



Asian American Immigration and Discrimination in the United States

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Asian American immigration has been a defining element of U.S. demographic evolution, shaped by both opportunity and exclusion. This brief will explore the historical trajectory of Asian migration, the policy shifts that enabled population growth, and the modern-day challenges faced by Asian American communities. It will also examine the socio-economic contributions of Asian immigrants and outline how immigration policy can better address existing disparities.

II. OVERVIEW

Asian American immigration in the United States is a complex issue shaped by a legacy of exclusionary laws, labor demands, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Despite being one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the country, Asian Americans have historically faced systemic barriers to inclusion, ranging from discriminatory immigration policies to racial stereotyping and socioeconomic marginalization. While the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act opened pathways for skilled and family-based migration, many Asian immigrants continue to encounter obstacles such as visa backlogs, underrepresentation in leadership, and the model minority myth that obscures internal disparities. This paper investigates the historical and

contemporary dimensions of Asian American immigration, examining how policy, public perception, and institutional structures have shaped the Asian American experience and what steps can be taken to foster greater equity and inclusion.

A. Relevance

Asian American immigration has long shaped the cultural and economic development of the United States, but has also been defined by exclusionary policies and persistent social barriers. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to World War II internment and post-9/11 surveillance of South Asians, Asian Americans have often been treated as perpetual outsiders. Even today, despite being the most highly educated racial group in the U.S., Asian immigrants face structural disadvantages in representation and visibility. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 70% of Asian immigrants aged 25 and older hold a college degree, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in public office and senior leadership roles. This disconnect reveals how systemic inequities continue to shape the experiences of Asian Americans in the workforce and beyond.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Asian American immigration has been a defining element of U.S. demographic evolution, shaped

by both opportunity and exclusion. The first major wave of Asian immigrants arrived in the mid-1800s, primarily as laborers in mining, agriculture, and railroad construction. However, anti-Asian sentiment led to restrictive laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first significant law restricting immigration into the United States based on ethnicity. These exclusionary policies persisted until the mid-20th century, severely limiting Asian immigration and naturalization opportunities.

A significant policy shift occurred with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished national-origin quotas and opened doors for a new wave of Asian immigrants. This led to a dramatic increase in the Asian American population, with immigrants arriving for various reasons, including employment opportunities, education, and as refugees fleeing conflict. For instance, the fall of Saigon in 1975 prompted a substantial influx of Vietnamese refugees, many of whom settled in communities across the United States, such as Houston and Orange County.

Today, Asian Americans represent one of the fastest-growing racial groups in the United States, with over 22 million people tracing their roots to more than 20 countries in East and Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Despite high levels of educational attainment and professional participation, Asian Americans often face challenges such as underrepresentation in leadership roles and the perpetuation of the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype. These issues highlight the ongoing need to address systemic biases and promote equitable opportunities for Asian Americans in all sectors of society.

contribute and commit as efficiently to the organisation.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The most directly affected stakeholders are Asian American immigrants themselves, particularly recent arrivals and those from underrepresented subgroups such as Southeast Asians, who continue to face systemic barriers in employment, education, and civic participation. These individuals often enter the country with high educational credentials or marketable skills, yet face visa backlogs, workplace discrimination, and limited access to leadership roles. They are expected to contribute economically but are not equally afforded the institutional support or recognition that facilitates long-term advancement and inclusion.

Community-based organizations and advocacy groups are key stakeholders, as they provide support services and legal advocacy that compensate for systemic gaps. Additionally, local governments, particularly in cities with large Asian American populations like Houston and Los Angeles, have a vested interest in ensuring these communities are integrated successfully to maintain social cohesion and economic productivity.

Equally important are educational institutions and employers, who rely on Asian American labor and talent but often fail to confront the structural inequities that limit advancement and visibility. These institutions must recognize their role in shaping public perception and opportunity distribution. Finally, federal agencies such as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

(USCIS) and the Department of State are critical stakeholders, as they manage the visa and immigration systems that directly affect the community's legal and professional stability.

B. Risks of Indifference

The failure to address systemic inequalities in Asian American immigration and integration carries several serious consequences. First, indifference perpetuates a narrative of the “model minority” that masks the real struggles faced by many within the community—particularly low-income and refugee groups such as Vietnamese and Hmong Americans. This stereotype contributes to policy blind spots, where needs for mental health services, ESL programs, and economic support go unrecognized and unfunded.

Without action, we risk reinforcing cultural and structural barriers that leave large populations marginalized. Continued underrepresentation in political, academic, and corporate leadership not only limits individual potential but also weakens democratic inclusivity and innovation. Ignoring the disparities also opens the door to increased racial hostility and xenophobia, especially during times of economic or geopolitical tension—as evidenced by post-9/11 surveillance of South Asians and the rise in anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because Asian American immigration and discriminatory actions do not only affect individuals, but rather societies and communities themselves, it is imperative that nonpartisan

intervention takes place. The benefits of such intervention include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) **Economic and Intellectual Growth:** With one of the most educated demographics in the U.S., Asian Americans represent an untapped leadership resource. Policies that remove barriers to advancement in both the public and private sectors can unlock significant economic and social contributions. As local examples show, such as Houston's thriving Vietnamese business community, immigrant integration boosts local entrepreneurship and job creation
- 2) **Governmental Efficiency and Fairness:** Streamlining visa and citizenship pathways ensures that talented individuals contribute fully and feel protected under the law. This enhances national competitiveness and aligns with American values of equal opportunity and merit-based advancement.
- 3) **Community Stability and Social Equity:** Equitable policies reduce long-term reliance on emergency services and welfare systems, while increasing family security and upward mobility. Communities where immigrants are included thrive across metrics of education, public health, and civic engagement. Addressing systemic exclusion improves not just immigrant outcomes but the cohesion and prosperity of the society at large.

V. TRIED POLICY

To begin with, a notable federal policy aimed at reforming systemic discrimination in immigration was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (INA), a landmark law that abolished the race-based national origin quotas that had previously dominated U.S. immigration policy. The INA was introduced with the intention of creating a fairer and more merit-based system, opening the doors to a large wave of Asian immigrants for the first time in U.S. history.

However, this policy has struggled to achieve equity in practice. While it removed overt racial barriers, the INA still embedded a preference system that prioritized family reunification and employment-based visas, which unintentionally disadvantaged immigrants from certain Asian countries due to long visa backlogs. For example, high numbers of applicants from India, China, and the Philippines have created decades-long wait times, disproportionately affecting their ability to reunite with family or secure permanent residency. While the law opened doors for skilled immigrants, it did not include mechanisms for integrating refugees or low-income migrants, many of whom came from war-affected countries like Vietnam and Cambodia. As a result, socioeconomic disparities continue to persist within Asian American communities, despite the perception that this group is uniformly successful.

Rather than challenging systemic bias or promoting social integration, the INA remains largely a gatekeeping mechanism—one that

unintentionally reinforces inequalities within the broader Asian American demographic. Like other well-intended policies, its failure lies in its inability to confront the full spectrum of exclusion, from immigration processes to workplace discrimination and civic underrepresentation.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Standardisation of anti-discrimination training and evaluation

Unconscious bias, stereotypes, and societal norms often lead to discriminatory attitudes against Asian Americans, particularly in workplaces and immigration processes. These biases can influence decision-making negatively, leading to unfair treatment in hiring, promotion, and immigration adjudications. To counter this, I recommend implementing standardized, data-driven anti-discrimination training programs that specifically address the unique stereotypes and challenges faced by Asian Americans. Such training should be mandatory across both public institutions and private companies. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) could jointly oversee compliance and regularly evaluate the effectiveness of these programs to ensure fairness and reduce implicit bias.

Reform of immigration policies to address systemic barriers

Current immigration policies often present hurdles that disproportionately affect Asian American immigrants, such as lengthy visa processing times, restrictive quotas, and barriers to family reunification. These systemic issues contribute to stress, uncertainty, and limited

economic opportunities for Asian American communities. I recommend a comprehensive review and reform of immigration policies to streamline visa processing, expand quotas in line with current labor market demands, and facilitate family-based immigration. Such reforms should be developed collaboratively by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Labor (DOL), and community advocacy groups to ensure equitable access and fair treatment for Asian immigrants.

Mandate transparency in workplace diversity and inclusion data

Despite the growing presence of Asian Americans in the workforce, many experience the “bamboo ceiling” where career advancement is limited due to cultural stereotypes and lack of representation in leadership. To address this, organizations should be required to publicly disclose diversity metrics, including hiring, promotion rates, and pay equity for Asian American employees. This transparency mandate can be enforced by the EEOC and incentivized through federal grants and contracts. Such measures will encourage companies to actively assess and improve their inclusion practices and hold them accountable for equitable treatment of Asian American workers.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have examined various facets of discrimination faced by Asian Americans, particularly in the realms of workplace inequality and immigration challenges, alongside potential policy responses to address these issues. Among the proposed options, the standardisation of anti-discrimination training and evaluation stands out as the most feasible and impactful measure,

with oversight by bodies such as the EEOC and USCIS ensuring consistent implementation.

That said, tackling Asian American discrimination requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach, considering both systemic barriers and subtle biases that affect everyday experiences. While there is still significant progress to be made in achieving true equity and inclusion for Asian Americans, this can be accomplished by prioritizing well-structured policies, fostering accountability, and promoting transparent practices. I am confident that these challenges can be addressed effectively if approached pragmatically and with sustained commitment to follow-through.

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