



DiversityInc



# MEETING IN A BOX: Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

**Asian American and Pacific  
Islander Heritage Month takes place  
in May to celebrate the strength,  
tenacity, resilience and contributions  
of Asian Americans from around the  
world. AAPI individuals are diverse,  
with different backgrounds, sexual  
orientations, identities and abilities.  
This month, we aim to celebrate all  
of them.**

This Meeting in a Box is designed to serve as a valuable tool to continue your employees' cultural competence education, open conversations about race and ethnicity and spotlight the accomplishments of the AAPI community. This month, we'll examine disparities in the Asian American work experience, a timeline of historical events, data from DiversityInc outlining Asian Americans in leadership and the achievement gaps that exist for Asian Americans.

## **A Closer Look at the Disparities in the Asian American Work Experience**

Michelle Lee knows first-hand about the bamboo ceiling – the limitations that Asian Americans experience when trying to ascend in the workplace.

In 2022, the attorney sued her former employer for allegedly passing her over for promotions and paying her less than her white peers. While Lee said the matter is resolved and wouldn't comment on the case, she is vocal about the barriers Asian Americans often experience at work.

"I have a Yale undergrad degree and a Yale Law degree," she says. "I'm 44. I should be at the peak of my contribution to the U.S. economy, to the U.S. workforce, but because of all of these forces I've had to deal with at work that's not related to the actual work itself, I have pulled myself out of that."

Lee left corporate America behind and has dedicated her life to volunteering at Stand with Asian Americans, a non-profit organization that protects Asian Americans against discrimination and violence.

“My career has always been a huge part of my identity,” she says. “Since graduating from law school, I’ve worked 17 years and never taken a break. I have three boys and have always wanted to show that their mom is a strong, independent, working mom. Yet, in some ways, I feel like I couldn’t fight.”

## Leadership Gap

The model minority myth paints Asian Americans as hard-working and intelligent but also quiet and unassertive, stereotypes that can prevent them from climbing the corporate ladder.

“It suggests that Asian Americans have a certain place in our society,” says John Yang, President and Executive Director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice. “Typically, the stereotype is that we’re hard-working. We’re quiet, but we’re not leaders.”

Asian Americans are the least likely of any racial group to be promoted to management, have role models at their company, have strong networks or have a sponsor.

“Asian professionals still have a lack of opportunities when it comes to promotions, still don’t have any opportunities when it comes to leadership opportunities on an executive level – you see percentages dropping off when it gets to that C-suite,” says Sy Stokes, Vice President of Research at Coqual, a non-profit think tank.

“These are things that have been happening for generations even though there’s this model minority myth claiming that Asian professionals are doing the best out of all categories and don’t need any support.”

That support is elusive for Asian women.



Of the average top 10 companies on the DiversityInc 2022 Top 50 Companies for Diversity list, Asian women have the lowest percentage of senior management positions compared to all Asians, Asian men and people of color. They are also less likely than other groups of women to receive positive feedback on their leadership abilities, even when their performance ratings are strong. As a result, they are more likely to be unhappy at their company. But not all Asians experience the bamboo ceiling in the same way.

Take the tech industry as an example. That’s where you’ll find Indian-born CEOs like Microsoft’s Satya Nadella, Vimeo’s Anjali Sud, Google’s Sundar Pichai and Flextronics’ Revathi Advaiti running some of the best-known companies in the world. Nadella has been the CEO of Microsoft for almost a decade. Before his promotion, he held leadership roles across Microsoft’s enterprise and consumer businesses.

Jackson G. Lu, Professor at Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, co-authored a study that found that East Asians (e.g., China) are less likely than South Asians (e.g., India) and whites to attain leadership positions in the U.S. and it has nothing to do with prejudice or motivation. While East Asian cultures perceive humility and non-assertiveness as steady personality traits, the U.S. interprets those characteristics as a lack of confidence or motivation.

“Their low verbal assertiveness is incongruent with American norms concerning how leaders should communicate,” says Lu.

## Income Disparities

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in the U.S., but they also have the highest income inequality of any racial group.

“Racial wealth inequality is much larger among Asian Americans than against whites, and that means that the bottom is much larger and much poorer,” says Christian Weller, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress (CAP).

While 10% of Asian Americans live in poverty, the median household income of Asian Americans was \$85,800 in 2019, higher than the \$61,800 median among all U.S. households. The typical Asian American household also has a higher level of educational attainment than the typical white household.

The CAP says the disparity is most likely a combination of factors, including access to quality employment with benefits and high wages. Asian Americans tend to be overrepresented in high-paying occupations like computer programmers and low-paying jobs like cooks and skin care specialists.

“For instance, dependence on social assistance in old age is larger among Asian Americans than among any other subpopulation in the country,” says Weller. “There is a huge share of Asian Americans that are struggling and they don’t have much wealth.”

The CAP notes how income inequality varies between Asian American subgroups. In 2019, Mongolian and Burmese Americans had the highest poverty rates among all Asian-origin groups. Employment and wage data also suggest Vietnamese Americans are economically more vulnerable than other groups, but that’s not true for all Asian Americans.

“Groups of populations are doing relatively well with lots of qualifications,” says Weller. “Those tend to be Chinese American, Japanese American and Korean American, but it depends a little on when they came. With Chinese Americans, whether they came from the mainland or Taiwan and so on, it’s not as clear cut.”

## Stressed at Work

Anti-Asian hate crimes soared a record 224% in 2021. Sixty-two percent of Asian and Asian American respondents in a Coqual study say the violence has negatively affected their feelings of safety commuting to work.

“When something tragic happens and you’re trying to go about business as usual, but your entire life just got flipped on its head — you fear going outside to go to and from work,” says Stokes. “You’re trying to figure out whether or not you should be with your community right now. How do you cater to your needs?”

The violence has affected the mental and physical health of Asian Americans, their ability to focus at work and their relationships with managers and colleagues.

“When you come into an office where your manager is treating everything as business as usual, it makes you feel as though being a human doesn’t matter,” says Stokes. “And the same with your co-workers. When they say, ‘how was your dinner last night’ when something tragic just struck your community? You start to question your place in the workplace.”

Lee shared how her husband commutes into New York City to work every day but has stopped taking the subway.

“I’m constantly in fear of him getting randomly attacked,” she says. “I live close to New York City but never take public transportation anymore. Even though parking costs an arm and a leg, I always drive to the city and park near where I’m supposed to go. I don’t walk around and enjoy the city anymore because I’m constantly looking around like, ‘am I going to get attacked?’”

Asking Asian Americans where they’re “really” from or assuming all Asians are good at math can seem harmless, but microaggressions can be damaging. Lee says her discriminatory experience took a toll on her mental health, an issue often underreported in Asian American communities.

“Companies have to realize they are losing good people,” says Lee. “I’ve been so physically ill from what I’ve experienced that it’s not worth it. The money’s not worth it.”

## Insufficient Support

Only one in four Asian and Asian American professionals in the Coqual study feel that their company is very vocal about violence against their community.

Yang says when tragic events occur in the Asian community, a company’s public statement can go a long way in helping employees feel recognized. CEO-led town halls and employee resource groups (ERGs) can also allow workers to discuss their feelings. In addition, Yang says companies have begun offering bystander intervention training.

“If you see an act of hate, what can you do at that moment? This training is not self-defense. It’s not telling people to fight back necessarily, but it’s to give people options,” he says.



Stokes is challenging companies to improve workplace experiences for Asian Americans by having frank conversations with them, reviewing talent processes for inequities and building solutions like flexible work options. He says creating a more inclusive work environment for Asian Americans is imperative, especially when productivity is at stake.

“If there were anything else within the workplace that affects someone’s ability to work or be productive — every single company, every single manager would jump at every possibility to nip it in the bud to do everything they could to address that issue and provide any resources necessary.”

# TIMELINE



**1587**

“Luzon Indios” Filipinos are considered the first Asians in what would be known as America when they arrived in Morro Bay, California.

**1790**

The first recorded immigrants from India arrive in Massachusetts.

**1815**

The first recorded immigrants from China arrive in San Francisco.



**1848**

The California Gold Rush leads to the first large-scale immigration of Chinese to the U.S. due to the aftermath of the Opium Wars when the British levied high taxes against Chinese peasants and farmers and drove them from their land. In addition to military intervention and rampant opium addiction, alternating periods of floods and droughts in China exacerbated the already destabilized region, leading many desperate Chinese people to sail for California in the hopes of survival.

**1854**

Yung Wing graduates from Yale College, becoming the first Chinese person to graduate from a U.S. college. He goes on to champion higher education for other Chinese by establishing the Chinese Educational Mission, which helps send other Chinese students to U.S. schools. He also writes a memoir, *My Life in China and America*, where he outlines how the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 impacted his life.

In *People v. Hall*, the California Supreme Court rules that Chinese people (and anyone who “looked Chinese”) cannot testify against whites accused of murder, just as Native American and Black people could not.

**1869**

The first transcontinental railroad is completed. The Central Pacific crew is made up of primarily Chinese immigrants, while the Union Pacific crew is made up of primarily Irish immigrants. These sides often clash. The laborers work as long as 15 hours a day in treacherous conditions to complete the project. The first Japanese settlers arrive on the U.S. mainland in California.

**1870**

The Naturalization Act of 1870 restricts citizenship to whites and Blacks, making Chinese people ineligible. Naturalized American citizens of Chinese descent also had their status revoked.

**1871**

The Chinese Massacre of 1871: 500 white and Hispanic people ran through Old Chinatown in Los Angeles, killing 500 Chinese people — the largest mass lynching in U.S. History.

**1875**

The Page Act of 1875 (a preamble to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) prohibited Chinese women from entering the U.S. under the pretense of “population control.”

**1878**

A California circuit court rules that *In re Ah Yup* and other residents of Asian descent were not eligible for naturalization, emphasizing that “Orientals” were unfit to participate in government.

**1879**

California adopts a constitution prohibiting the employment of Chinese immigrants by corporates, states, county or municipal governments.

**1882**

The Chinese Exclusion Act, the first and only law banning the immigration of a specific ethnic/national demographic, prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the United States for “10 years.”

**1885**

Soh Jaipil (anglicized as “Philip Jaisohn”) arrives in the U.S. as a political exile. He becomes the first Korean to be naturalized as a U.S. citizen and the first Korean American medical doctor. He returns home in 1896 and becomes a well-known political activist.

The Rock Springs Massacre: On Sept. 2, white immigrant miners killed 28 Chinese immigrant miners, injured 15, and burned down 78 Chinese homes because they felt Chinese miners were taking all the mining jobs.

The Tacoma Riot: A mob of nearly 500 prominent businessmen, police and political leaders drove 200 Chinese residents out of Tacoma, Washington. The anti-Chinese sentiment was so strong at the time that none of the mob members faced any repercussions.

In *Tape v. Hurley*, the California Supreme Court ruled that the exclusion of Chinese American students from public school based on their ancestry was unlawful, becoming a precursor to *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954.

**1886**

In *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, the Supreme Court rules that any law with unequal impact on different groups is discriminatory.

Seattle Riot of 1886: local chapters of the American labor federation, Knights of Labor, methodically expelled 200 Chinese civilians due to labor competition.

**1887**

The Hells Canyon Massacre (also known as the Snake River Massacre): 34 Chinese gold miners were ambushed, robbed, murdered and mutilated in May 1887.

**1892**

The Geary Act of 1892 extended the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and included provisions such as carrying a “Certificate of Residence” or face detention or deportation.

**1893**

Hawaii’s monarchy was overthrown by a group of American-backed businessmen, forcing Queen Liliuokalani out of power. Five years later, the United States annexed Hawaii and in 1959 Hawaii became the 50th state.



**1898**

Guam becomes a U.S. territory after the United States wins the Spanish-American war and The Treaty of Paris is signed.

The U.S. assumes control of the Philippines upon winning the Spanish-American War. The U.S. also illegally annexes Hawaii. In *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, the Supreme Court upholds the 14th Amendment: that all people born in the U.S., even if they are of Chinese descent, are citizens.

**1900**

American Samoa officially became a U.S. territory. The Department of Interior was given authority over American Samoa in 1956.

**1900-1904**

The San Francisco Plague: an epidemic of the bubonic plague occurs in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Medical authorities were aware of the disease, but then-California Gov. Henry Gage denied its existence for more than two years. His reluctance to act on it led to widespread outbreaks throughout the city, including cases identified in Oakland. Originally, 121 cases were identified and 119 people died, but four years later, 160 more cases and 78 more deaths linked to the initial outbreak were documented.

**1906**

The San Francisco Board of Education segregates Chinese, Japanese and Korean schoolchildren in newly formed “Oriental Schools.”

**1907**

Theodore Roosevelt issues Executive Order 589, preventing Japanese and Korean people from entering the U.S. mainland. Fueled by anti-Asian sentiment from the Asiatic Exclusion League, the Pacific Coast Race Riots of 1907 occurred in San Francisco, Bellingham, Washington, and Vancouver, Canada.

**1910**

Angel Island opens in California's San Francisco Bay. Known as the Ellis Island of the West, the immigration station served as the country's major port of entry for Asian immigrants.

**1917**

The Immigration Act of 1917 was passed to restrict immigration by imposing a literacy test and thus creating new categories of inadmissible persons. One section of the law specified an "Asiatic barred zone," which included immigrants from China, Myanmar (then Burma), Thailand (then Siam) and most Polynesian islands. Occupational exceptions included those who were lawyers, physicians, chemists, civil engineers and merchants.

**1922**

In *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, the Supreme Court rules that Japanese migrants cannot be naturalized.

**1924**

The Immigration Act of 1924 effectively prohibits the immigration of all Asians to the U.S.

**1927**

In *Lum v. Rice*, the Supreme Court ruled that exclusion by race of Chinese American students from school did not violate the 14th Amendment — creating a precedence that would exclude minority children from schools reserved for whites.

**1942**

After the Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 results in 120,000 Japanese Americans being sent to internment camps.

**1943**

Congress repeals the Chinese Exclusion Act and grants naturalization rights to some Chinese immigrants already residing in the United States with the Magnuson Act.

**1946**

The Luce-Celler Act permits 100 Filipinos and 100 Indians to immigrate and become naturalized per year. Wing Ong becomes the first Chinese American not born in the U.S. to be elected to state office. He serves in the Arizona State House of Representatives.

**1949**

The U.S. grants 5,000 educated Chinese people refugee status after the Communist takeover of China.

**1955**

The Vietnam War begins, ultimately sparking resistance from many Asian Americans. The Asian American Movement, made up of several grassroots organizations, goes on to reach its peak in the 1960s and '70s.

**1956**

Dalip Singh Saund of California becomes the first Indian American in Congress.

**1958**

Japanese American Miyoshi Umeki wins Best Supporting Actress at the 30th Academy Awards for her role in "Sayonara" — the first actor of Asian descent to win an Oscar for acting.

**1959**

Hiram Fong of Hawaii becomes the first Chinese American in the Senate. Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, a World War II veteran, becomes the first Japanese American in Congress. In 1962, Inouye became the first Japanese American elected to the Senate.

**1964**

Patsy Takemoto Mink of Hawaii becomes the first woman of color in Congress. She is a third-generation Japanese American who grew up in Maui.

**1965**

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminates the national-origins quota system, which had previously provided immigration visas to 2% of the total number of people of each nationality — a quota that largely affected Asians and non-Northwestern Europeans.

**1968**

The term “Asian American” was coined by historian-activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee during the founding of the Asian American Political Alliance.

**1973**

The Organization of Chinese Americans (now known as the Asian Pacific American Advocates) is founded to advance the social, political and economic well-being of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the U.S.

The film “Enter the Dragon” is released, making Bruce Lee the first Asian American Hollywood action superstar.

**1974**

George Ariyoshi becomes the first Asian American governor of a U.S. state — Hawaii.

**1975**

The war in Vietnam ends, leading to a large migration of Southeast Asian refugees to the U.S.

**1979**

The first Asian Pacific American Heritage Week is celebrated on May 4. Capitol Hill staffer and member of the Organization of Chinese Americans, Jeanie Jew, is credited for spearheading the initiative along with Ruby Moy.

**1980**

The U.S. census first uses the term “Asian American.”

**1982**

The Vietnam War Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C., honoring the 57,939 Americans killed in the war.

**1985**

Ellison Onizuka becomes the first Asian American — and first American of Japanese descent — in space.

**1988**

The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 pays surviving Japanese American internees \$20,000 each in reparations.

**1990**

President George H.W. Bush issued a Presidential Proclamation designating May 1990 as the first Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Two years later, Congress passes legislation making the designation permanent.

**1992**

Jay Kim of California becomes the first Korean American elected to Congress.

**1994**

“All American Girl,” starring comedienne Margaret Cho, was the first network sitcom to feature a predominantly Asian American cast.

**1997**

Astronaut and engineer Kalpana Chawla becomes the first woman of Indian descent to go into space during NASA’s Columbia mission. In 2003, during the second mission, she was one of the seven crew members who died during the Columbia disaster.

**1999**

Chinese Canadian Andrea Jung becomes the first woman of color CEO of a Fortune 500 company, Avon.

**2000**

Norman Mineta becomes the first Asian American Cabinet member when he briefly served as President Clinton’s Secretary of Commerce. Mineta goes on to become the Secretary of Transportation for the Bush administration in 2001 — the only Democrat Cabinet member.

**2001**

September 11th attacks lead to a wave of anti-Asian sentiment and the Patriot Act, which is linked to the unfair detainment of South Asian people in the U.S.

Elaine Chao, who was born in Taiwan, becomes the first woman Asian American Cabinet member. She served as the Secretary of Labor under the Bush administration and goes on to serve as the Secretary of Transportation under President Trump.



## 2004

The Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami was one of the deadliest disasters in modern history, killing nearly 230,000 people in countries including Sri Lanka, Thailand and India. Losses were estimated at \$10 billion.

## 2006

At the 78th Academy Awards, Ang Lee becomes the first person of color and first Asian to win Best Director for "Brokeback Mountain."

## 2007

Bobby Jindal of Louisiana becomes the first Indian American governor. The National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance is founded to connect Asian American, South Asian, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander LGBTQ+ organizations and support LGBTQ+ AAPI rights and visibility.

## 2009

President Obama appoints three Asian Americans to the Cabinet: Gary Locke, Secretary of Commerce; Steven Chu, Energy Secretary; and Eric Shinseki, Veterans Affairs Secretary.

Far East Movement is the first Asian American group to earn a number-one hit on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for the song, "Like a G6."

Speed Skater Apolo Anton Ohno, who is half Japanese, earns eight Olympic medals, becoming the most decorated winter Olympian.

Nikki Haley of South Carolina becomes the first female Indian American governor.

Jeremy Lin becomes the first Taiwanese American player in the NBA, who signed him out of Harvard University into a two-year deal with the Golden State Warriors. He goes on to sign with the Toronto Raptors in 2019, becoming the first Asian American to win an NBA championship.

## 2013

Kevin Tsujihara, of Japanese American heritage, becomes the first non-white CEO of a major Hollywood studio, Warner Bros. At the 85th Academy Awards, Ang Lee wins his second Oscar for Best Director for "Life of Pi."

## 2014

Pakistani Activist Malala Yousafzai becomes the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. She became an advocate for girls' education after 2012 when a Taliban gunman shot her in the head for attending school.

## 2015

House of Representatives unanimously passes legislation to remove all references to "Orientals" in federal law and replace the term with the more accurate and inclusive "Asian American/Pacific Islanders."

## 2016

California Attorney General Kamala Harris, who is half Indian, is elected as a Senator. She is the first Indian American to serve in the Senate.

Iraq War veteran Tammy Duckworth becomes the first Thai American woman and the first woman with a disability elected to Congress. In addition to being the first female double amputee in the Senate, Duckworth is also the first Senator to give birth while in office.

The U.S. government formally banned the use of the derogatory term "Oriental" from federal law, replacing it with the term Asian American.

The Disney film "Moana" premieres and grosses \$247 million in the U.S. To ensure a culturally accurate representation of the film's main character, a Polynesian princess, Disney enlists the help of anthropologists, linguists, historians, choreographers and cultural practitioners from islands including Samoa, Tahiti, Mo'orea and Fiji.

## 2018

Korean pop group BTS reaches No. 1 on the Billboard 200. The band grows a dedicated fanbase and an interest in K-pop music stateside.

## 2019

Sandra Oh wins the Golden Globe for Best Performance in a Television Series – Drama for her role in "Killing Eve."

## 2020

Nora "Awkwafina" Lum becomes the first Asian American to win Best Actress at the Golden Globes for her role in "The Farewell."

At the 92nd Academy Awards, Korean filmmaker, Bong Joonho's "Parasite" wins four Oscars, including Best Picture — the first non-English language film to win the category.

Stop AAPI Hate is founded to track the surge in anti-Asian hate crimes in America stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.



## 2021

Kamala Harris is sworn in as the first woman Vice President of the United States, becoming the highest-ranking female official in history. Half Filipina singer H.E.R. wins the Grammy for Song of the Year for “I Can’t Breathe” — inspired by the nationwide protests over the death of George Floyd.

At the 93rd Academy Awards, in addition to one of the most diverse slate of nominees, it’s a banner year for Asian representation:

Beijing-born Chloé Zhao becomes the first woman of color, first Asian woman and only second women ever to be nominated and win Best Director for her film, “Nomadland.” Along with nominations for Best Picture, adapted screenplay and editing, Zhao is also the first woman ever to receive four nominations in a single year. Zhao is joined by Korean American director of “Minari,” Lee Isaac Chung — the first time two directors of Asian descent were nominated for Best Director.

Korean American Steven Yeun became the first Asian American nominated for Best Actor for his role in “Minari.” He is joined by British-Pakistani Riz Ahmed for his role in “Sound of Metal.” For the first time, two actors of Asian heritage were nominated for Best Actor in the same year.

Youn Yuh-jung becomes the first Korean actress to win Best Supporting Actress for her role in “Minari.”

“Raya and the Last Dragon” is Disney’s first animated movie featuring a Southeast Asian princess. The film is voiced by Kelly Marie Tran, the first Southeast Asian actor to lead an animated feature from the studio.

Marvel’s “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings,” starring Simu Liu, is the first big-budget American blockbuster to feature an Asian superhero.

## 2022

Frederic Aspiras, who styled Lady Gaga in the film “House of Gucci,” is the second Asian American to be nominated for a hair and makeup Oscar.

Actress Anna May Wong became the first Asian American to appear on U.S. currency.

Patricia Lee was the first Asian American and African American woman to serve on the Nevada Supreme Court.

Aruna Miller became the nation’s first South Asian woman elected state lieutenant governor of Maryland.

Rob Bonta was elected California’s first Filipino American attorney general.

## 2023

Michelle Yeoh made history as the first Asian woman to win the Oscar for best actress for her performance in “Everything Everywhere All at Once.” Ke Huy Quan also wins a best supporting actor Oscar for his role in “Everything Everywhere All at Once.” The distinction makes Quan, who is Chinese Vietnamese, the second actor of Asian descent to win in this category.

The Biden-Harris Administration released its first-ever National Strategy to Advance Equity, Justice and Opportunity for Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities.

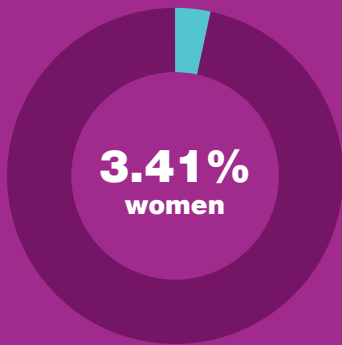
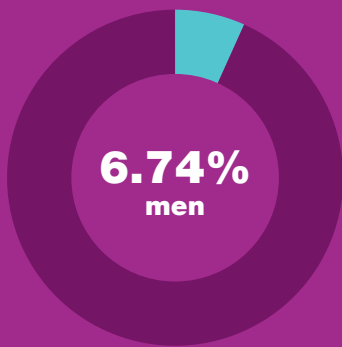


# FACTS & FIGURES

USING TOP 50 DATA, WE CAN SEE THE FOLLOWING BREAKDOWN FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT:

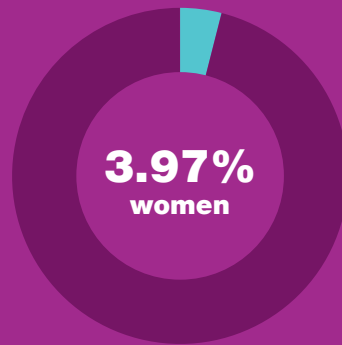
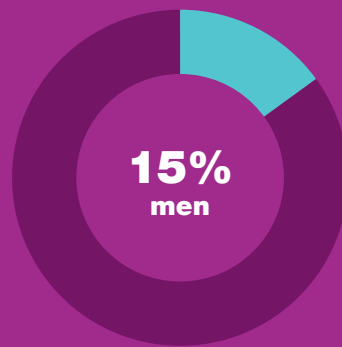
## Top 10 Companies

**10.15%** of Senior Management is made up of Asian Americans:



## Top Companies for Asian Americans

**19%** of Senior Management is Asian American:



**\$100,572**

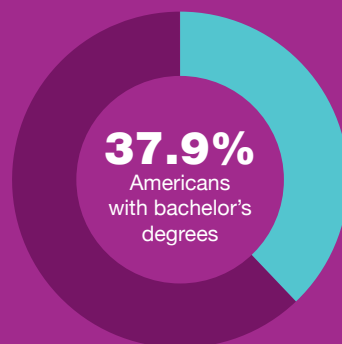
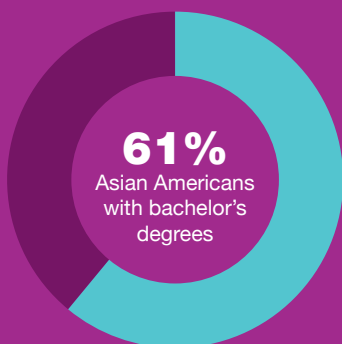
Asian Americans' average household income

**\$69,717**

All Americans' average household income

**\$1.3 TRILLION**

Asian American Buying Power



# HARD WORK AND NO PAY:

## Achievement Gaps Present Throughout the Asian American Experience

The Asian achievement gap typically refers to the disparity in academic performance between Asian American students and their non-Asian peers. Despite facing similar socioeconomic and cultural challenges as other minority groups, Asian Americans consistently outperform other racial groups in various academic measures, such as standardized test scores, high school graduation rates and college attendance rates.

While this gap may seem like a positive outcome for the Asian American community, it doesn't always translate to success in the real world. There are important questions about the root causes and implications of this. Let's dig into some of the possible explanations for the Asian achievement gap and its implications for education, corporate America and society as a whole.

### Causes of the Asian Achievement Gap

One of the most significant factors contributing to the Asian achievement gap in educational attainment is the cultural emphasis on education and academic achievement in many Asian countries. In countries like China, Japan and South Korea, education is highly valued, and parents often push their children to excel academically. As a result, many Asian Americans from families with roots in those countries prioritize education and expect high levels of achievement from their children.



But that experience is not uniform across the diaspora of Asian Americans. The experience of people with Chinese, Japanese and South Korean roots is in part due to a history of immigration policies that have favored highly skilled immigrants from those countries. As a result, these groups tend to have greater representation in corporate and professional positions, reflecting a long history of successful assimilation and integration into American society.

On the other hand, Southeast Asian Americans, such as Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese Americans, tend to have lower levels of educational attainment and income compared to other Asian American groups. A history of immigration policies that have allowed for fewer skilled immigrants from those countries contributes to this. These groups have often faced significant discrimination and prejudice, particularly in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

South Asian Americans, such as Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Americans, also have unique experiences, with a long history of immigration to the United States and a relatively high level of representation in professional and technical occupations. However, these groups have also faced discrimination and prejudice based on their religion and customs and have at times been mistreated in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

The stereotype threat is another contributing factor of the Asian achievement gap. This refers to the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group. For example, the stereotype that Asians are good at math can create pressure on Asian American students to perform well in math classes, leading them to work harder and achieve higher grades.

A recent study published in the journal *Sociology of Education*, titled "Stereotype Promise: Racialized Teacher Appraisals of Asian American Academic Achievement" shows that teachers often hold higher expectations for Asian American students and are more likely to recommend them for advanced coursework.

### Implications of the Asian Achievement Gap

The Asian achievement gap has both positive and negative implications for education and society. On the one hand, it highlights the potential for academic success among minority students and challenges racist stereotypes that minorities are inherently less intelligent or less capable than their white counterparts.

However, the Asian achievement gap can also contribute to the perception of Asian Americans as a “model minority.” This stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are a group that has overcome discrimination and achieved success through hard work and perseverance despite facing similar challenges as other minority groups. This stereotype can be harmful because it ignores the systemic barriers and discrimination that many Asian Americans face.

The emphasis on academic success can put a significant amount of pressure on Asian American students, leading to high levels of stress and anxiety. In some cases, this pressure can lead to mental health issues or academic burnout.

## The Drop Off in Asian Americans at the Executive Level in Corporate America

The achievement gap changes in a different way as Asian Americans age and move into the corporate world.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Minority Health, Asian Americans make up roughly 6% of the U.S. population and have high levels of educational attainment (54% have bachelor’s degrees). Despite this, Asian Americans are often underrepresented in leadership positions in corporate America. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the drop off in Asian Americans at the executive level, highlighting the need for increased representation and the elimination of bias.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Asian Americans make up 6% of the overall U.S. workforce, however, they are overrepresented in STEM careers. They make up roughly 13% of all STEM careers and 20% of computer science workers, according to the latest data from Pew Research Center.

Despite the success in STEM, Asian Americans’ success does not equate to ascending the organizational ladder. Only 4.4% of director-level or above positions at Fortune 1000 companies were occupied by Asian Americans, according to Ascend, a national organization that promotes Asian American corporate professionals.

Additionally, Asian Americans are less likely to be promoted to managerial positions than their white counterparts, even when they have similar qualifications and experience.

In 2021, McKinsey’s Women in the Workplace study examined 400 large organizations across the U.S., revealing that Asian Americans make up just 9% of senior vice presidents, but only 5% of promotions to the C-suite. For Asian women, the picture was more bleak as they make up less than 1% of those promotions.

## The Model Minority Myth Strikes Again

The model minority myth is another explanation for the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in executive positions. This stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are high-achieving, hard-working and successful, and as a result, they do not face the same barriers to advancement as other minority groups. This stereotype can create a perception that Asian Americans are not in need of support or advocacy in the workplace, leading to less attention and resources being devoted to their advancement.

Bias at the executive level is another factor affecting Asian Americans in the workplace. This can take many forms, including unconscious bias, which is often unintentional and can be difficult to identify. For example, Asian Americans may be perceived as lacking leadership skills or being less assertive or communicative than their non-Asian peers, leading to being overlooked for promotions and leadership opportunities.

The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in executive positions has significant implications for both the Asian American community and corporate America as a whole. From a business perspective, diverse leadership teams have been shown to lead to better decision-making and increased innovation. By excluding Asian Americans from executive positions, companies are missing out on the benefits that come with the perspective that stems from their experience.

From a societal perspective, the underrepresentation of Asian Americans reinforces the notion that certain racial groups are not capable of leadership, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and discrimination.



# SOLUTIONS

To address the drop off in Asian Americans at the executive level, companies can take steps to promote diversity and inclusion, including implementing policies and programs that specifically target the advancement of Asian Americans. This may include mentoring programs, unconscious bias training and leadership development programs.

It's also important to recognize the unique challenges that Asian Americans face in the workplace and to ensure that they are not overlooked in diversity and inclusion efforts. This includes challenging the model minority stereotype and addressing unconscious bias against Asian Americans in leadership positions.

Challenging bias across the talent lifecycle should be a part of a company's DEI initiatives. The success of those initiatives often hinges on whether the company has created an effective and impactful executive diversity council. All companies in the DiversityInc Top 50 have EDCs driving or monitoring their efforts to:

- ✓ **Achieve a proportional racial representation in management by a specific timeframe**
- ✓ **Combat unconscious bias**
- ✓ **Detect and correct pay inequity**
- ✓ **Promote cross-cultural competence**
- ✓ **Educate employees on anti-racism**

Leadership can address this issue through their own actions and foster a culture of inclusion and belonging by pairing Asian American employees under their wing via mentoring and sponsorship relationships. This can help to provide Asian Americans with valuable guidance and support, as well as opportunities for networking and career advancement.

