

The Rise of the Asian American Immigrant Population

When Huilin Chen immigrated from China to the United States in 2010, she was overwhelmed with feelings of excitement, hope and fear.

“Excited to start a new life in New York City, hoping that everything will go smoothly – yet the fear of all the unknowns and fear of not being able to make it here,” she says.

Chen came to the United States to pursue a master’s degree in computer science at New York University. She admits it was very tough. Chen struggled with communication and the high cost of living in New York City. She worked two minimum wage jobs while attending college.

“I lived in my friend’s balcony-converted guest bedroom in Brooklyn,” she says. “There were times the only groceries I could afford were just eggs and potatoes.”

But Chen persevered. Ten years and 4 months after she arrived in the U.S., Chen got her green card and became a U.S. citizen. She currently works as a Vice President at Morgan Stanley.

“I am grateful to experience the hardships,” Chen says. “They made me stronger and more resilient. These are great qualities to have to build a solid career. And this is what I love about New York, it’s an immigrant city and so many other immigrants could relate to my struggle and I theirs.”

Asian American Immigrant Population

Chen is one of the more than 18 million people that make up the Asian American population. By the middle of the century, Asian Americans could be the largest immigrant group in the country, according to a [Pew Research Center](#) analysis of Census Bureau data.

“Asian Americans are projected to become the largest immigrant group in the U.S., surpassing Hispanics in 2055,” according to a statement from Neil Ruiz, Associate Director of Race and Ethnicity Research at the Pew Research Center. “By then, Asians are expected to make up 36% of all U.S. immigrants, while Hispanics will make up 34%.”

By 2060, the Asian American population is forecast to reach 46 million, nearly four times the current total. Compare that to the 1870 Census, when roughly 63,000 people were classified as Asian by the Census Bureau.

Daishi Miguel Tanaka, Manager of Immigration Advocacy at [Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#), says the family immigration system – where a U.S. citizen or green-card holder sponsors a family member from a foreign country – has contributed to the growth of the Asian American population. But he admits that the system is flawed.



“We have four million immigrants in the family immigration backlog, many of them from China, Vietnam, India and the Philippines,” Tanaka says. “You have a system on one end that has beautifully contributed to the tapestry of this country and on the other end, it’s keeping families apart. Families are waiting decades to see their mom, dad or sibling abroad.”

Asian American Population Diversity

A [Pew analysis](#) of Census Bureau data found that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States.

“Between 2000 and 2019, the Asian population in the U.S. grew by 81%,” says Ruiz. “This growth can be attributed to immigration. Around 6-in-10 Asian Americans, including 71% of Asian American adults, were born in another country in 2019.”

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders saw the third fastest population growth in the same period. The Asian countries with the largest number of U.S. immigrants in 2019 were China, India and the Philippines. Experts say the data highlights the importance of acknowledging how diverse the Asian American population is.

“The diversity is significantly greater, in terms of languages, culture and religion,” says Jeanne Batalova, a senior policy analyst at the [Migration Policy Institute](#). “We have Southeast Asian immigrants, which are very different not only within themselves but also those who come from Central Asia or South Asia. That diversity is often missed when we combine populations in these large buckets.”

Tanaka says the variety of ethnicities, languages, education and income that make up the Asian American population often get lost in the Asian model minority myth.

“The Asian American and Pacific Islander community is not a monolith,” he says. “It’s really important for Asian Americans to be recognized for our unique cultures, languages and our history with America, as well as the struggles that individual communities face.”

The Growing Influence of Asian Americans

As the Asian American immigrant population grows, so will their influence in areas like politics, says Mark Mather, a demographer at the [Population Reference Bureau](#), a nonpartisan research organization.

“More Asian Americans are turning out to vote and they are voting about issues they care about,” he says. “It’s going to be a diverse set of topics because it’s such a diverse population. In many cases, in immigrant communities, it’s going to be things like education and barriers to learning in school because of English language issues. Poverty among the refugee populations, for example, is another. And some of the hate crimes they have experienced.”

The buying power of Asian Americans grew 314% from 2000 to 2019, almost triple the total U.S. buying power in the same period, according to [Nielsen](#). In 2022, Asian American buying power is expected to climb to \$1.3 trillion.



“The Asian American population has a tremendous buying power and it’s growing – not because their population is growing but because there is a fairly large group of Asian Americans that have a high income,” Mather says. “We’re going to see more businesses trying to meet the needs of this population. And it’s going to be important for them to do that.” With that income, more Asian Americans are becoming homeowners. Between 1989 and 2019, Asian households had the largest homeownership rate increase of any racial or ethnic group according to the [Urban Institute](#).

“A higher proportion of Asian Americans are living in multigenerational households,” says Jung Hyun Choi, a senior research associate with the Housing Finance Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Choi says that would shift the demand for the type of housing supply that is needed in the U.S., to multifamily and larger homes or duplexes.

U.S. Immigration and Asian Racism

Asian Americans have faced a long legacy of immigration discrimination in the U.S.

“Rewind the clock and see that racism has manifested itself throughout many points in our history,” says Tanaka. “Starting with the yellow peril, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II and scapegoating and violence directed against Arab, Middle East, Asian, Muslim and South Asian communities after 9/11.”

“Yellow Peril” was a term used in the mid 19th century that painted Asian immigrants as undesirable people who were stealing American jobs. This led to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the first major law in the U.S. that barred immigration solely based on race.

In more recent history, the Trump administration enacted restrictive immigration policies, including banning immigration from Muslim-majority Asian countries. The policy was reversed by President Biden in his first 100 days in office.

The rise in anti-Asian sentiment and negative immigration rhetoric has accelerated during the pandemic, as Asians have

been accused of causing and spreading COVID-19. In 2020, anti-Asian hate crimes increased 149% in 16 of the largest cities in the U.S., according to the [Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism](#).

“People who were thinking about the United States may have changed their minds because there’s been a bit of a backlash against immigrants,” says Mather. “During the pandemic, there’s been a lot of backlash against Asian Americans in particular. In the short term, there may have been some kind of a chilling effect. But I would not expect that to continue in the long term.”

Chen recalls the racism she experienced both before and after the pandemic. While Chen wasn’t physically injured in the most recent attack, she says the mental damage was real. She began to have nightmares and insomnia and started to carry pepper sprays. Chen admits that she questioned her decision to immigrate to the U.S. Some of her friends have decided to move back to China permanently. Yet, Chen remains optimistic about the future.

“I’m just one of the 18.64 million Asian Americans with hopes and dreams living here, passing by you on the streets, in the grocery store, at a restaurant, at a coffee shop,” she says. “I hope we can all see each other beyond the colors of our skin and let our humanity shine through.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES:

Asian Americans are forecast to be the largest immigration group by 2055. What do the projections mean for the growing influence of Asian Americans?

How diverse is the AAPI population and why is it important to acknowledge their diversity?

How has the model minority myth contributed to the lack of understanding of how diverse the AAPI community is?

In what ways have the AAPI community experienced immigration discrimination in the United States and how is it still happening in the present day?

