Reading Between the Data

The Incomplete Story of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders

By Farah Z. Ahmad and Christian E. Weller   March 2014

Center for American Progress

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Introduction and summary

Income inequality has become one of our greatest obstacles to economic mobility, as U.S. residents today face unequal opportunities and access to the American Dream. Some people have it better than others: Whites earn higher incomes and greater access to education and health care than communities of color.[1] But there are large variations even between different communities of color, with African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans—as well as multiracial Americans and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, or AAPI—all facing different challenges. There are further differences within these individual populations, particularly among AAPIs. As policymakers craft interventions to best address inequality, it is vital that their data are robust and their analysis is performed thoughtfully. This will ensure not only that policy solutions efficiently address the problem but also that they successfully acknowledge the diversity within different communities.

While not the only criterion,[2] efficiency is very important to the design of public policy. More efficient public policy means that more government services and social programs can help Americans who need assistance. For programs to be efficient, however, their target audiences must be clearly identified; this is not always a simple task. In the United States, identifying target audiences to determine the distribution of public services often requires a working definition of race and ethnicity, as communities of color frequently struggle with economic disadvantages that require these services. But population data that are broken down by race and ethnicity often only exist at highly aggregated levels, meaning that groups of people with very different cultural, social, and historical backgrounds end up being lumped into one larger group. For example, people of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian descent—among many others—make up the Asian American population, even though their socioeconomic experiences vary widely. Therefore, programs and services targeted toward only the broader Asian American population may struggle to meet the specific needs of some subpopulations.

This report discusses some of the data available on Asian Americans. It then presents and explains the challenges associated with the data and offers policy recommendations to address them. During our research, we discovered that:

- Asian Americans are a very diverse population group. The term "Asian" in official government statistics is a racial category based on the history of U.S. migration and race relations. It encompasses immigrants from Asia and people of Asian descent born in the United States. Asians come from Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Thai backgrounds, among many others. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander has been a different racial category in the decennial census since 2000, and the category was added for data collected by all federal agencies no later than January 1, 2003.[3]

- People of Asian descent are the fastest-growing population in the United States. The portion of the U.S. population that self-identifies as Asian grew 46 percent from 2000 to 2010.[4] The Asian American population grew by 2.9 percent in 2012, compared to the Hispanic population, which grew 2.2 percent. However, the total population of Hispanics is still markedly bigger at 53 million people; there are still only 18.9 million Asian Americans.[5]

- Asian Americans have highly varied economic experiences. A substantial share of Asian American subpopulations struggle with high poverty and a lack of health insurance, but these struggles are often masked by the high employment and incomes of other, larger Asian American subpopulations.

To both increase the number of respondents willing to identify their race and ethnicities and better disseminate disaggregated data, we recommend that the federal government do the following:

- Conduct surveys in the most common languages of relevant subpopulations

- Encourage the Census Bureau and other federal statistical agencies to continue researching more ways to capture subpopulation data, including national origin

- Oversample respondents from subpopulations that are likely to underreport

- Generate disaggregated data in addition to its aggregated data whenever possible

- Create a central data repository on communities of color, including—but not limited to—Asian Americans

The importance of Asian Americans

Asian Americans are a growing share of the U.S. population and offer our nation a variety of talents and rich cultures. They are an important part of the country's communities of color—communities that include African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Communities of color will account for the majority of U.S. residents by 2043 and make up a majority of the workforce by 2045.[6] Importantly, 92 percent of U.S. population growth over the past decade has come from people of color—a trend that will continue in the years to come.[7] But with these communities' low rates of education, training, and economic opportunity, we will not meet future needs, and our economy will suffer.[8] Ten years from now, 36 million American jobs will require some education beyond high school; if nothing changes, we will not be able to fill 5 million of them.[9] While many Asian Americans have high levels of education, a large share of this population does not. In fact, some groups have quite the opposite experience, with low high school graduation rates that may be caused by their poor or underprivileged backgrounds—such as those of many Southeast Asians—and a lack of access to affordable higher education.[10]

With growing diversity comes a tremendous opportunity to build a robust, sustainable, and competitive economy that benefits all Americans. This is why closing racial gaps, such as those within the Asian American community, is more important than ever. If we had managed to close racial and ethnic gaps in 2011, the year in which the data we analyzed were collected, average yearly income and gross domestic product, or GDP, would be substantially higher, and 13 million people would have been lifted out of poverty.[11]

In order to close these gaps, we need to make important policy changes in education, health care, the workforce, and immigration, as outlined in the recent Center for American Progress publication *All-In Nation: An America that Works for All*. Furthermore, we need to make sure these policies are right for the communities they affect. To do this, policymakers must examine data in a meaningful way, particularly in regard to the Asian American community, where diversity is often masked when policies only consider the median or average community member.

Asian Americans: A diverse and fast-growing part of the U.S. population

Race and ethnicity are distinct government data categories. In their book *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, academics Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann provide nuanced definitions of race and ethnicity that rely heavily on the theory of social constructivism—the idea that race is defined by social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances.[12] They define race as:

> a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. … Determining which characteristics constitute the race … is a choice human beings make. Neither markers nor categories are predetermined by any biological factors.[13]
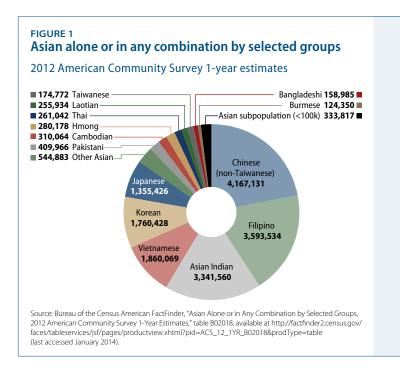
Ethnicity, they say, is "a sense of common ancestry based on cultural attachments, past linguistic heritage, religious affiliations, claimed kinship, or some physical traits."[14] They further clarify that racial identities are typically thought of as encompassing multiple ethnic identities.[15] The Asian racial category in the U.S. context, for example, contains many ethnicities and origins, including Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, and Bangladeshi. Similarly, the Hispanic ethnicity is defined as a person belonging to or of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.[16]

Although the aforementioned concept of race is often seen as more of a self-perceived physical construct and ethnicity as more of a cultural one, both of these concepts and national origin have no generally agreed upon definition.[17] But the federal government, as determined by the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, has five minimum categories for race in federal statistics, program administrative reporting, and civil rights compliance reporting.[18] The federal government notes that these categories are for data-collection purposes only and are social-political constructs that should not be interpreted as scientific or anthropological in nature.[19] These categories are "American Indian or Alaska Native," "Asian," "Black or African American," "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander," and "White."[20] Additionally, there are two categories for data on ethnicity: "Hispanic or Latino," and "Not Hispanic or Latino."[21] While these categories may seem innocuous, they carry considerable historical weight based on past patterns of racial discrimination, colonization, and immigration.[22]

"Asian" is deemed a racial category for all federal agencies that perform data collection. As such, it refers to "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam."[23] Asians make up a considerable portion of the U.S. population, which totals close to 314 million people: More than 18 million people, or 5.8 percent of the population, are AAPI.[24] Some subpopulations make up a larger share of the Asian American population than others. Below is a chart displaying the 14 largest Asian American groups by origin.

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing population in the United States, even though the sheer size of the population that identifies as Hispanic is much larger—53 million people.[25] The population self-identifying as Asian grew 45.6 percent from 2000 to 2010.[26] This trend continued from 2010 to 2012: The Asian American population grew 2.9 percent in 2012, compared to the Hispanic population, which grew 2.2 percent.

During this period, Asian American growth was rather rapid across much of the country. All but one state increased their Asian populations from 2000 to 2010 with growth rates between 30 percent and 116 percent. Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina, North Dakota, and Georgia were the five states with the fastest growth.[27]

FIGURE 1
Asian alone or in any combination by selected groups

2012 American Community Survey 1-year estimates

- 174,772 Taiwanese
- 255,934 Laotian
- 261,042 Thai
- 280,178 Hmong
- 310,064 Cambodian
- 409,966 Pakistani
- 544,883 Other Asian
- Bangladeshi 158,985
- Burmese 124,350
- Asian subpopulation (<100k) 333,817
- Chinese (non-Taiwanese) 4,167,131
- Filipino 3,593,534
- Asian Indian 3,341,560
- Vietnamese 1,860,069
- Korean 1,760,428
- Japanese 1,355,426

Source: Bureau of the Census American FactFinder, "Asian Alone or in Any Combination by Selected Groups, 2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," table B02018, available at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_12_1YR_B02018&prodType=table (last accessed January 2014).

Challenges in using Asian American data

While the above definitions may seem relatively straightforward, they hide major challenges in using Asian American data.[28] We discuss these challenges and their policy implications in the following sections.

Self-identification of racial categories can prevent detailed analysis of the Asian American experience

The OMB views self-identification as the preferred method of obtaining information on individuals' race and ethnicity;[29] the U.S. government thus relies on people's self-identification when collecting data by race and ethnicity. This can lead to underreporting for a variety of reasons. Survey data analysts using agency guidance, for example, may view certain people's race differently than they would identify themselves. The OMB offered guidance in 2000 that sought to produce a relatively easy method to ensure that data were consistent across federal agencies, allowing for easier and more straightforward enforcement of civil rights laws. Among other guidance, it deemed that "responses that combine one minority race and white are allocated to the minority race."[30] If a person identifies as both Asian and white, for example, that person's race will be allocated to the "Asian in combination" race category, which distinguishes the response from those that indicate "Asian alone" but does not provide more detail.[31] The government sees the minority race as the dominant identity, while individuals may not personally ascribe to that view. Because of this determination, data by race may be artificially skewed for minority communities, including Asian Americans.

Self-identification also poses a particular problem for the collection of accurate and comprehensive Asian American data. Many Asian Americans do not view their race as Asian, even though the Census would view it as such. This is because being Asian American often is seen as more experiential than physical or biological.[32] The term "Asian American" is largely a geopolitical construct that resulted over time as a product of immigration from the Asian continent to

the United States. Outside of the United States, individuals do not necessarily identify as Asian but rather identify based on their ethnicities or nationalities—as, for instance, Chinese or Indian.[33] In fact, most Asian Americans self-identified in the 2012 Asian American Survey as either their ethnic group—Filipino, for example—or an ethnic American—Filipino American—rather than Asian American or Asian.[34] Forty-six percent of those surveyed who were of Filipino descent identified as "Filipino Americans," compared to 40 percent who identified as "Filipino," 15 percent as "Asian American," 15 percent as "Asian," and just 3 percent as "American." This dominance of self-identifying by country-of-origin American over Asian American holds true for both foreign-born and native-born Asian Americans.[35] It is thus important to note as we analyze data that such self-identification is an evolving process, especially as the population of native-born Asians increases and immigrants stay longer in the United States.[36]

Other reasons for the underreporting of race and ethnicity could include language barriers, lack of trust of government, and cultural obstacles, such as the genders of the interviewer and interviewee for survey data that are collected over the phone and in person. Federal government statisticians can address such issues, within limits, to make sure that data indeed reflect much of the Asian American experience. These statisticians can employ various methods, including the reallocation of country-of-origin-American responses to the Asian American category. However, the lack of specific reporting can prevent researchers from breaking down data by age, gender, and subpopulation characteristics and analyzing it at a more granular level.

Additionally, the inclusion of Pacific Islanders in the Asian American category is largely seen as a result of their shared experience of marginalization in the United States.[37] Thus, the merging of these groups into one singular racial category is inherently a more experiential allocation than a physical one.
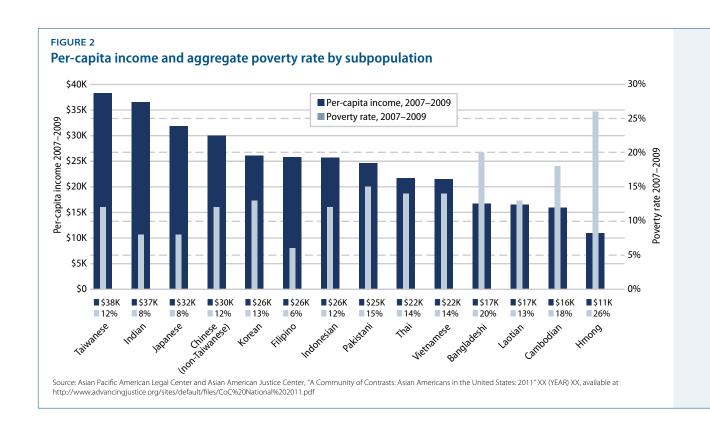
While necessary, data aggregation misses experiences of key subpopulations

The aggregation of Asian American data occurs at several levels. A number of federal government datasets do not include information on Asians as a subcategory. For example, the Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances—a key dataset on household wealth—does not allow for self-reporting of Asian as a race. Even among datasets that do permit for the possibility of self-identification as Asian, more specified groupings by origin, for instance, are often unavailable. This is especially problematic for many advocates—such as policy think tanks and non-

profit organizations—that often rely on summary data from third parties—such as research organizations and the government. These summary data often do not separate information on Asians from other racial and ethnic categories, such as American Indians, and do not break down Asian American data by age, gender, and subpopulation, even when that information has been collected.

That is not to say that aggregating data is without merit. It is necessary to some degree because of small sample sizes in the data on Asian subpopulations. In this instance, multiple years of these data—if it exists at all—would likely have to be combined to constitute a representative sample. Aggregation is also necessary for historical comparisons. An agency may collect data on Asians now, but that does not mean that it did so in the past. The creation of the "other" category in some routine surveys—which combines information on Asian Americans with other groups that have small sample sizes—allows for these time comparisons.

Nevertheless, data aggregation masks the tremendous and rapidly changing diversity in the Asian American population. The composition of the Asian American population has changed over the past century, becoming more diverse with respect to national origin. In the early 20th century, the Asian American population was primarily made up of Chinese and Japanese Americans; these people are less than one-third of the population today.[38] The Pacific Islander population is also diverse but consists of fewer subpopulations than the Asian American population since half of it is comprised of Native Hawaiians and Samoans.[39]

This ethnic diversity has led to increasing diversity in the social and economic well-being of the Asian American community. These incredibly varied individuals and communities often tell a misleading story when considered together—that the Asian American community, on average, is doing the best of any demographic group or at least performing as well as non-Hispanic whites. A closer look at the data shows this is not the case. Interestingly, although the Asian American population is diverse, it is largely a bifurcated population: There are many Asian Americans who fare very well across a wide range of economic indicators, such as income level and employment, but there is also a sizable group that fares poorly when it comes to such indicators as uninsured and poverty rates.

FIGURE 2

Per-capita income and aggregate poverty rate by subpopulation

	Taiwanese	Indian	Japanese	Chinese (non-Taiwanese)	Korean	Filipino	Indonesian	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese	Bangladeshi	Laotian	Cambodian	Hmong
■ Per-capita income	$38K	$37K	$32K	$30K	$26K	$26K	$26K	$25K	$22K	$22K	$17K	$17K	$16K	$11K
■ Poverty rate	12%	8%	8%	12%	13%	6%	12%	15%	14%	14%	20%	13%	18%	26%

Legend: ■ Per-capita income, 2007–2009; ■ Poverty rate, 2007–2009

Source: Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, "A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans in the United States: 2011" XX (YEAR) XX, available at http://www.advancingjustice.org/sites/default/files/CoC%20National%202011.pdf

Language barriers present significant challenges in precise data collection

Close to 77 percent of Asian Americans spoke a language other than English at home in 2011. This was a greater percentage than that of any other population in the United States.[40] Of these almost 11 million Asian Americans, 47 percent spoke English less than "very well"—again, a percentage higher than that of any other population, including Hispanics.[41] As the Asian American population grows, so too does the number of Asian Americans who speak languages other than English at home. From 1980 to 2010, the number of people in the United States who spoke Chinese at home grew 345 percent, and the number who spoke Vietnamese increased 600 percent.[42] Between 2000 and 2011, the use of "other Asian languages"—including Turkish and Dravidian languages such as Malayalam, Telugu, and Tamil[43]—grew the fastest.[44] Because of this, and because a large share of this population has limited English proficiency, or LEP,[45] surveys conducted solely in English may collect inaccurate data due to a lack of understanding, and they may also leave out a segment of the population that cannot participate. In fact, many Asian Americans are opting for in-language surveys—surveys in their native languages—when they have the opportunity to do so: In a 2012 post-election survey of Asian Americans, 46 percent of respondents opted for an in-language survey.[46]

Explaining the variances in the Asian American community

The variances within the Asian American community are much greater than those in other ethnically diverse communities. They can be attributed to a variety of factors, including—but not limited to—place of birth, immigration status, culture, and geographic location. We discuss place of birth and immigration status below.

Place of birth: Foreign born versus U.S. born

Foreign-born immigrants make up 13 percent of the U.S. population.[47] Asians have recently taken the lead as the largest share of documented people immigrating to the United States. Outside of this population, there are an estimated 1.3 million undocumented Asian immigrants in the United States.[48] Three out of four Asian American adults are foreign born, the highest share of any group.[49]

The rate of increase in Asian immigration to the United States has been incredibly high, and Asian immigrants have overtaken Hispanics in recent years—Asians made up 36 percent of the overall immigrant population in 2010, and Hispanics made up 31 percent.[50] Immigration is one of the main drivers of Asian population growth in the United States. This is markedly different from the Latino community, in which population growth is largely driven by birth rate.[51] However, the native-born share of Asian Americans is slowly increasing as well. Between 2007 and 2009, 60 percent of the nation's Asian American population was foreign born, a drop from 63 percent in 2000.[52]
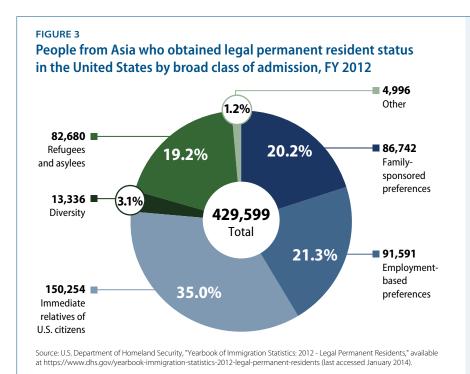
Large numbers of Asian Americans are recent immigrants. One in three of the 9.2 million foreign-born Asian Americans entered the United States in the first decade of the 21st century.[53] About 70 percent of Malaysian, Bangladeshi, Indian, and Taiwanese Americans were born abroad.[54] But a substantial number of immigrants are long-term U.S. residents or many generations of their families have lived in the United States. Examples of this include the many Japanese immigrants who arrived in the United States during the 19th century and the Chinese immigrant laborers who helped build the transcontinental railroad, which was completed in 1869.[55]

Reasons for emigration and immigration status

Immigrants come to the United States for myriad reasons—such as reuniting with their families, furthering their education, accepting employment, making investments, and escaping oppressive home countries—with their reasons reflecting their economic status and affecting their economic mobility. Consistently, the

largest number of Asian immigrants who arrive in the United States come on family sponsored visas for immediate relatives of U.S. citizens; 35 percent of visas issued to people born in Asia were family sponsored in fiscal year 2012, and an additional 20 percent of immigrants arrived on family sponsored preferences.[56] This compares to the 22 percent that arrive on employment-based preferences and the 19 percent that arrive as refugees and asylees.[57] Yet the visa process can be incredibly difficult to pass through if one has a certain type of visa due to caps on the number of visas issued annually that result in issuance backlogs. The visa waitlist for applicants from Asian countries is huge. For family visas, the waitlist is close to 18 million people. For employment visas, however, it is only slightly more than 94,000 people.[58]

As such, many Asians immigrants come to the United States on education visas, pursuing opportunities such as graduate school. Chinese and Indian Americans—who make up two of the biggest shares of the Asian American population—obtain a large amount of issued education visas. The growing middle class in China is one major reason for the increase in Chinese immigration to the United States on education visas, as undergraduate education in China becomes more attainable and thus the pursuit of graduate school in the United States is placed more within reach of Chinese incomes.[59] In fact, China produces more applications to U.S. graduate schools than any other country, with the next highest number coming from India.[60] Overall, 27 percent of the U.S. immigrant population has a bachelor's degree or higher.[61] But a Pew study finds that, when looking at what type of education recent immigrants possess, 65 percent of Asians have a college degree or higher, compared to only 16 percent of Hispanic immigrants.[62] In fact, the gap between recent Asian immigrants and recent non-Asian immigrants between the

FIGURE 3

People from Asia who obtained legal permanent resident status in the United States by broad class of admission, FY 2012

- 4,996 Other — 1.2%
- 86,742 Family-sponsored preferences — 20.2%
- 91,591 Employment-based preferences — 21.3%
- 150,254 Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens — 35.0%
- 13,336 Diversity — 3.1%
- 82,680 Refugees and asylees — 19.2%

429,599 Total

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012 - Legal Permanent Residents," available at https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-legal-permanent-residents (last accessed January 2014).

ages of 25 and 64 who possess at least a bachelor's degree has only widened since the 1980s: 61 percent of Asian immigrants had at least a bachelor's degree in 2010, compared to only 30 percent of recent non-Asian immigrants.[63]

Additionally, immigrants with high levels of education are often able to obtain employment visas. Indian immigrants, for example, tend to be more educated and more proficient in English than the United States' overall foreign-born population, which may be a principal reason why they are more likely to arrive on employment-based visas.[64] In fact, more than 70 percent of all Indian immigrants have strong English-language skills, and only 27 percent of them have LEP, compared to 51 percent of all immigrants.[65] Indian immigrants, both male and female, are also more likely to report working in the science and technology sector, particularly the information technology sector, than their overall working immigrant counterparts.[66]

In 2010, Indian Americans had the highest median household income of any group—$88,000—compared to Asian Americans overall—$66,000. The general U.S. public made an average of only $49,800 that same year.[67] Furthermore, a look at per-capita income from 2007 to 2009 shows that Indian Americans had, on average, the second-highest per-capita income at $36,533; Taiwanese per-capita income was highest at $38,312. Meanwhile, the average per-capita income of whites was $31,735.[68]

Due to the growing economies and wealth of a number of Asian countries such as China, the utilization of nontraditional forms of immigration has increased. One example of this is the use of the EB-5 immigration visa program, in which individuals from outside the United States can invest either $500,000 or $1 million in American development projects in exchange for green cards for themselves and their families.[69] Emigration is high for some wealthy Chinese citizens, as they search for better education for their children, a different type of government system, and investment opportunities, among other things.[70] Twenty-five percent of Chinese individuals worth more than $16 million have emigrated, according to a recent Hurun Research Institute and Bank of China report.[71] Affluent and educated Chinese elites have been the major force for Chinese emigration, with the United States as their top target country, according to the 2012 Annual Report of Chinese International Migration.[72]

While education, employment, and wealth have brought many middle- and upper-class Asian immigrants to the United States, another important component of the Asian immigration story is seemingly contradictory. A large number of Asian immigrants to the United States comes as refugees. More than 47 percent of the 582,000 refugee arrivals to the United States between 2001 and 2010 were born in an Asian country, with large shares coming from Myanmar, Bhutan, and Vietnam.[73] Furthermore, 43.2 percent of asylum grantees in the United States during that same time period were from an Asian country—and more than half of them were Chinese nationals.[74] Refugees may have little wealth and education upon their arrival, and they provide an important contrast to their educated and affluent counterparts in the analysis of Asian American data.

Dispelling the model minority myth: A closer look at disaggregated data

Keeping in mind the two caveats that we just discussed—the limits of self-reporting racial categories and data aggregation—we present some of the available economic data on Asian Americans. These data already highlight the tremendous diversity in the Asian American population and suggest that large shares of this population struggle economically.

The aggregate data for Asian Americans show an apparent contradiction: Unemployment rates are lower and wages and incomes are higher for Asian Americans than they are for whites, but poverty rates and the number of people without health insurance are also higher. This is likely the result of aggregating data over a larger subgroup that does comparatively well—one that has a lower unemployment rate and higher earnings and income than whites—and a smaller subgroup that has high poverty and uninsured rates. The economically vulnerable subpopulation has to be sizable or their struggles have to be very large to affect the aggregate data on Asian Americans in a noticeable way. Put differently, we can infer from the data that most Asian Americans do somewhat better than most whites with respect to unemployment and earnings, but a sizable number of Asian Americans do worse, possibly much worse, than most whites. And we have enough data on subpopulations available to know that the subpopulations that tend to do better than whites are usually those of Chinese and Indian descent, while those of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Filipino descent tend to fare worse than whites. Some notable examples follow.

Unemployment

The unemployment rate for Asian Americans is often lower than that for whites. The nonseasonally adjusted unemployment rate for Asian Americans was 5.3 percent in November 2013, while the nonseasonally adjusted unemployment rate for whites was 5.6 percent.[75]

Generally, unemployment rates for Asians look similar to those for whites and follow a similar pattern of increases and decreases.[76] When comparing Asians and whites by type of postsecondary degree, however, Asians do worse. Asian Americans who had at least a college degree had an unemployment rate of 6.4 percent in 2011, compared to whites with a college degree, who had an unemployment rate of 4.3 percent.[77]
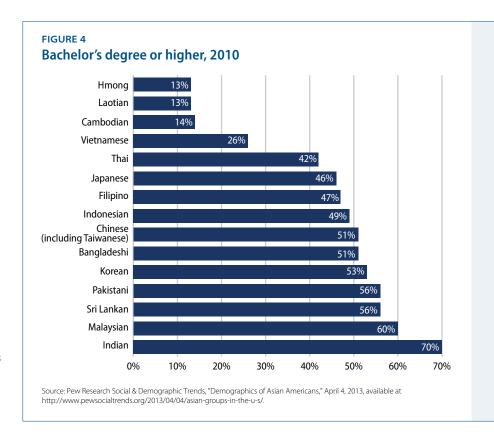
Examining the unemployment rates of Asian ethnic groups makes the comparison with whites even more complicated. For example, combined data show that the overall Asian unemployment rate was 6.2 percent from 2008 to 2010,[78] but the unemployment rate varied from 4 percent for Japanese Americans to 6.6 percent for Filipino Americans. Those in the "other Asian" category—Asians who are not Indians, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese—had an unemployment rate more than double that of Japanese Americans at 8.5 percent.[79]

Furthermore, the unemployment story for Asian Americans grows even more complex when we look at long-term unemployment. While it appears that Asian Americans have low unemployment rates, a look at long-term unemployment rates paints a different picture: Asian Americans had the highest long-term unemployment rate of any unemployed group in both 2010 and 2011. Of all unemployed Asians, 50.1 percent were long-term unemployed in 2011, compared to 42.4 percent of unemployed whites, 49.9 percent of unemployed African Americans, and 39.8 percent of unemployed Hispanics.[80]

Educational attainment

While it appears that the educational attainment rate is high for Asian Americans, a deeper look into Asian subpopulations reveals a more complex story. While 86 percent of Asian Americans have completed their high school education—slightly above the national average of 85 percent[81]—some groups, particularly Southeast Asians, have significantly lower rates. Cambodians and Hmong, for example, have rates of 62 percent and 61 percent, respectively.[82]

Similarly, while Asian Americans have the highest rate of postsecondary educational attainment when compared to any other demographic group—49 percent of Asian Americans age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2010—a closer look at the subpopulations shows a large variation.[83] Indian Americans have a 70 percent rate, while Vietnamese Americans have a rate of only 26 percent. On average, only 17 percent of Pacific Islanders have a college degree.[84] Both Indian Americans and Vietnamese Americans have large populations with major-ity shares—87 percent and 84 percent, respectively—born outside the United States, but their experiences are vastly different. When they are aggregated together, they provide a skewed example of reality.[85]

FIGURE 4
Bachelor's degree or higher, 2010

Group	Percent
Hmong	13%
Laotian	13%
Cambodian	14%
Vietnamese	26%
Thai	42%
Japanese	46%
Filipino	47%
Indonesian	49%
Chinese (including Taiwanese)	51%
Bangladeshi	51%
Korean	53%
Pakistani	56%
Sri Lankan	56%
Malaysian	60%
Indian	70%

Source: Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends, "Demographics of Asian Americans," April 4, 2013, available at http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/04/04/asian-groups-in-the-u-s/.

Poverty

One of the starkest contrasts in aggregate Asian American data is the national poverty rate. Although Asian Americans had a median income 20 percent higher than that of non-Hispanic whites in 2012, the Asian American poverty rate was also higher than that of non-Hispanic whites.[86] The Asian American poverty rate was 11.7 percent in 2012, and the white poverty rate was 9.7 percent.[87] A look at five-year estimates from the American Community Survey shows just how much the diversity within the AAPI community can skew the data. For example, the five-year estimate of the poverty rate for Filipinos—who make up 18 percent of the AAPI population—is 6.4 percent, while the poverty rate for Koreans and Vietnamese—who each make up 9 percent of the population, for a total share almost the same as that of Filipinos—each have a poverty rate of 13.9 percent.[88]

A recent National Academy of Sciences analysis shows that Asian American poverty data may be even worse than previously thought, due to the high concentration of Asian Americans in cities with high costs of living, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City. About one-third of the Asian American population lived in these cities in 2011.[89] In fact, half of the AAPI people in poverty live in the 20 most expensive U.S. real estate markets.[90] This analysis showed that the Asian poverty rate was about 2.9 percent higher than the white poverty rate in 2011, but when cost-of-living adjustments were made, the poverty rate was 5.7 percent higher than the white poverty rate, a very substantial increase.[91]

Household income

Data show that Asian American households appear to have the highest median household income at $68,636 in 2012, compared to white households at $57,009, African American households at $33,321, and Latino households at $39,005.[92] Interestingly, Asian Americans are the most likely group to have three or more working individuals per household.[93] This may skew the data and make Asian American households appear wealthier than they are, when they simply have more working members living in one home. To compensate for this variable, a better measure of Asian American income would be per-capita income. Per-capita income for Asian Americans from 2007 to 2009—$28,342—shows that they do about as well as the national average of $27,100, but non-Hispanic white individuals have a significantly higher per-capita income—$31,735.[94]

Health insurance

The total uninsured rate for Asian Americans was 15.1 percent in 2012, compared to 11.1 percent for whites, 19 percent for African Americans, and 29.1 percent for Latinos.[95] Health insurance rates are reflective of the bifurcation among the Asian American community and follow a pattern similar to that of the previously discussed indicators—lower-income Asian American subpopulations tend to be less insured. Thus, the high rate of uninsured among low-income Asian Americans, when combined with the higher rate of insurance among higher-income Asian Americans, does not have much sway over the aggregated rate for all Asian Americans. Yet some deviations from the trend exist. Korean Americans, for example, had relatively high incomes in 2012—median annual personal earnings were $45,000, well above the national median of $40,000—but an uninsured rate of 22 percent.[96]

Datasets from the American Community Survey and decennial Census

The U.S. Census Bureau's decennial survey and the widely respected American Community Survey provide an example of the limitations of Asian American data. The American Community Survey is an annual survey that includes Asian Americans in the following categories: unemployment, employment, the employment-to-population ratio, earnings, minimum-wage earners, income, poverty rates, and health insurance coverage. The unemployment category has included subpopulation data since 2003, but the other categories currently do not.

Other surveys and research also illustrate the limitations of Asian American data, including:

- Publically available wealth data from the Federal Reserve, in which Asians, Native Americans, and others are combined into one category

- Homeownership rates from the Current Population Survey, in which no data on Asians are included as a separate category in public-use summary tables

- Foreclosure data from the Center for Responsible Lending, in which Asians are included but data for subpopulations are not

- Retirement plan coverage from the Employee Benefit Research Institute, in which Asians are not included in summary data

Recommendations for improving the use of Asian American data for public policy

Our discussion in this brief has highlighted two key issues in the collection and use of Asian American data. First, some subpopulations may underreport their race and ethnicity. Second, available data are often aggregated for public use to allow for comparison over time and address small sample sizes. The federal government should address these two issues through a number of actions.

First, those in charge of government data collection could help increase the number of respondents willing to identify their race and ethnicities by taking the following steps:

• Conduct surveys in the most common languages of relevant subpopulations. This will help overcome potential language barriers and increase survey participation by communities of color.

• Encourage the Census Bureau and other federal statistical agencies to continue researching more ways to capture subpopulation data, including national origin. Among other provisions, Census and survey questions should include more subpopulation and national origin choices by way of checkboxes. This will allow government surveys to speak more directly to people's experiences and possibly increase respondents' participation.

• Oversample respondents from subpopulations that are likely to underreport. If this were done, survey designs would be able to address known potential obstacles, and the government would gain more reliable information, even if the chance of subpopulation members actually participating in the survey does not increase.

A second set of policy recommendations would help generate and disseminate disaggregated data of Asian American subpopulations. These recommendations include:

- The federal government should generate disaggregated data in addition to its aggregated data whenever possible. In some instances, this may require the combination of a number of time periods. For example, subpopulation data may only be available on an annual basis, even if the federal government collects data on a monthly basis. The monthly data may be too sparse to be reliable on its own but nonetheless sufficient for analysis when observations from each month in a year are combined.

- The federal government should help establish the creation of a central data repository on communities of color, including—but not limited to—Asian Americans. The government could rely on a panel of experts to review third-party data to make sure they meet widely accepted standards of data collection and generation before they are added to the central repository.

Instituting all of these reforms would allow the federal government to collect more-comprehensive data on the Asian American community. Asian Americans deserve to be better represented and understood as policymakers consider how best to address economic inequality.

Conclusion

Achieving the American Dream requires creating equal opportunities for all U.S. residents to succeed. Often, the government must intervene to ensure that families have equal opportunities to access many things, including education, the workplace, and health care. However, these government interventions are most efficient if policymakers actually know who has and who does not have necessary economic, political, and social opportunities.

To know this requires good data, but data are often limited. This is especially true for Asian Americans—the largest and one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the country. Furthermore, compared to data on whites, there is tremendous diversity among Asian Americans—a fact that is frequently masked, as the diversity within this population is not often considered. Unemployment rates for Asian Americans, for instance, tend to be lower than or about the same as those for whites, and their median earnings tend to be higher. But their poverty rates tend to be much higher as well, suggesting that large groups within the Asian American community face substantial obstacles to make ends meet, even as top-line numbers indicate that they are doing better than whites. Where data are available, it is clear that some subpopulations are doing very well while others are barely surviving.

Because of inadequate data, researchers and policymakers often do not know exactly who makes up the Asian American subgroups that face these obstacles. By basing policies on inadequate data, we stand to continue creating policies that do not address inequality for all but only for some. This is the primary reason we need to pay more attention to improving the quantity and quality of data on Asian Americans. Only with robust data can we create a true pathway to the American Dream for all.

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Acknowledgments

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