

Asian-Nation

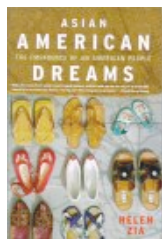
The Landscape of Asian America

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Research Resources Used/ Recommended for Further Reading



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The Model Minority Image

In a lot of ways, Asian Americans have done remarkably well in achieving "the American dream" of getting a good education, working at a good job, and earning a good living. So much so that the image many have of Asian Americans is that we are the "model minority" -- a bright, shining example of hard work and patience whose example other minority groups should follow. However, the practical reality is slightly more complicated than that.

STATISTICS DON'T LIE . . . DO THEY?

Once in a great while, statistics don't lie. It is true that in many ways, Asian Americans have done very well socially and economically. The data in the following tables was calculated using the [2000 Census Public Use Microdata Samples](#), and they compare the major racial/ethnic groups among different measures of what sociologists call "socioeconomic achievement." The numbers in bold black represent the group with the highest (most successful) attainment, while the group with the bold red number has the lowest (least successful) attainment levels.

Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Five Major Racial/Ethnic Groups in the U.S.

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics/ Latinos	Native Americans	Asian Americans
Less than High School	15.3	29.1	48.5	27.4	19.5
College Degree	25.3	13.6	9.9	10.8	42.9
Advanced Degree	3.0	1.2	1.6	0.9	6.5
Median Personal Income	\$23,640	\$16,300	\$14,400	\$14,500	\$20,200
Median Family Income	\$48,500	\$33,300	\$36,000	\$32,240	\$59,000
Living in Poverty	9.4	24.9	21.4	25.1	11.5
Public Assistance	1.3	4.5	3.5	6.1	2.2
Homeowner	78.2	54.4	52.4	64.2	62.0
In Labor Force	62.6	50.0	61.5	61.2	65.2

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IN LABOR FORCE	65.0	57.0	61.5	61.2	65.5
High Skill Occupation	21.4	12.3	9.6	11.9	34.6
Median SEI Score	47.0	44.0	26.0	44.0	49.0

Methodology and data source used to calculate these statistics

These numbers tell you that among the five major racial/ethnic groups in the U.S., Asian Americans have the highest college degree attainment rate, rates of having an advanced degree (professional or Ph.D.), median family income, being in the labor force, rate of working in a "high skill" occupation (executive, professional, technical, or upper management), and median Socioeconomic Index (SEI) score that measures occupational prestige. Yes, in these categories, Asians even outperform Whites. Asian Americans seem to have done so well that magazines such as *Newsweek* and respected television shows such as *60 Minutes* proclaim us to be the "model minority."



They point to statistics like this and say how well Asian Americans are doing in society and that we've overcome past instances of prejudice and discrimination without resorting to political or violent confrontations with Whites. Further, our success should serve as an example for other racial/ethnic minority groups to follow in their own quest to overcome barriers in their way to achieving the American dream.

Many people go even further and argue that since Asian Americans are doing so well, we **no longer experience any discrimination** and that Asian Americans no longer need public services such as bilingual education, government documents in multiple languages, and welfare. Further, using the first stereotype of Asian Americans, many just assume that all Asian Americans are successful and that none of us are struggling.

On the surface, it may sound rather benign and even flattering to be described in those terms. However, we need to take a much closer look at these numbers. As we will see, many other statistics show that Asian Americans are still the targets of racial inequality and institutional discrimination and that the **model minority image is a myth**.

WHEN GOOD NUMBERS GO BAD

Again, we need to remember that not all Asian Americans are the same. For every Chinese American or South Asian who has a college degree, the same number of Southeast Asians are still struggling to adapt to their lives in the U.S. For example, as shown in the tables in the [Socioeconomic Statistics & Demographics](#) article, Vietnamese Americans only have a college degree attainment rate of 20%, less than half the rate for other Asian American ethnic groups. The rates for Laotians, Cambodians, and Khmer are even lower at less than 10%.

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The results show that as a whole Asian American families have higher median incomes than White families. However, this is because in most cases, the typical Asian American family tends to have more members who are working than the typical White family. It's not unusual for an Asian American family to have four, five, or more members working.

A more telling statistic is **median personal income** (also known as per capita income).

The results above show that Asian Americans still trail Whites on this very important measure.



Case in point, another reason why Asian American families tend to make more than White families is because, as described in the

[Population Statistics](#) page, Asian Americans

are much more likely to concentrate in metropolitan areas where the **cost of living** is much higher. Anyone who has lived in New York City (yours truly included) can attest to just how expensive it is to live in these cities. Therefore, Asian Americans may earn more but they also have to spend more to survive. In fact, research shows that within these metropolitan areas, Asian American incomes still trail that of Whites.

"SUCCESS" MAY ONLY BE SKIN-DEEP

Another telling statistic is how much more money a person earns with each additional year of schooling completed, or what sociologists call "returns on education." One of the first in-depth studies that looked at per capita income between Asian Americans and other racial/ethnic groups came from Robert Jiobu and is cited in *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* by Sucheng Chan. Using this measure, research consistently shows that for each additional year of education attained, Whites earn another \$522.

That is, beyond a high school degree, a White with 4 more years of education (equivalent to a college degree) can expect to earn \$2088 per year in salary. In contrast, returns on each additional year of education for a Japanese American is only \$438. For a Chinese American, it's \$320. For Blacks, it's even worse at only \$284. What this means is that basically, a typical Asian American has to get more years of education **just to make the same amount of money** that a typical White makes with less education.

Recent research from scholars such as Timothy Fong, Roderick Harrison, and Paul Ong, to name just a few, continues to confirm these findings that controlling for other variables, Asian Americans still earn less money than Whites with virtually equal qualifications. Once again, for each statistic that suggests everything is picture-perfect for Asian Americans, there is another that proves otherwise.

As another example, in California, almost 40% of all Vietnamese refugees are on public assistance and in Minnesota and Wisconsin, an equal number of Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians also receive public assistance. Another example is that of many Korean immigrants who come to the U.S. with very high levels of education. But for various

reasons (i.e., not being fluent in English), many are not able to get decent jobs that pay well. Therefore, they are forced to work as janitors, waiters, busboys, or go into business for themselves to survive. The only reason why many Korean small business owners are able to make a small profit is that they have no paid employees and work 20 hours a day.

ALWAYS CHECK BELOW THE SURFACE

Another point is that even despite the real successes we've achieved, Asian Americans are still significantly underrepresented in positions of **political leadership** at the local, regional, state, and federal levels

(despite the successes of a few individuals such as Norman Mineta and Elaine Chao) -- just like Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians. In the corporate world, Asian Americans are underrepresented as CEOs, board members, and high-level supervisors -- just like Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians.



This is not to say that there aren't Asian Americans out there who are quite successful and have essentially achieved the American dream. As their socioeconomic attainment levels clearly illustrate for example, Asian Indians consistently outperform not only other Asian ethnic groups but Whites in several achievement measures, sometimes by a large margin. And of course, you'll find plenty of examples of Asian Americans who are quite affluent and successful, and as Asian Americans, we should rightly feel proud of these examples of success.

The point is that just because many Asian Americans have "made it," it does not mean that **all** Asian Americans have made it. In many ways, Asian Americans are still the targets of much prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. For instance, the persistent belief that "all Asians are smart" puts a tremendous amount of pressure on many Asian Americans. Many, particularly Southeast Asians, are not able to conform to this unrealistic expectation and in fact, have the highest high school dropout rates in the country.

Asian Americans are also increasingly becoming the targets of hate crimes. In fact, research shows that Asian Americans are the fastest growing victims of hate crimes in the U.S. Asian Indians and other successful Asian Americans may have extraordinary levels of socioeconomic achievement but it's very unlikely that many of them will say that they no longer experience discrimination because of their Asian ethnicity.

Ultimately, the process of achieving socioeconomic success among Asian Americans is very complex. There are many examples of affluence and prosperity within the Asian American population but in many ways, we still face the same types of racism, social inequality, and institutional discrimination that other groups of color face. Therefore, the image that the entire Asian American community is the "model minority" is a myth.

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