THE NATIONAL KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

PROMISES, PERILS, AND PARADOXES

TAEKU LEE, PH.D.

COUNCIL OF KOREAN AMERICANS

DECEMBER 2020

THE NATIONAL KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Promises, Perils, and Paradoxes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The Council of Korean Americans is pleased to publish the following research on the current state of the national Korean American community. Authored by the celebrated University of California, Berkeley political scientist, Dr. Taeku Lee, this study presents revealing data and insightful analysis of the notable successes and challenges that characterize this dynamic group.

This initiative is significant in four ways. First, this important work shows the incredible growth and accomplishments of the Korean American community over the last century. Korean Americans have advanced economically, politically, and culturally in the United States. There is much to celebrate about this growing population.

Second, despite notable progress, this report also disputes the frequent "Model Minority" stereotyping that all Korean Americans are doing economically well or rarely face discrimination in their workplace and neighborhoods. The data also showcases several key paradoxes. For example, although Korean Americans are one of the most educated ethnic groups in the United States, their average annual salary falls behind the U.S. national average at every education level.

Third, this report reveals the unseen societal problems within our community and the immense collective effort needed to address these areas. Mental illness, discrimination, and lack of health care coverage are significant issues that plague many Korean Americans.

Finally, this report highlights the need for further research to assess Korean Americans separately from other Asian American groups. Although Korean Americans share everyday experiences with the larger Asian American community, there are distinct historical, demographic, sociological, and political differences that are diluted or missed when our data is aggregated with a larger, more diverse pool.

This publication is the first step in a two-part series to examine the national Korean American community more closely. Through Dr. Lee's keen analytical efforts, we were able to pull the most relevant insights on our community from existing national surveys and datasets. However, this initial endeavor also generates more questions about the Korean American community and recognizes that more work needs to be done.

Our next step is to work with civic leader partners to conduct original survey research and fill critical knowledge gaps in the national Korean American community. Ultimately, we aim to help local and national leaders better identify priority needs to invest our time, energy, and resources when addressing societal challenges and strengthening the Korean American community.

We hope you find the revelations in this paper as thought-provoking as we did. Lastly, we thank Peter & Jihee Huh, Eugene & Carol Choi, and the Overseas Koreans Foundation for their vital role in underwriting this report.

Now, let's go build up the Korean American community.

Respectfully,

Abraham Kim, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Council of Korean Americans

December 2020

THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN 2020 AND BEYOND[1]

TAEKU LEE, PH.D. | DECEMBER 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a picture of the Korean American community today based on an analysis of available data. It covers a wide landscape, first using federal data collections to describe demographics and the socioeconomic and health status of Korean Americans. It then analyzes original survey data to explore Korean Americans' experiences of hardship and biased treatment, their identity and shared interests, their views on politics and public policy, and their political engagement.

Key findings include:

- In numbers, the Korean American population has grown dramatically in the last half century and approaches 2 million today. However, that growth is slowing rapidly and is becoming more geographically dispersed.
- Socioeconomically, Korean Americans are highly educated and earn above the national median household income. Yet, relative to educational level, their income earnings were found to be below national averages. Older Korean Americans are overrepresented among the poor. And prior to the passage of Affordable Care Act, Korean Americans were more likely to be uninsured.
- This insecurity of many Korean Americans is also reflected in self-reports of bias and hardship. About 30 percent of Korean Americans report at least one experience of being discriminated against. Nearly all Korean Americans have faced some kind of microaggression and face economic and other everyday challenges. Young Korean Americans are especially likely to confront these everyday hardships.
- Korean Americans are especially likely to identify with the label "Korean American." They also see Asian Americans as a common race and culture. They especially like to believe Korean Americans and other Asian Americans share a linked fate.
- Korean Americans are far less likely than other Asian Americans to interact socially with Latinos and African Americans, especially likely to believe Korean Americans do not get along with Black Americans, and less likely to see common political causes with African Americans.[2]
- Politically, Korean American voters are rising in numbers in recent elections and are emerging as a solidly liberal and Democratic electorate. Yet, Korean Americans remain underrepresented in elected offices and remain under-mobilized in election campaigns. These patterns are especially pronounced among younger Korean Americans.

[1] Prepared for the Council of Korean Americans. Please do not cite without permission. Inquiries may be directed to taekulee@berkeley.edu.

[2] This report uses the term "Latino" to describe self-identified Hispanics, Latinos, Latinas, and Latinx Americans. It also uses "Black" and "African American" interchangeably.

In sum, the findings in this report present a cautionary tale. The Korean American experience today shows patterns of promise and paradoxes of precarity. While the population grows and many thrive, the community also includes many who are less well-off and face significant hardships. While Korean Americans are unified by common interests, experiences, and a sense of shared fate, they remain in many ways politically and racially isolated, underrepresented, and under-mobilized.

However, these findings go only as far as the availability of data allows. The report suggests several important areas where filling data gaps would create a clearer picture of the unmet needs and unvoiced interests of Korean Americans. Additionally, these findings are based on data collected before the current COVID-19-related public health and economic crisis, the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2020 election campaign. As a result, the report concludes on a more speculative note, with thoughts on challenges and opportunities facing the Korean American community in this current moment.

INTRODUCTION: A RISING TIDE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Oscar Handlin began his classic work, *The Uprooted* (1951), with the lines, "Once I thought to write a history of immigrants in America. Then I discovered that immigrants were American history." Since then, the immigrants who make American history have diversified in dramatic fashion, coming far less from across the Atlantic and vastly more from South of the Border and across the Pacific. Koreans have contributed vitally to this most recent wave of newcomers to America's shores. In the last decade alone, K-pop, K-drama, and Korean cuisine have made their way into mainstream American culture, just as Korean Americans are increasingly visible in the corridors of power on Wall Street, in Silicon Valley, and in Washington, D.C.

But Korean Americans are not an overnight sensation. Koreans have been present on American soil since the first overseas diplomats arrived in San Francisco in 1883. While Korea was a lesser source of immigration from East Asia to the U.S. at the turn of the 19th century than China or Japan, records show an influx of mostly farm laborers from around Incheon arriving on Hawaiian shores starting in 1903. Koreans, in part, migrated to fill the agricultural labor gap that resulted from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. On the heels of this inflow of laborers came Korean "picture brides," and after the Korean Independence Movement of 1919, political and intellectual refugees seeking shelter in the United States.

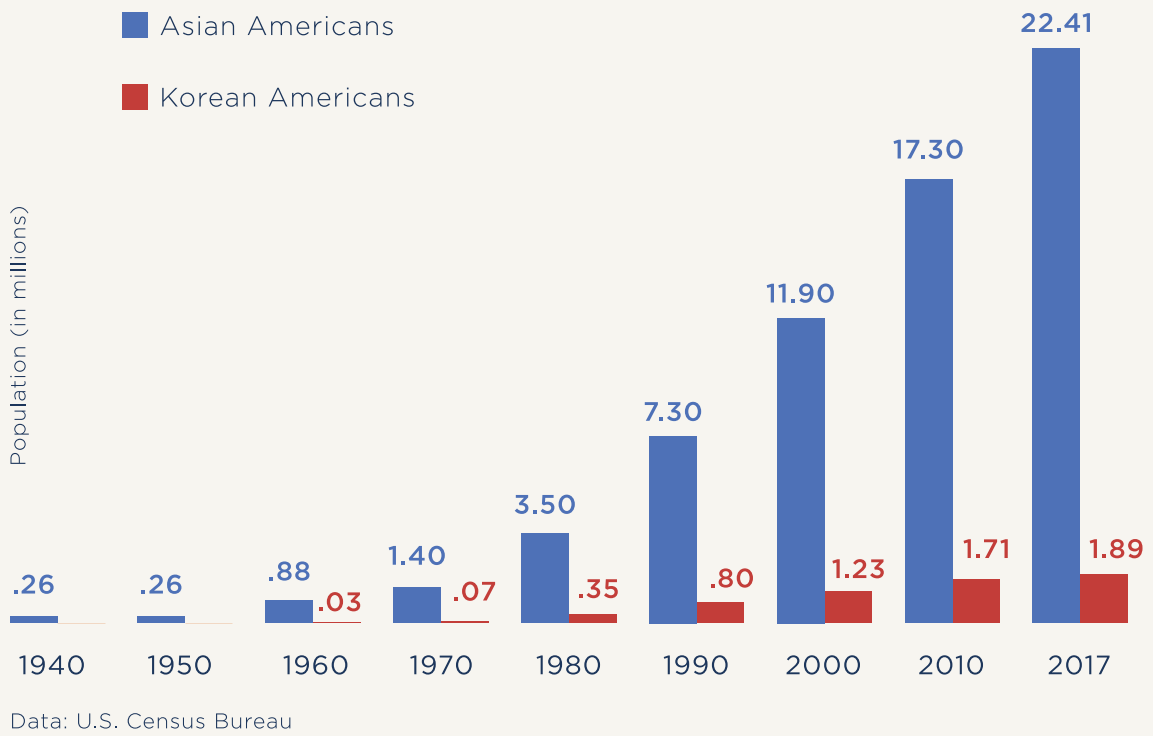
This first wave of migration from Korea coincided with a rising tide of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment in America. This was bookmarked by anti-Chinese laws and exclusionary court rulings in the late 19th century and the designation of an "Asiatic Barred Zone" in 1917 and 1924 that effectively curbed all migration from across the Pacific to the U.S. The next significant wave of migration follows America's engagement in the Cold War, during and after the Korean war, with the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 that effectively eliminated race as a precluding factor in barring immigration from Asia. This second wave consisted mostly of Korean wives of U.S. servicemen; war orphans adopted by American families; and a patchwork of students, businessmen, and intellectuals from Korea.[3]

These prior waves, while historically important, yielded trickling numbers compared to the influx of immigration from Korea after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. This landmark legislation formally abolished a "national origins" quota system limiting immigration into the U.S., and permitted immigration based on family reunification. Hart-Cellar ushered in a new era of immigrants who were pushed to leave a Korea marked by economic insecurity and political unrest, leading them to come to an America lauded for its opportunity, prosperity, and freedoms.

[3] For more on this history, see Chang and Park (2019) and Hong (2018).

In numbers, this third wave of migration has spawned a truly stunning growth of Koreans and other Asians in the United States. As Figure 1 shows, in 1940 and 1950, there were slightly more than a quarter million Asian Americans counted in the decennial census. By 1970, those numbers grew more than five-fold to 1.4 million. As of this writing, the 2020 census is projected to count somewhere between 22 and 23 million Asian Americans.[4] Meanwhile, the Korean American population grew from less than 70,000 in 1970 to nearly 2 million just before the 2020 census. In the past two censuses, Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S., and the results of the 2020 census are likely to reflect a continuation of that trend. Today, Asian Americans comprise roughly six percent of the U.S. population.

Figure 1.
RISING POPULATION GROWTH



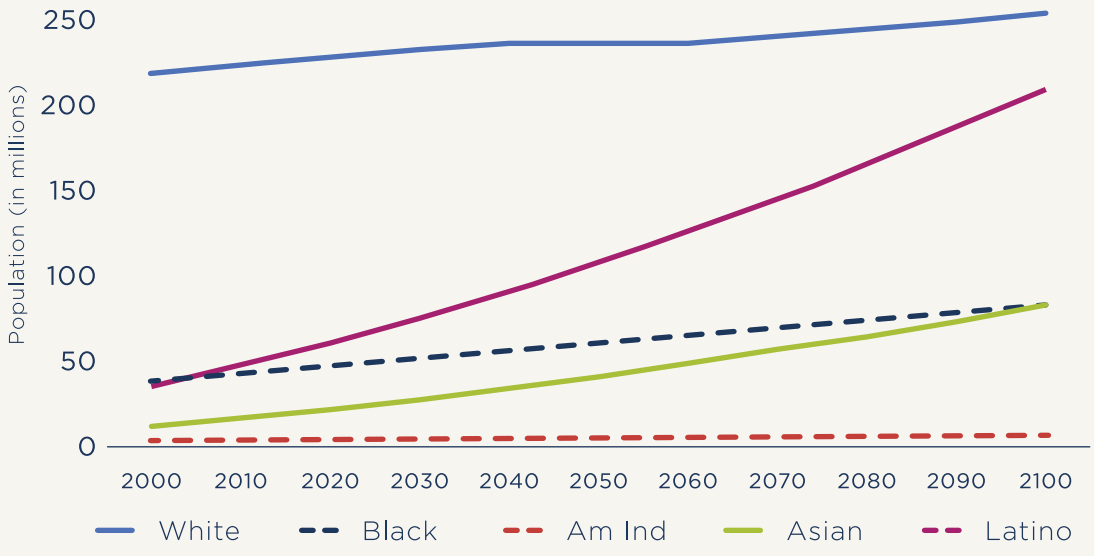
Data: U.S. Census Bureau

[4] This figure is for the more inclusive, "alone or in combination" definition of "Asian American" in the census. Since 2000, the decennial census has given Americans with multiple racial backgrounds the ability to "mark one or more" categories rather than choose between racial heritages. The result is that today, for any given racial category like "Korean," census data can be tabulated to count "Korean alone" for those who identify only as Koreans or "Korean alone or in combination" to also include those who identify as Koreans *and* another racial category (i.e., "Chinese" or "White").

Figure 2 shows recent population projections for future decennial censuses. While the growth of the Asian American population is unlikely to continue in such exponential fashion in the coming decades, sizable growth is expected to continue throughout the century. By the middle of the 21st century, the United States is projected to become a "majority-minority" nation, where White Americans will no longer be a numeric majority. When that happens, Asian Americans will comprise nearly one of every eight Americans. By mid-century, Asian Americans are expected to overtake Latinos as the largest share of foreign-born Americans. In fact, it has already been the case since 2008 that the largest contributor to new migration to the United States in numbers is not Mexico and Latin America but Asia, with China and India leading the numbers of newcomers to the United States.[5]

By mid-century, Asian Americans are expected to overtake Latinos as the largest share of foreign-born Americans.

Figure 2.
CONTINUED GROWTH EXPECTED OF ASIAN AMERICAN POPULATION



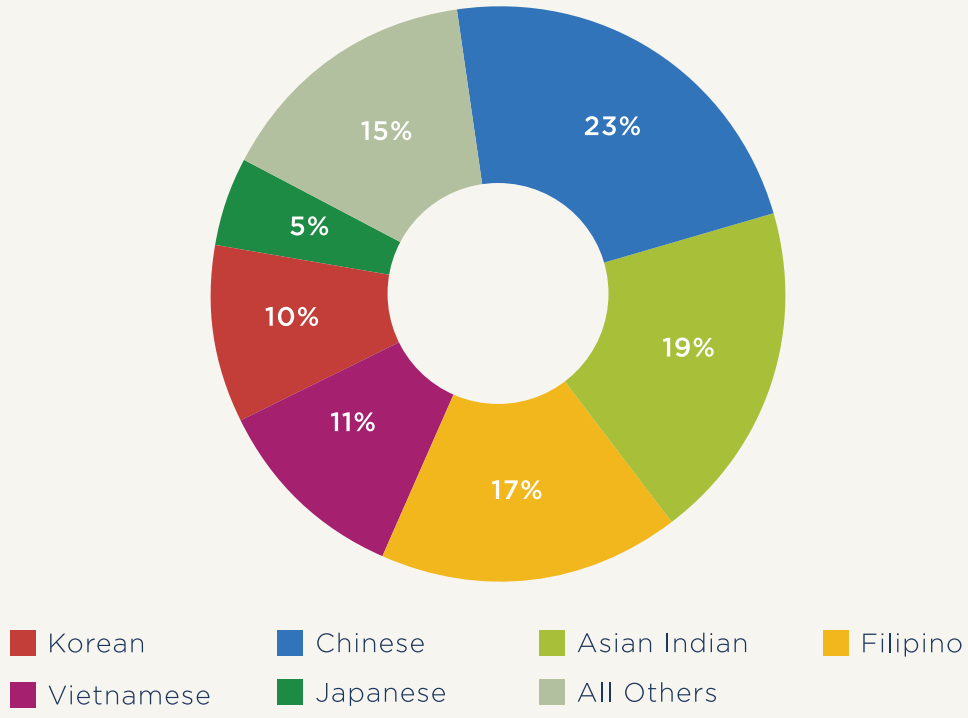
Data: U.S. Census Bureau

[5] Source: Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/20/facts-on-u-s-immigrants/.

Of course, these are only projections; they extrapolate future population growth based on assumptions that can always change. The Trump administration's previous efforts to sharply curb entry into the United States could slow or stanch these projections. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, these efforts have turned to issuing bans on new H-1B visas and guidelines for international students requiring in-person classes, curbs that are particularly likely to affect potential entrants from Asia.[6]

One should also keep in mind that the term "Asian American" covers a veritable kaleidoscope of diverse groups with varying histories and contrasting population trends. In the late 19th century, "Asian American" was recognized not as a formal, legally sanctioned or an informal, socially practiced racial category, but rather, as a grouping of Americans of primarily Chinese and Japanese descent. Today, "Asian American" is a formally and informally familiar category of identity composed not only of Chinese and Japanese, but also Taiwanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, Thai, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, to name just a few. Using data from the 2010 decennial census, Figure 3 shows that Korean Americans are just 10 percent of this diverse, "pan-ethnic" group.[7]

Figure 3.
ASIAN AMERICAN DIVERSITY IN 2010



Data: U.S. Census Bureau

[6] Nick Miroff, "Trump's New Restrictions on Foreign Workers," *Washington Post,* June 23, 2020.
Alex Fang and Yi Fan Yu, "US halts H-1B and other visas in a blow to Indian and Chinese Talent," *Nikkei Asia Review,* June 23, 2020.

[7] In Figure 3, "all others" includes Pakistanis (2.6%), Cambodians (1.7%), Hmong (1.7%), Laotians (1.3%), Thai (1.1%), Taiwanese (1.0%), Bangladeshis (0.9%), Indonesians (0.4%).

Thus, while the demographic changes we have seen so far set an important context for understanding any Asian ethnic group in the United States, they also obscure the unique characteristics of today's Korean American community. Aggregated data for all Asian Americans combined often misses the distinctiveness and diversity of this "pan-ethnic" grouping. For example, the median household income for Asian American subgroups in 2012 ranged from $46,950 a year for Bangladeshi Americans to $95,000 for Asian Indians. Similarly, while 72 percent of Asian Indians 25 and older had achieved a bachelor's degree or higher, only about 14 percent of Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans had achieved equivalent levels of education.[8]

This report is a crucial first step in highlighting critical trends in the Korean American community by disaggregating available data. Below are key findings from this disaggregated analysis:

- Demographically, the Korean American community has grown rapidly since the 1960s, but the growth has slowed and will continue to slow in the coming years.
- Many Korean Americans are highly educated and economically secure, but this success is not uniform across the entire community. Many others face hardships and vulnerability.
- Korean Americans hold a strong sense of group identity, but also face isolation from other racial and ethnic groups.
- Korean Americans are becoming more civically engaged and more politically liberal, but remain politically underrepresented and less active relative to other ethnic communities.

[8] See Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Ahmad. 2014 "State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Series," Center for American Progress.

PATTERNS OF KOREAN AMERICAN POPULATION CHANGE: SLOWING IMMIGRATION AND DISPERSING MIGRATION

Therefore, it is important to examine how similar or different demographic traits and trends of Korean Americans are to those of Asian Americans overall. As a population, the Korean American community is largely composed of individuals who identify only as Korean (78 percent) but with a substantial proportion (22 percent) of mixed-race individuals who identify as Korean in combination with another race. Mixed-race Korean Americans are one segment of the Korean American community that is growing dramatically; between the 2010 census and the 2018 American Community Survey, mixed-race Korean Americans have increased in number by over 50 percent, from about 283,000 to over 446,000. Also of note is that the Korean American community is predominantly foreign-born. In the 2017 American Community Survey, 71 percent were born outside the United States. A similar proportion (74 percent) report speaking Korean at home. At the same time, nearly three out of four Korean Americans are U.S. citizens.[9]

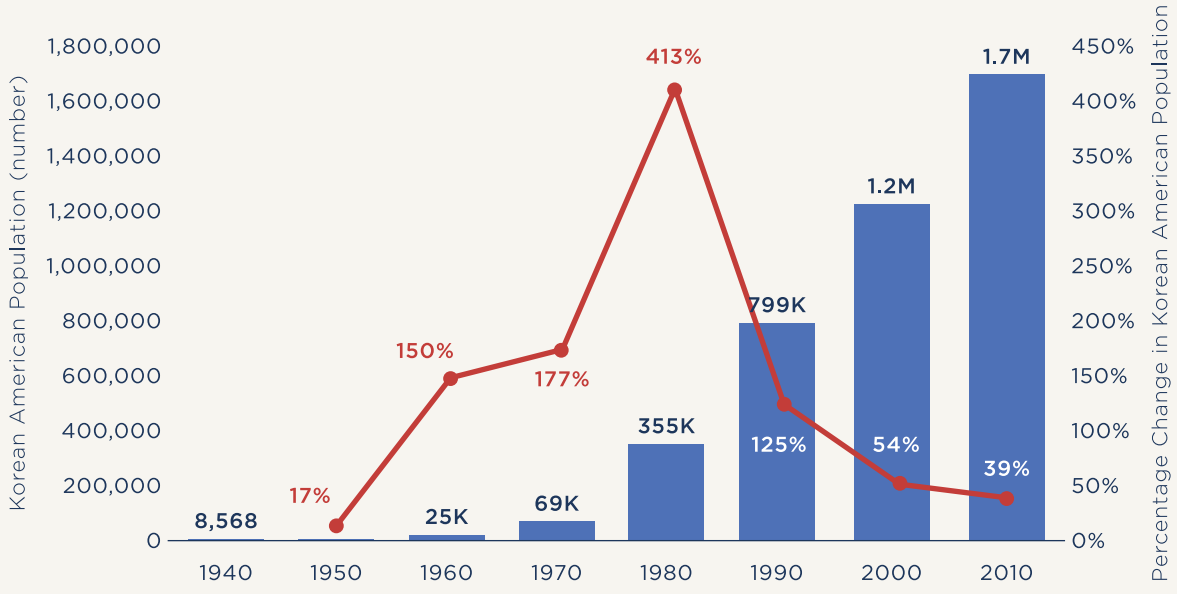
Korean Americans are currently the fifth largest Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) group, but this may not last, with slowing population and immigration growth in the community.

The story of population trends for Korean Americans is notable in three respects. First, as Figure 4 shows, census data reflects remarkable growth in numbers for the Korean American population in the last half century. In 1960, Koreans were an estimated 25,000 in number, while a recent American Community Survey estimated almost 1.9 million Korean Americans in 2017. Based on these numbers, we can expect nearly 2.0 million Korean Americans to be counted in the 2020 decennial census. These figures do not include the undocumented Korean American population, which the Pew Research Center estimates to be roughly 150,000.[10]

[9] These figures are of the "Korean alone" population. The total population estimate of 1.9 million in the 2017 ACS is for the "Korean alone or in combination" population. See supra FN 1 for more details on these categories.

[10] Source: Pew Research Center, https://pewrsr.ch/31s3twf.

Figure 4.
KOREAN AMERICAN POPULATION STOCKS AND FLOWS: IMMIGRATION AND POPULATION GROWTH RATES ARE SLOWING



Data: U.S. Census Bureau

At the same time, unlike population growth for Asian Americans generally, the rate of growth for Korean Americans has slowed dramatically in recent decades. Figure 4 shows population "stocks and flows" for Korean Americans; "stocks" referring to how many are counted in any given decennial census, and "flows" referring to the percentage change from the previous decennial census. The peak period of growth for Korean Americans was between 1970 and 1980, when the number of Koreans in the U.S. increased more than four-fold. By the most recent 2000 to 2010 decennial comparison, that growth rate had slowed to 39 percent. And based on the year-to-year American Community Survey counts since 2010, that growth rate will likely have slowed to between 10 and 20 percent by 2020. So in considering the demographic background of Korean Americans, we can infer that Asian Americans will continue to grow as a proportion of the nation's population while Korean Americans will shrink as a proportion of the Asian American community.

The third notable demographic trend for Korean Americans is where they choose to settle. Historically, Korean Americans (like many other immigrant groups) were drawn to coastal "gateways" like New York and California. The geography of the Korean American population in 2010 remained dominated by these coastal destinations, with more than a half-million Korean Americans in California and a quarter-million in New York and New Jersey combined. This means that together, California and the New York/New Jersey area account for nearly one in every two Korean Americans.

TABLE 1. POPULATION GROWTH IS SHIFTING TO "NEW DESTINATIONS"			
	2000 Population	*2010 Population*	*Percent Growth*
California	375,571	505,225	35%
New York	127,068	153,609	21%
New Jersey	68,990	100,334	45%
District of Columbia	1,273	2,990	135%
Alabama	5,401	10,624	97%
Nevada	9,608	18,518	93%
Georgia	32,660	60,836	86%
Arizona	11,936	21,125	77%
Utah	4,609	7,888	71%
North Carolina	15,438	25,420	65%
Virginia	50,468	82,006	62%
Texas	54,300	85,332	57%
Arkansas	2,113	3,247	54%

Source: 2000 and 2010 decennial Census.

But the dynamic change in the Korean American population is geographically dispersed far beyond these coastal regions. Table 1 shows the growth of the Korean American community between 2000 and 2010. While the Korean American population continues to grow in gateway states (21 percent in New York; 35 percent in California; 45 percent in New Jersey), the table shows the ten states (including the District of Columbia) with the most rapid growth over a ten-year period. This includes places that are not often associated with a Korean American community, like Arizona, Utah, North Carolina, and Arkansas. It also includes locations like Georgia, Texas, and the Washington, D.C. metro area, which have thriving, diverse Korean American communities with churches, community-service organizations, and businesses serving Korean Americans. This growing geographic dispersal is heavily driven by first- and second-generation immigrants, and it is not unique to Korean Americans. Scholars who have studied the phenomenon generally attribute the change to more favorable labor market conditions in these states,[11] though there has been no study to date focused specifically on Korean Americans.

[11] See Card and Lewis (2005). On new immigrant destinations more generally, see Massey (2008).

SOCIOECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES: HIGH ACHIEVERS WITH UNEVEN BENEFITS

These population numbers and trends paint a portrait of a Korean American community that continues to grow, but not at the same rate or in the same places as before. Next, we examine available data to gauge how well Koreans in the United States are faring. In popular accounts, select Korean Americans are often portrayed for their vaunted, outsized achievements, representing a "model minority" who immigrated to the United States and, by dint of family values, education, and hard work, achieved the American Dream.[12] The names of Korean Americans are today associated with the highest ranks of their professions. Notable examples include David Chang, Margaret Cho, Chloe Kim, Jim Yong Kim, Min Jin Lee, Gideon Yu, and countless others.

However, hidden behind these headliners and the prevailing narrative of a model immigrant group attaining the American dream is a more cautionary tale of hidden ceilings and daily struggles. Below, we begin to tell this tale through an analysis of available census and survey data on the socioeconomic and health status of Korean Americans. Table 2 shows how Korean Americans have fared across a range of profile markers available in the yearly American Community Survey data from the Census Bureau, comparing Korean Americans and the general U.S. population in 2018 and 2010.

Often, the popular view of a successful immigrant minority starts with the remarkable educational attainment of Korean Americans. In the 2018 American Community Survey, roughly one in three Americans reported having achieved a bachelor's degree or higher. For Korean Americans, that figure is 58 percent, even higher than the average for Asian Americans as a whole, which is 55 percent. Moreover, about 13 percent of all Americans aged 25 or older reported holding a post-baccalaureate degree; by comparison, nearly 23 percent of Korean Americans hold a graduate degree.[13]

The Korean American community has more college graduates than the national average and the AAPI average.

[12] For more on the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans, see Lee (1996), Tuan (1998), Kim (1999).

[13] Data and findings for this section are from a combination of existing analysis available via the Census Bureau's Fact Finder (https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml) and primary analysis of the Bureau's Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) raw data (https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data/pums.html). The PUMS data used in this report is the 2014-2018 ACS 5-year dataset.

In addition to high educational attainment, Table 2 shows how Korean Americans are faring well in terms of income, occupational status, and poverty and employment rates:

- The median household income for Korean Americans is significantly higher than the national average ($72,000 to $62,000), a noticeable improvement from 2010, when the median household income for Korean Americans nearly matched that of all American households.
- While Korean Americans have long been significantly more likely to be small business owners, that trend appears to be waning. In 2010, one in nine Korean Americans was self-employed in unincorporated owned businesses (compared to a national rate of 6 percent). By 2018, that figure for Korean Americans has declined to about one in twelve.
- Therefore, a higher proportion of Korean Americans work in high-status occupations. For 2018, more than half (55.4 percent) of Korean Americans work in the management, business, science, or arts professions, a rate that is much higher than the national average (38.6 percent) and much higher than it was in 2010 (46.8 percent).
- Paralleling these other figures, unemployment rates and poverty rates for Korean Americans continue to be lower than national averages in 2018 (4 percent versus 4.9 percent unemployment and 7.8 percent versus 9.3 percent poverty).

TABLE 2. SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF KOREAN AMERICANS[14]

	Korean Americans		*US Total*	
	(2018)	**(2010)**	**(2018)**	**(2010)**
B.A. degree or higher	58.4%	52.8%	32.6%	28.2%
Median household income	$72,074	$50,316	$61.937	$50,046
Highest occupational class*	55.4%	46.8%	38.6%	35.9%
Unemployment	4.0%	4.8%	4.9%	6.9%
Self-employed*	7.9%	11.1%	5.9%	6.3%
Poverty rate	7.8%	11.8%	9.3%	11.3%
Poverty (65 and older)	18.6%	20.9%	9.4%	9.0%
No health insurance	8.7%	26.8%	8.9%	15.5%

[14] Data from the 2018 ACS 1-year estimates accessed at https://data.census.gov. "Highest Occupational Class" are those working in "management, business, science, and the arts." "Self-employed" here refers to the category of "self-employed in own, not incorporated business."

The Korean American community's socio-economic curve is U-shaped – high levels of education and wealth in one corner, but also high levels of poverty in the other.

However, just beneath this overall favorable profile are many signs and symptoms of struggle and precarity. First, while overall the poverty rate for Korean Americans in 2018 is lower than the national average, as recently as 2010 (in the aftermath of the Great Recession), the poverty rate for Korean Americans was 11.8 percent, slightly higher than the national rate of 11.3 percent. Moreover, among those 65 years and older, Korean Americans' poverty rate (18.6 percent in 2018) is more than twice the national rate (9 percent in 2018). Health care has also long been a major challenge for Korean Americans. While the rate of Korean Americans without any health insurance in 2018 (8.7 percent) is very close to the national average of 8.9 percent as a result of the Affordable Care Act, in the years prior to the ACA's implementation, Korean Americans were nearly twice as likely to be uninsured as the national average (26.8 percent to 15.5 percent in 2010).[15] In fact, the Urban Institute's simulations of more recent 2014 federal data find that without the ACA, a whopping 29.9 percent of Korean Americans would be without health insurance, a higher rate than for any other Asian sub-group.[16]

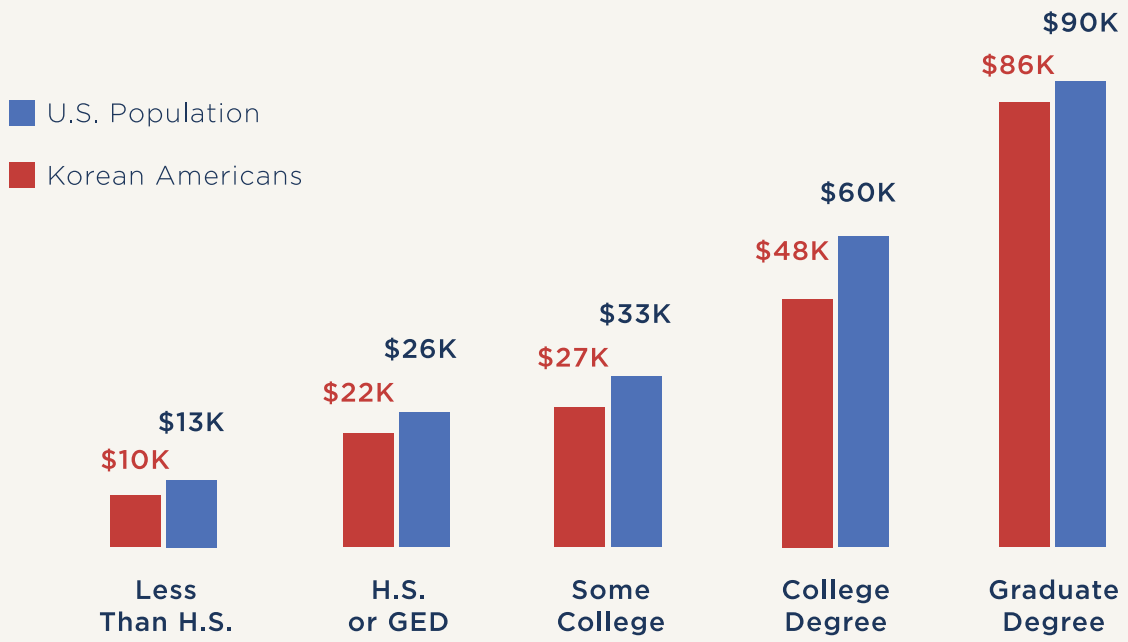
If not for the Affordable Care Act, nearly one out of three Korean Americans would not have health insurance coverage.

Furthermore, while educational attainment is high, there is a conspicuous mismatch between education and income. In 2010, the rate of Korean Americans attaining a college degree or higher was 87 percent higher than the national rate, but there was essentially no difference in the median household income of Koreans compared to the national median. The most recent 2018 ACS data shows only the most modest improvement: Korean Americans' rate of attaining a college degree or higher is nearly 80 percent higher than the national rate, yet their median household income is only 16 percent higher.

[15] The narrowed gap in health insurance coverage rates for Korean Americans relative to national statistics is a recent phenomenon. In fact, 2018 is the first year in which Korean Americans' rate of being uninsured is lower than the national average.

[16] Clemans-Cope, Buettgens, and Recht (2011).

Figure 5.
MEAN PERSONAL INCOME, BY EDUCATION:
KOREAN AMERICANS ARE CONSISTENTLY BEHIND IN THEIR EARNINGS



Data: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 5 shows this difference more starkly by comparing personal income at each educational level for Korean Americans to the U.S. as a whole. At every level of educational attainment, the mean personal income for Korean Americans is significantly lower than the mean for that same educational level in the U.S. population at large. For example, the mean annual personal income in 2018 for a Korean American with a college degree was just above $48,000 while in the U.S. overall, the mean was above $60,000. In fact, except among Korean Americans with a graduate degree — where the gap in mean personal income is substantially narrower — Korean Americans earn about 80 cents to every dollar, compared to national averages at each educational level.[17] These findings remind us that the economic fortunes of Korean Americans are more than an issue of "bamboo ceilings" limiting the upward mobility of Asian Americans striving for the executive echelons of their companies and professions. Rather, the earnings gap affects Korean Americans up and down each rung of the education ladder.[18]

[17] Korean Americans also fare more poorly than other Asian American groups that are widely seen as successful immigrants. For Indian Americans, for example, the median household income in 2018 was an estimated $119,858; only 4.5 percent were without health insurance, and poverty rates among Indian Americans 65 years and older was only 7.6 percent. Indian Americans, however, have substantially higher educational levels than Korean Americans (75.8 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2018).

[18] See Woo (2000) and Gee and Peck (2017) on glass ceilings and Asian Americans; Min (1996, 2008) on Korean Americans' economic mobility.

The Korean American community suffers from severe economic inequality and wealth disparity.

The publicly available census data also show significant income inequality *within* the Korean American community. Here, inequality is determined by analyzing annual personal income in two ways: deriving Gini coefficients and calculating the ratio of the mean income of those in the 90th and the 10th percentiles of an income distribution.[19] From the five-year 2014-2018 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) census data, the Gini index for Korean Americans was 0.573. This is higher than the national Gini of 0.538 and higher than the Gini for all other racial groups in America. This inequality is even more pronounced in the 90/10 income ratio. For Korean Americans, that ratio is 22.6 to 1. That is, the mean personal income for Korean Americans in the 90th percentile ($120,000) is 22.6 times higher than the mean personal income for Korean Americans in the 10th percentile ($5,300). For the nation, this 90/10 income ratio is still high, but substantially smaller at 16.1 to 1. The causes of this contrast in economic fortunes warrant further inquiry.[20]

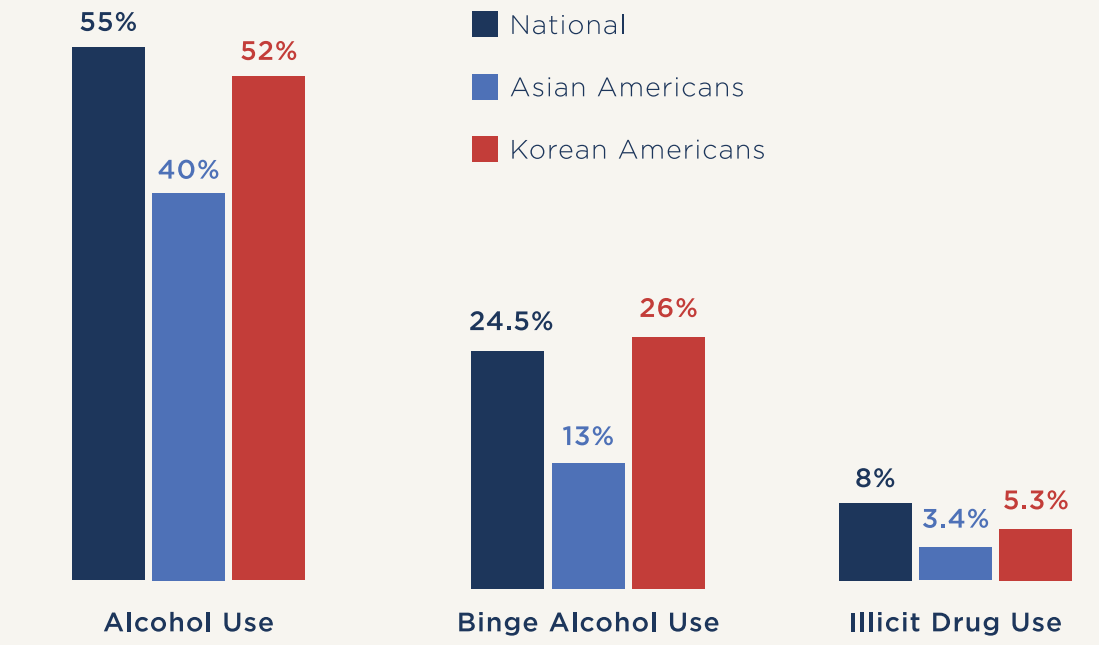
Finally, the extremely high rates of Korean Americans without health insurance until recently raise the question of whether Korean Americans suffer in their physical and mental health status. As critical as this question is, the available data on Korean Americans' health status is very limited. The two primary nationally representative surveys of health, the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) and the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), generally do not disaggregate their public reports to the level of sub-groups like Korean Americans and do not allow for a disaggregated analysis of their raw data.

That said, the available data and reports show a mixed picture on the health status of Korean Americans. Reports from the 2010–2014 NHIS include a few disaggregated health indicators, including self-assessment of one's overall health. Here, roughly one in eight (12.2 percent) of Korean Americans report that their health "in general" is only "fair" or "poor." This figure is close to the U.S. average, but worse than for other Asian Americans, for whom only about one in ten report their general health as fair or poor. The NHIS also included measures of serious psychological stress, whether the respondents have been diagnosed with multiple chronic health conditions, and whether respondents were hampered in their ability to participate in social activities "without using any special equipment." On the first two of these measures, Korean Americans appear to face fewer health problems than national averages, but these numbers may be biased by cultural differences in Korean Americans' health care-seeking behavior and social taboos working against self-reports on their mental health status.

[19] Gini coefficients are perhaps the most commonly used summary measure of income inequality, calculated as the difference between an observed cumulative income distribution and what that distribution would look like if income were distributed perfectly equally. 90/10 percentile ratios are a more intuitive comparison of the top and the bottom of an income distribution.

[20] The corresponding mean personal incomes nationally are $93,000 (90th percentile) and $5,700 (10th percentile). These calculations are only for those persons who reported a positive personal income in the previous twelve months.

Figure 6.
SUBSTANCE USE DURING THE PAST MONTH: DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE HIGH



Data: 2004 to 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

There is also evidence from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) for high rates of substance use and abuse among Korean Americans. Many Korean Americans reported some alcohol use in the past month, at numbers close to the national average and significantly higher than alcohol use for other Asian Americans (see Figure 6). NSDUH also asked about binge alcohol drinking in the past month.[21] Here, nearly one in four adult Americans report binge drinking (24.5 percent), and an even higher proportion of Korean Americans do so (25.9 percent). Again, the rates of binge drinking are much lower for other Asian Americans. Finally, the NSDUH asked about illicit drug use. Nationally, about 8 percent reported illicit drug use. For Korean Americans, the rate is slightly lower at 5.3 percent while for other Asian Americans, only 3.4 percent report illicit drug use.[22]

[21] Binge drinking is defined in the NSDUH as males having five or more alcoholic drinks or females having four or more drinks on one occasion on at least one day in the past month.

[22] From the NSDUH May 2010 report: "Past Month Substance Use among Asians Aged 18 or Older Compared with the National Average: 2004 to 2008." The NSDUH also collects data on substance use among adolescents – alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and non-medical prescription drug use. In each of these categories, Korean American youth use substances at lower rates than the national average but at higher rates than other Asian Americans. For more information, see the NSDUH October 2011 report: "Past Month Substance Use among Asians Aged 12-17 Compared with the National Average: 2004 to 2009."

These statistics point to some clear challenges facing Korean Americans. At the same time, the availability of national data on the health and mental health status of Korean Americans is extremely limited, so the full extent of these challenges remains unknown. However, there are more fine-grained studies of sub-groups of Korean Americans, such as Korean immigrants in specific cities and age groups. These more localized, targeted studies suggest further significant stresses and risks, especially in mental health.[23] This is clearly an area warranting investments in better data and further research.

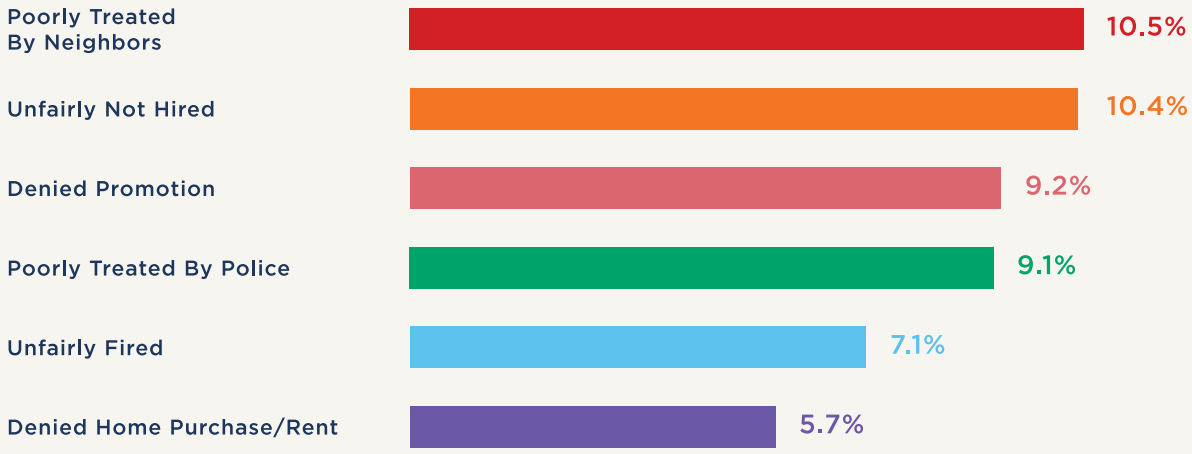
ENCOUNTERING HIGH LEVELS OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

These federal statistics on Korean Americans show shifting population patterns and a multi-faceted portrait of successes and challenges. In this next section, we turn to more direct, firsthand reports on the hardships and barriers that Korean Americans face. While Koreans, like other Asians in America, are often cast as a prosperous "model minority" free from the vestiges of racial discrimination, surveys of ordinary Korean Americans present a more complex tale of their lived experiences. In 2012, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of Asian Americans that asked whether discrimination against their group was "a major problem," "a minor problem," or "not a problem." Korean Americans were by far the Asian ethnic group most likely to see discrimination against their group as a major problem (Korean Americans: 24 percent; Asian Americans: 12 percent). Only 27 percent of Korean Americans answered that discrimination is "not a problem," compared to 36 percent of other Asian Americans.

Among AAPI groups, Korean Americans are most likely to perceive discrimination against their community.

[23] For example, Yoonsun Choi and her colleagues' study of Korean American youth in the greater Chicago area found that up to 16 percent manifested suicidal ideation (Choi *et al,* 2020). Another study (Na *et al,* 2017) estimated that 15 percent of older Korean Americans in the greater Baltimore area also manifested suicidal ideation. And in the 2011 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), 40 percent of Korean Americans did not have access to a "usual source of care" (meaning a primary health care provider), compared to 20 percent for AAPIs in general. And Koreans ranked the highest among all AAPIs on measures of psychological distress in the CHIS.

Figure 7.
TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCES THAT KOREAN AMERICANS ENCOUNTER



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

To delve more deeply into the sources of this perception of bias and hardship, we analyze data from the 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS), which measured Korean Americans' experiences with discrimination and microaggressions, as well as the extent to which they face a range of challenges in their daily life. Examining this breadth of experiences is critical to getting an accurate picture, because largely immigrant-based groups like Korean Americans often face cultural biases that lead them to internalize their hardships, making it difficult to classify such experiences as discrimination.

On discrimination, NAAS asks respondents if they had ever experienced discrimination in six contexts. Overall, 30 percent of Korean Americans reported experiencing at least one of these major discrimination events.[24] For other Asian Americans, the reports of being discriminated against in at least one of these contexts is slightly higher at 34 percent. The breakdown of specific contexts (see Figure 7) shows that Korean Americans were most likely to experience poor treatment from neighbors and not being hired for a job, followed closely by being passed over for a promotion and poor treatment from the police. The NAAS followed up this question by asking what respondents felt to be the basis for unfair treatment in these contexts. In 75 percent of cases, the respondent reported that the basis for their experience was due to their race/ethnicity, language, or accent.

[24] *N.B.:* These are self-reports of unfair treatment and should not be viewed as indirect estimates of the actual incidence of discrimination against Korean Americans. Self-reports of actual experiences, for instance, can vary by age, gender, generation, nativity, and education.

These experiences of discrimination are more likely to be found among certain demographic sub-groups of Korean Americans:

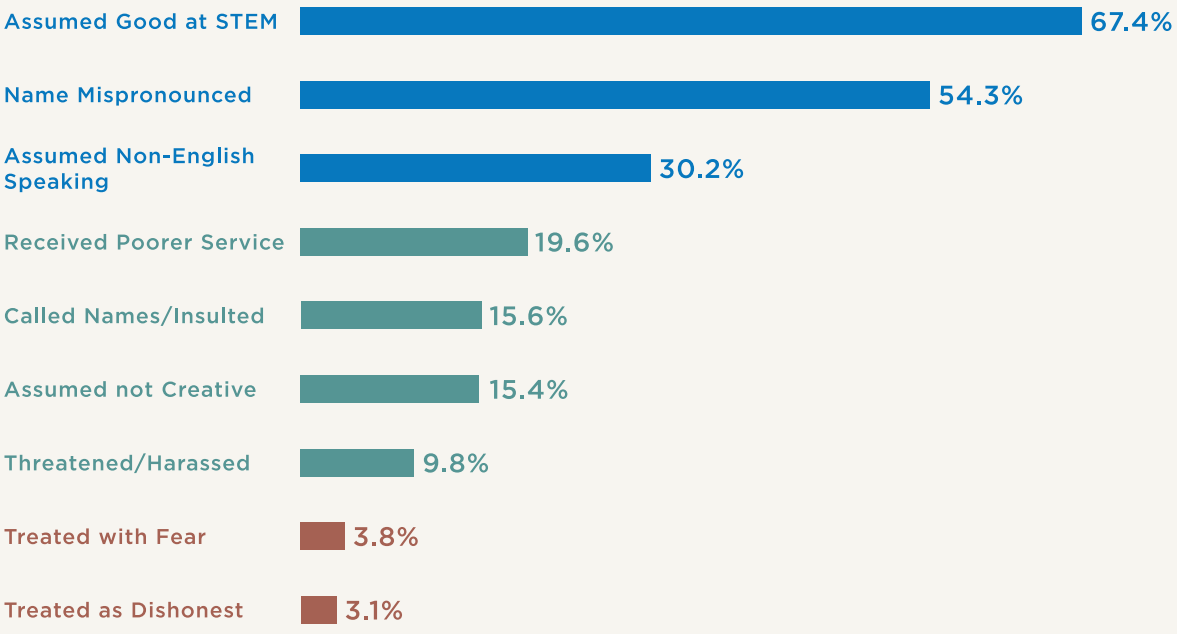
- By age, the experience of being unfairly fired is highest among those aged 18 to 35 (9.5 percent) and 36 to 55 (10 percent). Younger Korean Americans, aged 18 to 35 years, are much more likely than the average Korean American to report being unfairly passed over for a job (15 percent), unfairly treated by the police (12 percent), and poorly treated by their neighbors (20 percent).
- By gender, a higher proportion of men report at least one of the above experiences of unfair treatment than women (35 percent, compared to 27 percent). Korean American men are notably more likely to say they were passed over for a job than Korean American women (14 percent, compared to 8 percent), and that they were unfairly treated by police (14 percent, compared to 5 percent).
- By nativity, U.S.-born Korean Americans are only slightly more likely to report experiencing some kind of discrimination than their immigrant counterparts (33 percent, compared to 30 percent), but the contexts of unfair treatment differ. Foreign-born Korean Americans are more likely to report being denied housing and being unfairly fired, whereas U.S.-born are more likely to report not being hired, not being promoted, and being poorly treated by neighbors.

88% of Korean Americans state that they are experiencing some type of microaggression monthly.

Major discrimination events, such as being denied housing, a job, or a promotion are not the sum of all hardships and challenges facing minority communities in America. In the last decade, scholars have increasingly turned to less visible, more routinized forms of bias, such as microaggressions.[25] Microaggressions can be thought of as "everyday, verbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership." The 2016 NAAS included a battery of questions on the extent to which Asian Americans experienced microaggressions. Respondents were asked about "the way you have been treated in day-to-day encounters with strangers in the United States" and whether they experienced any of a list of potential microaggressions in a typical month.

[25] For more on microaggressions, see (Sue, et al. 2007). Another routinized form of bias related to microaggressions are implicit associations, where people tend to consistently associate groups with particular markers of stigma or belonging without even being aware of it. One classic study of implicit bias, for instance, finds that "Asian American" is far less likely to be subconsciously associated with "American" than "White" and "Black," even by Asian Americans themselves (Devos and Banaji, 2005).

Figure 8.
TYPES OF MICRO-AGGRESSIONS EXPERIENCED BY KOREAN AMERICANS



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

A strikingly high number (88 percent), of Korean Americans report experiencing at least one microaggression monthly. On average, Korean Americans experienced 2.3 of the nine microaggressions they were asked about.[26] More specifically, Korean Americans were especially likely to be assumed to be good in STEM fields (67 percent), to have had their names mispronounced (54 percent), and to be assumed to be a non-English speaker (30 percent). Somewhat less common yet still fairly prevalent are Korean Americans who report receiving "poorer service than others at restaurants and stores" (20 percent), being called names or insulted (16 percent), being assumed not to be a creative thinker (15 percent) and being threatened or harassed (10 percent). Very few Korean Americans report that "people act as if they are afraid of you" or "as if they think you are dishonest."

[26] For other Asian Americans, the rate of experiencing microaggressions is slightly lower than for Korean Americans: 86 percent report at least one microaggression and on average, 2.1 types of microaggressions in total in the past month.

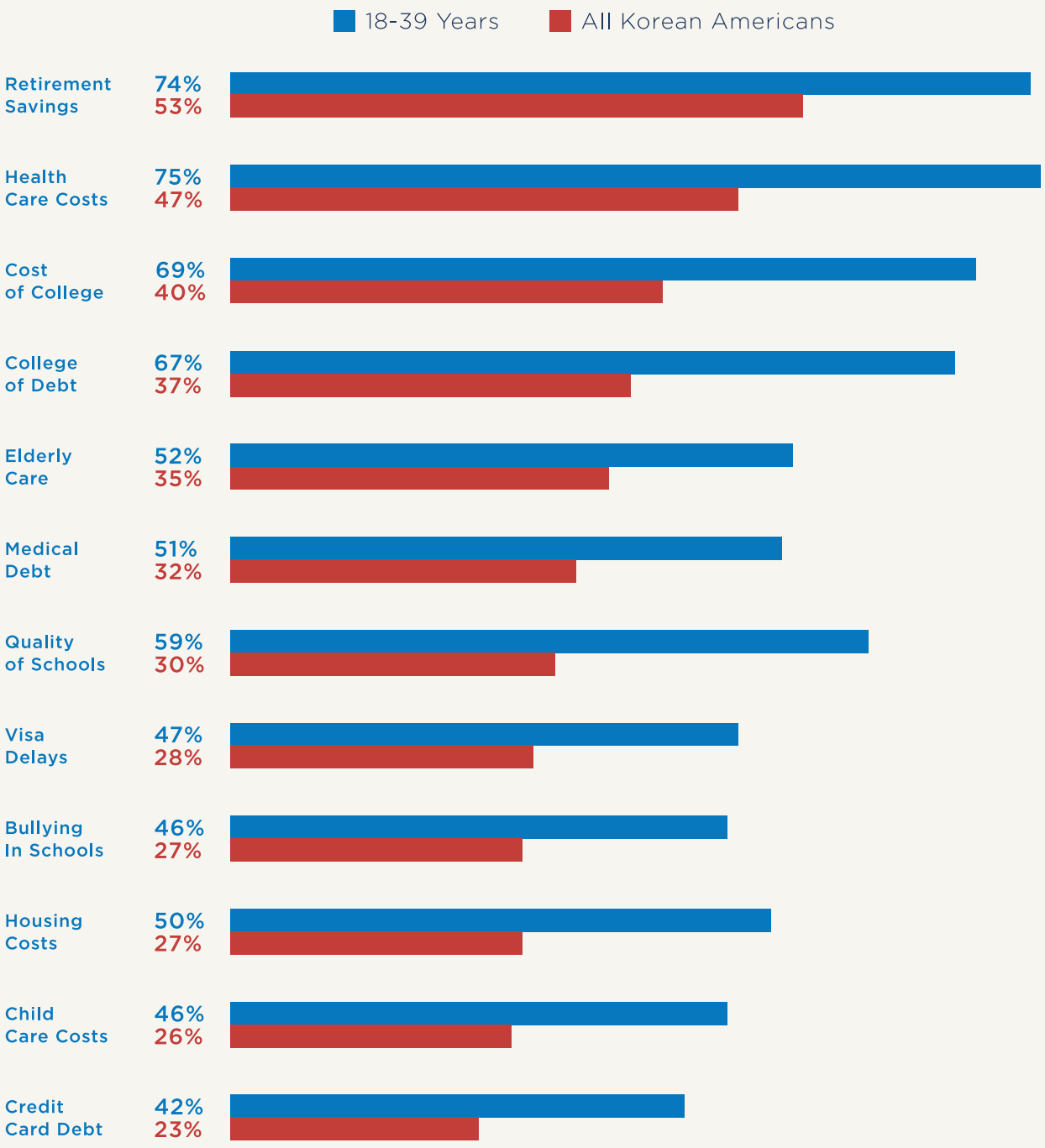
OTHER LIFE STRESSES THAT PLAGUE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY: DEBT, HEALTH CARE, AND EDUCATION

In addition to discrimination and the daily slings and arrows of microaggression, there are daily hardships and stressors that Korean Americans face that may have nothing to do with their race, nationality, immigration status, or any other aspect of their identity. The 2016 NAAS asked respondents if they faced any of a wide range of challenges that Korean Americans report as "fairly" or "very" serious.[27] The questions cover a diverse range of challenges and hardships, from financial stressors like saving for retirement, covering health care, elderly care, childcare, housing, and educational costs, to the challenges of school bullying, school quality, and visa delays.

As Figure 9 shows, a significant number of Korean Americans faced hardships. The most commonly mentioned "fairly serious" or "very serious" challenges were saving for retirement (53 percent), health care costs (47 percent), costs of college and paying off college loans (37 percent and 35 percent), and elderly care (35 percent). Even among Korean Americans with family incomes above $100,000 per year, 53 percent were worried about saving for retirement, 44 percent about health care costs, and 48 percent about the cost of college. Concerns about college affordability were especially serious among younger Korean Americans. As the figure shows, Korean Americans aged 18 to 39 were especially concerned about retirement savings (74 percent), health care costs (75 percent), college costs and debt (69 percent and 67 percent). By contrast, far fewer Korean Americans aged 70 and older saw these challenges as serious – even when it came to retirement savings, health care costs, and elderly care costs.

[27] Respondents in the 2016 NAAS were asked, "Here are some issues that other people have mentioned as challenges they face. Please tell me how serious each is for you and your family." Figure 10 shows the percentage who reported a given challenge as "fairly" or "very" serious.

Figure 9.
EVERYDAY HARDSHIPS



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

In conclusion, we opened this section by noting the common perception of Korean Americans in American society as a "model minority" that enjoys oversized successes and embodies the American Dream. That perception is certainly a reality for some Korean Americans, but the findings in this section demonstrate that many Korean Americans experience a different side of the American immigrant experience – one of poverty and adversities. Nearly one in three report some major discrimination event, and the vast majority of Korean Americans have experienced microaggressions and hardships such as financial insecurity. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, these underlying racial tensions and preexisting oppressive trends explain the rapid rise of anti-Asian sentiments and hate crimes in the United States.[28] In a Pew Research Center survey conducted in June 2020, 39 percent of Asian Americans reported that "people acted as if they were uncomfortable around them" because of their race/ethnicity since the COVID-19 outbreak; 31 percent said they had been subject to "slurs or jokes"; 26 percent "feared someone might threaten or physically attack them."[29] The underlying issues also leave Korean Americans especially vulnerable to the economic consequences of COVID-19. In a November 2020 poll of voters, an estimated 31 percent of Korean Americans reported that they or someone in their household had lost their job due to the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, 48 percent reported they or someone in their household had their pay cut or work hours cut, and 26 percent of self-employed Korean Americans had to close their businesses temporarily or permanently.[30]

[28] See, for example, this article and this article in the *Washington Post's* "Monkey Cage." According to the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council's hate incident self-report website, more than 2,100 anti-Asian hate incidents related to COVID-19 were reported between March and June of 2020. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/.

[29] Neil Ruiz, Juliana Horowitz, and Christine Tamir. July 1, 2020. "Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak." Pew Research Center, https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/.

[30] These data are from the 2020 American Election Eve poll (see https://electioneve2020.com).

BEING KOREAN AMERICAN:
COMMON LABELS AND COMMON INTERESTS

This next section examines how Korean Americans think of themselves as a group. Beliefs about group interests and affirmations of group solidarity inform Korean Americans' experiences and often provide essential resources for immigrant communities and minoritized groups. Here, we look at group orientation in many ways: the labels Korean Americans use to describe themselves, their perceptions of what Asian Americans have in common with each other, their belief that one's personal interests are linked to the interests of their group, and their views on shared political interests with other racial/ethnic groups in the U.S.

To start, there are many ways that Asian Americans might describe themselves in racial or ethnic terms. Korean Americans tend to describe themselves first and foremost with the term "Korean," either alone or modified as "Korean American." The 2012 National Asian American Survey asked about terms its respondents used to "describe themselves" – as "Asian" only, as "Asian American," or in terms of their ethnic or hyphenated ethnic identities (that is, as "Korean" only or "Korean American"). When we examine just the first term that respondents identify with, 48 percent describe themselves as just Korean and another 33 percent identify as Korean American. By contrast, only 7 percent describe themselves firstly as Asian American and another 7 percent identify firstly as Asian only.[31]

TABLE 3. SELF-IDENTIFYING LABELS AMONG KOREAN AMERICANS

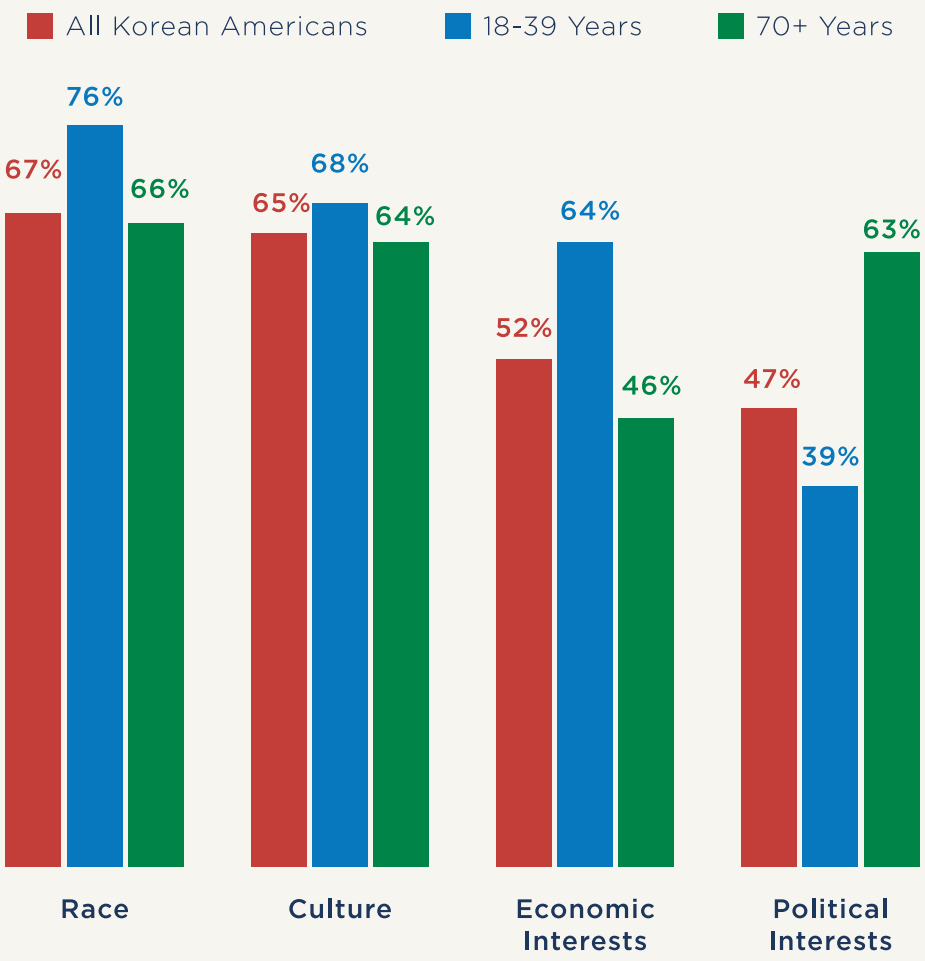
Koreans	48%
Korean Americans	33%
Asian Americans	7%
Asians	7%

[31] The 2012 NAAS item allows respondents to identify with more than one of these labels. When any identification with the terms is allowed, 56 percent describe themselves as Koreans, 44 percent as Korean Americans, 17 percent as Asians, and only 14 percent of Korean Americans describe themselves with the label Asian Americans.

SHARING COMMON INTEREST WITH OTHER ASIAN AMERICANS

The fact that most Korean Americans describe themselves in terms of their ethnic/national origin (i.e., as Koreans) rather than in pan-ethnic terms (i.e., as Asian Americans) does not, however, mean that Korean Americans see no commonality with other Asians in the U.S. "Asian American" is now well-established in the American racial vernacular, yet the term is used to describe a remarkable diversity of people of different national origins, religions, languages, cultures, and so on. The 2016 National Asian American Survey (NAAS) asked its respondents the question, "What, if anything, do Asians in the United States share with one another? Would you say they share a common race, a common culture, common economic interests, common political interests?"

Figure 10.
WHAT KOREAN AMERICANS HAVE IN COMMON WITH OTHER ASIAN AMERICANS



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

For this question, the first notable finding is that relative to the diversity of the Asian American community, a large share of Korean Americans sees multiple bases of commonality as Asian Americans. Based on responses to the various factors addressed in the question, between about half and about two-thirds of respondents find something in common among Asians in the United States. Korean Americans are more likely to see Asians in the U.S. as sharing a common race and common culture than they are to see shared political or economic interests (see Figure 10).[32] When we drill down into the data a bit more, there are some interesting differences across age groups in perceptions of commonality. Younger Korean Americans (aged 18 to 35) are more likely to see Asians as sharing common economic interests and racial definitions than are their older (aged 70 and up) co-ethnics. Perhaps more surprisingly, younger Korean Americans are far less likely to see common political cause among Asian Americans, especially in contrast to their older counterparts.

A majority of Korean Americans see their fate as linked to other Asian American communities.

This affinity towards seeing shared group definition and interests also extends to another commonly examined dimension of identity: namely, the sense of a "linked fate." Linked fate is important because it is especially powerful at connecting group identification with action, such as voting and other forms of political participation.[33] In response to the following question in the 2016 NAAS, "Do you think what generally happens to other Asian Americans affects what happens in your life?" roughly two-thirds of Korean Americans agreed (shown in Figure 11). By contrast, less than a majority of other Asian groups shared that view. In the 2008 NAAS that asked the same question, Koreans were also significantly more likely than other Asian groups to perceive a racial linked fate, 58 percent to 37 percent.

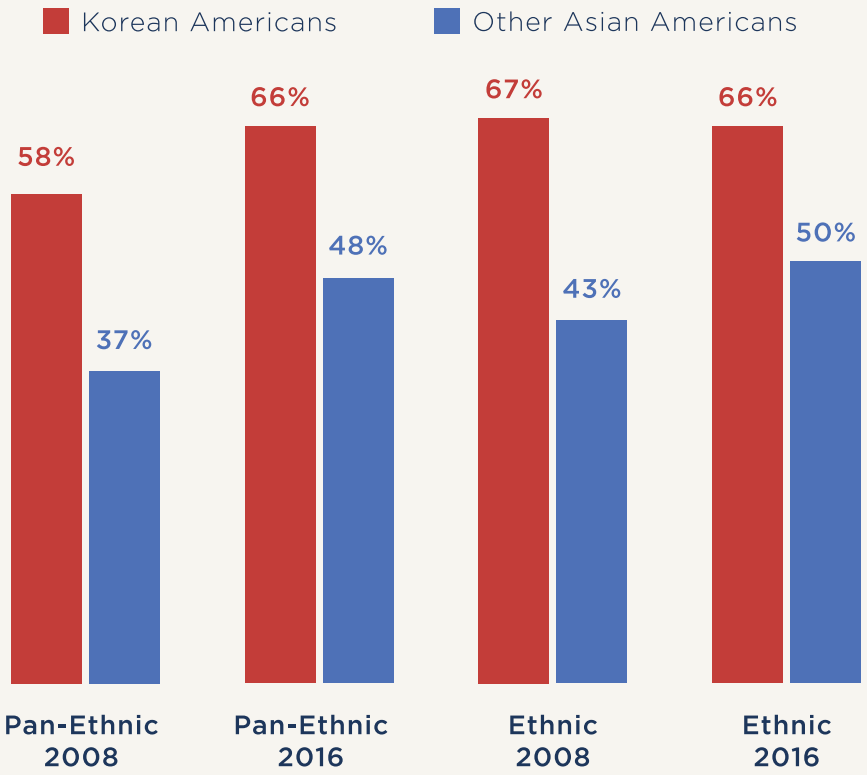
[32] These questions were also asked in the 2008 and 2012 National Asian American Surveys. In all years, roughly two-thirds of Korean Americans see a common race while slightly more than a majority of other non-Korean Asian ethnic groups do.

[33] On linked fate, see Dawson (1994) and Lien, Conway, and Wong (2004).

Although Korean Americans see themselves as a distinct group, they still see themselves as sharing many common political and economic interests with other Asian Americans.

This sense of shared destiny defined not only one's "pan-ethnic" identity as Asian American but also one's ethnic identity as Korean American. The two NAAS surveys also asked respondents, "Do you think what generally happens to other Korean Americans affects what happens in your life?" This sense of linked fate is a potential resource and influence on Korean Americans in the political arena. Those who hold strongly to the idea that their destiny is connected to that of other Korean Americans are more likely to be politically engaged, more likely to hold distinct and progressive views on politics, and more likely to identify as Democrats and vote for liberal candidates.

Figure 11.
KOREAN AMERICANS VIEW ON PAN-ETHNIC AND ETHNIC LINKED FATE, 2008 AND 2016



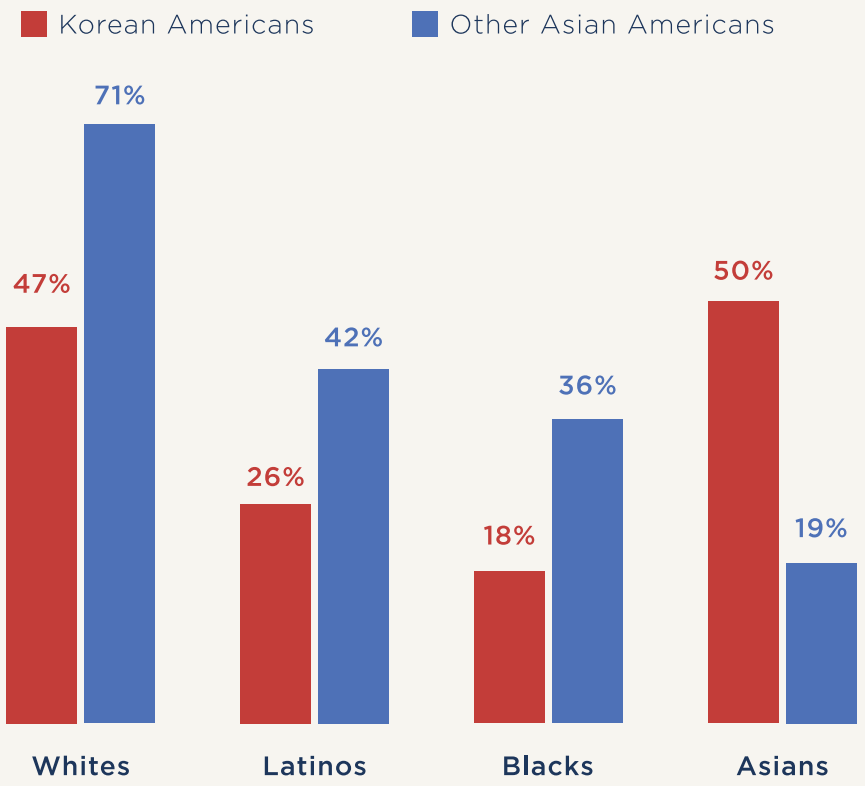
Data: 2008 and 2016 National Asian American Survey

Here too, roughly two-thirds of Korean Americans believed in this sense of linked fate, and that share was significantly higher than for other Asian Americans (vis-à-vis their ethnic/national origin group). With both ethnic and pan-ethnic measures of linked fate, we also find some interesting age differences. Younger Korean Americans (18-35) are much more likely to see their fate as linked to the groups they identify with than older (70 years and up) Korean Americans, roughly 75 percent compared to 55-57 percent. The data also show differences in linked fate by immigrant status. On the question of linked fate with all Asian Americans, U.S.-born Korean Americans are much more likely than their foreign-born counterparts to agree (roughly 80 percent versus 63 percent). By contrast, on the question of linked fate with all Korean Americans, both U.S.-born and foreign-born Korean Americans are equally likely to agree.

ALIENS, ALLIES AND ADVERSARIES IN RACE RELATIONS: KOREAN AMERICAN FRICTION WITH OTHER RACIAL GROUPS

The last aspect of group ties we examine in this section is how Korean Americans relate to other racial and ethnic groups in America. Race is not only a social construction; it is also fundamentally relational. Constructions like Asian Americans as a "model minority" reference the allegedly "model" attitudes and achievements of Asians in contrast to Black Americans, which is a deeply inscribed dynamic that Claire Kim describes as "relative valorization."[34] In this section, we examine three snapshots of race relations vis-à-vis Korean Americans: the extent of Korean Americans' social interactions with other groups, Korean Americans' views toward Black Americans, and perceptions of political commonality with other racial and ethnic groups in America.

Figure 12.
KOREAN AMERICANS VS. ASIAN AMERICANS DAILY SOCIAL CONTACT WITH OTHERS ("A LOT")



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

[34] Kim (1999) further argues that relative valorization describes one of the two defining axes of Asian Americans, the other being "civic ostracism" (cf. civic acceptance) and the sense in which Asians are persistently cast as "perpetually foreign." These two dimensions demarcate Asian Americans as racially "triangulated" between Black and White people in the American racial hierarchy.

On social interactions with others, respondents to the 2016 NAAS were asked, "In your daily life, how much contact do you, personally, have with people who are ... White, Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Asian American?" The response options given ranged from "a lot" to "no contact at all." Figure 12 above shows the degree to which Korean Americans, compared to other Asian Americans, report "a lot" of contact with the reference groups.

Korean Americans generally have low levels of interaction with other races.

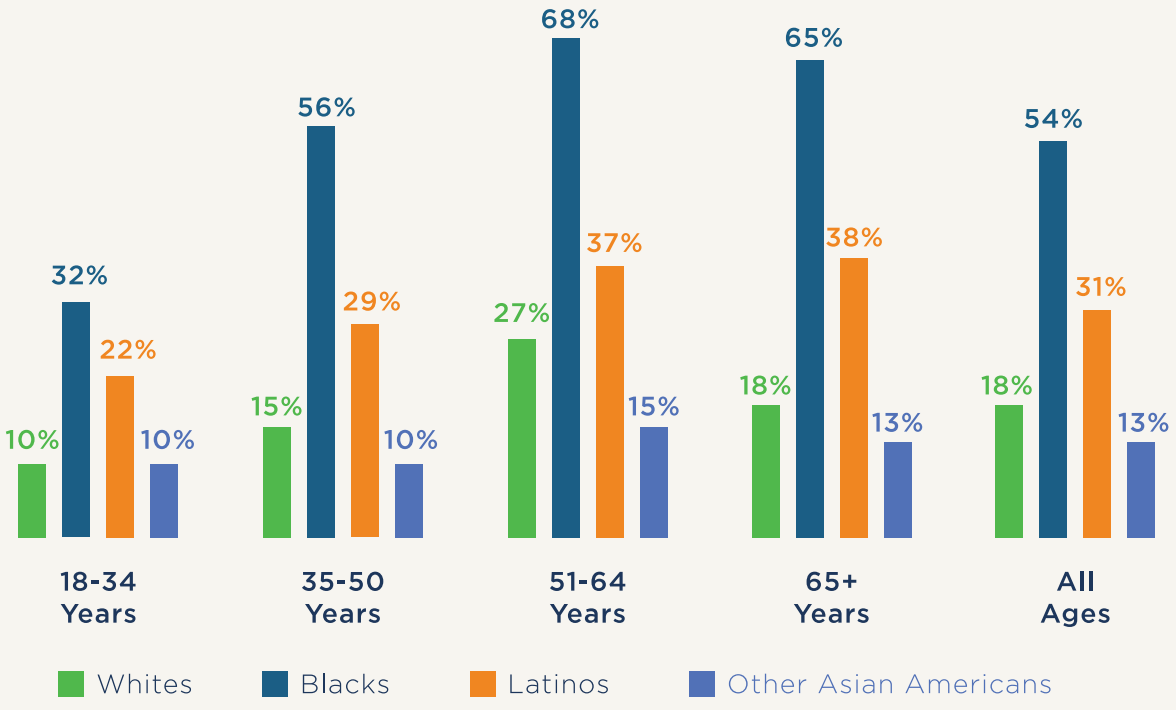
The results show that Korean Americans by far reported more regular social interactions in their daily life with Whites and other Asian Americans, and also that Korean Americans were significantly less likely to interact with Latinos and least likely of all Asian sub-groups to interact with Black Americans. Other Asian Americans were more likely to report regular interactions with Whites, Latino, and African Americans.[35] These results are moderated somewhat by age groups: middle-aged Korean Americans and, to a lesser extent, young Korean Americans, were more likely to report regular daily contact with Black and Latino Americans.[36]

While Korean Americans may interact less with Latinos and Blacks, these patterns could result at least in part from residential and employment segregation patterns that make it less likely for Koreans to have opportunities to interact with certain communities of color. The 2012 Pew survey of Asian Americans asks more directly about how well different groups get along with one another. Specifically, Pew asked, "How well do you think [Korean Americans and Whites; Korean Americans and Blacks, Korean Americans and Latinos; Korean Americans and Asian Americans from other countries] get along with each other these days – would you say very well, pretty well, not too well, or not at all well?"

[35] The 2012 Pew survey of Asian Americans further finds that 58 percent of Korean Americans report that "all" or "most" of their friends are other Korean Americans. By contrast, for other Asian Americans, only 39 percent report most or all friends were co-ethnics.

[36] Younger Korean Americans in this analysis are those 18-35 years old; middle-aged Korean Americans are those 35-55 years old.

Figure 13.
KOREAN AMERICANS GETTING ALONG POORLY WITH OTHERS (DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS)



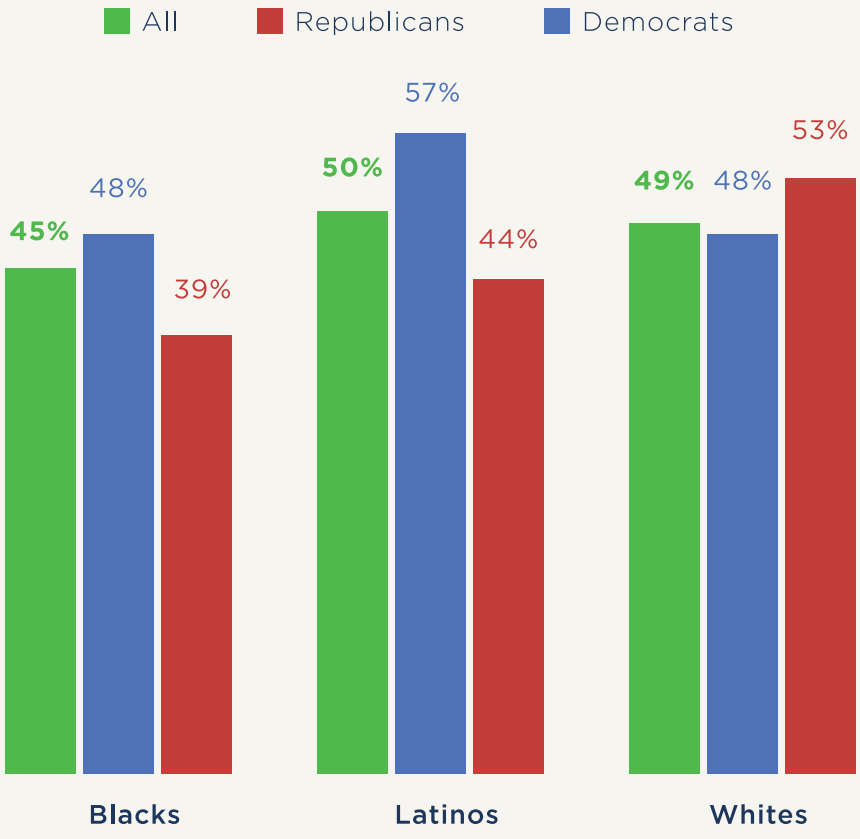
Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

Figure 13 captures those Korean Americans who report that they get along "not too well" or "not well at all" with others. Overall, Koreans are least likely to report getting along poorly with other Asian Americans, followed closely by Whites. Korean Americans are most likely to report getting along poorly with African Americans. Considering all ages together, 54 percent report not getting along well, with most of that group reporting getting along "not too well" (49 percent) with African Americans. Figure 14 further shows that this interracial friction is moderated by age. Younger Korean Americans are least likely to report not getting along with any group, including Blacks. At the same time, the general rank-ordering of groups that Korean Americans get along with – from other Asians on one end of the ordering to Blacks on the other – is consistent regardless of age group.

IMPLICATION FOR POLITICAL ALLIANCES WITH OTHER RACES

These findings paint a sobering view of the challenges facing Korean Americans in their interactions with other racial and ethnic groups in America. Some three decades after the Red Apple boycotts in Flatbush, Brooklyn in 1990, Soon Ja Du's killing of Latasha Harlins in L.A. in 1991, and *Sa-I-Gu* in 1992, Black-Korean relations remain marked by infrequent daily contact and widespread perceptions that Koreans and Blacks do not get along. More generally, these findings are concerning because Korean Americans (and, for that matter, Asian Americans) remain small in size as a group, while advancing community interests and acquiring political influence often require greater strength in numbers through coalitions with other groups.

Figure 14.
KOREAN AMERICANS VIEW ON POLITICAL COMMONALITY WITH OTHERS



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey

To assess Asian Americans' potential willingness to forge political coalitions, the 2016 NAAS asked, "Thinking about government services, political power and representation, would you say Asians have a lot in common, some, little, or nothing at all in common with Blacks, Latinos, and Whites?" In general, Korean Americans were split in their views on whether Asians share political commonality with other groups. Roughly one in two agree that Asians share "some" or "a lot" in common with Whites and Latinos; that figure goes down slightly to 45 percent with Black Americans. The lion's share of this perceived political commonality is in the category of "some" commonality; only 6 percent (with Whites) and 12 percent (with Blacks and Latinos) of Korean Americans perceive "a lot" of political commonality." We further note that the other way to see these results is that about half of Korean Americans see "little" or "nothing at all" in common politically with non-Asian groups. Korean Americans who identify as Democrats are slightly more likely than Republicans to say that Asians have commonality with Latinos and Blacks, but the difference is modest.

BUILDING POLITICAL POWER FOR THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

This final section turns directly to the arena of politics. The story of Korean Americans' political power starts with its striking invisibility in the corridors of governance. Looking at federal elected offices, there have been no Korean American elected officials in Congress between 1999, when Jay Kim of California's 41st district lost a bid for re-election under a cloud of suspicion of political corruption, and the 2018 midterm elections, when Andy Kim won election to represent New Jersey's 3rd district. Thus, over the two decades when Korean Americans grew in numbers from 1.2 million in the 2000 census to the roughly 2 million expected in the 2020 census count, the interests and issues of Korean Americans had no voice in the people's house in Congress.

This contrast between growing visibility in the population and persistent invisibility in political offices is true of Asian Americans generally. While AAPIs are more than 6 percent of the U.S. population today, they occupy only 3 percent of all seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and an even smaller 2 percent of all seats in state legislatures.[37] As of 2016, there were 56 Korean Americans holding political office at the state and local level, making up over 12 percent of all AAPI elected officials nationally. Since Korean Americans compose 10 percent of the U.S. AAPI population, they are slightly more highly represented *among* Asian American elected representatives, but Asian Americans are far less likely to be represented in elected office.[38]

[37] New American Leaders Project, 2016.

[38] Lien and Esteban 2018).

At the same time, this picture of underrepresentation is only half the story of Asian American representation in political offices. The other half, perhaps even more striking, is the fact that there has been a dramatic increase in Asian American representation in just the last few years. Eleven of the fourteen current Asian American members of the House were elected in 2012 or since then. All three AAPI U.S. Senators – Tammy Duckworth, Kamala Harris, and Mazie Hirono – were elected in 2012 or 2016. This trend is also true at the state level. In the 2018 midterm elections, 137 Asian Americans ran for state legislative offices and well over 70 percent of those candidates won their campaign.[39] This trend may also be catching on with Korean Americans. After the nearly twenty-year drought with no Korean American representation in Congress, Andy Kim's success in 2018 was followed in 2020 by electoral victories for Young Kim (CA-39), Michelle Steele (CA-48), and Marilyn Strickland (WA-10).

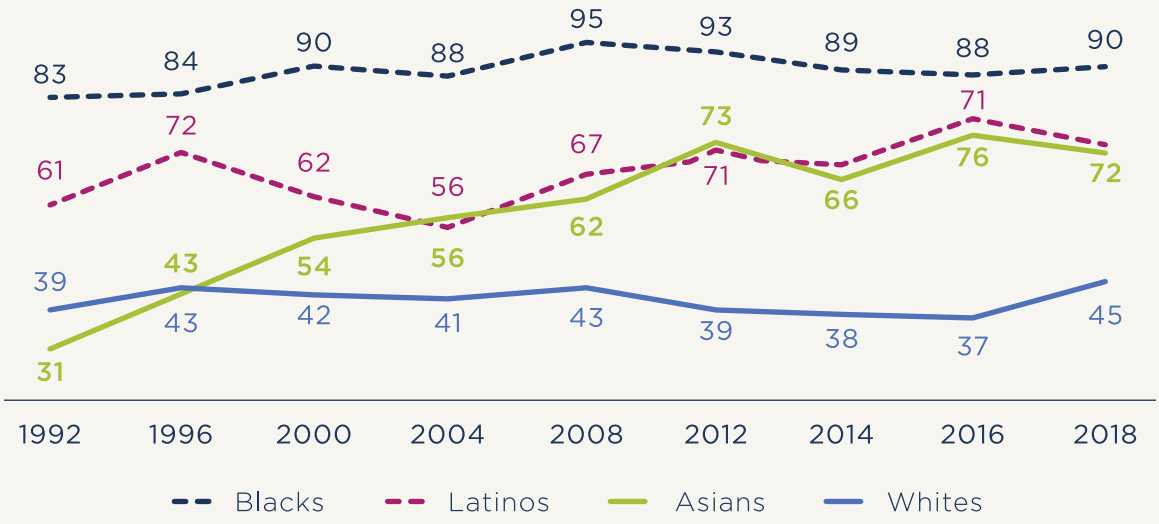
Since the 1992 election, Asian Americans have increasingly voted for Democratic candidates. Korean Americans have also followed this trend.

For the most part, this increase in Asian American representation has occurred in elections where Asian Americans have run as Democrats. For example, of the record 137 Asian American candidates for state legislative offices in 2018, more than 75 percent ran as Democrats. This points to a second, equally striking shift in Asian American politics: Asian Americans have undergone an extraordinary transformation in how they vote. Just a generation ago, scholars writing on Asian Americans as an emerging bloc of voters described them as median voters and swing voters, and the earliest polls of the party preferences found an even split between Democratic and Republican identifiers. As Figure 15 shows, since 1992 (the earliest date for which exit poll data for Asian Americans exist), Asian Americans have shifted their presidential voting preferences to become a heavily Democratic electorate.[40] In 1992, exit polls reported that only 31 percent of Asian Americans reported voting for the Democratic candidate, Bill Clinton. Since the 2008 election, the Democratic vote share for Asian American voters has grown to between 66 percent and 76 percent.

[39] Source: http://aapidata.com/blog/aa-state-leg-elections-2018/.

[40] The source for voting numbers are mostly from the Voter News Service and National Election Pool exit polls. These mainstream media exit polls, however, have some known limitations in their accuracy with Latino and Asian American voters, so the numbers for 2014, 2016, and 2018 are from the Latino and Asian American Election Eve polls.

Figure 15.
A SOLIDLY DEMOCRATIC ELECTORATE



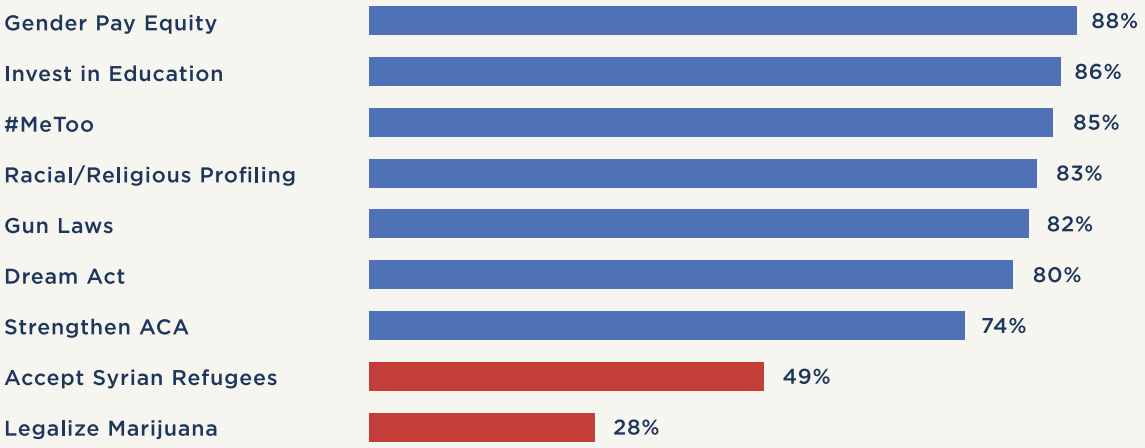
1992, 1996, 2000 Voter News Service / 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2018 National Election Pool / 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018 Latino Election Eve Poll (Latino Decisions) / 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018 Asian American Election Eve Poll

This shift in partisan voting patterns is also discernible for Korean Americans. The first quantitative studies of Koreans in California in the 1980s and 1990s suggested that Korean Americans, like Vietnamese Americans, might vote more conservatively than Chinese or Japanese Americans due to the dominance of foreign policy concerns in the Cold War and post-Cold War era. In the last four elections, by contrast, Korean Americans have voted consistently and solidly in favor of Democratic candidates: 70 percent in 2012, 63 percent in 2014, 68 percent in 2016, and 73 percent in the most recent 2018 midterms.[41] Among younger Korean Americans, this pattern of favoring Democratic candidates is even stronger, with 85 percent of Korean Americans aged 18-34 voting for Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump in 2016 and 84 percent voting for Democratic congressional candidates in the 2018 midterm elections.[42]

[41] The source for these figures is also from the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 Asian American Election Eve polls.

[42] By all indications, this high rate of voting for Democratic candidates will continue to manifest in the 2020 presidential election. Data from the 2020 NationScape survey – which includes 974 Korean American respondents – suggests that more than two out of every three likely Korean American voters intend to vote for Joe Biden over Donald Trump, including about 70 percent of Korean American Independents. NationScape surveys are conducted online and in English only, and their sample is drawn to be representative of all adult Americans, not Korean Americans per se, so caution is advised in interpreting these results. For more details on NationScape, see https://www.voterstudygroup.org/nationscape.

Figure 16.
KOREAN AMERICANS SUPPORT LIBERAL POLICIES ON MOST ISSUES



Data: 2016 National Asian American Survey and 2018 Asian American Eve Poll

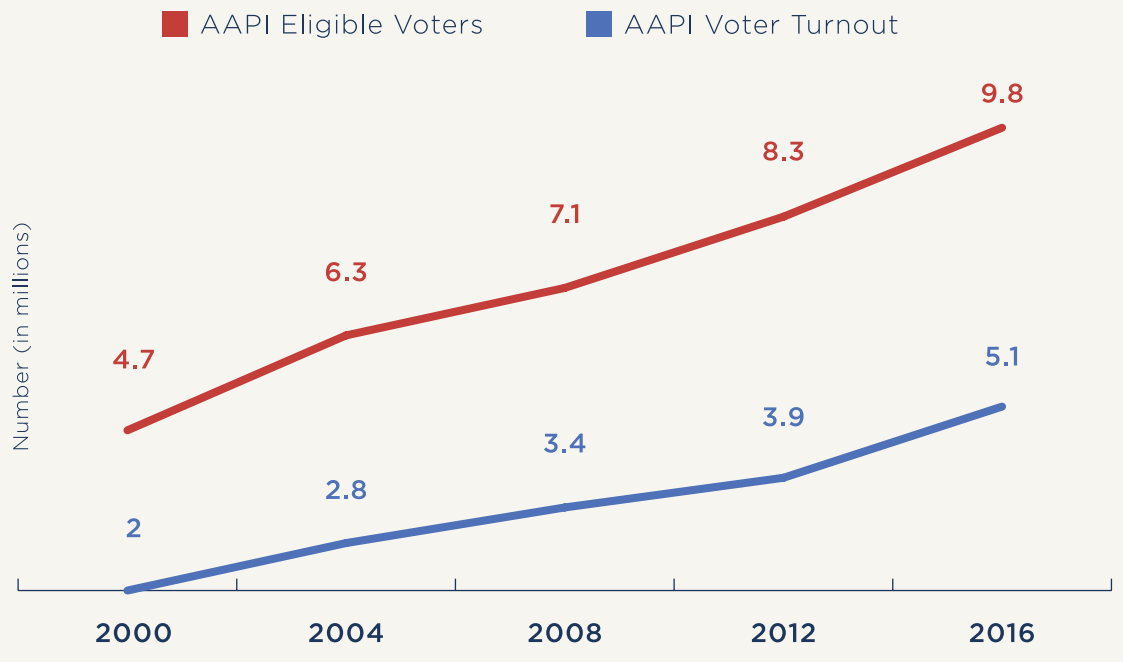
Consistent with this high rate of voting for Democratic candidates, Korean Americans are liberal across a wide range of policy issues. Figure 16 shows that very large majorities of Korean Americans support pay equity between men and women, favor greater investments in public education, agree sexual harassment against women is a major problem, oppose profiling individuals on the basis of race or religion, endorse stricter gun control laws, believe that Congress should pass the Dream Act, and advocate for strengthening the Affordable Care Act. At the same time, Korean Americans are not progressive across the board. For instance, in the 2016 NAAS, less than half of Korean Americans supported accepting Syrian refugees into the United States, and a healthy majority of Korean Americans opposed California's Proposition 64 to legalize recreational marijuana.[43]

More generally, Korean Americans favor an active government role in addressing issues. The 2012 Pew survey of Asian Americans asked, "If you had to choose, would you rather have a smaller government providing fewer services, or a bigger government providing more services?" 68 percent of Korean Americans preferred a bigger government, compared to 53 percent of all other Asian Americans in the survey. In a version of the same question asked in the 2012 American National Election Study, only 46 percent of the general American public favored a larger role for government.[44]

[43] Based on an analysis of the 2018 Asian American Election Eve poll and the 2016 National Asian American Survey.

[44] The question wording in the 2012 ANES is slightly different. Respondents there were asked, "Which of the two statements comes closer to your view? 1. The less government, the better. 2. There are more things that the government should be doing."

Figure 17.
RAPID GROWTH IN THE ELECTORATE



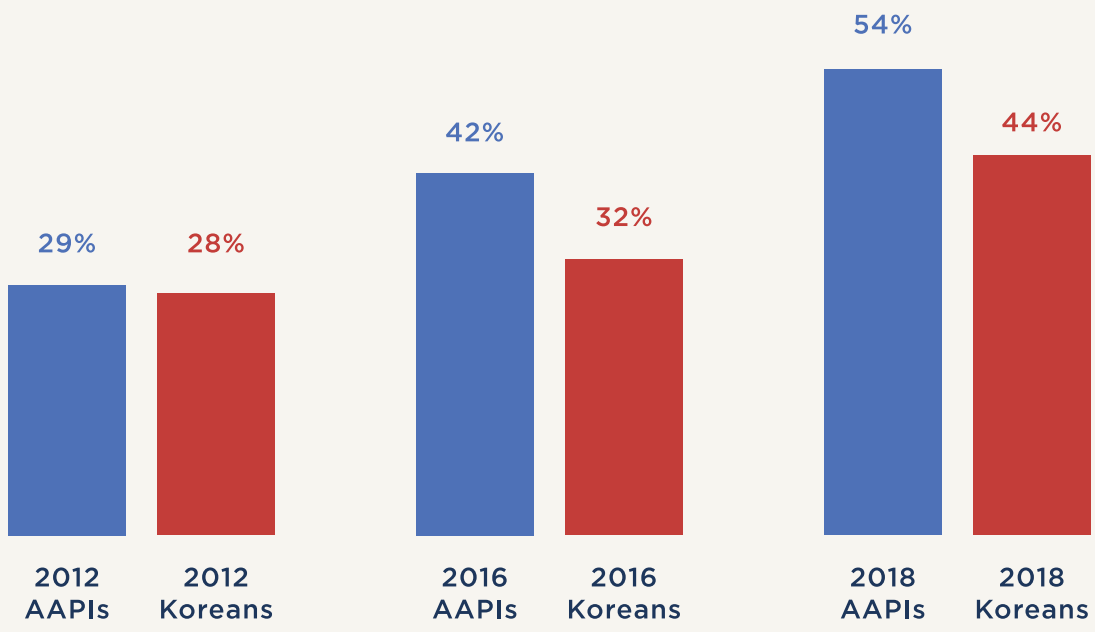
Data: Current Population Survey, Census Bureau

THE KOREAN AMERICAN VOTERS: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

The recent dramatic increase in Asian Americans' success in winning political offices rides the crest of an equally dramatic increase in Asian Americans' share of the electorate. Figure 17 shows that between 2000 and 2016, the number of Asian American and Pacific Islander citizens of voting age doubled from just below 5 million to nearly 10 million. Between 2012 and 2016 alone, the number of eligible AAPI voters increased by 1.5 million. By 2020, that figure should exceed 11 million. Of course, not all adults eligible to vote will do so; registration and turnout have historically been especially high barriers to democratic participation for Asian Americans. Until recently, just above one out of every three Asian American citizens of voting age actually voted.

This citizen-to-voter gap is notable because the size of the AAPI voting public is also growing, as Figure 17 also shows. In 2000, only an estimated 2 million Asian Americans turned out to vote; by 2016, that figure exceeded 5 million. Given the historic turnout levels in the 2020 election, the total number of AAPI voters in 2020 should exceed 6 million. In the two previous presidential elections, moreover, there are also promising signs that the voter registration gap for AAPIs is closing: for example, between 2012 and 2016, the size of the AAPI eligible voter population increased by 1.5 million; over the same two elections, the number of new AAPIs who voted increased by 1.14 million. The Current Population Survey data do not allow for a separate analysis of Korean Americans, but it is reasonable to extrapolate that Korean Americans are contributing to this growth in Asian Americans in the electorate.[45]

Figure 18.
AAPIs AND KOREAN AMERICANS CONTACTED TO VOTE OR REGISTER DURING 2012 AND 2016

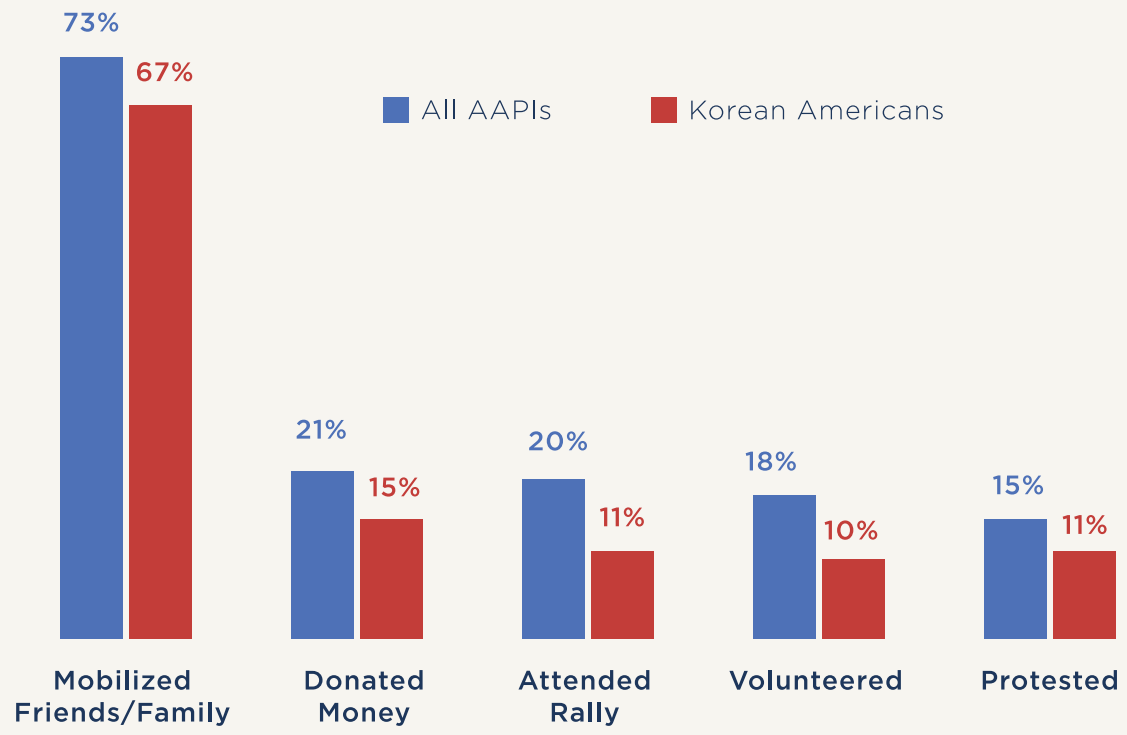


Data: 2008 and 2016 NAAS; 2018 Asian American Eve Poll

[45] Data are from the biennial the Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplements. The CPS supplements are the primary federal reports on the U.S. electorate but are not without limitations for an analysis of the AAPI electorate. In addition to not being able to disaggregate Asian American numbers to the level of groups like Korean Americans, the CPS is also limited by not interviewing in any Asian language.

The second important pattern shown in Figure 18 is that Korean Americans appear to be growing less likely to be contacted than other AAPIs over the same time period. Thus, while Korean Americans are also reporting higher rates of being contacted to register and to vote between 2012 and 2018, the increase is less dramatic than for other Asian Americans (28 percent, compared to 44 percent). In 2016 and 2018, Korean Americans are significantly less likely to be mobilized. One key source of this gap is the extent to which non-partisan groups, like community-based organizations or non-profits like the Council of Korean Americans, have done outreach work. In 2016, 35 percent of Korean Americans who reported being contacted said they were contacted by a non-partisan group; for other Asian Americans, that figure was 47 percent. Similarly, in 2018, an identical 35 percent of Korean Americans were contacted by a non-partisan group while 44 percent of other Asian Americans were contacted.

Figure 19.
AAPI & KOREAN AMERICAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS MULTIPLE ARENAS

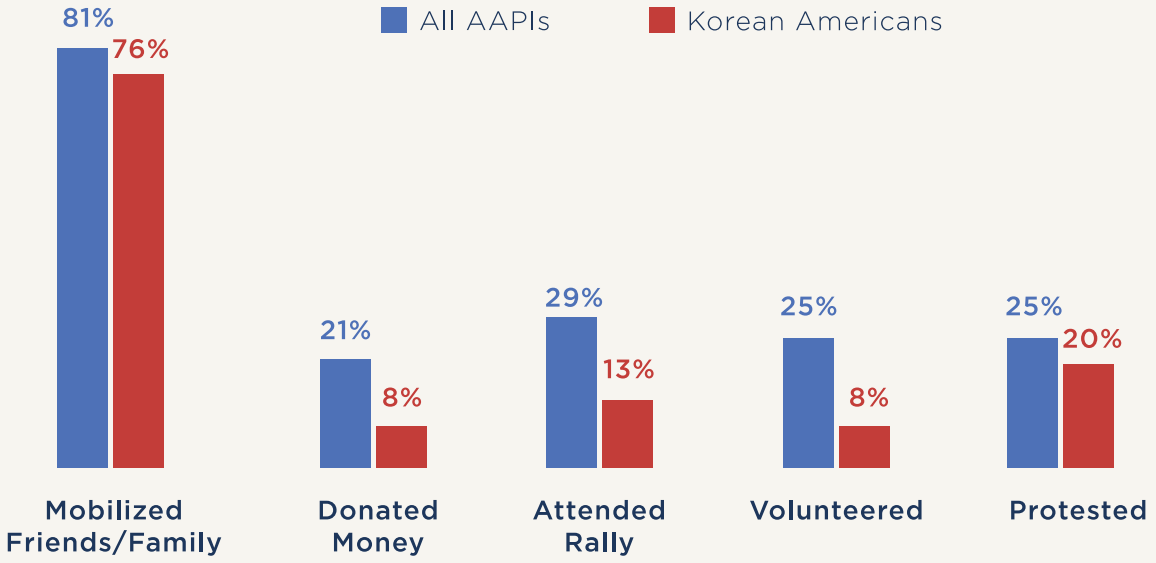


Data: 2018 Asian American Eve Poll

Beyond voting, evidence suggests that Korean Americans were less likely to be engaged across a wide range of activities than other Asian Americans. In the 2018 Asian American Election Eve poll, respondents were asked if they had participated in any of the following activities "related to the 2018 Election ... encouraged friends and family to register or vote ... donated money to a candidate or campaign ... attended a campaign rally or event in support of a candidate ... volunteered to help a candidate or voter outreach drive ... attended a protest or demonstration against someone or an issue."

Figure 19 shows that across all five activities, Korean Americans were less likely to participate. On the high end of participation, 67 percent of Korean Americans tried to press friends and family to engage politically in 2018, but that fell shy of the 73 percent of all Asian Americans who did so. The participation gap for Korean Americans was most pronounced on the sweat equity side of electoral politics – attending rallies and volunteering for a campaign – but participation rates were also lower in making campaign contributions and engaging in protest politics. (It should be noted that 2018 was marked by very high rates of participation in protest politics among all Americans).

Figure 20.
AAPI & KOREAN AMERICAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS



Data: 2018 Asian American Eve Poll

Some of these gaps are especially pronounced in specific demographic segments of the Korean American community. Figure 20 suggests that young Korean Americans are less engaged than other young Asian Americans. On the measures of mobilizing friends and family and participating in protest politics, young adults (both Korean and all Asians) are more active, and the gaps are roughly the same as that between Koreans and all Asians across all age groups. However, when it comes to volunteering for a campaign, attending campaign events, and donating to a campaign, the data show that while young Asian Americans generally were more active than older Asian Americans, young Korean Americans were *less* active. This finding points to a puzzle and an opportunity to explore why Korean American youth are less engaged, and to leverage those insights for outreach and mobilization campaigns targeted to Korean American youth.

CONCLUSION

This report on the status of Koreans in the United States captures many snapshots of where the community is today, from demographic changes and socioeconomic status to reports of bias and hardship, perceptions of group belonging and race relations, and political orientation and engagement. It covers more findings than can be justly covered in a concluding section. However, these snapshots, taken together, present a collage of contradictions:

- **Growing, yet slowing:** Demographically, Korean Americans as a population group have grown remarkably in number over the past half century. At the same time, the rate of that growth has slowed significantly.
- **Successful yet struggling:** Socioeconomically, Korean Americans are overachieving in educational attainment. At the same time, income lags significantly behind education and many Korean Americans live in economic precarity. Many face discrimination, microaggressions, and daily hardships.
- **Race-based yet isolated:** Many Korean Americans see their experience through a racial lens – identifying as Korean Americans, seeing Asians in America as sharing a common race, expressing a linked fate with other Korean and Asian Americans. At the same time, there is little daily contact with Blacks and Latinos and high levels of friction with Black Americans.
- **Political yet underpowered:** Korean American voters, like other Asian Americans, have grown in numbers and become solidly Democratic with largely liberal positions on policy issues. At the same time, Korean Americans remain underrepresented in political offices and are less likely than other Asian Americans to be mobilized to register and vote and less likely to be engaged in politics beyond voting.

These conflicting narratives present some clear implications and compelling challenges to the Council of Korean Americans and to all national and community-level organizations representing the Korean American community's needs and interests.

- The narrative of slowing growth means that we cannot bank on continued increases in population numbers to do the work of building power and influence for the Korean American community. It also redoubles the importance of Korean American participation in the 2020 census to ensure that every Korean in the United States is counted.
- The narrative of socioeconomic struggles calls the bluff on popular accounts of Korean Americans as a model minority. While many have achieved soaring heights in their professions and communities, too many Korean Americans remain behind and too many experience daily hardships and reminders of being perpetual outsiders in American social and economic life.
- The narrative of race poses a challenge to how Korean Americans will organize and act as a group. Many issues of particular concern to Korean Americans – health care, education, immigration, inequality, race relations – require collaboration and coalitions with other racial and ethnic communities. Moreover, in the current context, there is a lot of internal work to be done in order to fight anti-Blackness in the Korean American community and relational work to be done if Korean Americans want to be allies to the reawakened Black community.
- Finally, the narrative of politics underscores the hurdles that Korean Americans, as a community, need to overcome before they can realize their full political potential. The three interconnected issues of underrepresentation, under-mobilization, and under-participation require a concerted strategic plan to organize and build power in the Korean American community, especially among younger Korean Americans.

These narratives, perhaps because they are contradictory, invite more exploration and explanation than this report can cover. A key limitation of the report is that the analysis is limited to available data. And on many unanswered questions concerning Korean Americans, data are either absent, restricted in what questions are asked, or aggregated only to the level of Asian Americans. To better understand the Korean American community, serve their needs, and represent their interests, we need better and finer-grained data on a range of topics, including: health and mental health outcomes; economic precarity facing older and younger Korean Americans; opinions on specific policy areas, from U.S. trade and security policy affecting the Koreas to higher education policy affecting Korean Americans; and deeper dives into the sources of Korean American under-mobilization and under-participation in politics. As CKA navigates the unprecedented uncertainties confronting Korean Americans beyond 2020, evidence-based facts and findings will be more critical than ever to realizing the mission of advancing the voice and influence of the Korean American community.

The Council of Korean Americans (CKA) is a national nonprofit leadership organization for Korean Americans. Our mission is to advance the national voice and influence of the Korean American community through collaboration and leadership development. At CKA, we envision a community that invests in each other and future leaders. We aspire to a world in which Korean American leaders serve at the highest levels in society.

To learn more about CKA, please visit www.councilka.org or email info@councilka.org.

Taeku Lee is a George Johnson Professor of Law and Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His interests are in racial and ethnic politics; public opinion and survey research; identity and inequality; and deliberative and participatory democracy. He is the author of *Mobilizing Public Opinion* (2002); T*ransforming Politics, Transforming America* (2006), *Why Americans Don't Join the Party* (2011), *Accountability through Public Opinion* (2011), *Asian American Political Participation* (2011), and the *Oxford Handbook of Racial and Ethnic Politics in the United States* (2015).

Lee is co-Principal Investigator of the National Asian American Survey, co-Principal Investigator of the Bay Area Poverty Tracker, and Managing Director of Asian American Decisions. He serves on the National Advisory Committee for the U.S. Census Bureau, and has previously served in numerous leadership positions, including as member of the Board of Overseers of the American National Election Studies, member of the Board of Overseers of the General Social Survey, Treasurer and Executive Council member for the American Political Science Association, Department Chair at Berkeley, and Associate Director of the Haas Institute at Berkeley. His previous positions include Assistant Professor at Harvard, Robert Wood Johnson Scholar at Yale, Fernand Braudel Senior Fellow at the European University Institute, and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Lee is also Associate Dean of Law, directing its Jurisprudence and Social Policy Program.

Lee was born in South Korea, grew up in rural Malaysia, Manhattan, and suburban Michigan, and is a proud graduate of K-12 public schools, the University of Michigan (A.B.), Harvard University (M.P.P.), and the University of Chicago (Ph.D.).

We extend our deepest gratitude to our visionary and generous sponsors of this important research on the Korean American community. Special Thanks to:

- Peter and Jihee Huh
- Eugene and Carol Choi
- Overseas Koreans Foundation

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Card, David and Ethan Lewis. 2007. "The Diffusion of Mexican Immigrants During the 1990s: Explanations and Impacts." In *NBER Chapters,* National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chang, Edward and Carol Park. 2019. *Korean Americans: A Concise History.* Young Oak Kim Center, UC-Riverside.

Cho, Wendy K. Tam, Cain, Bruce E. 2001. Asian Americans as the Median Voters. In *Asian Americans and Politics,* ed. Gordon Chang. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Choi, Yoosun, et al. 2020. "Asian American Mental Health: Longitudinal Trend and Explanatory Factors among Young Filipino- and Korean Americans." *SSM – Population Health* 10.

Clemans-Cope Lisa, Matthew Buettgens, and Hannah Recht. 2014. "Racial/Ethnic Differences in Underinsurance Rates under the ACA." Urban Institute.

Dawson, Michael. 1994. *Behind the Mule.* Princeton University Press.

Devos, Thierry and Mahzarin Banaji. 2005. "American = White?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88(3): 447-66.

Gee, Buck and Denise Peck. 2017. "The Illusion of Asian Success." Report to the Ascend Foundation. Available here.

Hong, Jane. 2018. "The Origins and Construction of Korean America: Immigration Before 1965." In Rachael Miyung Joo and Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, eds. *A Companion to Korean American Studies.* Brill.

Kim, Claire. 1999. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics and Society* 27(1): 105-138.

Lee, Stacey J. 1996. *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth.* Teachers College Press.

Lien, Pei-te and Rhoanne Esteban. 2018. "Korean Americans and Electoral Politics." In Rachael Miyung Joo and Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, eds. *A Companion to Korean American Studies.* Brill.

Lien, Pei-te, M. Margaret Conway, and Janelle Wong. 2004. *The Politics of Asian Americans. Routledge.*

Massey, Douglas S., ed. 2008. *New Faces in New Places.* Russell Sage Foundation Press.

Min, Pyong-Gap. 1996. *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles.* University of California Press.

Min, Pyong Gap. 2008. *Ethnic Solidarity for Economic Survival: Korean Greengrocers in New York City.* Wiley.

Min, Pyong Gap, ed. 2012. *Koreans in North America: Their Twenty-First Century Experiences.* Lexington Books.

Na, Peter, et al. 2017. "Predictors of Suicidal Ideation in Korean American Older Adults." *Int. J. Geriatric Psychiatry* 32(12): 1272-1279.

Nakanishi, Don. 1991. "The Next Swing Vote?" *In Racial and Ethnic Politics in California, Volume Two,* ed. Bryan O. Jackson and Michael B. Preston. IGS Press.

New American Leaders Project. 2016. *States of Inclusion: New American Journeys to Elected Office.* New American Leaders report available here.

Tuan, Mia. 1998. *Forever Foreigner or Honorary Whites?* Rutgers University Press.

Woo, Deborah. 2000. *Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans.* Alta Mira.

Copyright © 2020 Council of Korean Americans

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

For permission requests, please contact the Council of Korean Americans at info@councilka.org

Printed in the USA

First Printing, 2020

Council of Korean Americans
1875 K Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006
info@councilka.org

Visit www.councilka.org for more information.

COUNCILKA.ORG

1875 K STREET NW, SUITE 400
WASHINGTON, DC 20006

COUNCIL OF
KOREAN
AMERICANS