

Demographics of Asian Americans - Introduction

Prepared by Malcolm Collier in 8/24/01 and revised 1/16/2006

The information presented here draws on information from the US census as reported in a number of public and private sources. This summary is prepared by Malcolm Collier and reflects information available as of 8/24/01.

This short essay serves to make several points regarding Asian American populations in the period from 1965 to the present. Current demographic patterns for Asian Americans are very much the product of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 which, for the first time in American history, provided Asians equal access to immigration and naturalization. Together with political events in Asia and economic trends in the U.S., this legislation produced a spectacular growth in immigration from Asia and in the numbers and variety of Asians in America between 1965 and the present.

A. Growth

The single, most important feature of Asian Americans demographics has been growth, as illustrated by the following figures for Asian American population in the United States.

Table A1 - Combined AA population 1960-2000(1)

Year	AA population	Growth rate per decade
1960	768,000	na
1970	1,426,000	86%
1980	3,140,000	120%
1990	5,791,000	84%
2000	11,899,000	105%

Table A2 - Figures for selected AA groups 1960, 1990, and 2000(2)

group/year	1960	1990	2000
Chinese Am	217,000	1,645,000	2,433,000
Filipino Am	180,000	1,407,000	2,039,000
Japanese Am	360,000	848,000	996,000
Korean Am	11,000	799,000	1,077,000
Vietnamese Am	--	615,000	1,123,000
Asian Indian	--	815,000	1,679,000

B Diversity

The Asian American population has become much more diverse since 1960, both in terms of ethnic/national identity and in terms of social class. In 1960 over approximately 98% of Asian Americans were Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino Americans but today these three groups made up only about 50% of the Asian American population.

Table B1 - Major AA groups for year 2000 in three broad population categories

Over 1.5 million	Approx. 1 million	Over 100,000
Chinese Am	Korean Am	Laotian Am
Filipino Am	Vietnamese Am	Hmong Am
Asian Indian Am	Japanese Am	Cambodian Am
		Thai Am

Diversity has also increased within groups. In 1965 Chinese Americans were overwhelmingly from a few districts in Guangdong province in southern China. Today, Chinese Americans include large numbers of people from different parts of China, Taiwan, SE Asia, and elsewhere, many of whom speak Mandarin and other languages that were not a significant part of the Chinese American scene prior to 1965. The class composition of Asian Americans is also more complex today than in the past. Historically, Asian Americans were largely working class but modern immigration has brought increasing numbers of professionals at the same time that education in the United States has produced a growing population of college educated American born whose employment is largely in white collar and professional arenas.

C. Immigrants

One aspect has remained relatively constant from the 1970s to the present - the majority of Asian Americans are immigrants. In 1980 and 1990 approximately 66% of Asian Americans were foreign born immigrants and this is still true in the year 2000 despite growing numbers of American born. The strong presence of an immigrant population is the result of continued heavy immigration through the 1980s and 1990s. Only Japanese Americans are primarily an American born group, with only about 30% of the Japanese American population being immigrant. This reflects both the earlier

establishment of family based communities by Japanese Americans and the political/economic stability of modern Japan which has served to reduce the demand for emigration. This lower level of immigration from Japan in turn means that the Japanese American population has grown much more slowly than other groups.

Another aspect of the post 1965 immigration era is that Asians comprise up to 50% of all immigrants to the United States, whereas in the past they were a very small proportion of immigrants. Historically, large scale Asian immigration has triggered anti-Asian sentiments in the US and there is evidence that this is the case today, although in a different political context.

D. Current Trends 2006

The demographics of Asian Americans are likely to show a number of significant characteristics at the end of this decade in 2010, key among these are:

- a) Continued rapid growth.
- b) A decline in the proportion of the population that is immigrant and an increase in the proportion of those who are American born.
- c) A continued shift in the social characteristics of new immigrants to those who are of urban, middle class, and educated origins with a significant decline in those that are working class, rural, and less educated. This shift is driven by both American immigration regulations and changes in Asia.
- d) Continued increase in diversity of origins in Asia.
- e) Continued dispersion of the Asian American population in the United States into a wider range of regions, locales, and environments.

(1) a) The figures for 1960-90 do not include Asian Indians but they are included in figures for 2000.
b) Figures are rounded and figure for 2000 includes figures for people who indicated being part Asian and part other groups, a distinction not reflected in earlier census data.

(2) Figures for 2000 are skewed by a new system of counting people of mixed descent and the data available as of 8/24/01 does not allow for making adjustments for these shifts. It is my estimate that this has particularly distorted figures for JAs and FAs, consequently the year 2000 figures presented here for JAs and FAs are NOT directly from the census but reflect an estimate on my part of the probable population for each group inclusive of people of mixed descent. The figures for the other AA groups are as reported by the census but certainly lower than they would be with an allowance for people of mixed descent.

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