

9-21-2004

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Recommended Citation

Watanabe, Paul; Liu, Michael; and Lo, Shauna (2004) "A Portrait of Asian Americans in Metro Boston," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 19.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol20/iss1/19>

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A Portrait of Asian Americans in Metro Boston

Paul Watanabe

Michael Liu

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The Asian American population of metropolitan Boston has grown rapidly and in extraordinary numbers. This article describes the great variety within the population with the purpose of fostering effective analysis, policy making, and service delivery.¹

In the 1870s, Chinese laborers, originally hired to break a strike at a shoe factory in North Adams, made their way to Boston along with Chinese workers contracted to build the Pearl Street Telephone Exchange in the South Station area. For more than a century since that time there has been an Asian American community in the Boston area. In the decades at the turn of the last century, the Asian American population was relatively small and mainly Chinese, but beginning in the mid 1960s with the loosening of restrictive immigration laws, the Asian American community has undergone unprecedented growth and transformation.

In developing policies and programs in the 21st century, the new realities of the Asian American community must be thoroughly grasped. Asian Americans understand through long historical experience the relationship between data and destiny as stated in the opening pages of a recently published book edited by Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles, *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity and Change in the 21st Century*.

Far too often and for far too long, statistics have been used to paint an inaccurate portrait of the Asian Pacific American community, often to its detriment. In the late 19th century, immigration statistics were used to foment fears of a “yellow peril,” justify restrictive quotas, and discourage Asian workers from

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settling in the United States. In the late 20th century, statistics were used to portray Asian Pacific Americans as a monolithic Model Minority, a community in which everyone was well-educated and well-off, a concept that is often used to drive a wedge between minority communities.”²

Mindful of the potential of statistics to perpetuate myths, this article uses data drawn from the 2000 U.S. Census to paint a portrait of the often ignored and misrepresented Asian American community in Metro Boston.³ Our primary focus is description. There have been, to now, few efforts to fully describe Asian Americans, and of the descriptions that have emerged, many have been devoid of critical nuance. Further, in many studies where race has been a critical consideration, Asian Americans have either been excluded or lumped indiscriminately with majority whites or with other minorities. For effective analysis, policymaking, and service delivery it is important to capture and disseminate this data which speak to three essential components of the Asian American community — its growth, diversity, and enormous complexity.

- The growth of the Asian American population, fed significantly by immigration, has been stunning. A fuller understanding the diversity that exists within that population is needed.
- Far from monolithic, the Asian American community is incredibly diverse in its characteristics and socio-economic condition. Furthermore, an accurate portrait requires a full recognition of the ways in which rapid growth and diversity can effect such dimensions as educational attainment, income, and employment.
- The complexity that accompanies diversity has important policy implications for Asian Americans. Asian Americans are rich and poor, well and poorly educated, city and suburban dwellers, professionals and manual laborers. Individual Asian subgroups often occupy different locations on these divides. Assuredly, given this situation, one size fits all policies in areas such as immigration, education, social welfare, housing, and employment may be inappropriate. In response to this complexity and the difficulty of accounting for its sources and consequences, policy practitioners, analysts, and service providers should not be tempted to ignore or oversimplify the situation of Asian Americans.

To fully understand the circumstances of Asian Americans in Metro Boston the effect of immigration policies and immigrant experiences must be recognized, but a full examination of this topic is not possible within the scope of this article.

Size, Growth, and Geographical Distribution

In 2000, the Metro Boston Asian American population was 223,424,⁴ comprising 4.3 percent of the total Metro Boston population. The Asian American population grew by 70 percent in the 1990s compared to a growth rate for the overall population of 5.8 percent. Twenty cities and towns within Metro Boston in 2000 had at least 2000 Asian Americans. These cities and towns are remarkably diverse — urban and suburban, well-to-do and struggling, racially heterogeneous and homogenous. Boston had the largest Asian American population followed by Lowell, Quincy, Cambridge, Worcester, Malden, Brookline, Newton, and Lynn. The large cities, therefore, generally had the largest Asian American populations. By and large, the greatest increases in Asian American populations, however, were recorded in suburban cities and towns: Malden 180 percent, Shrewsbury 166.4 percent, Quincy 142.9 percent, Burlington 134.2 percent, and Waltham 110.1 percent. The communities that experienced relatively more modest growth were Brockton 30 percent, Revere 36.6 percent, Boston 45.7 percent, Cambridge 48.9 percent, and Lowell 51.1 percent.

The themes of diversity, complexity, and growth are amply demonstrated in the broad range of Asian ethnic groups represented among Metro Boston's Asian American population. Fifteen Asian ethnic groups each had at least 500 persons (Table 1). The histories and experiences of these groups are as diverse as their number. The Chinese, for example, have been a presence in this region for several decades, and they have been influenced by several immigration regimes stretching back prior to the Chinese exclusion period well over a century ago. Indians immigrated to this region in significant numbers only after passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. Southeast Asian groups, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thai, and Hmong, began arriving in substantial numbers, many as refugees, less than thirty years ago. The Japanese and Korean communities are each comprised of a large number of college and graduate students.

In 2000 and, indeed, throughout most of the history of Asian Americans in Metro Boston, the Chinese remained the largest Asian American group. Their share of the population, however, dropped from 39 percent in 1990 to 35 percent in 2000. Indians and Vietnamese remained the second and third largest Asian American groups, but, unlike the Chinese, their share of the population increased in the 1990s. The Indian portion of the Asian American population increased to 19 percent from 14 percent in 1990. The Vietnamese share also grew, from 11 percent in 1990 to 14 percent in 2000. For certain Asian ethnic groups the growth rate was even more dramatic than the 70 percent increase in the overall Asian American population. The Hmong population, for example, grew by a whopping 355.3 percent, Indians by 129.4 percent, and Vietnamese by 117.3 percent.

Table 1
Population by Asian Subgroup

	1990	2000	% Change	% AAs in 2000
Bangladesh alone	–	544	–	0.2%
Cambodian	13,405	18,890	40.9%	8.5%
Chinese	50,713	78,415	54.6%	35.1%
Filipino	5,523	7,415	34.3%	3.3%
Hmong	228	1,038	355.3%	0.5%
Indian	17,978	41,240	129.4%	18.5%
Indonesian	–	670	–	0.3%
Japanese	7,912	9,699	22.6%	4.3%
Korean	10,107	15,615	54.5%	7.0%
Laotian	3,797	3,576	-5.8%	1.6%
Malaysian	–	199	–	0.1%
Pakastani	–	1,821	–	0.8%
Sri Lankan	–	602	–	0.3%
Taiwanese	–	2,208	–	1.0%
Thai	1,314	1,969	49.8%	0.9%
Vietnamese	14,502	31,511	117.3%	14.1%
Other Asian	–	533	–	0.2%
Other Asian, not specified	–	3,655	–	1.6%
Total Asian (one ethnicity)	–	219,600	–	98.3%
Total Asian*	131,453	223,424	70.0%	100.0%

*Source: U.S. Census 1990 Summary Tape File 1 (STF 1) 100% Data and U.S. Census 2000 Summary File 2 (STF 2) 100% Data. *This total reflects Asians who identified themselves as one or more Asian subgroups.*

Diversity is clearly apparent as well in the distribution of Asian ethnic groups in Metro Boston's cities and towns. The larger cities and towns in Metro Boston with Asian American populations greater than 2000, including Boston, Lowell, Cambridge, and Worcester, were most likely to include persons from a broad array of Asian ethnic groups. On the other hand, suburban communities such as Burlington, Shrewsbury, Revere, Medford, and Randolph largely drew their Asian populations from two or three Asian subgroups. In thirteen of the cities and towns, the Chinese were the largest group. In certain places, however, the Chinese population lagged considerably behind that of other Asian groups. In Lowell and Lynn, for example, the Chinese were the fifth largest group. Cambodians were the largest group in Lowell, Lynn, and

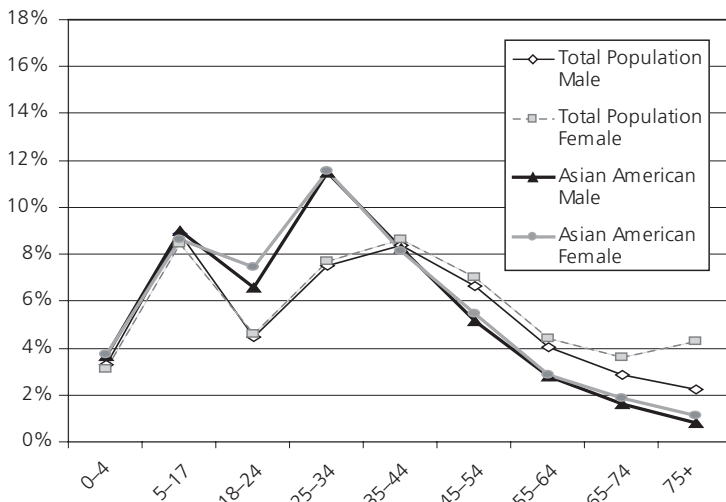
Revere. Indians were the largest group in four suburban communities outside of Boston: Waltham, Framingham, Burlington, and Shrewsbury. In Worcester, whose total population was the second largest in the region, the Vietnamese were the largest group.

The patterns of residence for individual Asian groups also reflect considerable diversity. The Chinese, for example, were heavily concentrated in Boston and in towns and cities touching or closely adjacent to Boston. The patterns of Filipino, Japanese, and Korean settlement were similar to those of the Chinese. The Cambodian community was heavily concentrated in Lowell with significant communities in Lynn, Fall River, and Revere. Fitchburg had by far the area's largest number of Hmong residents. Vietnamese tended to live largely in the areas larger cities and towns: Boston, Worcester, Quincy, Lowell, Malden, and Lynn. Indians, in contrast, were distributed broadly throughout the region in cities and towns, large and small, urban and suburban.

Age and Sex

The age and sex distribution of Asian Americans differed significantly from that of the general population in several categories (Figure 1). The percentage of Asian Americans in the age groups 45 years old and older, for example, was much lower than that of the total population. This discrepancy was particularly pronounced in the oldest age groups. On the other hand, in the 18–24 and especially in the 25–44 year old age groups, a considerably higher percentage of Asian Americans were found compared to the total population. The overall gender distribution of Asian Americans was 49.2 percent male and 50.8 percent female.

Figure 1
Age and Sex for Asian Americans and Total Population



Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File 2 (STF 2) 100% Data

There were some notable variations in the distribution of age and sex for specific Asian American groups. Pakistanis and Indians, for example, had considerably higher percentages of males compared to females, 56.4 percent to 43.6 percent for Pakistanis and 53.8 percent to 46.2 percent for Indians. In contrast, the Filipino and Japanese groups were disproportionately female. For Filipinos the gender distribution was 41.3 percent male and 58.7 percent female; for Japanese, 42.1 percent male and 57.9 percent female.

There was little uniformity in the patterns of age distributions among various Asian ethnic groups. For instance, compared with other Asian American groups, an especially large percentage of Cambodians and Hmong were in the two youngest categories. At the other end of the age spectrum, a higher percentage of Chinese were in the two oldest age groups compared with other Asian American groups. This may reflect the fact that the Chinese have been established in Metro Boston longer than any other Asian group. A comparatively higher percentage of Indians was in the 25–34 years old category.

Nativity, Citizenship, and English Language Proficiency

Data on nativity and citizenship readily reflect the immigrant foundations of the Asian American population. As indicated earlier, this information is extremely useful in providing a context for analyzing policies and strategies and delivering programs as they influence Asian Americans in diverse domains — social welfare, education, political participation, housing, employment, and community development. One can imagine, for example, myriad political and strategic implications accompanying the fact that over 70 percent of Asian Americans were foreign-born, by far the highest percentage of any group in the region (Table 2). Fewer than 60 percent of all Asian Americans were United States citizens, the smallest percentage of any group. Among the groups with large percentages of foreign born populations, however, Asian Americans had 42.1 percent of its foreign-born population become citizens compared with blacks or African Americans with 39.2 percent and Latinos with 26.6 percent naturalized.

Table 2
Nativity and Citizenship by Race and Latino Origin

	Asian Am.	White	Black or Afr. Am.	Nat. Am.	Latino
Foreign Born	71.8%	7.7%	26.8%	15.9%	36.8%
Not a Citizen	41.6%	3.8%	16.3%	9.0%	27.0%
Naturalized	30.2%	3.9%	10.5%	6.9%	9.8%
U.S. Born	28.2%	92.3%	73.2%	84.1%	63.2%

Some variations with regard to nativity and citizenship can be found when examining specific Asian ethnic groups (Table 3). Although all of the groups, with the exception of the Hmong at 47.6 percent, had foreign-born populations greater than 60 percent, the Pakistanis and Thais had foreign-born populations of 79.7 percent and 80.7 percent respectively. Stated in another way, only the Hmong had a U.S.-born population greater than 40 percent.

The Asian subgroups with the largest portions of their foreign-born populations naturalized were the Filipinos, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Koreans. The communities with the highest overall percentages of U.S. citizens were the Filipinos, Hmong, and Chinese. The Japanese with 31.2 percent had by far the lowest citizenship rate. One can speculate that this reflects the relatively large number of Japanese residents of the region who were students.

Table 3
Nativity and Citizenship by Asian Subgroup

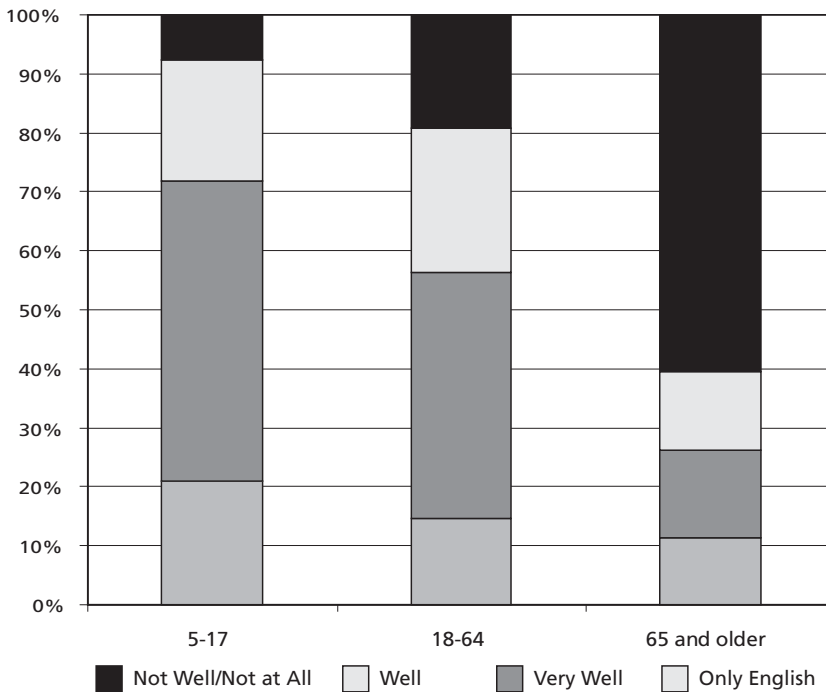
	Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese
Foreign Born	63.3%	70.1%	68.1%	47.6%	76.3%	76.6%
Not a Citizen	42.3%	35.3%	29.4%	31.9%	52.2%	68.8%
Naturalized	21.0%	34.8%	38.7%	15.7%	24.1%	7.8%
U.S. Born	36.7%	29.9%	31.9%	52.4%	23.7%	23.4%

	Korean	Laotian	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese
Foreign Born	75.1%	67.4%	79.7%	80.7%	76.5%
Not a Citizen	39.0%	42.1%	56.1%	60.0%	38.9%
Naturalized	36.1%	25.3%	23.6%	20.7%	37.6%
U.S. Born	24.9%	32.6%	20.3%	19.3%	23.5%

Important additional information about the citizenship and nativity of Asian Americans is data on their English language proficiency. Language issues are of strong importance to Asian Americans. The diverse countries of origin of Asian Americans mean that many speak a broad range of languages adding to the complex relationships among Asian American groups. In contrast to the large foreign-born Latino population, for example, who mostly speak Spanish, Asian groups do not have a corresponding non-English language that ties them together. Asian American immigrants from a range of Asian subgroups, therefore, have a considerable stake in the development of their English language capabilities for personal and, to the extent that they exist or are germane, larger group interests. English, in short, must serve as a tie that binds many Asian Americans together as well as a vehicle for facilitating their participation in the economic, political, and social life of American society.

For Asian Americans in Metro Boston, English language proficiency is strongly associated with age (Figure 2). Fewer than 10 percent of Asian Americans in the youngest age group (5 percent17 years old) were described as “not well or not at all” proficient in English. Between the ages of 18 and 64 years old, approximately 20 percent reported that level of proficiency. In the oldest age group, over 60 percent were described as “not well or not at all” proficient.

Figure 2
English Proficiency by Age Among Asian Americans



Income, Poverty Status, and Employment Status

The median household income of Asian Americans was less than that of whites and considerably greater than that of other groups (Table 4). In the case of Asian Americans, however, the aggregate income figure, as was true for several other variables, masked the wide diversity among specific Asian subgroups where the range of incomes was substantial (Table 5). At the high end, Indians had a median household income in 2000 of nearly \$72,000. Filipinos and Chinese also had incomes above the median for all Asian Americans. Cambodians with approximately \$38,000 had the lowest median family income of any Asian American group. Their income was the closest to those of

blacks or African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Thais, Hmong, and Laotians had incomes below the Asian American median.

Table 4
Median Household Income by Race and Latino Origin

Asian Am.	White	Black or Afr. Am.	Nat. Am.	Latino	TOTAL POP
\$51,830	\$54,976	\$34,680	\$37,547	\$29,294	\$52,154

Table 5
Median Household Income by Asian Subgroup

Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese
\$37,295	\$52,121	\$60,524	\$46,875	\$71,771	\$38,033

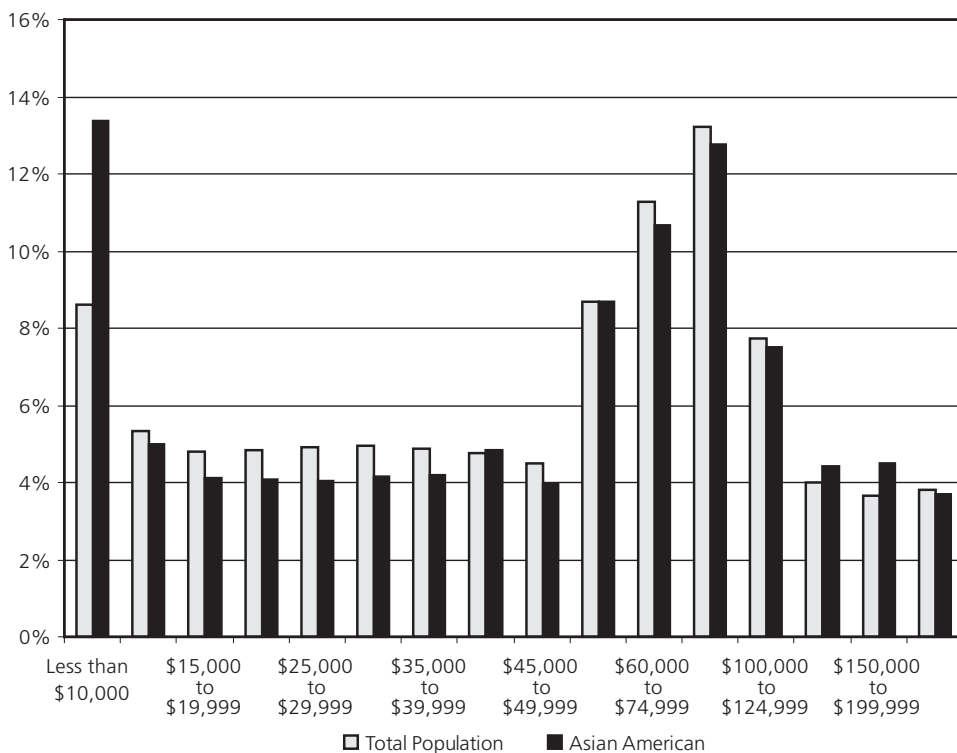
Korean	Laotian	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese
\$40,408	\$50,893	\$45,174	\$44,167	\$42,402

A factor that might help to account for the relatively lower income levels of Japanese, Koreans, and some other groups might be the large number of college students within their ranks. For example, 34.3 percent of Japanese and 33.4 percent of Koreans in Metro Boston were enrolled in college or graduate schools.

Generally speaking, the distribution of Asian American household incomes approximated that of the total population with one very notable exception (Figure 3). Nearly 14 percent of Asian Americans were in the lowest income category (those making less than \$10,000) compared with just over 8 percent of the total population. Indeed the largest number of Asian American households was in the lowest income category. For the total population the category with the largest number of households was \$75,000 to \$99,999.

Figure 3

Household Income Distribution for Asian Americans and Total Population



When considering specific Asian American groups, there were some significant disparities in their income distributions. For example, almost half of all Indian households had incomes over \$75,000 while fewer than 20% of Cambodian households had incomes over \$75,000. About 13 percent of Indian households had incomes below \$20,000 compared to approximately 25 percent of Cambodian and Vietnamese households.

The mean per capita income of Asian Americans, \$21,712, was substantially lower than that of whites, \$28,822, and higher than that of Latinos, \$12,546, Native Americans, \$16,214, and blacks or African Americans, \$16,230.

With per capita income as in the case of household income, broad variability existed among Asian subgroups. The per capita income in 2000 of the Hmong population, for example, was barely \$8,000 and the Cambodian population was just over \$10,000. In contrast, Indian per capita income was nearly four times higher than Hmong and three times higher than Cambodian.

For all non-white groups, including Asian Americans, poverty is an especially significant challenge and a dramatic reflection of inequality. It has been a significant part of the Asian American reality from the nineteenth century to the present. In 2000 the percentage of Asian American families in poverty, 12.3 percent, was nearly double that of the total population, 6.4 percent, and nearly three times that of whites, 4.4 percent (Table 6).

Poverty rates varied substantially among Asian subgroups (Table 7). Notably, however, in every Asian subgroup the poverty rate was higher than that of the white population. Nearly one-fourth of Cambodian and Pakistani families were in poverty. The Asian groups with the lowest poverty rates were the Indians and Laotians where about one in twenty of their families were in poverty.

Table 6
Poverty Status of Families by Race and Latino Origin

Asian Am.	White	Black or Afr. Am.	Nat. Am.	Latino	TOTAL POP
12.3%	4.4%	17.7%	18.7%	26.2%	6.4%

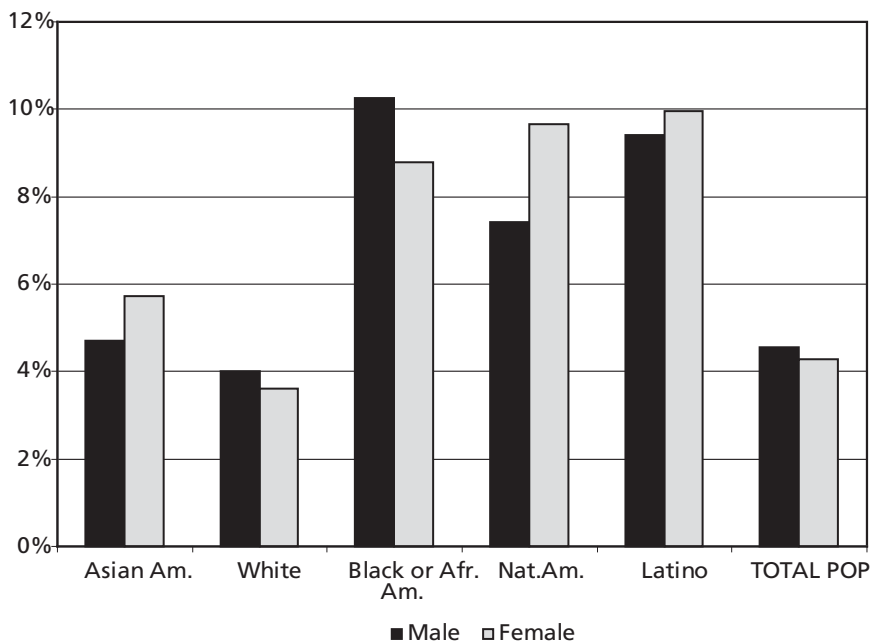
Table 7
Poverty Status of Families by Asian Subgroup

Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese
23.9%	9.9%	7.4%	17.4%	5.3%	13.0%
Korean	Laotian	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese	
14.6%	5.0%	23.3%	10.6%	21.2%	

The Asian American unemployment rate was greater than that of whites and significantly less than that of other groups (Figure 4). In comparing Asian American unemployment with the total population, Asian Americans differed in that for them the female unemployment rate exceeded the male rate whereas in the total population the male rate was higher than the female.

Figure 4

Unemployment Rate for the Population 16 Years and Older by Sex, Race, and Latino Origin

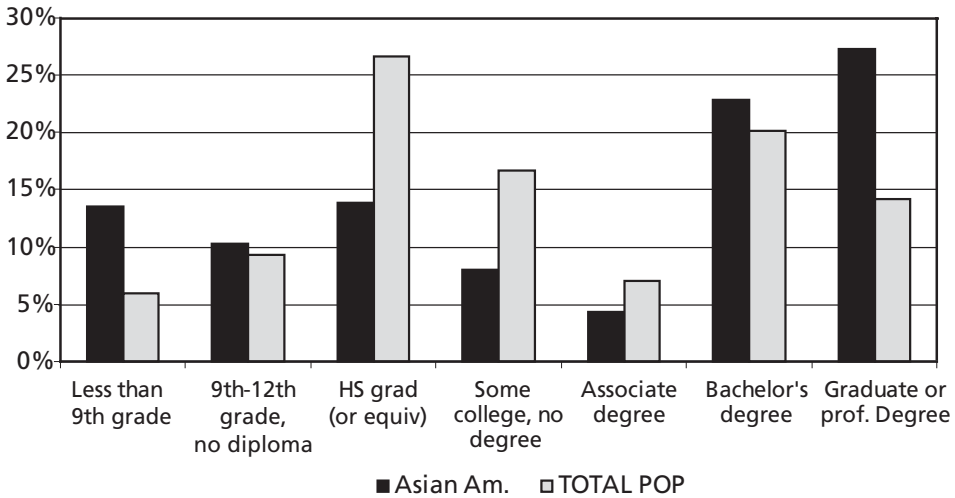


Educational Attainment

The pattern of Asian Americans disproportionately occupying the low and high ends of various spectrums is again readily apparent in the data on levels of educational attainment for those 25 years old and older (Figure 5). At the low end, the percentage of Asian Americans in 2000 with less than a ninth grade education was more than double that of the total population. Only Latinos had a higher percentage of their population in this category. At the high end, the percentage of Asian Americans with graduate or professional degrees was more than double that of the total population and was considerably larger than that of any group. Indeed, one out of two Asian Americans had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Furthermore, while a slightly higher percentage of Asian Americans compared to the total population had a bachelor's degree, the percentage of Asian Americans whose highest level of educational attainment was graduating from high school, 13.8 percent, was nearly half that of the total population and was by far the lowest percentage of any group.

Figure 5

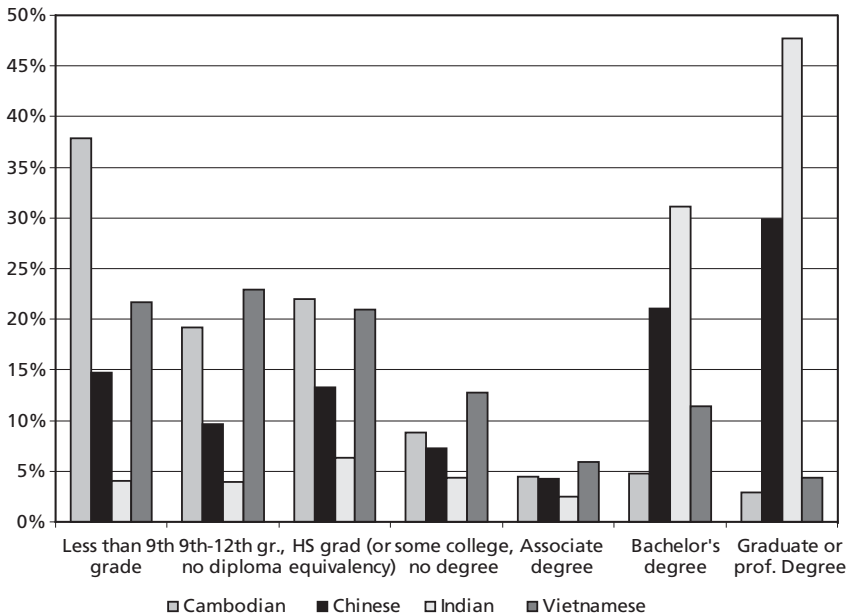
Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Older for Asian Americans and Total Population



It is especially important to move beyond data on Asian American educational attainment as a group and instead examine individually specific sub-groups. For example, in looking at the four largest Asian ethnic groups percent Indians, Chinese, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, several notable differences were apparent (Figure 6). Cambodians had considerably lower levels of educational attainment than Indians who had remarkably high levels of attainment. Nearly 40% of Cambodians had less than a ninth grade education compared to 4 percent of Indians, while 47.7 percent of Indians had a graduate or professional degree compared to just below 2.9 percent of Cambodians. The pattern of Chinese attainment most closely resembled that of Indians, while the pattern for Vietnamese somewhat followed that of the Cambodians.

Figure 6

Educational Attainment for the Population 25 Years and Older for Selected Asian Subgroups



Housing: Household Size, and Tenure

Asian American households were second only to Latinos in their average size (Table 18). All of the non-white racial groups and Latinos had average household sizes larger than those of whites and the total population.

Among Asian subgroups, Hmong households with 6.5 members were by far the largest (Table 9). The Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, and Pakistanis also had average household sizes greater than the Asian American average. The Japanese at 2 had the smallest average household size.

Table 8

Average Household Size by Race and Latino Origin

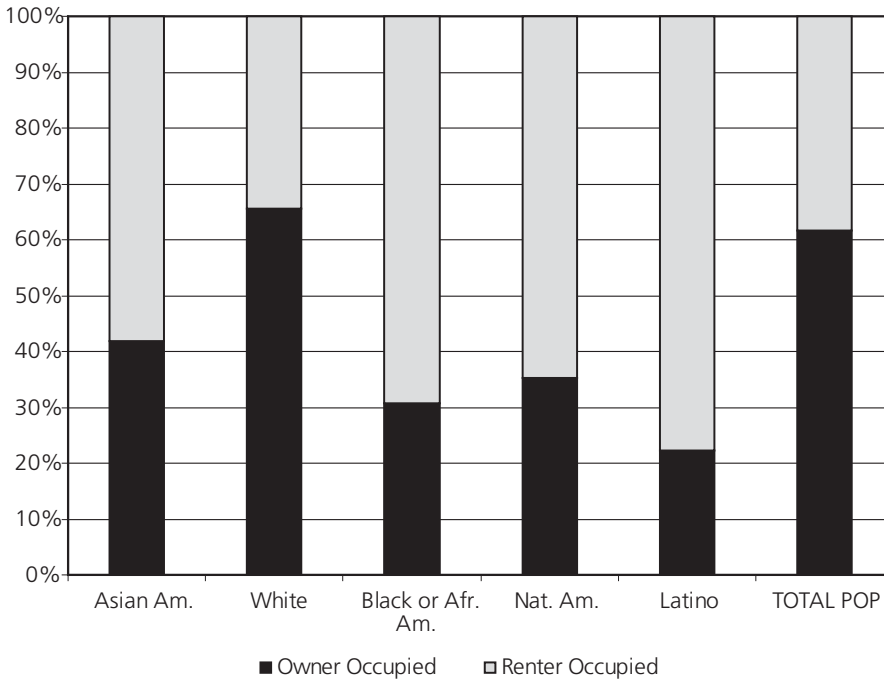
Asian Am.	White	Black or Afr. Am.	Nat. Am.	Latino	TOTAL POP
3.0	2.5	2.7	2.7	3.2	2.5

Table 9
Average Household Size by Asian Subgroup

Cambodian	Chinese	Filipino	Hmong	Indian	Japanese
4.6	2.9	2.7	6.5	2.7	2.0
Korean	Laotian	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese	
2.4	4.4	3.8	2.3	3.9	

While a majority of whites lived in owner occupied households, the majority of Asian Americans, blacks or African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans lived in households where rents were paid (Figure 7). The Asian American owner occupancy rate was higher than that of blacks or African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos but about one-third less than that of the total population and of whites.

Figure 7
Tenure by Race and Latino Origin



Of the Asian subgroups, the Hmong had the highest owner occupancy rate and the Japanese the lowest. It is not readily apparent why the Hmong have such a high rate. The concentration of Hmong in cities such as Fitchburg with relatively low home values may account for the high ownership rate. For some groups, such as the Japanese, Koreans, and Thais, the relatively low owner occupancy rates might be reflective of their high college student populations.

Conclusion

The themes of growth, diversity, and the attendant complexity that accompanies rapid change have been chronicled in the data presented here. On virtually every variable — size, growth, location, age, nativity, citizenship, English language proficiency, income, poverty rate, employment status, educational attainment, and housing — there are significant differences both between Asian Americans and certain other racial groups and also among the specific Asian groups that constitute the Asian American population.

Any picture of the Asian American community, including this one, can only capture a moment in a dynamic landscape. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the tendency historically has been to depict Asian Americans simply and stereotypically resulting in attitudes, assumptions, and policies that have often been detrimental to them. One lesson, therefore, is clear: Fresh and comprehensive information and analysis are crucial on the Asian American community and the resources needed to carry out these tasks. The ultimate challenge for those interested in enhancing the quality of life of Asian Americans is to carefully study and understand the contours of rapid change and transformation in that population and then to determine whether those changes and transformations require corresponding responses in policies that are developed, programs constructed, and services delivered.✿

Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a report initially prepared for and with the support of the Metro Boston Equity Initiative of the Harvard Civil Rights Project.
- 2 Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles, eds., *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity and Change in the 21st Century* (Berkeley: Asian Week with UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2003), 1.
- 3 For purposes of this article, Metro Boston entails the census geographical area defined as the "Massachusetts (part); Boston-Worcester-Lawrence-Lowell-Brockton, MA-NH New England county metropolitan area." This area includes Bristol, Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, Suffolk, and Worcester counties, and 192 cities and towns. The source of the data in this article is U.S. Census Data 2000 Summary File (SF-4) Sample Data unless otherwise indicated.

- 4 The data reported in this article includes those persons identified as selecting one race alone with the exception of instances where figures for "total population" are designated which include all persons. It is important to bear in mind some of the consequences of reporting statistics on single race persons. For example, by utilizing "Asian alone" when referring to Asian Americans, the numbers reported represent the minimum figures for Asian Americans. By not including persons who indicated Asian and at least one other race in our calculations, we do not account for multiracial individuals who might be regarded as "Asian Americans." In 2000, 23,544 persons identified themselves as Asian in combination with one or more other races, meaning that 9.5% of all Asians (those reporting Asian alone and Asian in combination with one or more other race) were multiracial.