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Asian Americans: Diverse and Growing

by Sharon M. Lee

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Asian Americans: Diverse and Growing

by Sharon M. Lee

The author appreciates the contributions of Juanita Tamayo Lott, Morrison Wong, and Min Zhou, who reviewed an earlier draft of this publication, and of Kelvin Pollard and Mary Kent of PRB. Most of the work on this Population Bulletin was completed while Dr. Lee was a visiting scholar at Portland State University.

The Asian American population is growing at a breathtaking pace. Their numbers nearly doubled between 1980 and 1990 and are likely to double again by 2010. The estimated 9.6 million Asian Americans in 1997 make up less than 4 percent of the total U.S. population, but their influence on U.S. society is accentuated by their geographic concentration in a handful of states and cities and their above average income and educational levels.

While the history of Asians in the United States has been marked by racial prejudice and discrimination,¹

Asian Americans today are entitled to the same rights as other U.S. residents and citizens, and they work in a wide range of occupations. Many are active in politics and hold high elected offices. Their high average educational attainment, occupational status, and household incomes appear to negate the idea that they are a disadvantaged minority. But Asian Americans' ethnic and socioeconomic diversity also appear to contradict the common stereotype of Asians as a "model minority" that succeeds through hard work and strong family values. Asian Americans still experience racial prejudice in various forms and of various levels of intensity.

Immigration has fueled the dramatic growth of the Asian American population.² Almost 70 percent of the U.S. Asians counted in the 1990 Census were either immigrants who came to the United States after 1970 or the children of these immigrants. About 20 percent of the 1997 population arrived after 1990.³

Immigrants from Asia represent more than one-third of all legal immigrants admitted to the United States in recent years, which places Asian Americans in the center of the debate over immigration reform.

The rapid expansion of the Asian American population in recent decades has been accompanied by a remarkable ethnic diversification. In 1970, 96 percent of Asian Americans were Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino. As the 21st century approaches, these three groups make up just over 50 percent of Asian Americans. Asian Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese now outnumber Japanese Americans. The number of Asian ethnic groups recognized in publications based on the U.S. census has grown from four to 13 since 1970, and now includes Cambodians, Pakistanis, and Thais, among others.⁴

This *Population Bulletin* examines three major issues created by the rapid growth and diversification of the Asian American population: the social status and position of Asians in the United States; Asian Americans'

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Growth and diversity are changing what it means to be Asian American.

search for an identity amidst increasing ethnic and socioeconomic diversity; and the demographic impact of Asian Americans on the U.S. population. This *Population Bulletin* will address these issues by examining the growth and demographic characteristics of Asian Americans, including their geographic concentration, age structure, fertility rates, household characteristics, and socioeconomic indicators such as education, employment, and income.

Asian American Identity

Population growth and ethnic diversification are changing the meaning of “Asian American.” For most non-Asian Americans, “Asian” means Chinese, Japanese, or “oriental.” The first Asian immigrants were indeed Chinese and Japanese, and China and Japan dominated U.S. relations with Asian countries until the 1950s and 1960s, when the United States became involved in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Today, the largest Asian Ameri-

can ethnic groups include not only East Asians such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, but also Filipinos, Asian Indians, and Vietnamese (see Figure 1, page 6). Three Southeast Asian groups that were displaced by the Vietnam War—Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians—make up about 5 percent of the Asian American populations. A number of other groups—including Indonesians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Thais—make up another 7 percent. Each group is distinguished from the others by its language, religion, food, dress, customs, and history of settlement in the United States.

Natives of some countries that are considered Asian because of geographic location—such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey—are not considered Asian in the racial classifications used by most federal agencies. In this *Population Bulletin*, references to Asian Americans follow the classification and usage of the U.S. Census Bureau and most federal agencies (see Box 1 and Box 2, pages 4 and 7).

Box 1

Who Are Asian Americans?

Asian Americans come from many national backgrounds, speak many different languages, and encompass a wide variety of physical and social characteristics. Most immigrants from Asian countries identify themselves by their national or ethnic origin—Chinese, Korean, or Indian—not as “Asian.”

Asian is a label used by the majority U.S. population and officially recognized by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 1977 in Federal Statistical Directive Number 15.¹ This directive specified that federal statistics by race be grouped into at least four categories: White, Black, American

Indian (including Aleuts and Eskimos), and Asians and Pacific Islanders. Asians and Pacific Islanders were described as persons with ethnic origins in “any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands.”² In 1997, the OMB recommended that federal statistics be reported separately for Asians and Pacific Islanders.³

Race is self-reported in most federal statistics. People are officially counted as Asian if they select an Asian category on survey or census forms.

The race categories used to designate Asians (and all Americans)

Asian Americans’ minority status is an important aspect of their evolving identity.

1990 Census of Population, item 4

4. Race
Fill ONE circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be.

Indian (Amer.), print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe _____

Other Asian or Pacific Islander (API), print one group, for example: Hmong, Fijian, Laotian, Thai, Tongan, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on. _____

Other race, print race. _____

White

Black or Negro

Indian (Amer.) (Print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe.) _____

Eskimo

Aleut

Asian or Pacific Islander (API)

Chinese

Filipino

Hawaiian

Korean

Vietnamese

Japanese

Asian Indian

Samoan

Guamanian

Other API _____

Other race (Print race) _____

Asian Americans’ minority status is an important aspect of their evolving identity. Asian Americans are a racial minority in the United States because of their physical characteristics as well as ethnic origins. In sociological terms, membership in a minority group is ascribed and involuntary and is usually based on physical or cultural traits. Minority group members are discriminated against and have lower status and less power than majority group members. Minority group

members often feel a sense of group solidarity, and most members marry someone from the same minority group.⁵

Asian Americans differ from the two largest U.S. racial and ethnic minority groups—African Americans and Hispanics—because a much larger percentage of Asians are in middle- and upper-income levels. They are more likely than blacks (and as likely as Hispanics) to marry outside their racial and ethnic groups. Some

scholars even suggest that Asians' minority status will erode and eventually disappear. By the middle of the 21st century, the term "Asian American" may impart no more social distance from the majority population than Italian American or Greek American does today.⁶

At the beginning of the 20th century, Southern European immigrants were considered inassimilable and a threat to racial quality, but they now are integrated into American culture and society.⁷ Will Asians follow this path to assimilation or will they retain the subordinate social status that goes along with being a minority? What will it mean to be "Asian American" in the next century? The history, accomplishments, and current demographic trends of this rapidly growing population guarantee that Asian American identity will be even more complex, but Asians' minority group status will hinge on much broader social and political changes.

Immigration Before 1965

The earliest Asian immigrants were mostly Chinese and Japanese men who worked as miners, railroad workers, farmers, and laborers between the 1850s and the 1920s.⁸ The first wave of Chinese immigrants was attracted by the California gold rush in the 1850s. A second wave arrived in the late 1800s to help build the transcontinental railroads. Nearly all of these settlers were men. Like many other U.S. immigrant groups, these men were sojourners who intended to make their fortunes in the United States and then return to their homelands. But few accumulated much money and most stayed in the United States. They lived in mostly male communities that came to be known as "bachelor societies."

The Chinese workers suffered fierce prejudice and discrimination in the United States. Strong anti-Chinese sentiments culminated in passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

This was the first law to exclude a specific nationality from moving to the United States. The law also prevented Chinese residents from becoming U.S. citizens. The act was extended every 10 years until World War II, when China's status as a U.S. ally made such a discriminatory law politically untenable.

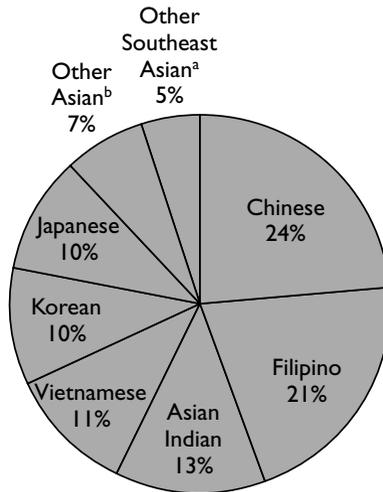
The Chinese American population declined between the 1890s and 1920s (which was the peak period for immigration to the United States from Europe), but a core population remained and began to grow slowly after the 1930s.

The first Japanese immigrants arrived at the end of the 19th century, primarily to work in agriculture in California. There were about 25,000 Japanese living on the West Coast in 1900.

Japanese immigrants also suffered extraordinary racial discrimination from Americans of European descent. Many Americans wanted to end immigration from Japan, just as Chinese immigration had been halted by the Chinese Exclusion Act. Japan had a greater economic and political stature than China at the beginning of the 20th century, and the United States did not want to jeopardize relations with an outright ban on the entry of Japanese. But immigration from Japan was severely curtailed by the Immigration Act of 1907. Specific provisions of this law, which became known as the Gentleman's Agreement, kept out Japanese laborers by authorizing the U.S. president to refuse admission of immigrants who were deemed "detrimental to labor conditions in the United States."⁹ Single Japanese men circumvented the restrictions of this agreement by bringing over Japanese wives they had selected from photographs and married by proxy (known as "picture brides"). The Japanese American community slowly expanded.

In 1924, the U.S. Congress passed a law that effectively banned all immigration from Asia, except for a small number of diplomats and students. Still needing workers, American

Figure 1
Ethnic Origins of Asian Americans, 1997



^a Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.
^b All other Asian American ethnic groups.
 Source: Author's estimates. See notes for Table 4.

These [settlers] were sojourners who intended to make their fortunes in the United States and then return to their homelands.

employers began to look to the Philippines for inexpensive labor. The Philippines had come under U.S. control after the Spanish-American War of 1898 and Filipinos were U.S. nationals (but not citizens). Filipinos' unique legal status exempted them from many of the restrictions that kept out Chinese and Japanese laborers. The first big wave of Filipino immigrants arrived between 1909 and 1934 to work on sugar plantations in Hawaii. Most of these immigrants were men; many married non-Filipinos and raised families in the United States.

The growing immigrant population helped generate anti-Filipino attitudes and public pressure to halt the immigrant flow from the Philippines. In 1934, the U.S. Congress passed the Tydings-McDuffie Act, which promised independence to the Philippines by 1945 but immediately restricted Filipino immigration to 50 immigrants annually. After World War II, the limit was raised to 100 Filipino immigrants per year.

U.S. military presence in Japan after 1945 and in Korea in the 1950s generated a small flow of "war brides"

who married Americans stationed in those countries and then accompanied them to the United States.¹⁰ But immigration from Asia remained low until the passage of the landmark 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments. The 1965 law attempted to limit the annual number of immigrants, but it relaxed restrictions on immigration from Asia by eliminating national origin, race, or ancestry as a basis for admitting immigrants to the United States.¹¹ It also opened an important new avenue for immigration by emphasizing family reunification. The relatives of U.S. citizens and legal immigrants were granted preference in obtaining immigrant visas. The 1965 act reflected the attitudes of the civil rights era, which helped improve Asians' social position in the United States.

Discrimination and Prejudice

Prior to the 1950s, Asian immigrants were denied the right to become naturalized citizens—a right granted all other immigrants to the United States. Anti-miscegenation laws in many U.S. states forbade marriages between nonwhites (including Asians) and whites, although social pressures were probably the major impediment to interracial marriage. Laws that explicitly discriminated against Asians were gradually repealed after World War II; the last anti-miscegenation law was finally repealed in 1967.

Legal discrimination of Asian Americans was accompanied by discriminatory actions by individuals and by groups such as organized labor. Early Chinese and Japanese immigrants were segregated in jobs that whites shunned, such as laundry and dangerous menial work on the railroads. Some were subjected to mob violence and murder.

When the United States declared war on Japan in 1941, after Japanese warplanes bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, the relatively small Asian American population experienced renewed racial discrimination.

Sources of Information on Asian Americans

Information on Asian Americans can be gleaned from a number of sources. Each major source has distinct strengths and limitations. The data used in this publication (unless stated otherwise) are collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and other federal and state statistical agencies that generally follow the guidelines on racial and ethnic group statistics contained in Federal Statistical Directive Number 15.

Decennial Census and CPS: The 1990 Census is the most recent, and often the only, source for detailed information on individual Asian American populations. More recent data are available from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Surveys (CPS). Asian Americans are combined with Pacific Islanders in the CPS; information is not available separately for Asians or for specific Asian ethnic groups. In addition, the CPS sample size (about 60,000 households) is too small to provide reliable estimates for smaller subgroups such as native-born Asian American women.

Census data on race and Hispanic origin are sometimes inconsistent. Some published tables provide data on "Asian and Pacific Islanders, not Hispanic"; others present data on Asians separately from Pacific Islanders but include Hispanic Asians. Finally, census data on the foreign born are used to represent immigrants, although not all foreign-born persons are immigrants.

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS): The INS uses the U.S. State Department definition of Asia when it summarizes annual immigration statistics. Immigrants from countries in Western Asia and the Middle East (including Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) are

included in the total immigration figures for Asia. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a different definition of "Asia" in racial classifications. People from countries west of Pakistan—Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey, for example—are considered white, not Asian. In this *Bulletin*, INS statistics are revised to be consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau's racial classifications. About 13 percent of recent immigrants from Asia are from countries west of Pakistan and some of the statistics cited in this *Bulletin* will not match published INS statistics.

Other Sources and Research: Other sources and research supplement data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the INS. Data on fertility, mortality, and health are based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*. These statistics are collected by state governments and tabulated by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). They generally show data for Asians and Pacific Islanders together, although selected groups (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Hawaiian, and "Other Asian") are shown separately for some indicators. In many areas, however, the data are unavailable or incomplete. More detailed data may be available as new guidelines for race and ethnic statistical reporting are implemented. For example, the Office of Management and Budget has recommended that statistics be reported separately for Asians and Pacific Islanders.

As the Asian American population continues to grow and gains greater attention from official statistical agencies, researchers, and the media, the wide range of data now available for blacks and Hispanics should become available for Asian Americans as well.

Americans of Japanese descent were considered a threat to national security and were incarcerated in internment camps. Many Japanese American families lost their businesses and property as a result.

Subsequent research turned up no evidence that Japanese Americans collaborated with the Japanese government during the war. The racial discrimination implied by the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans received little attention for several decades after World War II. In 1982, a U.S. government report on wartime internment recommended the U.S. government offer an official apology to the internees and pay \$20,000 in compensation to each survivor.¹²

Legal discrimination against Asians and other minorities was eliminated as a result of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The civil rights era also gave rise to affirmative action programs that helped many Asian Americans get advanced college degrees and start businesses. The civil rights movement also affected immigration law and opened a new era in the evolution of the Asian American population.

Immigration After 1965

Immigration from Asia was transformed after 1965 by two factors: the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 and the end of the Vietnam War. The law effectively opened the way for new waves of immigrants from China and the Philippines as well as new flows from many other countries, primarily South Korea and India.

Immigration from Asia averaged about 15,000 people per year during the 1950s, but the numbers surged as the 1965 immigration law was implemented. There were almost 43,000 immigrants per year during the 1960s, 160,000 immigrants per year during the 1970s, and 274,000 immigrants per year during the 1980s.¹³ The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 generated

a stream of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that continues into the 1990s (see Box 3, page 9).

A new wave of immigration from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong emerged after 1965, as Chinese Americans were able to sponsor family members under the family reunification provisions of the 1965 law. Many other prospective immigrants qualified under the law's employment-based preferences.

A flow of migrants from India and South Korea also surfaced during this period. The earliest Asian Indian Americans consisted of a handful of Sikh agricultural workers who immigrated to California via British Columbia, Canada. By the 1950s, several hundred Hindu and Moslem Indians were engaged in trade and small business on the East Coast. The post-1965 flow began with highly educated professionals who came to the United States in search of jobs; it is now dominated by the families of those immigrants. India has been among the leading countries of origin of U.S. immigrants in the 1990s, and the Asian Indian population is now the third-largest Asian American ethnic group.¹⁴

Before 1965, the Korean American population consisted primarily of descendants of agricultural workers brought to Hawaii during the early 1900s. A small group of "war brides" entered during the 1950s after the Korean War. But immigration from Korea surged after 1965, and in the 1990s, Koreans have become the fifth-largest Asian American ethnic group.

The number of immigrants to the United States from all countries increased after 1965 and Asians accounted for a growing percentage of the total (see Figure 2). During the 1950s, about 5 percent of immigrants were from Asian countries. By the 1980s and early 1990s, 39 percent of legal immigrants were from Asia. Of the top 10 countries of birth for immigrants admitted between 1981 and 1996, five were Asian: China, the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and Korea.¹⁵ Europe, the dominant source

Southeast Asians: Involuntary Immigrants

The Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong communities in the United States are distinct from other Asian American groups in several ways. They formed because of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and other parts of Indochina in the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike most other Asian Americans, many Southeast Asian Americans were involuntary migrants. They were forced to leave their homes because they feared persecution after the United States pulled out of Southeast Asia. They were accepted into the United States under refugee status.

Before 1980, refugees were admitted to the United States on an ad hoc basis. Refugee status was most commonly conferred on people fleeing an oppressive communist government, and the Southeast Asians fit into that category. In 1980, the Refugee Assistance Act was passed, which provided for the admission of a specified number of refugees each year. The number is determined by the president. The total number of refugees admitted into the United States has varied from 90,000 to 155,000 between 1980 and 1996. Refugees are generally adjusted to immigrant status one year after they arrive in the United States.

Two distinct waves of refugees flowed from Southeast Asia to the United States.¹ The first began in the 1960s and continued until the end of the war in 1975. These were mainly middle and upper class Vietnamese who found ways to get their families and financial assets out of the country when it became clear the United States would not win the war. Many of these people had worked in South Vietnam's military, government, or for U.S. concerns. Between 1961 and 1976, about 25,000 immigrants from Vietnam were admitted into the country.

The second wave of refugees was very different. Harsh economic conditions, political persecution within Vietnam, and widespread genocide by the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia created a flood of refugees desperate to leave the area. Many crowded onto unsafe boats and hoped to reach Hong Kong, Malaysia, and other neighboring countries. Some of these "boat people" eventually settled in the United States. Between 1975 and 1994, more than 700,000 Vietnamese refugees and 500,000 Cambodians and Laotians were resettled in the United States.² The U.S. government and voluntary organizations assisted the refugees when they first arrived. There was a conscious effort to disperse the refugees throughout the United States to minimize their effect on the host communities. Many eventually moved to warmer climates or joined established communities in California, Florida, and Texas.

The refugees who arrived in the second wave were poorer and less educated, on average, than those who came in the first wave. Many were from rural areas and had few skills applicable to the U.S. labor market. Southeast Asians are also much younger and have higher fertility rates, on average, than other Asian immigrants. Thus, even though the flow of refugees has diminished, the Southeast Asian population will continue to grow.

References

1. Harry H.L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995).
2. U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Refugee Resettlement Program Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995): A-3.

Southeast Asians are much younger and have higher fertility rates, on average, than other Asian immigrants.

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The flow of refugees from Southeast Asia surged after passage of the Refugee Act of 1980.

of immigrants throughout the 19th century, still provided 54 percent of immigrants in the 1950s but accounted for just 20 percent of immigrants between 1981 and 1996.

Early Asian American communities in the United States were shaped by legal and social constraints, and by the conditions under which most Asians arrived in this country. The 1965 immigration law transformed Asian populations by allowing Asian immigrants to sponsor the entry of family members. Post-1965 Asian immigration has been more balanced between males and females and has included more families.

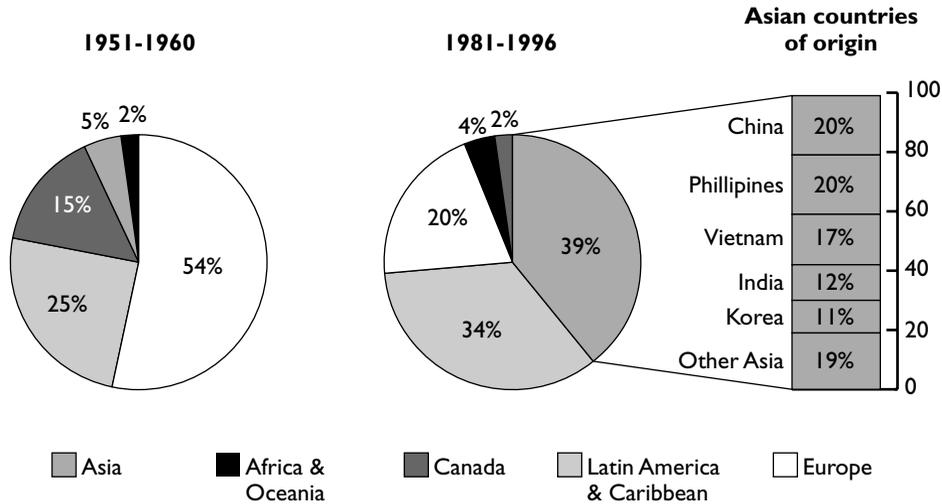
The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 further changed the Asian

American community as Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong who had supported the United States in the war left Southeast Asia as it came under control of the North Vietnamese and Cambodian communist governments. The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 established a program of domestic resettlement for refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam, which was extended to Laotians in 1976. The flow of refugees from Southeast Asia was further expanded by the Refugee Act of 1980. The 1980 law created a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission and resettlement of refugees and asylees. The law also adopted the UN terminology, which defines a refugee (or an asylee) as an individual who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. The persecution may be based on an individual's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.¹⁶

Of the 916,000 legal immigrants admitted to the United States between October 1995 and September 1996, 65 percent were admitted either under family-sponsored preferences or as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. Similarly, nearly 63 percent of the 266,000 immigrants from Asia were admitted as immediate relatives (spouses, minor children, and parents) of U.S. citizens or under family-sponsored preferences. Most other Asian immigrants were admitted to fill U.S. jobs or as refugees. About 20 percent came under employment-based preferences, which include professionals with advanced degrees, artists, skilled workers, unskilled workers in certain employment areas, and investors. Refugees and asylees, primarily from Vietnam, made up another 14 percent of total admissions from Asia. Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and family-sponsored immigrants accounted for the majority of immigrants from the four main Asian countries of origin: 83 percent of

Figure 2

Immigration by Region and Selected Countries of Origin, 1951-1960 and 1981-1996



Note: To make regional categories consistent with census data on Asians, Asia refers to countries east of Afghanistan; Europe includes Turkey, Iran, Israel, and other Middle Eastern countries because natives of these countries are considered white in census data. China includes China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Immigrants legalized under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) are excluded because most entered the United States before 1982. Regions and countries of origin refer to country of last residence for 1951-1960, and to region or country of birth for 1981-1996.

Sources: Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1990 Statistical Yearbook*: tables 3 and 4; *1996 Statistical Yearbook*: tables 3 and 4.

immigrants from the Philippines, 76 percent of immigrants from India, 66 percent of immigrants from Korea, and 62 percent of immigrants from China. More than one-third of immigrants from China were admitted under employment-based preferences.¹⁷ Immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were the exceptions—more than one-half were admitted as refugees.

The importance of recent immigration to the current Asian American population is demonstrated by the large percentage who are foreign born. Two of every three Asian Americans were foreign born in 1990, and more than one-half had entered the United States in the previous decade (see Table 1). Figures are not available separately for Asians after 1990, but the 1997 Current Population Survey (CPS) showed that 61 percent of the combined Asian and Pacific Islander population was foreign born. Pacific Islanders, who make up less than 5 percent of the combined Asian and Pacific Islander population, are predominantly native

born, which suggests that the percentage of Asians who are foreign born is slightly larger.¹⁸

Among the major Asian ethnic groups, only Japanese Americans are not predominantly foreign born: in 1990, slightly less than one-third were foreign born. As with most other Asian groups, the majority of foreign-born Japanese Americans are recent immigrants.

Geographic Concentration

The majority of Asian Americans (54 percent) live in the western United States, reflecting the destination of the earliest Asian immigrants and the proximity of the western states to Asia (see Figure 3). But Asians are less concentrated geographically now than ever before. In 1860, 100 percent of Asians lived in the western United States; by 1940 just less than 90 percent lived in the West. Recent immigrants are forming networks of family and friends in a number of nonwestern states. Refugee resettle-

Table 1

Percent Foreign Born and Year of Entry for U.S. Asian Ethnic Groups, 1990 and 1997

Asian ethnic group	Percent foreign born	Percent foreign born who entered U.S.	
		Before 1980	1980 or later
Asians ^a (1997)	61	29	71 ^b
Asians (1990)	66	42	58
Chinese	69	43	57
Filipino	64	51	49
Japanese	32	45	55
Korean	73	44	56
Asian Indian	75	42	58
Vietnamese	80	38	62
Other Southeast Asian ^c	76	18	82
Other Asian ^d	62	41	59

^a Includes Pacific Islanders, who made up less than 5 percent of the Asian and Pacific Islander population in the 1990 Census. About 87 percent of the 1990 Pacific Islander population was born in the United States.

^b 1980 to 1997. Thirty-three percent of the 1997 foreign-born Asian population came to the United States after 1990.

^c Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^d Includes all other Asian American ethnic groups.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* CP-3-5 (August 1993); table 1; and PRB analysis of the March 1997 Current Population Survey.

ment programs and the gradual dispersion of longer-term residents and native-born Asians have expanded the geographic distribution of Asians.

In 1990, 76 percent of Japanese Americans and 70 percent of Filipino Americans resided in western states (see Table 2, page 14). Asian Indians are the only major Asian American population not concentrated in the West because of their settlement history. Only about one-fourth of Asian Indians lived in the West, while more than one-third lived in the Northeast in 1990.

Asians make up less than 2 percent of the population in most states, which reflects the relatively small size as well as the geographic concentration of the Asian American population. In 1990, Asians made up 2 percent or more of the population in just 12 states. Among the 13 states with at least 100,000 Asians, the percent Asian ranged from 48 percent of Hawaii's population and 9 percent of California's population to about 1

percent of the populations of Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

More recent state population estimates reflect the continued growth and gradual dispersion of Asian Americans. In 1996, Asians (including a small number of Pacific Islanders) made up at least 2 percent of the populations in 29 states, and at least 4 percent of the populations of seven states. These changes, which are likely to be confirmed by the 2000 Census, indicate that Asian Americans are slowly dispersing throughout the United States.

The Asian population in most states is dominated by a few ethnic groups, which reflects the history of Asian settlement in the United States, and in the case of Vietnamese, refugee resettlement policies. Japanese, Filipino, and Chinese Americans accounted for 93 percent of all Asians in Hawaii, according to the 1990 Census (see Figure 4, page 13). The same three groups combined accounted for at least one-half of the Asian populations of California and Washington. Chinese Americans, the largest group nationally, were among the top three groups in every state with at least 130,000 Asian Americans in 1990. Filipinos were among the top three ethnic groups in most of those states. Koreans accounted for about one-fifth of Asians in Maryland and Virginia and one-seventh of Asians in New York. While Asian Indians were not as numerous in 1990, they made up between 18 percent and 30 percent of Asians in six states in every region except the West: New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois, Texas, and Florida. Vietnamese were the largest group only in Texas. The 2000 Census is likely to show greater diversity among the top Asian groups because of the rapid growth and dispersion of Southeast Asians, Asian Indians, and several other Asian groups.

Urban Residence

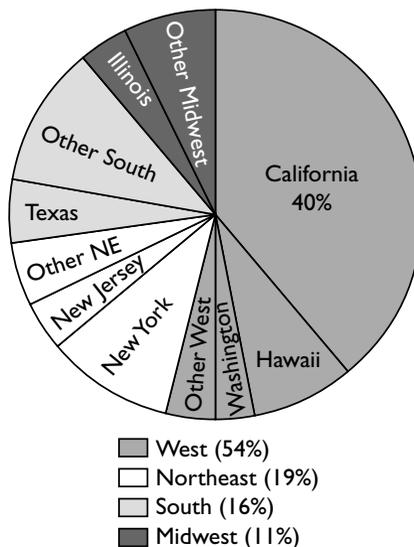
Asian Americans are a highly urban population. In 1996, 94 percent of the Asian population lived in metropoli-

tan areas, compared with 80 percent of the total population. Forty-five percent lived in central city areas, for example, compared with 55 percent of blacks and 22 percent of non-Hispanic whites. But Asians tend to live in less segregated neighborhoods than other minority groups.¹⁹

Residential segregation is an important dimension of social relations between minority and majority group members. The neighborhoods where people live define where their children attend school, with whom they form friendships, their social, political, and economic interests, and many other dimensions of social life.²⁰ Blacks live in the most segregated neighborhoods, according to 1990 Census data for U.S. metropolitan areas. Hispanics are less residentially segregated than blacks and more segregated than Asian Americans.

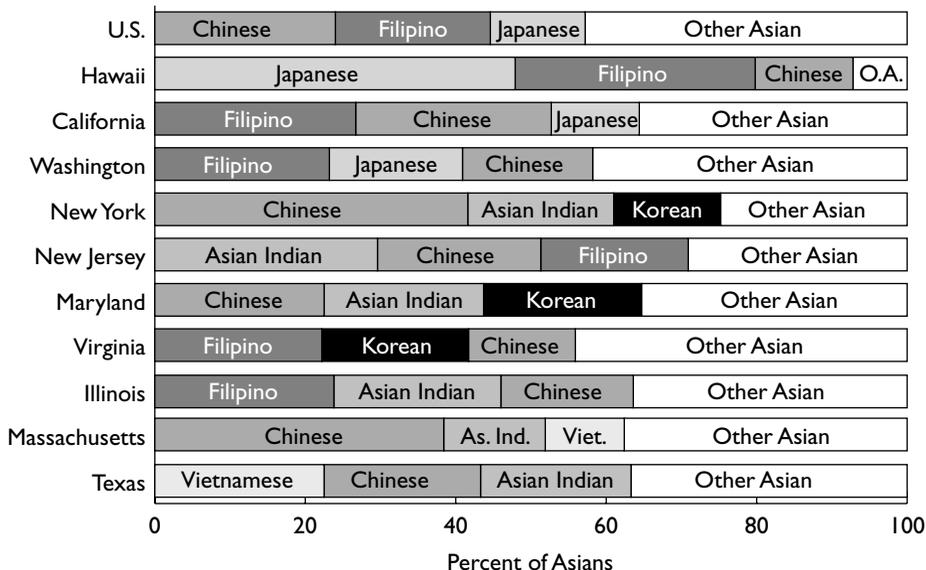
As the U.S. metropolitan population becomes more ethnically diverse, residential segregation of Asian groups may decline, according to a recent analysis of 1990 Census data.

Figure 3
Asian Americans by Region/
State, 1990



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States CP-2-1* (November 1993): table 135; and *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States CP-3-5* (August 1993): table 3.

Figure 4
Largest Asian Ethnic Groups in Ten States, 1990



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States CP-2-1* (November 1993): table 106; and *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States CP-3-5* (August 1993): table 3.

Table 2

Regional Distribution of U.S. Population and Selected Asian Ethnic Groups, 1990

Race/ethnic group	Percentage by region of residence			
	West	Northeast	South	Midwest
Total U.S. population	21	20	34	24
Asian	54	19	16	11
Chinese	53	27	12	8
Filipino	70	10	11	8
Japanese	76	9	8	7
Korean	45	23	19	14
Asian Indian	23	35	24	18
Vietnamese	55	10	27	8
Other SE Asian ^a	56	12	13	20
Other Asian ^b	37	22	24	16

^a Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^b All other Asian American ethnic groups.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States CP-2-1* (November 1993): table 135.

Asians, like other immigrant groups, tend to move to more diverse neighborhoods the longer they reside in the United States.²¹ Native-born Asians, especially Japanese, are largely integrated into the white majority community. Immigration continues to replenish the Asian immigrant communities, however, and ensures the existence of Asian ethnic neighborhoods in many U.S. cities.

Population Growth

Post-1965 immigration generated a surge in the Asian American population. Asian Americans increased by 141 percent between 1970 and 1980—from 1.4 million to 3.5 million—and by 98 percent between 1980 and 1990, when they numbered 6.9 million. More recent data indicate that the Asian American population increased by another 39 percent between 1990 and 1997 (see Table 3). Although less numerous than African Americans and Hispanics, Asian Americans are increasing at a much faster rate. Six Asian ethnic groups accounted for more than 95 percent of the total Asian American population in 1980. This figure slipped to about 88 percent in 1997 because the newer

immigrants came from more diverse national origins. Chinese and Filipinos are the two largest Asian American groups. There were an estimated 2.3 million Chinese Americans and 2.0 million Filipino Americans in 1997. Asian Indians and Vietnamese, the third- and fourth-largest groups, exceeded 1 million each by 1997.

The number of Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, and Other Asians living in the United States grew rapidly after 1980 because new refugee policies brought a large influx from Southeast Asia. The number of Other Southeast Asian Americans rose from less than 100,000 to nearly 400,000 during the 1980s, and was estimated at 444,000 in 1997. There has been little immigration from Japan in recent decades, which has slowed the growth of the Japanese American population. Since 1990, the Asian Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese have all surpassed the number of Japanese Americans.

As the Asian American population continues to grow throughout the 1990s, it is steadily increasing as a percentage of the U.S. population. The estimated 9.6 million Asian Americans in 1997 made up about 3.6 percent of the U.S. population. Assuming medium levels of fertility, mortality, and net immigration, the Asian American population is likely to exceed 32 million by 2050 and make up about 8 percent of the U.S. population.

The growth and diversity of the Asian American population in recent decades has been driven by changes in immigration laws (for example, by expanding existing communities through family reunification) and by political events, such as the Vietnam War, that generated new sources of immigrants. Future reforms and revisions of immigration law, illegal immigration, business interests, and changing public opinion are likely to cause the annual flow to rise and fall. Even so, immigration from Asia to the United States is expected to remain fairly high.

Asians tend to live in less segregated neighborhoods than other minority groups.

Table 3

Growth of the Asian American Population by Major Ethnic Group, 1980 to 1997

Ethnic Origin	1980		1990		1997 estimate ^a		Percent increase	
	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent	1980-1990	1990-1997
Total U.S. population	226,546	100	248,710	100	266,792	100	10	7
Whites ^a	180,906	80	188,425	76	191,791	72	4	2
Blacks ^a	26,142	12	29,285	12	33,293	12	12	14
Hispanics	14,609	6	21,900	9	29,704	11	50	36
Asians	3,466	2	6,876	3	9,568	4	98	39
Asian ethnic groups								
Total Asians ^b	3,466	100	6,876	100	9,568	100	98	39
Chinese	812	23	1,649	24	2,268	24	103	38
Filipino	782	23	1,420	21	1,995	21	82	41
Japanese	716	21	866	13	925	10	21	7
Asian Indian	387	11	787	11	1,215	13	103	55
Korean	357	10	797	12	982	10	123	23
Vietnamese	245	7	593	9	1,045	11	142	76
Other Southeast Asian ^c	69	2	391	6	444	5	467	14
Other Asian ^d	97	3	374	5	695	7	286	86

^a Non-Hispanic.

^b Includes ethnic groups not shown separately.

^c Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^d All other Asian American ethnic groups.

^e Estimated from 1997 national estimates for race and ethnic groups, which combined the Asian and Pacific Islander population. The Pacific Islander population made up less than 5 percent of the 1990 Asian and Pacific Islander population. Estimates for specific Asian groups are based on their 1990 populations, immigration data for 1990-1996, and the 1990-1996 increase in the Asian American population.

Sources: Robert W. Gardner, Bryant Robey, and Peter C. Smith, "Asian Americans: Growth, Change, and Diversity," *Population Bulletin* 40, no. 4 (1985): table 1; Immigration and Naturalization Service, *1996 Statistical Yearbook* (1997): table 3; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics CP-2-1* (November 1993): table 4; and "Resident Population of the United States: Estimates by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin." Accessed online at <http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/nation/intfile3-1.txt> on Sept. 26, 1997.

Immigration, along with fertility and mortality, continues to shape the demographic profile and growth rate of the Asian American population.

Age and Sex Composition

Immigration and differences in childbearing patterns have given Asian Americans an age structure that is strikingly different from the overall U.S. population and from other ethnic minority groups. Most immigrants move when they are young adults. At least 70 percent of Asian Americans are post-1970 immigrants or their children, which gives Asians a young age structure. Only about 7 percent of Asians were ages 65 or older in 1997, compared with 13 percent of the total U.S. population. U.S.-born Asians—primarily the

offspring of recent immigrants—have an extremely young age structure.

The 1990 Census data highlight the differences between recent Asian ethnic groups, such as Vietnamese, and more established Asian groups, such as Japanese and Filipinos.²² U.S.-born Japanese have an age structure similar to that of the total U.S. population: 16 percent were under age 15 and 12 percent were ages 65 or older. The older age profile of Japanese Americans also means that the Japanese share of the Asian American population will continue to decline because the younger groups will increase faster through natural increase.

Native-born Southeast Asians are extremely young and have a tremendous momentum for future growth. The end of the Vietnam War and the resettlement of refugee families from

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At least 70 percent of Asian Americans are post-1970 immigrants and their children, which gives Asians a young age structure.

Vietnam and other parts of Indochina shaped the age structure of the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians. More than 90 percent of U.S.-born Vietnamese, and 97 percent of Other Southeast Asians born in the United States, were under age 15 in 1990 (see Table 4). These young Americans will be forming their own families in the next decade and creating the first sizeable population of third-generation Southeast Asian Americans.

Balance Between Men and Women

The easing of immigration restrictions in 1965 has also affected the ratio of men to women among Asian Americans. The sex ratio (number of males per 100 females) for Asian American groups reflects whether their immigrant flows consisted predominantly of men, women, or families. The sex ratio for the total U.S. population in 1997 was 96. The sex ratio for the Asian American population (including Pacific Islanders) was estimated to be

94. This figure varies among the Asian groups depending upon their immigration history.

When the Chinese first immigrated to the United States to work on the railroads and in mines in the 19th century, the migration flow was overwhelmingly male. In 1900, the sex ratio for Chinese Americans was 1,385—there were almost 1,400 Chinese men for every 100 Chinese women.²³ The immigration waves of the 1970s were much more balanced between men and women. Since 1980, immigration from several of the primary sending countries in Asia has become female-dominant, meaning more recent immigrants are women. The sex ratios of Asian immigrants who arrived between 1980 and 1990 are well below 100, except among Asian Indians. The sex ratio of recent immigrants from the Philippines is 74, for example. It is 81 for recent Korean immigrants.

Immigrant flows from India and some other Asian countries have been dominated by men, although that dominance is waning. The sex ratio of

***The Asian
American
population is
likely to exceed
32 million
by 2050.***

Table 4

U.S. Population and Asian American Ethnic Groups by Age, 1990

Ethnic group	Percent in age group (age in years)								
	Total			Native born			Foreign born		
	<15	15-64	65+	<15	15-64	65+	<15	15-64	65+
Total U.S. population	22	66	13	23	65	12	7	79	14
Asian	23	70	6	51	44	5	9	83	7
Chinese	19	73	8	49	47	4	7	83	10
Japanese	16	72	12	19	66	15	10	84	6
Filipino	22	70	7	54	45	1	8	82	10
Korean	26	70	4	72	26	2	16	79	5
Asian Indian	25	72	3	77	22	1	10	87	3
Vietnamese	26	71	3	92	8	—	12	85	3
Other SE Asian ^a	43	55	2	97	3	—	27	70	3
Other Asian ^b	28	69	2	66	33	1	10	87	3

— Less than 0.5 percent.

^a Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^b All other Asian American ethnic groups.

Sources: Author's tabulations of 1990 Census data from the Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS); and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population: The Foreign Born Population of the United States CP-3-1* (July 1993): table 1.

Asian Indian immigrants who arrived before 1980 was 130, compared with a sex ratio of 116 for those who arrived between 1980 and 1990.

As long as immigration from Asia continues at current levels and women continue to dominate the flows, the sex ratios of most foreign-born Asian American populations are likely to remain below 100. As the native-born Asian American population grows, the overall sex ratio for Asian Americans should gradually approach that of the U.S. population as a whole.

Fertility

Aside from immigration, fertility is the major source of growth among the Asian American population. As the population base grows, fertility will become an even more important determinant of population growth, especially given Asians' young age structure.

Asian Americans tend to wait longer to have children and to have fewer children than other minority groups. Asian American mothers are also less likely than other racial and ethnic groups to have a baby out of wedlock. Asian mothers are more

likely to have a high school or college education than mothers in other racial and ethnic minority groups. These childbearing patterns reflect different age structures, marriage patterns, and cultural influences. But these characteristics vary tremendously among Asian ethnic groups and between U.S.-born and foreign-born Asian women.

The total fertility rate, or TFR (the average number of children a woman will have given current birth rates), for the combined Asian and Pacific Islander population (API) was 1.9 in 1995, slightly above the rate for non-Hispanic whites and lower than the rate for any other minority group (see Table 5).

Fertility rates are not available for specific Asian American ethnic groups after 1990, but published data on the characteristics of births for selected Asian ethnic groups provide some insight into ethnic differences in childbearing. Because Asians make up a growing proportion of the API population, recent birth rates for the API population primarily reflect Asian fertility. In 1995, Pacific Islanders contributed about 5 percent of API births, according to unpublished data

Table 5
**Fertility Rates by Race/Ethnicity,
 1990 and 1995**

Race/ethnic group	Total fertility rate ^a	
	1990	1995
All women	2.1	2.0
White, non-Hispanic	1.9	1.8
Black, non-Hispanic	2.5	2.2
Hispanic	3.0	3.0
American Indian	2.2	2.0
Asian and Pacific Islander ^b	2.0	1.9
Chinese	1.4	—
Japanese	1.1	—
Filipino	1.9	—
Other ^c	2.7	—

— Not available.

^a Total fertility rate is the average number of children a woman will have given current birth rates.

^b Includes a small number of Hispanics.

^c Includes all other Asians and Pacific Islanders.

Sources: NCHS, *Monthly Vital Statistics Reports* 45, no. 11 (S) (June 10, 1997); tables 10 and 11; and Centers for Disease Control, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 42, no. 20 (May 20, 1993): 400.

from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The NCHS may publish national rates for Asians separately from Pacific Islanders after the 2000 Census.

Chinese and Japanese American women have remarkably low fertility rates. The TFR for 1990 (the latest available) was 1.1 children per woman for Japanese Americans and 1.4 children per woman for Chinese Americans. These rates are well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per women—the number of children needed for a generation to replace itself. Without immigration, the U.S. Chinese and Japanese populations eventually would decline. These two groups have other characteristics associated with low fertility—high education levels and high average incomes.

Fertility rates from 1990 and more recent data on birth characteristics suggest that Koreans and Asian Indians also have relatively low fertility, while Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians have relatively high fertility. Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indians, and Koreans are much less

likely than Vietnamese and other Asians to have a birth while in their teens and more likely to have a birth after age 30. Such delays in childbearing usually translate into lower lifetime fertility.

Asian American women also are less likely than women from other racial and ethnic groups to have a child out of wedlock. About one-third of all U.S. births were to unmarried women in 1995, compared with 16 percent among Asians and Pacific Islanders (see Table 6). The rates for other groups ranged from 21 percent among non-Hispanic whites to 70 percent among non-Hispanic blacks.

The rates of unmarried childbearing are remarkably different among Asian groups, however. The percentage of births to unmarried mothers varied from 8 percent among the Chinese to 20 percent among Filipinos in 1995.

Foreign-born women in most Asian ethnic groups rarely give birth out of wedlock; it is more common among U.S.-born Asian women. An analysis of 1992 birth registration data in seven states showed that less than 8 percent of births to foreign-born Korean, Asian Indian, Chinese, and Japanese women were to unmarried mothers. But between 13 percent and 27 percent of births to U.S.-born women in these ethnic groups were to unmarried mothers. The report showed that a relatively high percentage of native-born Vietnamese, Filipino, and Other Asian women also had births out of wedlock.²⁴

Asian American mothers were more likely to have at least 12 years of school than mothers from other minority groups. Among Asians giving birth in 1995, the percentage who were high school graduates was lowest among the Other Asian and Pacific Islander group, which includes a large number of refugees from Southeast Asian countries where women have fewer educational opportunities.

More than 80 percent of Asian Americans born in 1995 had a foreign-born mother. The figure was 90 percent or more among Chinese and

the Other Asian category. These figures underscore the unique situation of Asian American children—a vast majority are second-generation Americans. In contrast, about one-fifth of all U.S. births and 62 percent of Hispanic births in 1995 were to foreign-born mothers.

Families and Households

An individual's living arrangements can enhance his or her well-being: Family and household members provide financial and emotional support, companionship, and help with housework or child care. Families have been especially important for immigrant groups whose members are adjusting to a new way of life and economy. Some Southeast Asian refugee families, for example, pool resources to purchase a home or car that is shared by all the contributing families.²⁵

Asian Americans are more likely than other major racial and ethnic groups to live in the supporting environment of a family household. In 1990, 78 percent of Asian American households were family households, compared with about 70 percent of non-Hispanic white and black households.

There are some variations across Asian American populations, primarily reflecting differences in age structures. Younger populations are more likely to be living in a family household, especially one with children, while population groups with an older average age are more likely to be living alone or in a nonfamily household. In 1990, 66 percent of Japanese American households were family households, compared with more than 80 percent of households composed of the generally younger populations of Vietnamese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Korean Americans or Other Southeast Asians (see Table 7). Japanese Americans have an older age structure, which is consistent with nonfamily households.

Table 6

Births by Race/Ethnicity and Characteristics of the Mother, 1995

Race/ethnic group	Percent of births			
	Characteristics of the mother			
	Under age 20	Unmarried	12+ years education	Foreign born
All women	13	32	77	18
White, non-Hispanic	10	21	87	5
Black, non-Hispanic	23	70	71	9
Hispanic	18	41	48	62
American Indian ^a	21	57	67	4
Asian and Pacific Islander ^b	6	16	84	84
Chinese	1	8	87	91
Japanese	3	11	97	55
Filipino	6	20	92	83
Other ^c	6	16	79	90

^a Includes a small number of Hispanics.

^b Pacific Islander births accounted for about 5 percent of combined Asian and Pacific Islander births in 1995.

^c Includes Koreans, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, and all other Asians and Pacific Islanders.

Source: NCHS, *Monthly Vital Statistics Reports* 45, no. 11 (S) (June 10, 1997): tables 10 and 11.

Asian American households are more likely than white households to include “other relatives”—family members outside the nuclear family (husband, wife, and their children). Among non-Hispanic whites, only 3 percent of household members were not part of the nuclear family, while 10 percent of household members in Asian American families consisted of other relatives. Among Asian ethnic groups, Filipino and Vietnamese American households were most likely to include other relatives; 13 percent of household members were non-nuclear family members in 1990. Only 4 percent of household members in Japanese American families were other relatives.

Because Asian households are more likely than white households to include people outside the nuclear family, it is not surprising that they are also larger than white households. Asian households are closer in size to Hispanic households, which also include many individuals outside the nuclear family. Asian households had an average of 3.3 persons in 1990, compared with 2.5 persons for white

Table 7

Household Characteristics by Race and Asian Ethnic Group, 1990

Ethnic Origin	Households (thousands)	Family households (percent)			Percent of household members		Children under age 18 living with two parents (%)	Persons/ household (average)
		Total	Male headed	Female headed	Other relative of householder ^a	Non- relative		
White ^a	73,747	70	58	12	3	4	80	2.5
Black	9,942	71	36	35	11	5	37	2.9
Hispanic ^b	5,872	81	60	22	10	6	64	3.5
Asian	1,932	78	65	13	10	5	83	3.3
Chinese	509	77	65	11	10	5	87	3.1
Filipino	356	82	64	18	13	5	80	3.6
Japanese	316	66	55	11	4	5	85	2.5
Korean	202	81	68	13	7	3	88	3.2
Asian Indian	234	83	76	7	9	4	91	3.4
Vietnamese	141	84	66	18	13	7	74	4.0
Other Southeast Asian ^c	76	94	72	22	11	4	77	5.1
Other Asian ^d	99	71	58	13	9	7	82	3.7

^a Non-Hispanic.

^b Hispanics may be of any race.

^c Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^d All other Asian American ethnic groups.

^e A relative other than a spouse or child.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics*, United States CP-2-1 (November 1993); tables 41 and 105.

households and 3.5 for Hispanic households. Among Asian ethnic groups, Vietnamese and Other Southeast Asians had the largest average household size in 1990: 4.0 and 5.1 persons, respectively.

Asian American children are more likely to be living with both parents than children in any other racial or ethnic group. This is an important indicator of the family support available for children in Asian American households. In 1990, the percentage of children living with both parents was 83 for Asian Americans, followed by 80 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Close to 90 percent of Chinese, Korean, and Asian Indian American children younger than 18 live with both parents. It appears that most Asian American children will grow up in the relatively stable family environment that is associated with an intact two-parent family.

More recent data from the March 1997 Current Population Survey confirm the picture of relatively stable family structure among Asian Americans.²⁶ Asian American households

were more likely than white households to consist of families (75 percent versus 68 percent). In 1997, Asian households were also larger than white households, and their members were more likely to include relatives or others outside the nuclear family.

Racial and Ethnic Intermarriage

Marriage between individuals of different races or ethnic groups is a significant indicator of social relationships between groups that are considered racially or ethnically different from one another. Racial and ethnic identities are often used to assign membership in dominant or subordinate social groups. In the U.S. racial hierarchy, whites are the dominant group and nonwhites, including Asian Americans, are in a subordinate status.

Marriage between members of different ethnic groups (or exogamy) has become more common in the United States, particularly among Americans of European ancestry.

Ethnic differences appear to be relatively minor barriers to marriage. The high percentage of white Americans who report multiple ancestries testifies to high rates of intermarriage across white ethnic groups.

Marriage between members of different races, however, is less common because of strong social norms against it. Interracial marriage was illegal in some U.S. states until the 1960s. Intermarriage is occurring at a high level among Asian Americans, however, particularly compared with the low rate of intermarriage among blacks. About 15 percent of married couples with an Asian American partner were interracial or interethnic in 1990, compared with about 6 percent of couples in which one partner was African American.

Intermarriage is much higher among native-born than foreign-born Asian Americans. In 1990, 40 percent of married U.S.-born Asians had a spouse of another race or Asian ethnic group, up from 35 percent in 1980. The percentage was notably lower among foreign-born Asians, 17 percent. Intermarriage has declined among foreign-born Asians since 1980, when it was 22 percent, to 17 percent in 1990, probably reflecting the large influx of refugees and immigrants from Asian countries during the 1980s. Many of the newcomers were already married when they arrived.

Another important pattern is the higher exogamy rates among Asian American women than Asian American men, especially among the foreign born (see Figure 5). For certain immigrant cohorts, foreign-born Asian American women are more than twice as likely to marry a non-Asian as foreign-born Asian American men. An important reason for this gender difference is the pattern of marriage between Asian women and U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The gender gap in exogamy is small among native-born Asian Americans; only slightly more

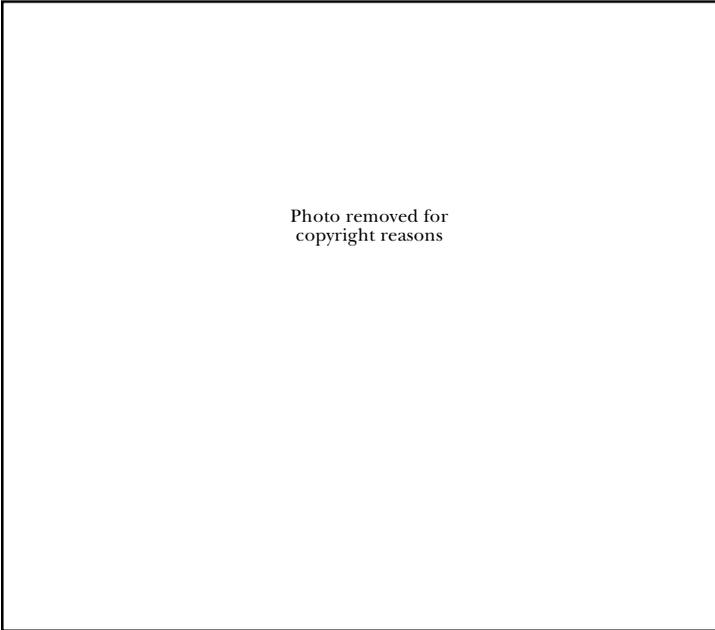


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Asian Americans are much more likely than black or white Americans to marry someone of another race or ethnic group.

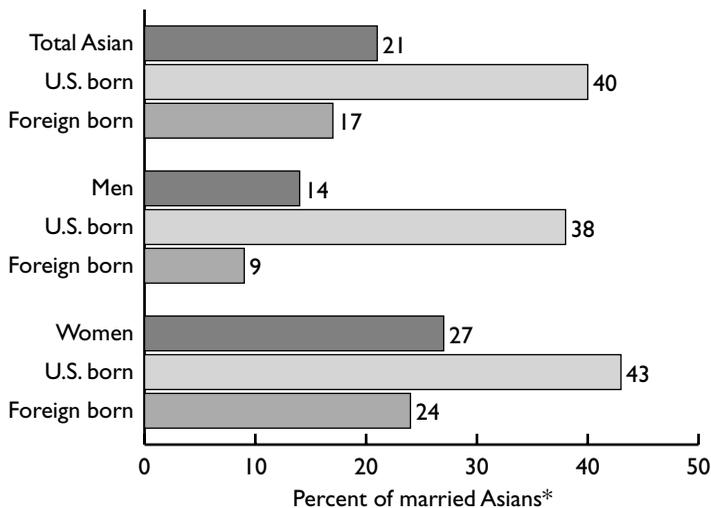
native-born Asian American women than men outmarry.

Historical relations between individual Asian countries and the United States and cultural differences among Asian countries explain some of the different patterns of intermarriage among Asian ethnic groups. Asian Indians are an exception to the overall picture, with lower exogamy rates overall, and a higher outmarriage rate among men, regardless of nativity. Cultural norms about gender roles and status may explain Indian marriage patterns in the United States. Traditional Indian culture strongly discourages individuals from marrying outside their caste, or specific social order. Interracial marriages violate the caste system by definition. Such marriages are especially offensive to traditional norms if an Indian woman marries a non-Indian because women are responsible for maintaining the purity and social status of the family.²⁷

As the native-born portion of the Asian American population grows, intermarriage is likely to rise among

Figure 5

Percent of Asian Men and Women Married Outside Their Ethnic Group, 1990



*Percent whose spouse is not Asian or is from a different Asian ethnic group.
Source: Sharon Lee and Marilyn Fernandez, *Sociological Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (1998): 323-42.

all Asian ethnic groups. This trend suggests important demographic and social consequences. Increased intermarriage will change the racial and ethnic composition of American families and is likely to affect the meaning of the term “Asian American.”

The future size of the U.S. Asian population depends in part on whether the children of these marriages consider themselves Asian—and identify themselves as Asian in censuses and surveys. If they do, the Asian population will increase faster than projected. If they choose the identity of their non-Asian parent, the U.S. Asian population will increase much more slowly.²⁸

Conventional sociological theories assume that intermarriage signals the breakdown of group boundaries because family ties cross racial and ethnic lines. As more Asian Americans outmarry, future generations of Asian Americans may increasingly blend with other American racial and ethnic groups, mirroring the experience of European ethnic groups in the United States over the past century.

Education

Asian Americans have demonstrated extraordinary advancements in educational attainment—an achievement that has been noted by researchers since the 1970s.²⁹ The media report numerous stories about the outstanding academic achievements of Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian Americans who overcame many disadvantages to attain the highest educational levels.

This advancement has been remarkable because the educational levels of the other major racial minority groups have been much lower than those of non-Hispanic whites. Asian Americans did not fit the stereotype of poorly educated minorities; instead, a new stereotype of the “model minority” arose to describe these highly educated Asian Americans. According to this image, Asian Americans work quietly with great discipline and effort to reach the highest levels of education. With these credentials and a strong work ethic, Asian Americans achieve financial security and enter high-status jobs. Many in the majority white population held up this path to success as the “model” for other minorities to emulate. This stereotype implicitly labels other minorities as “unsuccessful” because they have not achieved similar educational levels. The “model minority” image has led to resentment against Asians. It also ignores the relatively high educational levels of many Asian immigrant families (compared with Hispanic immigrants, for example) as well as social stratification within the Asian American population.³⁰

In 1997, 42 percent of Asian Americans ages 25 or older had a college or professional degree, compared with 26 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 13 percent of blacks, and 10 percent of Hispanics ages 25 or older (see Figure 6).

Immigration laws favor the entry of educated individuals because the laws give preference to individuals with high-level job skills. This preference

offers a partial explanation of Asian Americans' high educational levels. The relatives of these immigrants also tend to have above-average educational levels. About 43 percent of foreign-born Asians had at least an undergraduate college degree in 1997, while only about 24 percent of all Americans had such a degree. Nearly 40 percent of U.S.-born Asians (the children of these highly educated immigrants) had a bachelor's degree or higher in 1997.

Data from the 1990 Census show that recent immigration is transforming the educational profile of the Asian American population. Almost two-thirds of Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian adults did not have a high school education in 1990 (see Figure 7). Chinese and Vietnamese also have substantial percentages without a high school diploma. Only 13 percent of Japanese Americans and 15 percent of Asian Indians did not complete high school.

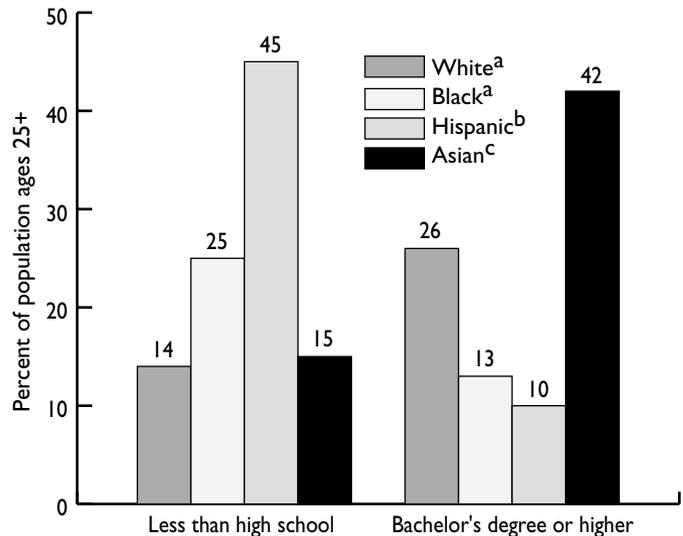
At the other end of the spectrum, more than 40 percent of Chinese and 58 percent of Asian Indian Americans have an undergraduate, graduate, or professional degree, compared with just 5 percent of Other Southeast Asian Americans.

In sum, Asian Americans tend to be highly educated and to surpass the non-Hispanic white majority in educational attainment. Asians' educational profiles differ markedly from those of other minority groups, which have higher school dropout rates and lower college completion rates than either Asians or whites.

There are clear variations across Asian American ethnic groups. Some groups, such as Japanese and Asian Indian Americans, are extremely well educated; a small percentage do not have a high school education and a large percentage have at least four years of college. Finally, some Asian ethnic groups have relatively high percentages at both the highest and lowest ends of the educational spectrum, creating a bipolar distribution. Among Chinese Americans, for example, recent immigrants have

Figure 6

Educational Attainment by Race and Ethnicity, 1997



^a Non-Hispanic.

^b May be of any race.

^c Includes Pacific Islanders, who were less than 5 percent of the 1990 Asian and Pacific Islander Population.

Source: Population Reference Bureau tabulations of the March 1997 Current Population Survey.

relatively low educational attainment while longer-term residents and the native born have relatively high levels.

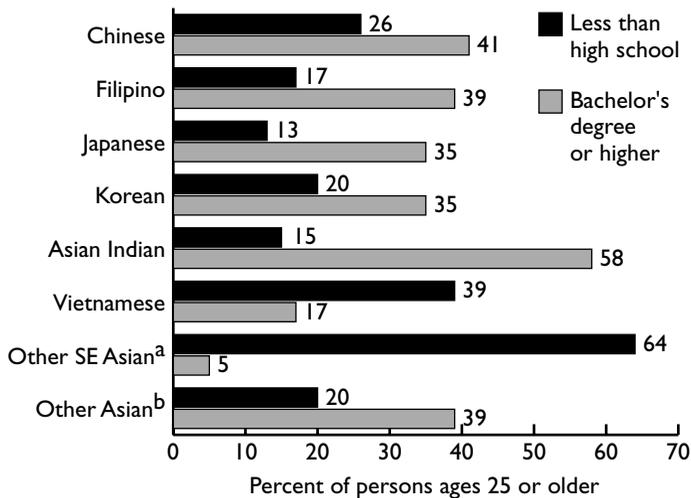
Gender and Nativity Differences

In general, American women have education levels similar to those of American men, but among Asian Americans, women have lower education levels than men. About 17 percent of Asian American women ages 25 or older had less than a high school education in 1997, compared with 13 percent of Asian American men. And 37 percent of Asian American women completed at least four years of college, compared with 48 percent of Asian American men.

This gender difference in educational attainment may be linked to the large percentage of immigrants among the Asian American population. Many immigrants came from countries where traditional cultural norms valued education for sons more than for daughters. The 1990 Census

Figure 7

Asian Ethnic Groups by Selected Education Category, 1990



^a Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

^b All other Asian American ethnic groups.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States CP-2-1* (November 1993): table 106.

provides the most recent evidence: Almost 30 percent of foreign-born Asian American women had less than a high school education in 1990, compared with 20 percent of foreign-born Asian American men.

Gender differences also exist at higher educational levels. About 45 percent of foreign-born Asian American men were college graduates, compared with 32 percent of foreign-born women. The gender difference is narrower among native-born Asian Americans and among younger Asians. Among Asian Americans who were ages 25 to 34 in 1990, 45 percent of men and 41 percent of women had completed four or more years of college.³¹

These educational characteristics and demographic trends suggest at least two changes as the native-born component of the Asian American population increases. First, the percentage of Asian Americans with less than a high school education will decline, easing the bipolar distribution that characterizes the Chinese and a few other Asian groups today. Second, gender differences in educa-

tional attainment will diminish and become similar to those of other racial and ethnic groups.

Asian Americans at Work

Most Asian American adults participate actively in the U.S. labor force. In 1997, the labor force participation rate for Asians (68 percent) was just above that of non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics (67 percent), and above the rate for African Americans (64 percent). Within the Asian American population, more recent immigrants, especially refugees, are less likely to be in the labor force (employed or actively seeking employment) and more likely to be unemployed than Asian Americans who immigrated before 1980 or who were born in the United States.

Educational levels and cultural factors also affect the work force profile of individual Asian ethnic groups. In general, Filipino and Asian Indians have much higher labor force participation rates than the other Asian ethnic groups, and Southeast Asians have lower participation and higher unemployment rates than the average for all Asians. The 1990 Census (the source of the most recent employment data for Asian ethnic groups) showed that 75 percent and 72 percent, respectively, of Filipino and Asian Indian Americans were in the labor force, compared with 67 percent of all Asians ages 16 or older. Just 48 percent of the Other Southeast Asians (Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans) were in the labor force in 1990. Unemployment rates varied from a low of 2.5 percent among Japanese Americans to 8.4 percent among Vietnamese and 10.7 percent among Other Southeast Asian Americans. Among the major racial and ethnic groups, only blacks had a higher unemployment rate, at 12.9 percent.

Gender Differences

Although women are entering the labor force in growing numbers,

gender differences in labor force characteristics persist because women traditionally have had greater responsibility for household and childrearing tasks. Men are more likely to be in the labor force and to work more hours per week. This gender difference is observed for all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Among Asian Americans, the gender gap is greatest among Asian Indians (84 percent of men and 59 percent of women were in the labor force) and smallest among Filipinos (79 percent of men and 72 percent of women were in the labor force), according to 1990 Census data.

The differences in labor force activity among Asian, Hispanic, black, and white women are small and are narrowing over time. The labor force participation rate for non-Hispanic white women has increased, closing the gap with Asian and other minority women. In 1990, 60 percent of Asian women were in the labor force, compared with 54 percent of white women. In 1997, 62 percent of Asian American and African American women were in the labor force, compared with 60 percent of whites. The rate for Hispanic women in 1997 (55 percent) was well below that of Asians and other groups. This gap has not narrowed since 1990. Filipino women have the highest rate of labor force participation among the major Asian groups (72 percent in 1990), while Southeast Asian women have the lowest rate (39 percent in 1990).

As the Asian American population continues to grow, the percent of the U.S. labor force that is Asian American also will increase. Some Asian American populations—for example, Asian Indian men and Filipino women—have particularly high rates of labor force participation. The Vietnamese and Other Southeast Asian populations, most of whom arrived as refugees after 1975, are less integrated into the U.S. labor force.

Foreign-Born Asians

Immigrants may encounter many obstacles in the work force; for

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Many Asian immigrants had high educational levels, which helps explain the educational achievements of their children.

example, limited ability to speak English, lack of work experience in the United States, and prejudice against immigrants from employers and co-workers. And different cohorts of Asian immigrants do not have the same success in the labor force. The 1990 Census shows that Asian immigrants who arrived in the previous decade had a lower labor force participation rate than those who arrived before 1980. About 62 percent of Asian immigrants who immigrated between 1980 and 1990 were in the labor force in 1989, compared with almost 73 percent of immigrants who arrived before 1980. This pattern of lower labor force participation among recent immigrants holds true for each national origin group. For example, 61 percent of recent Chinese immigrants were in the labor force in 1989 compared with 70 percent of Chinese immigrants who entered before 1980.

Foreign-born Japanese Americans have relatively low labor force participation rates regardless of when they immigrated. Two factors could contribute to these low rates. Many of the pre-1980 Japanese immigrants may be elderly and are no longer in the work force. And many recent Japanese

More recent immigrants, especially refugees, are less likely to be in the labor force.

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A relatively large percentage of Asian Americans work in professional and technical occupations, which reflects their high educational levels.

immigrants are nonworking wives of immigrants who were admitted under employment-based preferences.³²

The unemployment rate is higher among recent immigrants than among longer-term immigrants for most Asian American groups. In 1990, nearly 7 percent of Asian Americans who entered the United States between 1980 and 1990 were unemployed, while only 4.2 percent of long-term Asian residents were unemployed. Recent Japanese immigrants, however, had a slightly lower unemployment rate than Japanese immigrants who had resided in the United States for at least 10 years. This probably reflects the

relatively high percentage of Japanese admitted under employment-based immigrant preferences: They had jobs waiting for them.

Occupation

One consequence of Asian Americans' relatively high educational status is the large share who hold managerial and professional jobs. About one-third of Asian Americans had such high-level jobs in 1997, about the same as for non-Hispanic whites, and well above the share for blacks and Hispanics. The percentage of Asian Indians, Japanese, and Chinese Americans with managerial and professional jobs is particularly high (see Table 8). These figures mask the large percentage of some Asian ethnic groups who work in lower-paying jobs that require few skills. More than 20 percent of Vietnamese and 37 percent of Southeast Asian Americans worked as machine operators, fabricators, laborers, or in other unskilled or low-skilled jobs in 1990. The percentage of other Asian groups in these low-paying jobs was about the same, or lower, than for non-Hispanic whites and was well below the percentage for blacks and Hispanics.

The large share of Southeast Asians in low-skilled jobs may decline as this group gains experience in the U.S. labor market and improves its language skills. The children of these immigrants should have wider occupational choices when they enter the job market.

Income and Poverty

Asian Americans' median family income tends to be higher than that of whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Per capita income, a more accurate indicator of the financial resources available to each member of a family, is highest for whites, followed by Asian Americans, blacks, and Hispanics. Asians' family income is bolstered by the combined incomes of extended family members living in the household. In 1996, median family income

for Asians (including Pacific Islanders) was \$43,000, \$3,000 more than that of non-Hispanic whites, nearly \$18,000 above the median for Hispanics, and nearly \$20,000 above the median family income of blacks. But racial and ethnic differences in per capita incomes were much smaller. Asian Americans' median per capita income (\$18,000) was just below the median for whites (\$19,000), and above the medians for blacks (\$12,000) and Hispanics (\$10,000).³³

There are considerable income differences among Asian American ethnic groups, consistent with their differences in education and occupation. The 1990 Census showed that the per capita incomes of two Asian American groups—Japanese and Asian Indians—exceeded those of whites, while the per capita incomes of Vietnamese and Other Southeast Asians were extremely low, about \$11,000 in 1989.

Poverty rates offer additional evidence of income stratification in the Asian American population. Filipino, Japanese, and Asian Indian American families are about as likely as white families to have incomes below the poverty level: between 3 percent and 7 percent in 1989.

The 1990 Census showed that more recent immigrant groups had higher poverty rates than Asians who have been in the United States for at least a decade. This is consistent with the higher unemployment for recent immigrants. Nearly 24 percent of Vietnamese families were below poverty in 1989, as were 15 percent of Korean American families. Although Chinese American families have among the highest incomes and the lowest poverty rates of any group, recent immigrants are less fortunate. More than one-fifth of Chinese immigrant families entering the United States since 1980 had below-poverty incomes in 1989.

Income and poverty data reveal two important findings. First, Asian Americans, like other minorities, have not reached economic parity with whites. In 1996, the poverty rate for

Table 8

Percent Who Work in High- and Low-Skill Occupations by Race and Ethnicity, 1990 and 1997

Race/ethnic group	Managerial/ professional	Semi-skilled/ unskilled
1997		
White, non-Hispanic	33	12
Black, non-Hispanic	19	20
Hispanic	15	23
Asian ^a	35	14
1990		
White, non-Hispanic	29	13
Black, non-Hispanic	18	21
Hispanic	14	23
Asian	31	12
Asian ethnic groups		
Chinese	36	11
Filipino	27	11
Japanese	37	7
Korean	26	13
Asian Indian	44	9
Vietnamese	18	21
Other SE Asian ^b	8	37

^a Includes Pacific Islanders, who made up less than 5 percent of the 1990 Asian and Pacific Islander population.

^b Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics United States, CP-2-1* (November 1993); tables 44-47; and *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States CP-3-5* (August 1993); table 4; and Population Reference Bureau tabulations of the March 1997 Current Population Survey.

Asian and Pacific Islander families was less than one-half of the rates for Hispanic and African Americans, yet it was nearly twice the rate for non-Hispanic whites (see Figure 8). The gap between Asians and whites appears to have widened in recent years, as poverty rates fell for whites but increased for Asians.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, there is substantial income inequality among Asian Americans. The most recent poverty rates for Asian Indian, Filipino, and Japanese American families (for 1989) were the same or lower than the rate for white non-Hispanics, while the rates for Vietnamese and Korean Americans were much higher. Among all groups, recent immigrants are more likely than longer-term residents to have

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Southeast Asians who entered as refugees tend to hold low-paying jobs, but their occupational options may improve as they gain experience and English language skills.

below-poverty incomes. About 20 percent of Chinese who immigrated between 1980 and 1990 were in poverty in 1989, compared with 6 percent of Chinese who arrived before 1980. Almost one-half of Southeast Asian American families received public assistance in 1989. Southeast Asian refugees qualify for some public assistance to help them resettle in the United States. But these programs often do not raise family incomes above the poverty threshold.³⁴ And many Southeast Asian immigrants lacked the education, language, and

job skills necessary to secure jobs that pay enough to keep their families out of poverty.

Many elderly foreign-born Asian Americans depend on public assistance income, mainly Supplemental Security Income, or SSI.³⁵ They were directly affected by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which restricts the eligibility of noncitizens for many federally funded social welfare programs, including SSI.³⁶ As welfare benefits are cut further, the income gap among Asian Americans of all ages is likely to widen.

Emerging Political Influence

Asian Americans are unlikely to attain political influence and power equal to that of larger minority populations such as blacks and Hispanic Americans. As the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population continues to change and the native-born Asian population expands, however, the Asian American vote is likely to become more influential.³⁷

Becoming Citizens

Because about 60 percent of the Asian American population is foreign born, increasing the share who take U.S. citizenship is an important first step in enhancing Asian Americans' political participation. Immigrants must satisfy several qualifications before they can naturalize. They must be legal residents of the United States for a specified number of years (five years in most cases) and they must demonstrate basic knowledge of U.S. history and government.

Asian immigrants are more likely to naturalize than immigrants from Europe or Latin America. The longer distance between the United States and their countries of origin and the political problems that make it unlikely refugees will ever return home might explain the greater propensity for Asian Americans to naturalize. The 1990 Census docu-

mented that just over 43 percent of foreign-born Asian Americans ages 18 or older were naturalized citizens, compared with about one-third of all foreign-born U.S. residents. The rate of naturalization varies by ethnic group, period of immigration, and the specific circumstances that prompted emigration from the home country. In 1990, many people in the most recent wave of Southeast Asian immigrants would not have lived in the country long enough to qualify for naturalization. Filipino, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean Americans had the highest rates of naturalization, while foreign-born Japanese and Other Southeast Asians had the lowest. Naturalization rates are much higher among longer-term residents across all ethnic groups. Excluding Southeast Asians, one-half or more of the Asian immigrants who arrived before 1980 are naturalized citizens.³⁸

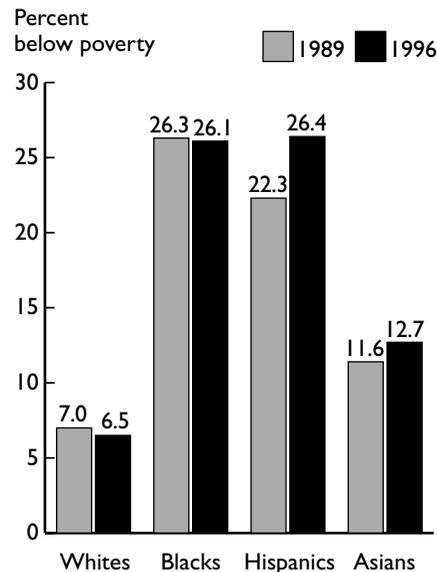
Political Participation

Many Americans do not vote in national elections. Only one-half of the population ages 18 or older cast ballots in the 1996 presidential election.³⁹ Rates of voter participation are especially low among young adults and people with less than a high school education. Minorities—who tend to be younger and have lower educational attainment than whites—also have a lower voter turnout than whites.⁴⁰ Asian Americans are no exception. Many foreign-born Asian Americans, even if they are naturalized, may not understand voting procedures. Many are unfamiliar with the U.S. system of democratic government or may be generally suspicious of politics because of experiences in their native lands. While about 50 percent of whites voted in the 1994 congressional election, 40 percent of Asian American citizens participated, about the same as for blacks. Hispanics had the lowest voting rate at 34 percent.

While Asian immigrants have low rates of voter participation,⁴¹ their relatively high rates of naturalization

Figure 8

Percent of Families With Incomes Below Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 1989 and 1996



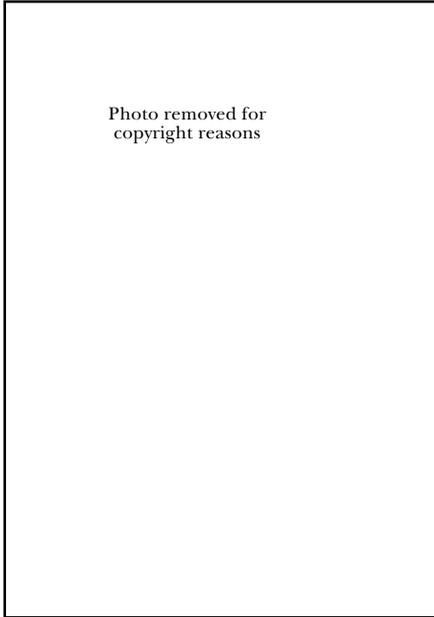
Note: Whites, blacks, and Asians are non-Hispanic. Asians include Pacific Islanders, who accounted for less than 5 percent of the Asian and Pacific Islander population in 1990.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population, Social and Economic Characteristics, United States CP-2-1: tables 112, 137, 140 and 141*; and the March 1997 Current Population Survey. Accessed online at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/poverty96/pv96est.html>.

suggest that they may become more politically active the longer they are in the country. In addition, actions that make it easier for citizens to register and vote—such as allowing people to register at Department of Motor Vehicles offices and to vote by mail—may increase the voting rates of Asian Americans as well as other Americans.

Who Do Asian Americans Vote For?

Racial and ethnic minorities in the United States traditionally support political parties and candidates that champion issues of civil rights, equal opportunity, and affirmative action. In addition, a population dominated by immigrants would not be expected to support candidates who press for



Washington's Governor Gary Locke was the first Chinese American elected to a governor's office, and the first Asian American governor outside Hawaii.

legislation that negatively affects immigrants. Welfare reform passed in 1996, for example, made legal immigrants who are not citizens ineligible for many federal social support programs.

Asian Americans do not vote the same way as do other minorities. The majority of Asian American voters supported the Republican presidential candidates in the 1992 and 1996 elections, for example, while the majority of blacks and Hispanics voted for the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton. The percentage of Asian Americans who voted for Clinton was substantially higher in 1996 than in 1992 (43 percent and 31 percent, respectively).⁴² Their support for the Democratic candidate may have been in response to perceived Republican anti-immigrant attitudes in the 1990s.

Data on Asian Americans' political party identification and voting patterns are scarce. Two exit polls conducted in 1996 in southern California and the San Francisco Bay

Area provide some information in two areas with large Asian populations.⁴³ The southern California study found that 40 percent of Asian Americans in southern California identify with the Republican Party, 36 percent identify with the Democratic Party, and 21 percent have no party identification. During the 1996 elections, the majority of Asian Americans surveyed in all Asian ethnic groups except Vietnamese voted for Clinton. The support for Clinton was especially high among Chinese (65 percent) and Koreans (60 percent). The San Francisco study reported a stronger affiliation with the Democratic Party, again except for Vietnamese; 66 percent of Asian respondents identified themselves as Democrats and only 17 percent identified with the Republican Party. Seventy-five percent of Asian voters supported Clinton in 1996.

Seeking Elected Office

Asian Americans, particularly Japanese Americans, have been prominent in Hawaiian politics for many years, primarily in the Democratic Party. Hawaii has sent many Asian American senators to Washington, D.C., including Sens. Hiram Fong, Daniel Inouye, and Spark Matsunaga. Elsewhere, particularly in states with significant Asian American populations, many Asian Americans have run for elected office. Recent examples include Michael Woo, who ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Los Angeles in 1993, and Michael Honda and Nao Takasugi, who were elected to the California State Assembly in the 1990s. Among the most prominent Asian American political leaders is Governor Gary Locke of Washington. Governor Locke is the first Chinese American elected as governor in any state and the first Asian American governor outside of Hawaii. In the 1996 election, Locke received 59 percent of the vote in a state where Asian Americans are less than 6 percent of the population.

Many black and Hispanic elected officials represent voting districts where blacks or Hispanics make up a majority of the population. Asians are not likely to form the majority population in many congressional districts because they are few relative to other groups and because they tend to be less residentially segregated than blacks and Hispanics. Asian Americans who run for elected office must appeal to non-Asian Americans in order to win, just as Gary Locke did in Washington.

The Future of Asian Americans

Asian Americans are an integral part of a changing U.S. society. The Asian American population is also changing as it absorbs new immigrants and a growing native-born population. Its future will be shaped by three factors raised earlier: the social status and

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Many Asian Americans strive to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to life in the United States.

position of Asian Americans; the meaning of “Asian American” in an increasingly diverse population; and the demographic impact of Asians on the U.S. population and society.

Evolving Status

Using conventional indicators such as education, occupation, and income, many Asian Americans have fared well and are considered part of the American middle class. Yet a significant part of the Asian American population is economically disadvantaged. High levels of poverty and use of public assistance, and low educational attainment and labor force participation characterize many Asian Americans. Poverty and economic marginality are concentrated among Asian American refugee populations, such as Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians.⁴⁴ There is some evidence that these Asian American populations are becoming part of the American underclass, which is composed of people who lack the social and technical skills to find and keep jobs and who experience chronic unemployment and poverty. However, second- and third-generation Southeast Asian Americans will have better

Affirmative Action: Help or Hindrance to Asian Americans?

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued Executive Order 11246, which required that federal contractors take “affirmative action” to increase the number of minorities they hired. This order laid the groundwork for a series of laws and regulations to promote economic advancement for women and for groups that had suffered racial or ethnic discrimination. These efforts, whether initiated by government or private industry, came to be known as affirmative action. Such programs tried to rectify the effects of past discrimination by giving women and racial minorities preference in, for example, college admissions, hiring, or job promotion. Asian Americans, along with African Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos, were entitled to participate in many affirmative action programs. Many Asian Americans directly benefited from such programs. One Small Business Administration program, for example, helped many Asian American-owned businesses to succeed.¹

Critics say that affirmative action programs are failed attempts at social engineering and that they discriminate against whites (particularly white men) and sometimes against Asian Americans. Asian Americans have conflicting opinions about whether affirmative action helps or hinders them and about whether it should be continued.

Many Asian Americans support affirmative action to counteract persistent racial prejudice against

Asians.² The high levels of education attainment and upward social mobility of many Asian groups have not eliminated racial discrimination in hiring and promotion. Japanese and Asian Indian Americans, for example, have among the highest educational levels of any racial or ethnic group. Many hold highly paid professional or managerial jobs, but they rarely enter top management positions. Civil rights advocates attribute this inability to reach the top to a “glass ceiling”—an artificial barrier that prevents individuals from achieving their full potential.³ Affirmative action laws can encourage employers to shatter the glass ceiling by promoting Asian Americans into top management positions.

Other Asian Americans believe that affirmative action has hurt them, especially in admissions to elite universities. In 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that universities could consider a student’s race in the admissions decision, and many universities adopted diversity policies to achieve a more diverse student body. But this limited the admission of Asian American students because many universities admitted far fewer Asian Americans than were qualified to enter.⁴

California recently ended affirmative action in public institutions with the passage of Proposition 209, reflecting the growing public sentiments against giving an individual preference because of his or her race or gender. Under the new law, college admissions officers can no longer consider a candidate’s race in their

Many Asian Americans support affirmative action to counteract persistent racial prejudice against Asians.

education and English language skills, which should translate into better job opportunities and incomes. As the U.S.-born component increases, Southeast Asians’ economic status should improve.

The well-being of Asian Americans is tied to their status as a racial minority. Their minority status affects the opportunities open to them (see Box 4, page 32).⁴⁵ Being labeled a racial minority affects all Asians, but it

is particularly important for the disadvantaged Asian ethnic groups.

Asian Americans are likely to remain a minority in numbers, but some analysts believe they will transcend the constraints of minority status and become an ethnic group, as did Italians, Irish, and other immigrant groups that were subject to intense discrimination when they first settled in the United States.

Growing diversity through immigration, the increase in native-born Asians, the blurring of racial lines through intermarriage, and the increasing visibility of Asian Americans in business and politics are likely to change the public's perception of what it means to be an Asian American. But whether Asian Americans lose their minority label will depend upon how the majority non-Asian society deals with race issues in the coming decades.⁴⁶

Asian Identity

The term Asian American encompasses an astounding variety of people, languages, religions, and cultures. The foreign-born majority tends to identify with the country of their birth. But even if immigration remains at high levels, a greater percentage of Asian Americans will be second-, third-, and higher-generation Americans. Demographers Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passel estimate that by 2040, 37 percent of Asian Americans will be second-generation and 14 percent will be third- or higher-generation Americans, compared with just 22 percent second-generation and 12 percent third- or higher-generation in 1990.⁴⁷

Researchers have found that young second-generation Asians are adapting well to life in the United States. This bodes well for the well-being of the next generation. While the children of immigrants generally do well in school, second-generation Asians do especially well. They make better grades and are less likely to drop out of high school than their black and Hispanic peers.⁴⁸

The second generation of each group will reflect the situation of its parents, but will develop its own identity—as will the third and succeeding generations. Japanese Americans are an example of what can happen when immigrant and ethnic groups have been in the country for several generations and are no longer refreshed by immigration—they marry outside their group and assume many characteristics of the dominant ethnic group. But will other Asian ethnic groups follow the same path?

The experience and growth of native-born Asians today suggest that by the middle of the next century most Asian Americans will speak English well (English will be the first language for many), they will be educated in U.S. schools, and they will increasingly marry non-Asians.

Asian Americans' identity is likely to change as a result. Some of their multiracial children will identify themselves as Asian, while others will not.⁴⁹

Influence on U.S. Society

Despite their remarkable pace of growth, Asian Americans will remain a small proportion of the U.S. population. Their influence on American institutions and culture will expand, largely because of their high average educational levels and increasing interaction with non-Asians. Asian Americans are founding high-tech companies in California's Silicon Valley, teaching at many U.S. universities, and practicing medicine at many hospitals. Asian American students have a high visibility on university campuses, especially in western states.

Asian Americans' geographic sphere of influence is also widening. They will be less concentrated in western states and a few large cities. U.S.-born Asian Americans in particular are likely to settle in new communities in response to economic factors that are unrelated to the immigrant histories of their parents and grandparents. Asian Indians are already geographically dispersed even though they are a relatively recent immigrant

[Because of affirmative action] many universities admitted far fewer Asian Americans than were qualified to enter.

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Asian American identity will continue to evolve as second- and third-generation Americans make up an increasing share of the Asian American population.

group. As the Asian American population grows and relocates, more non-Asians will know Asian Americans as co-workers and neighbors.

The effects of Asian Americans on U.S. society will be varied and diffuse and they may be tempered or accentuated by the complex demographic, political, and social changes that are occurring in the United States today. But just as previous immigrant groups were altered by life in the United

States, U.S. society has been profoundly altered by immigrants. The transformation of Asians into Asian Americans is happening at the time that American pluralism itself is deepening and expanding.

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Discussion Questions

1. How has immigration changed the Asian American population?
2. Debate the validity of the racial category "Asian American." Discuss the reasons for and against using such a label to describe the different groups included as Asian Americans.
3. Why do you think many Asian Americans have high levels of education?
4. The Asian American population is concentrated in certain western states, for example, California and Hawaii. How does this affect the demography, labor force, and relations between racial and ethnic groups in these states?
5. Describe the concept of "model minorities" as applied to Asian Americans.
6. Intermarriage has blurred racial and ethnic identity for many Americans. How will this affect Asian Americans?
7. What factors will determine the success of Asian American political candidates at the local, state, and national levels?

Prepared by Sharon M. Lee

Abstract—The number of Asian Americans nearly doubled between 1980 and 1990. Asian Americans now make up about 4 percent of the U.S. population. Their numbers are expected to double again by 2010. Immigration has increased the number and ethnic diversity of Asian Americans. While 96 percent of the 1970 Asian American population was Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino, these three groups accounted for just over 50 percent of Asian Americans in 1997. Americans with ethnic origins in India, Vietnam, and Korea now outnumber Japanese Americans. The growing diversity of Asian Americans and relatively high rate of marriage of Asians to non-Asians in the United States are among the reasons why Asian Americans do not conform to the common stereotype of a U.S. racial minority. This *Population Bulletin* explores the changing ethnic, social, and demographic characteristics of Asian Americans and their effect on U.S. society.

Asian Americans differ in many ways from the two largest U.S. racial and ethnic minority groups—African Americans and Hispanics. Asian Americans tend to have higher average education levels and incomes than African Americans and Hispanics, which has caused some to call Asians a “model minority.” Yet recent Asian immigrants, such as those from Southeast Asia, are changing the socioeconomic profile of the Asian American population. Almost two-thirds of Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian adults did not have a high school education in 1990. By contrast, only about 13 percent of Japanese Americans did not have a high school diploma. And, while poverty rates fell for whites in the 1990s, they increased among Asians. Asian American refugees and immigrants who arrived after 1980 still struggle to keep employed and stay above the poverty level. Their children and grandchildren, however, are likely to fare much better in the U.S. job market.

This *Population Bulletin* illuminates the forces behind the dramatic growth and diversity of the Asian American population, and explores the changing meaning of the words “Asian American.”

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