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Profiles of Asian American Subgroups in Massachusetts: Korean Americans in Massachusetts

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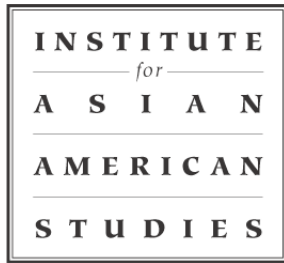


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Korean Americans

in Massachusetts

PROFILES OF ASIAN AMERICAN SUBGROUPS IN MASSACHUSETTS

This report looks at Korean Americans in Massachusetts with a focus on the Metro Boston area. Using the 2000 U.S. Census and the American Community Survey 2005–2007 Three-Year Estimates in combination with interviews and secondary research, this profile looks at Korean American demographics and community perspectives.

Brief History of Korean Immigration to the U.S.

Korean immigration to the U.S. has been strongly shaped by political, military and economic conditions in Korea as well as by U.S. labor needs and immigration legislation. These factors are evident in the three major immigration waves of Koreans to the U.S.

The first wave of Korean immigrants came to the U.S. to fill a need for labor. From 1903 to 1905, approximately 7,226 Korean laborers were recruited to work on sugar plantations in the newly acquired state of Hawaii (Park 9). Major droughts in Pyongan in Northwest Korea also persuaded the Korean government to agree to sending Koreans to the U.S. starting in 1902 (Shin 200).

The second wave of immigration was a direct consequence of the Korean War, which sent Korean wives of American servicemen—made possible by the War Brides Act of 1946—and Korean orphans as well as students and professionals to the U.S. It is estimated that about 18,800 Koreans immigrated to the U.S. between 1951-1964 (Yu and Choe 4). According to the *Overseas Adopted Koreans* website, between 1958 and 1968 approximately 6,002 Korean orphans were adopted by Americans. These Korean orphans became the first wave of Korean

adoptees to the U.S.

The third wave of Korean immigration was a result of the 1965 U.S. Immigration Act which abolished the National Origins Quota of 1924 that had previously banned the immigration of many Asians to the U.S. During the 1960s and 1970s, Korea experienced a rapid industrialization period as the economy attempted to rebound after the Korean War. As a result, a new middle class consisting of working professionals formed, and many immigrated to the U.S. to pursue career opportunities not available in Korea (Park 13).

The third wave of immigration also included Korean adoptees who continued to arrive in significant numbers throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The 1980s saw the largest wave of Korean adoptees in the history of Korean adoption. About 45,071 Koreans were adopted by Americans during that decade, representing 12.3% of all Korean immigrants in that decade (*Overseas Adopted Koreans* and U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security). Today, approximately one in ten Korean Americans is an adoptee.

Koreans in Massachusetts

Some of the earliest Koreans in Massachusetts were students. The first Korean student in the U.S. enrolled at Dummer Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts in 1884 (Kim, I. 18). A number of Korean students and political exiles came to the U.S. fleeing the Japanese occupation in the following years. Syngman Rhee, who later became the first President of South Korea, was one of these individuals and attended Harvard University in 1907 (N.E. Centennial Committee of Korean Immigration to the U.S. 281). From 1921 to



1940, about 289 Korean students entered the U.S. (Yu and Choe 4).

By 1945, Korean government officials, ministers, missionaries and scholars made up a majority of the Korean population in Massachusetts. Many of these Koreans were pursuing higher education in the state and as a result many of the first Korean American organizations in Massachusetts were student run. For example, although the Korean Society of New England was not initially a student organization, it fell into the hands of students after their first president Dr. Suh Doosoo stepped down (N.E. Centennial Committee of Korean Immigration to the U.S. 286–7). During his tenure, Dr. Suh compiled a Korean American directory in the 1950s documenting the growth of the Korean community in Boston (Table 1).

Table 1. Estimates of Korean American Population in Boston

Year	Population
1953	50
1954	120
1955	155
1956-1957	173
Total	498

Source: N.E. Centennial Committee of Korean Immigration to the U.S., p. 287).

Since the fifties, the Korean American population has gradually grown in Massachusetts. However, the most significant growth in the Korean American population in Massachusetts occurred after 1965 when many professionals and family members of Korean Americans immigrated.

In 2000, according to the U.S. Census, there were a little over a million Korean Americans living in the U.S. and 17,369 Korean Americans living in Massachusetts. Massachusetts had the 14th largest Korean American population in the nation in 2000. Since then the Korean American population in Massachusetts has increased by 20.8% to approximately 20,985 (ACS 2005–2007). Korean Americans comprise 6.9% of the total Asian American population in the state making them the fourth largest Asian subgroup in the state after Chinese, Indians,

and Vietnamese.

Unlike some other Asian American subgroups who live in distinct geographical communities, Korean Americans are generally spread throughout the state with a concentration in the Greater Boston area. In 2000, the top five cities and towns where Korean Americans lived were Boston, Cambridge, Brookline, Newton and Somerville (Table 2). Updated data will be available after the 2010 Census.

Table 2. Cities and Towns in MA with the Largest Korean American Population, 2000

Boston	2,564
Cambridge	1,901
Brookline	861
Newton	530
Somerville	462

Education

The Korean American population has been and continues to be highly educated in Massachusetts. In 2000, about 67% of Korean Americans 25 years and over had received a Bachelor's degree or higher. Korean Americans were twice as likely as the general population in Massachusetts to have received a Bachelor's degree or higher. Since 2000, educational attainment for Korean Americans 25 years and over has increased. The 2005-2007 ACS data shows that 75.5% of Korean Americans 25 years and over have a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 56.8% for all Asian Americans (Table 3).

Table 3. Education Attainment of Bachelor's Degree or Higher (for Populaton 25 Years and Older) in MA, 2005–2007

Korean American	75.6%
Asian American	56.0%
Total Population	37.1%

The rate of achievement is slightly higher for males at 80.3% as compared to women at 75.6%.

Korean Americans are also enrolled in college and graduate school at a rate that is significantly higher than the rate for Asian Americans as a whole, and twice that of the

Table 4. Enrollment in College or Graduate School for MA, 2005–2007

Korean American	64.1%
Asian American	43.1%
Total Population	30.3%

total population in Massachusetts (Table 4). This may indicate that Koreans and Korean Americans are attracted to Massachusetts particularly for the purpose of pursuing educational advancement.

The high rate of enrollment by Korean Americans in top local colleges and universities is notable, particularly at women's schools such as Wellesley College. According to Karen Shih, Director of Multicultural Programming/Asian Advisor at Wellesley College, 28% of their student body is Asian or Asian American and of these, about 200 are Korean Americans, making up about 31% of the Asian American student population.

Korean nationals are also attending higher education institutions in significant numbers. According to WoongSoon Lee, an active member of Boston's Korean religious community, several academies have opened in the Boston area to serve both Korean nationals and Korean American students who are preparing for higher education.

English Proficiency

English proficiency for Korean Americans varies by age and is particularly a problem for Korean American seniors. In 2000, 71.6% of Koreans in Massachusetts spoke a language other than English at home. Of these, 18.9% spoke English not well or not at all, and more than half of Koreans 65 years and older were not proficient in English.

Between 2005 and 2007, 65.7% of Korean Americans spoke a language other than English at home. Of that group, 31.9% spoke English less than "very well." Many leaders in the Korean American community confirm that limited English proficiency remains a major issue for seniors as well as for recent immigrants.

Song Kim, a lawyer and former President of the Korean American Citizens League-New England (KACL-NE) says a lack

of court room translators and other examples of language discrimination are some of the more common problems he has seen in the Korean American community in Massachusetts.

Table 5. Nativity and Citizenship for Korean Americans in MA, 2005–2007

U.S. Born	5,342	25.5%
Naturalized	7,709	36.7%
Not a Citizen	7,934	37.8%
Total	20,985	100.0%

Citizenship/Nativity

Since 2000, the ratio between foreign and native born Korean Americans has stayed relatively consistent. The 2005–2007 ACS data shows that native born Korean Americans make up 25.5% of the Korean population in Massachusetts (Table 5).

About three-quarters of the Korean population in Massachusetts is foreign born and 37.8% of all Korean Americans are not citizens. Therefore, not surprisingly, immigration and citizenship issues are important concerns for the Korean American community.

Song Kim says that about 80% of KACL-NE members are foreign born and have limited English proficiency. Thus, for the past 18 years, KACL-NE has offered a free workshop for individuals who wish to acquire U.S. citizenship. KACL-NE's current President, Kay Dong explained that despite declining interest in the workshop, acquiring citizenship is still an important issue for Korean Americans. Dong believes the recent citizenship application fee hike has negatively influenced interest in acquiring citizenship and has therefore reduced participation in their workshops (Kim, M., "KACL Holds Free Workshop" par. 3).

Income

Despite high levels of education, the median household income for Korean Americans was \$57,726, less than that for both the total population and Asian Americans as a group (Table 6). This data suggests a possible problem of underemployment for Korean Americans or that many are students who

Table 6. Median Household Income in MA, 2005–2007

Korean American	\$57,726
Asian American	\$69,552
Total Population	\$61,785

Table 7. Per Capita Income in MA, 2005–2007

Korean American	\$29,086
Indian American	\$42,099
Chinese American	\$31,209
Vietnamese American	\$23,128
Cambodian American	\$16,146
Asian American	\$30,498
Total Population	\$32,113

are not earning substantial income.

Of the five largest Asian American subgroups in the state, Korean American per capita income is behind that of Indian Americans and Chinese Americans (Table 7). Korean American per capita income falls just below that of Asian Americans as a group and that of the total population.

Employment

A majority of Korean Americans can be found in highly skilled professional fields and that percentage has increased from 53.6% in 2000 to 63.6% in 2005-2007 (Table 8). The percentages of Korean Americans in service; sales and office; and production, transportation and material moving have decreased.

However, there are occupational gender discrepancies evident in the 2005–2007 ACS data. For instance, a large percentage of Korean American males can be found in

management and professional occupations compared to Korean American women. And although 17.6% of all Koreans can be found in sales or office occupations, more women than men are employed in these occupations. Nearly a quarter of all Korean American females are employed in sales and office occupations compared to only 9.9% of Korean American males. These gender trends, however, are generally consistent with all Asian subgroups.

Although more males than females can be found in management & professional occupations for Korean Americans, this is not the case for the total population. The 2005-2007 ACS data shows out of the total population, more females than males are employed in management & professional occupations.

Overall, these figures suggest that Korean Americans have achieved a relative amount of upward socioeconomic mobility. However, there are still many living in poverty. In 2000, Korean American families had the third highest poverty rate of all Asian subgroups in Massachusetts. The 2005-2007 ACS data shows that the family poverty rate for Korean Americans has risen. Fifteen percent of Korean American families are living in poverty, a rate more than double that of the total population. A higher percentage of Korean American families are living in poverty than Asian American families as well (Table 9).

Although nationally Korean Americans have a higher rate of self-employment than the general population, in Massachusetts their rate of self-employment is comparable to the general population. About 10% of Korean Americans are self-employed and of those, about one in three own dry cleaning

Table 8. Occupation for Korean Americans in MA, 2000 & 2005–2007

	2000		2005–2007	
Management, professional, & related	4,292	53.6%	5,969	63.6%
Service	863	10.8%	901	9.6%
Sales & office	1,784	22.2%	1,652	17.6%
Farming, fishing, & forestry	0	0%	0	0%
Construction, extraction, & maintenance	99	1.2%	131	1.4%
Production, transportation, & material moving	965	12.0%	722,722	7.7%
Total	8,003	100.0%	9,386	100.0%

Table 9. Family Poverty Rates in MA, 2005–2007

Korean American	15.0%
Asian American	10.9%
Total Population	7.2%

businesses and one in eight own restaurants (ACS PUMS 2005-2007).

Religious Organizations

Michael Kim, English editor of the *Korean American Press* in Boston believes the Korean American community revolves around three elements: family, friends, and church. Indeed, religion has played a significant role in the lives of many Korean Americans. Many of the first Korean American organizations were churches. Korean churches have served as community centers providing essential resources such as English language classes, kye (rotating capital funds), and social and business networks (Park 187). Some community leaders believe that Korean American churches and faith based organizations fill the role of traditional social service agencies of which there are few targeted to Korean Americans in Massachusetts. In addition, as Karen Jung Won Chai has noted, in the United States there are “over 3,000 Korean ethnic Christian churches, providing “ ‘substitute ethnic neighborhoods’ for Korean immigrants, who tend to be residentially assimilated” (7).

According to *The New England Korean News*, a Korean-language newspaper published weekly by the Korean Society of New England, Inc. there are 54 Protestant Korean churches in Massachusetts (15). There is also one Catholic Korean church and four Korean Buddhist temples. The size and capacity of Korean American religious institutions in Massachusetts differ greatly, ranging from struggling small churches to organizations with multi-million dollar budgets with nearly 600 members. Regardless of size or budget, these religious organizations provide a unique sense of community for many Korean Americans in the state.

Worship services may be offered in Korean or English, or be bilingual to meet

the needs of diverse constituents and families. For example, first generation Korean Americans may prefer to attend services delivered in Korean while 1.5 or second generation Korean Americans may prefer to attend a service in English. Different generations may also be more comfortable with varying styles of religious practices. Thus, Protestant Korean churches throughout the area accommodate these needs with traditional Korean-language adult worship services and English-language youth groups and young adult worship.

Some churches offer bilingual services such as the Korean Catholic Church of Boston located in Waban which offers a bilingual mass specifically for multiracial families. The bilingual children’s worship services and Sunday schools attended by both the children and their parents at the Korean Church of Boston located in Brookline incorporate the needs of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural families with young children. In addition, there are specialized programs that teach traditional Korean religious practices to the general public such as the Wednesday Buddhist Meditation classes which are held weekly at the Mun Su Sa Buddhist Temple in Wakefield.

As noted above, religious institutions also provide Korean Americans with a multitude of other services. WoongSoon Lee observes that many Korean Americans rely on their religious networks for referrals for services as well as financial assistance such as personal loans. Lee believes that many Korean Americans still feel it is taboo to receive public aid.

The increasingly diverse nature of today’s Korean American population has been a point of unity and division. Some Korean American religious organizations have been able to successfully reach out to cross-sections of the population, while others struggle to recruit and retain members.

Civic Organizations

Since Koreans first arrived in Massachusetts, they have organized civic and professional associations to aid the community. These organizations have grappled with issues such as employment, language barriers, civic

engagement, citizenship, and at times, racism.

Perhaps one of the oldest and most well established Korean American organizations in Massachusetts is the Korean American Citizens League of New England. KACL-NE, located in Massachusetts, is a branch of the national organization and has been in existence for about 19 years. Dedicated to Korean American civic engagement and political empowerment, KACL-NE has approximately 300 members. Song Kim says that most of the KACL-NE's members are highly educated and come from professional backgrounds. It is one of the largest Korean American organizations in the state and provides an array of activities such as political internships for Korean American students, citizenship classes, and voter registration drives. KACL-NE also strives to promote Korean American participation in electoral politics, says Kim, and points to the election of Sam Yoon to the Boston City Council as an encouraging development.

KACL-NE may be one of the largest and longest-standing Korean American organizations in Massachusetts, but there are also a number of smaller organizations. Some are social organizations such as the Korean Elderly Association of Boston which is based out of Nuttinglake. Other organizations such as the New England Dry Cleaners Association, the Korean American Scientists and Engineers Association of New England, and the Korean Business Association provide specialized support for business owners and professionals.

Dr. Moon S. Kim, a co-founder of KACL-NE believes that as more Korean Americans are born and/or raised in the country, many no longer need the services once provided by professional organizations. And because of this, many long-standing organizations are on the verge of shuttering. When the New England Korean Medical Association first began, it was an organization assisting young and recently emigrated Korean doctors. The organization was founded by Dr. Eun Han Kim and Dr. Kyung Min Park in the 1980s. But since then their membership has been waning.

One Korean American organization however, Boston Korean Adoptees, Inc.

(BKA), has seen a steady increase in membership over the past several years. Some 107,145 Koreans were adopted by American families over the past 50 years and a significant number by families in Massachusetts (*Overseas Adopted Koreans*). Census data shows that in 2000, there were about 1,080 Korean adoptees living with their families in the state. This figure represents dependents only, however, and the number of adult Korean adoptees and total number of adoptees residing in the state is considerably larger.

BKA was founded over ten years ago to serve Korean adoptees in the Massachusetts and New England area. Its email listserv has approximately 135 members made up primarily of adult adoptees but also of adoptive family members. Overall, BKA has seen participation rise and membership increase over the past several years. Their programming includes quarterly social events, a book club for adoptee literature, adoption education and awareness, and interaction with Korean adoptee mentor programs.

This report was written by Nathan James Bae Kupel with assistance from Shauna Lo and WoongSoon Lee.

Notes on Census Data

- The U.S. Census data used in this profile is primarily from the 2005–2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates. Thus, the data represent averages over the period from January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2007.
- While a 3-year data set is more current than the 2000 U.S. Census, smaller sample sizes can make it difficult to obtain reliable data for smaller Asian American subgroups such as Korean Americans, particularly when data is disaggregated. The margin of error for some statistics may be quite large. For more information on accuracy of the ACS data, visit www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/Accuracy/Accuracy1.htm.

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