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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

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### **Asian Americans with Disabilities**

**Keywords:** Asian American, disability, social stigma, model minority, language access

**Description:** Asian Americans with disabilities face social stigma from Asian cultures and invisibility from the model minority myth. Along with the structural barriers related to immigrant status, these obstacles negatively impact Asian Americans' access to disability-related services.

**Key points:**

- The disability rate among Asian Americans is comparable to that of Americans overall.
- The social, religious, and philosophical views in many Asian cultures tend to facilitate the neglect of or stigmatize individuals with disabilities.
- The model minority myth generates an image of instantly successful Asian Americans and makes it difficult for Asian Americans with disabilities to receive support.
- Asian Americans tend to be underserved by disability-related service providers.
- The aforementioned social barriers and the structural barriers of language access and knowledge are barriers to accessing disability-related services.

**Images:**



Photograph from Friends of Children with Special Needs (FCSN), a nonprofit organization in Fremont, California that serves Asian American children and adults with disabilities.



Photograph of the Asians and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities of California (APIDC) board members and volunteers at the Statewide Disabilities Conference.

**Brief:**

The United States Census Bureau reports that the disability rate among Asian Americans is 14.5% (8). This disability rate is comparable to the 18.1% disability rate among Americans overall (United States Census Bureau 6). Asian Americans with disabilities face a unique set of cultural and structural obstacles both to gaining social acceptance and to accessing disability-related services. This brief will discuss Asian cultural stigma toward individuals with disabilities, the effects of the model minority myth, and the variety of social and structural factors that make it uniquely difficult for Asian Americans to access disability-related services.

Many Asian cultures have social, philosophical, and religious views that tend to facilitate the neglect of or stigmatize individuals with disabilities. These views are relevant in the United States because 74% of Asian Americans are foreign-born and because Asian Americans make up the largest share of recent immigrants (Pew Research Center). A 2001 survey found that Asian American subjects were more likely than African American, Latino American, and European American subjects to stigmatize physical and mental disabilities (Saetermoe et al. 709). Community organizations and scholars alike find that Asian cultures tend to perceive disability as shameful or indicative of individual inadequacy (Treichel; Kim). These views likely stem from Asian religious and philosophical beliefs. The philosophical and religious tradition of Confucianism influences Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures (Hampton 43). Confucianism values individuals based on their ability to contribute to the collective good (Saetermoe et al. 710), discourages individuals from advocating for themselves (Hampton 43), and emphasizes individual perfection (Hampton 43)—all views that would facilitate the neglect of and stigmatize people with disabilities. In Buddhism (a religion that is popular among Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Thai, and Vietnamese Americans), the view of karma may lead

people to believe that having a disability is one's punishment for doing wrong in previous lifetimes (Hampton 43).

In addition to facing obstacles from Asian cultures, Asian Americans with disabilities struggle to gain recognition because of the "model minority" myth. The model minority myth implies that because Asian Americans have a higher socioeconomic status on average, they have overcome all barriers to improvement (Hampton 42). Asian Americans are perceived to never require special attention or aid (Hampton 42). This view is particularly manifest in the situations of Asian American children with learning disabilities. Scholars find that Asian American students are placed in special education programs at a disproportionately low level (Treichel).

Asian cultural stigma, the model minority myth, and structural barriers all make it uniquely difficult for Asian Americans to receive disability-related services. Asian Americans are often underserved by disability-related services. The number of Asian Americans with disabilities who are served by the state-federal vocational rehabilitation system is disproportionately low (Hampton 41). A study conducted by two nonprofit organizations in Los Angeles similarly found that 83% of Asian American adults with disabilities have not utilized disability-related services (Yokoi).

Scholars have identified common barriers that Asian Americans face to accessing disability-related services. In the previously mentioned Los Angeles study, the researchers found that the most common barriers to accessing services were a lack of English proficiency, a lack of awareness of the available services, and a distrust of outside help. Only 53% of Asian American immigrant adults say that they speak English very well (Pew Research Center), but disability-related laws and services, social groups, and centers all tend to use English (Hampton 42). Asian Americans with disabilities also often lack knowledge about civil rights and disability-related

services. For instance, a study of Chinese Americans with disabilities found that only 77% have heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act and that none of the subjects sought services offered by state rehabilitation commissions (Hampton 42).

Asian Americans with disabilities are confronted with both Asian cultural stigma and the model minority myth. These factors, along with structural barriers, make it uniquely difficult for Asian Americans with disabilities to gain social support and to access disability-related services. Future policy regarding Asian Americans with disabilities would best take into account Asian cultural views, American racial prejudices, and the practical cultural and language barriers to accessing disability-related services.

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Yokoi, Iris. "Disabled Asians Aren't Using Public Services". *Los Angeles Times* 1994. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

**Relevant websites:**

- Asians and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities of California (APIDC)  
<http://apidisabilities.net/>
- The Asian American tag of the Disability Visibility Project (DVP)  
<https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/tag/asian-americans/>
- National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC). "Dual Status: Racial and Ethnic Minorities, and Disability" Research Reviews  
<http://www.naric.com/?q=en/node/87>