Indians	2.6	27.4	18.6	0.9	11.9	50.2	64.2	\$14,500	\$32,240	25.1	6.1
Indians	8.4	12.6	64.4	12.5	51.6	74.3	58.8	\$26,000	\$89,470	8.2	0.9
Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian	44.3	52.7	9.2	0.4	9.8	86.6	53.1	\$16,000	\$43,850	22.5	9.9
Chinese	31.3	23.6	46.3	8.5	41.9	67.1	65.7	\$20,000	\$58,300	13.1	1.8
Filipinos	7.0	13.1	42.6	4.3	29.7	62.7	67.6	\$23,000	\$65,400	6.9	1.0
Japanese	10.0	9.5	40.6	4.6	32.0	60.7	70.6	\$26,000	\$61,630	8.6	0.9
Koreans	32.9	13.8	43.6	5.6	27.0	69.0	51.9	\$16,300	\$48,500	15.5	1.6
Pacific Islanders	7.1	21.7	15.6	1.8	13.8	61.4	48.1	\$19,100	\$50,000	16.7	4.4
Vietnamese	40.4	37.8	13.6	2.5	22.6	61.2	60.0	\$16,000	\$51,500	13.8	4.8

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www.asiannation.org

² see figure 2

Figure 2

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/briefs/>

General References

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Relevant Websites

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