



COUNCIL OF  
KOREAN  
AMERICANS

2023 Edition

# The Multiple Faces of the National Korean American Community: **PROGRESS AND PARADOXES**

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Harvard University

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Taeku Lee, Harvard University

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## FOREWORD

As we celebrate the 120th anniversary of Korean immigration in the United States, it is amazing to look back and see how the Korean diaspora has grown and evolved since the first sugar cane workers arrived in Honolulu in 1903. Today, many Korean Americans are on the forefront of business, culture, research, capital markets, the arts, media, and education. The community is dynamic, culturally rich, and actively making an impact across the country.

However, that description does not reflect the complete experience of the Korean American community. There are numerous seen and unseen challenges. Many of these problems only become apparent when we compile and analyze data on community experiences and their economic, social, and political context.

As in the 2020 edition of his analysis, Dr. Taeku Lee assembles information from existing surveys and recently released data reports on the Korean American community to prepare an informative and comprehensive meta-analysis. By presenting this information side-by-side with longitudinal comparisons, Dr. Lee highlights progress, persistent challenges, and areas where we need deeper research on the Korean American community.

This second edition updates our first report with more recent data points, especially with the newly available 2020 US Census data and surveys reflecting the impact of COVID-19 and the resurgence of anti-Asian American violence. This analysis demonstrates important progress made in many areas. Most significantly, income gaps between Korean American and White professionals have narrowed over the past decade.

However, this research also highlights the uncertainties and trends that may impact the future shape and influence of the Korean American community. One critical subject with wide potential ramifications is the slowing population growth of the Korean American community, which is in part influenced by the precipitous decline in immigration levels from Korea. This is an example of where the trends within the Korean American community deviate from trends in the broader AAPI community. It's also a reflection of the meteoric economic rise of South Korea and the resulting economic opportunity across the peninsula. Dr. Lee's research shows that the number of Asian Americans will grow rapidly (mostly driven by Indian American and Chinese American population growth) and become the largest minority population in the United States by mid-century, while in contrast, the Korean American population may shrink over time.

This slowing immigration rate has implications that goes beyond just population growth, but also may impact the characteristics and culture of the Korean American community moving forward. Today, as Dr. Lee points out, more than 50 percent of the Korean American population are foreign born and more than 50 percent of households still speak Korean at home. As these numbers decrease, with more Korean Americans born in the United States and speaking English fluently, organizations that focus on particular pain points in immigrant Korean American communities may need to refocus their mission and service priorities in the long-term as the needs of their beneficiaries change.

Finally, this research allows us to consider the community through an intersectional lens, highlighting the need for more incisive multivariable research. For example, the report reaffirms earlier research demonstrating the bimodal nature of socioeconomic achievement in the community. On the one hand, we present a cutting-edge, highly successful image of Korean Americans. On the other, the reality for many Korean Americans is life close to the poverty line. Diving into the data, we see the potential influence of other factors, such as age, immigration history, and language fluency. This example reminds us that we cannot paint the community with one broad brush. We need to develop targeted and tailored solutions to address disparities across the Korean American community.

In short, the power of this second report and Dr. Taeku Lee's analysis is not just in how it deepens our understanding of the Korean American community and its growth and evolution, but in the important questions it elicits, such as "How?" and "Why?"

These questions reflect the purpose of this research: to provide a deeper, data driven understanding of the Korean American community, so local and national organizations, like the Council of Korean Americans, can achieve a better understanding of the need and set priorities to serve our communities more effectively. Through this research, we can attract greater government and philanthropic investment in our community. Finally, it prompts us to engage in more nuanced analysis and explore new aspects of our past, present, and future.

I hope you find this new report and its insightful results enlightening. We hope it sparks more questions and conversations and leads you to an enriching understanding of this dynamic community.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Abraham Kim', written in a cursive style.

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

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**THIS REPORT UPDATES AND EXPANDS** on the 2020 commissioned report of the Council of Korean Americans, *The National Korean American Community: Promises, Perils, and Paradoxes*. This first report was a foundational analysis drawing together a wide variety of available data on the status of the national Korean American community from various publicly available sources covering numerous topics ranging from demographics, socioeconomics, and health status to identity issues, mental health, and political engagement.<sup>1</sup> Although it did not present new datasets on Korean Americans, the 2020 report analyzed federal datasets and drew from respected public surveys about Asian American Pacific Islander communities in one report that highlighted critical trends on how the Korean American community as a whole has evolved over the past decades.

This 2023 report builds upon the groundbreaking work of the 2020 research effort with newly available data. It provides greater insights on the changes occurring in the Korean American community, especially as certain societal issues have become more prominent in the national psyche over the last few years (e.g., hardships of COVID-19, mental health, anti-Asian American violence). This updated analysis examines these issues, with the key findings including the following:

- Demographically, the Korean American population has grown considerably since the 1960s and is 2 million strong today. Yet, in recent decades, that growth has rapidly slowed, and the population has become more geographically dispersed.
- Socioeconomically, Korean Americans are highly educated and earn household incomes higher than the median. At nearly every educational level, however, income earnings are below national averages, although the gaps have closed noticeably since 2020.
- Income inequality within the Korean American community is higher than the US national average. Older Korean Americans are overrepresented among the poor.
- About two in three Korean Americans face daily challenges related to their mental health, financial hardships, and COVID-19.
- About one in two Korean Americans report some experience as a victim of discrimination. Nearly nine in 10 face microaggressions as well as economic and other everyday challenges.
- Nearly 60% of Korean American women report experiencing sexual harassment. Korean women were less likely than others to be believed when they reported these experiences.

- Compared to other AAPI groups, Korean Americans are especially likely to identify with their ethnic-specific label (e.g., “Korean American” or “Korean”) rather than broad inclusive labels (e.g., “Asian American” or “Asian”). Nevertheless, Korean Americans identify their political interests, culture, and fate as being linked to those of the broader Asian American community.
- Korean Americans are especially far apart from Blacks: daily social contacts are rare, Korean Americans believe that Korean Americans and Blacks do not get along, and Korean Americans see themselves as least likely to have political causes in common with Blacks.<sup>2</sup> That being said, these patterns vary by age: younger Korean Americans are less distant from African Americans on these measures than their older counterparts.
- Politically, Korean American voters have been rising in number in recent elections. They are emerging as a solidly liberal and Democratic electorate. Yet, Korean Americans remain underrepresented in elected offices and under-mobilized in election campaigns. These patterns are especially pronounced for younger Korean Americans.

In sum, the findings in this report present a cautionary tale. The Korean American experience today shows a promising future and new opportunities on the one hand and patterns of paradox, uncertainty, and precarity on the other. While the population grows, and many are thriving, the Korean American 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 a shared fate with other Asian American groups, they also remain politically and racially isolated and under-mobilized compared to other Asian American groups.

Finally, while this report reveals essential insights into the national Korean American community, its findings only go as far as the available data. In addition to promoting greater awareness about Korean Americans, this report also aims to spotlight important areas where data gaps exist and where additional research is required for a clearer picture of the unmet needs and unvoiced interests of Korean Americans. The 2023 report thus concludes, in a more speculative register, with thoughts on the challenges and opportunities facing the Korean American community in this current moment.

# INTRODUCTION

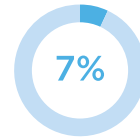
## A Rising Tide in Historical Context



Koreans have been present in the United States for **over 120 years.**



Immigration from Asia to the U.S. has increased dramatically **since the 1960s.**



Asian Americans represent **7%** of the US population and will continue to increase in number.

**AMERICANS OF KOREAN DESCENT HAVE BEEN** on US soil since the first overseas diplomats arrived in San Francisco in 1883 and the first immigrants from Korea arrived from Hawaiian shores in 1903. Korean immigration initially consisted of mostly farm laborers from around Incheon to fill an agricultural labor gap resulting from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. On the heels of this influx of laborers came “picture brides” and then, after the Korean Independence Movement of 1919, political and intellectual refugees.<sup>3</sup>

### Historical Waves of Immigration to the United States

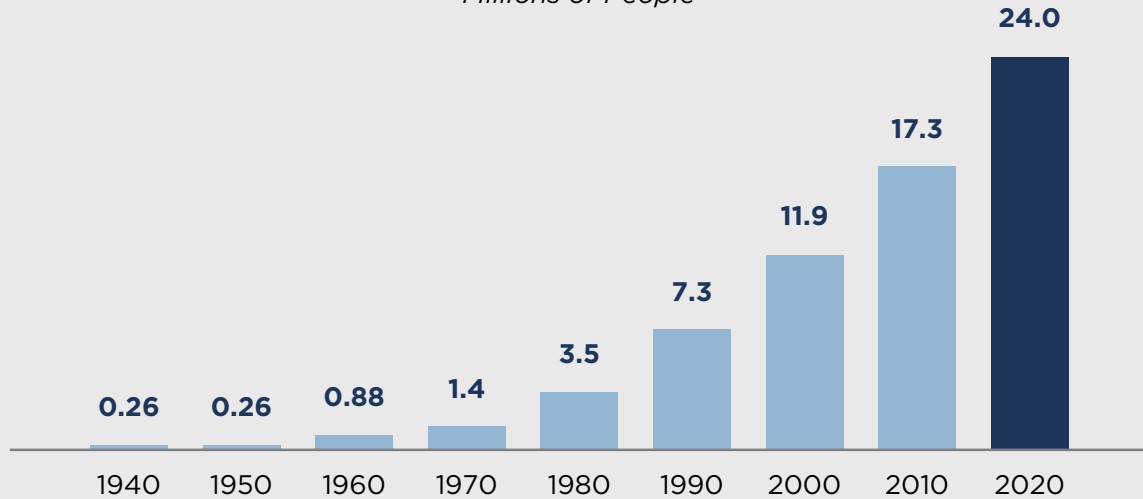
This first wave of migration from Korea coincided with a rising tide of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment in America. Most notably, this early period was bookended by anti-Chinese laws and exclusionary court rulings in the late 19th century and the demarcation of an “Asiatic Barred Zone” in 1917 and 1924 that effectively curbed all migration from across the Pacific to the US. The next significant wave of migration came with America’s engagement in the Cold War, during and after the Korean War, with the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. This legislation effectively eliminated race as a precluding factor in barring immigration from Asia and opened another wave of Korean immigration. These immigrants consisted mostly of the Korean wives of US GIs, war orphans adopted by American families, and a patchwork of students, businessmen, and intellectuals.

While this wave of immigration is historically important, it was merely a trickle compared to the huge flow of immigrants from Korea after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965. This landmark law formally abolished the “national origins” quota system that had limited immigration into the US, and it permitted immigration based on family reunification. Hart-Cellar ushered in a new era of immigrants from throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including South Korea, who faced economic insecurity and political unrest and were attracted by an America vaunted for its opportunity, prosperity, and freedoms.



**Figure 1. History of Asian American Immigration: 24 Million and Rising**

*Millions of People*



Source: US Census Bureau

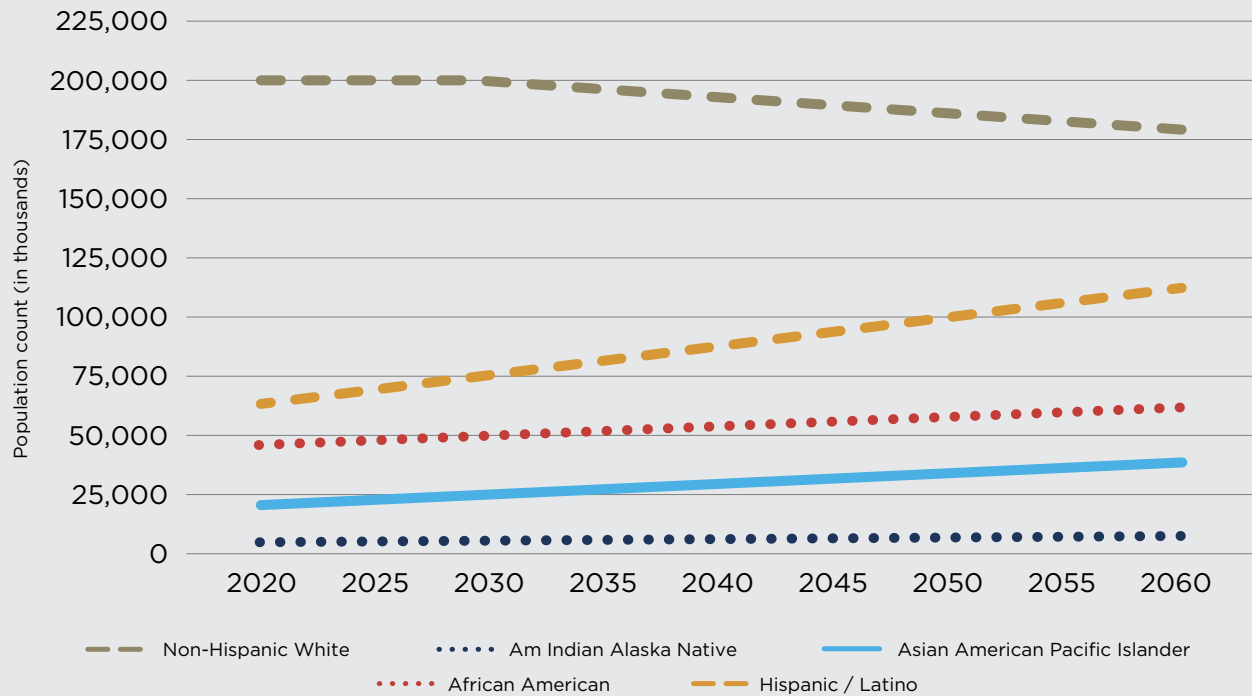
In numbers, this third wave of migration spurred a truly stunning growth of Koreans and other Asians in the United States. As Figure 1 shows, in the 1940s and 1950s, there were slightly more than a quarter million Asian Americans counted in the decennial census. By 1970, those numbers had grown more than five-fold to 1.4 million; in

the most recent 2020 decennial census, the Asian American population counted 24 million, a nearly 100-fold increase from 1950.<sup>4</sup> Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing racial group in the United States in the past two censuses and constitute roughly 6% of the US population today.

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*Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing racial group in the United States.*

**Figure 2. Continued Growth Expected of American Ethno-Racial Groups**



Source: US Census Bureau

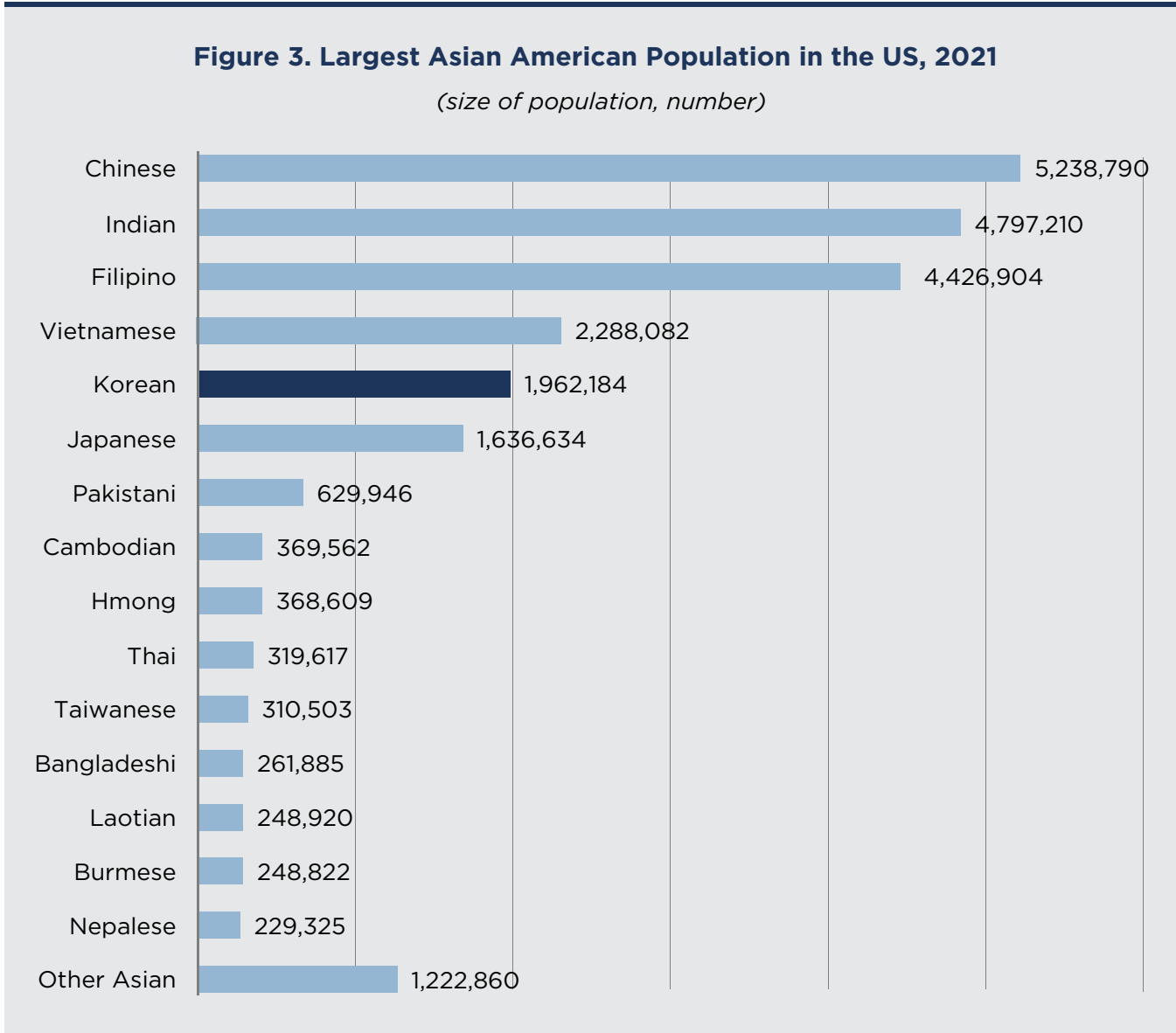
Figure 2 shows recent population projections going forward to 2060.<sup>5</sup> While demographers do not project that the Asian American population will grow as exponentially in the coming decades as it has since 1950, the population counts are nevertheless expected to grow substantially in the foreseeable future. By the mid-21st century, the United States is expected to become a “majority-minority” nation, where White Americans will no longer be a numeric majority. When that happens,

Asian Americans counted in the “Asian alone” category will approximate one in every 10 Americans; those counted in the “Asian alone or in combination” category will approximate one in every eight Americans.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-21st century, Asian Americans are also 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 in numbers to new migration to the United States is not Mexico and Latin America but Asia, with China and India leading the numbers of newcomers from Asia. These are, of course, only projections. Domestic or global changes, such as changes in immigration policies or geopolitical tensions, may affect the forecasts of these demographic trends.

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*By the mid-21st century, the United States is expected to become a “majority-minority” nation, where White Americans will no longer be a numeric majority.*

Importantly, the “Asian American”—or “Asian American Pacific Islander” (AAPI) or “Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander” (AANHPI)—category is a catch-all reference capturing a remarkable diversity of more than 50 subgroups speaking over 100 languages. The origins of the term “Asian American” itself is generally dated to the social movements of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s and attributed to Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, student activists at UC Berkeley who sought an umbrella term that could organize diverse groups together under a “pan-ethnic” banner.<sup>7</sup> Today, “Asian American” is both a formally and informally familiar category of identity, with Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos making up 60% of the population and substantial numbers of Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, Pakistanis, Cambodians, Hmong, Thai, Taiwanese, Bangladeshis, Laotians, and Nepalese, among others.<sup>8</sup> Figure 3 captures this broad diversity in population counts, based on the 2021 American Community Survey.



Source: US Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey estimates

## The Importance of Disaggregating Data on the AANHPI Community

With these variations in size and group cultures, the downside of combining all these subgroups under one category may be clear. Some of the problems include the dilution of critical statistical variations between communities, the loss of historical nuances of individual subgroups (e.g., Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to the US in the 1970s), and the assumption that all Asian American experiences are the same in the United States regardless of their history and culture. The reality is that each subgroup has their own migration history, population trends, and distinct cultural characteristics.

Consequently, it is important to disaggregate the Asian American community into individual subgroups to understand their unique culture, immigration history, and various characteristics to fully understand the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for each of these ethnic groups. Thus, this analysis focuses on what makes the Korean American experience and its community distinct, extraordinary, and challenged. In the coming chapters, we draw from and present notable data from reputable sources to showcase these nuances about the national Korean American community. Through this process, our aim is to address the following questions: How does this dynamic and evolving community relate to and diverge from the developments and trends in demographics, economics, politics, and society in the broader AANHPI community? Where do future leaders and analysts need to focus their attention to support Korean Americans and celebrate their progress?

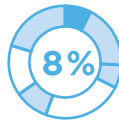
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*It is important to disaggregate the Asian American community into individual subgroups... to fully understand the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for each of these ethnic groups.*

# Demographic Trends: Patterns of Korean American Population Change



Korean Americans have grown nearly **80 times** in number since 1960.



Korean Americans today constitute **8% of all Asian Americans**, but population growth for Korean Americans has dramatically slowed in recent decades.



Korean Americans in the future will be experiencing **increasingly modest population growth**; they will be increasingly US-born, English-speaking, geographically dispersed, multi-racial, and American citizens.

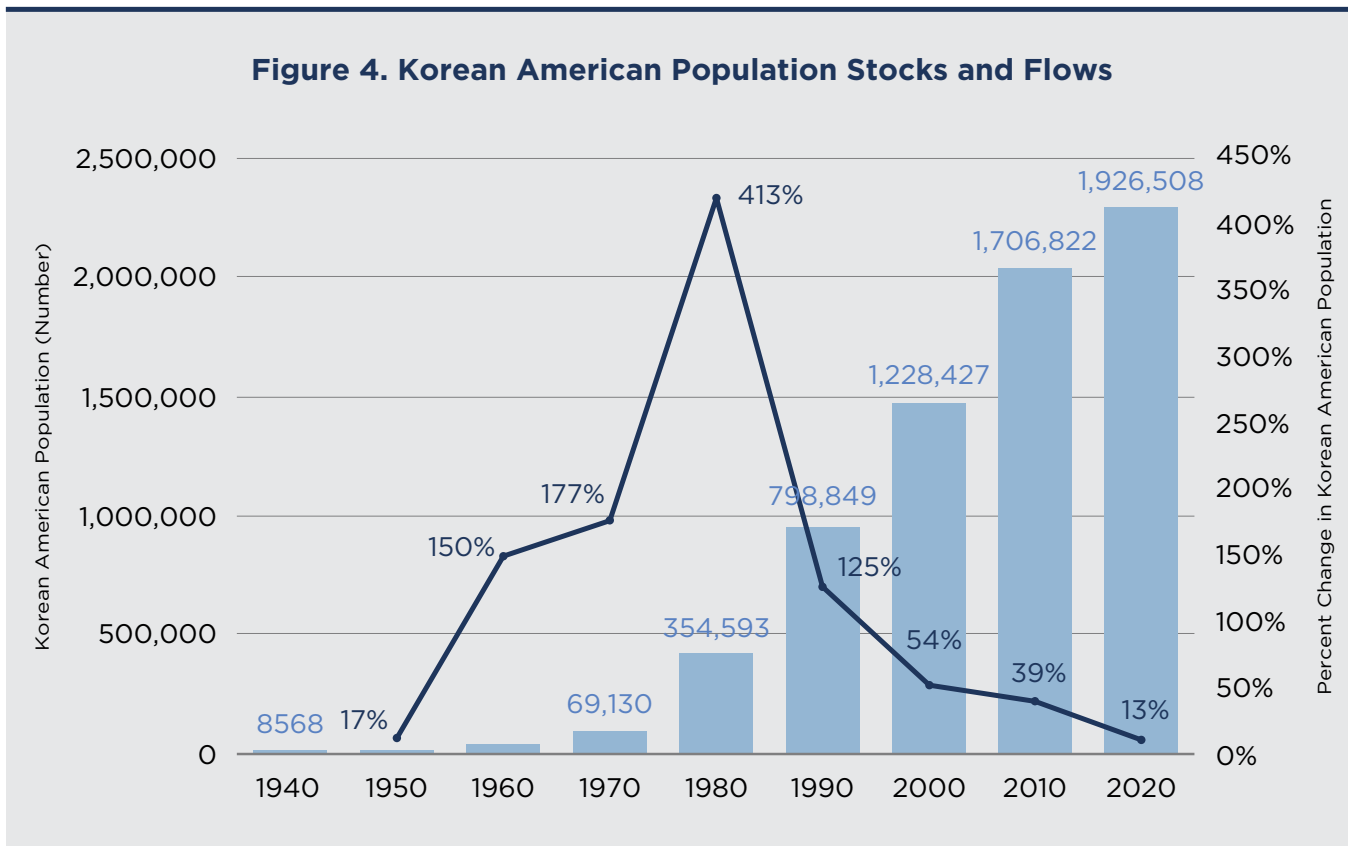
**HOW DO THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS** of Korean Americans compare to those of Asian Americans as a whole? Figure 4 shows the “stocks” (how many individuals are counted in any given time period) and “flows” (the percentage of change between time periods) of the Korean American community, based on decennial census data from 1940 to 2020. These trends have two defining features. First, the growth of the Korean American population over the last six decades is impressive: there has been a nearly 80-fold increase in population size since 1960, when Korean Americans were estimated to be 25,000 in number. These numbers, furthermore, do not include the undocumented Korean American population. While this population is notably difficult to count with precision, the Pew Research Center estimated about 150,000 undocumented Korean Americans in 2017; more recently, in 2019, the Center for Migration Studies estimated about 138,000.<sup>9</sup>

### The Declining Growth of the Korean American Population

Second, Korean American population growth has slowed dramatically in recent decades. As Figure 4 shows, Korean Americans today are roughly 2 million in number or about 8% of all Asian Americans, under the more inclusive “alone or in combination” category. There were fewer than 1.5 million in the narrower “Korean alone” category, or about 6% of all Asian

*The Korean American community will continue to see modest growth and comprise a smaller proportion of the total Asian American community.*

Americans. As recently as 2000, however, Korean Americans comprised 10.3% of all Asian Americans (both in the “alone” or “in combination” categories).<sup>10</sup> Figure 4 shows that the peak positive “flow” of population change occurred between 1970 and 1980, when the number of Koreans in the US increased by 413%. That growth rate slowed to 39% between 2000 and 2010; it slowed even further between 2010 to 2020, to 13%. Assuming that the factors that determine migration from Korea to the United States do not change appreciably in future decades, the Korean American community will continue to see modest growth and comprise a smaller proportion of the total Asian American community.

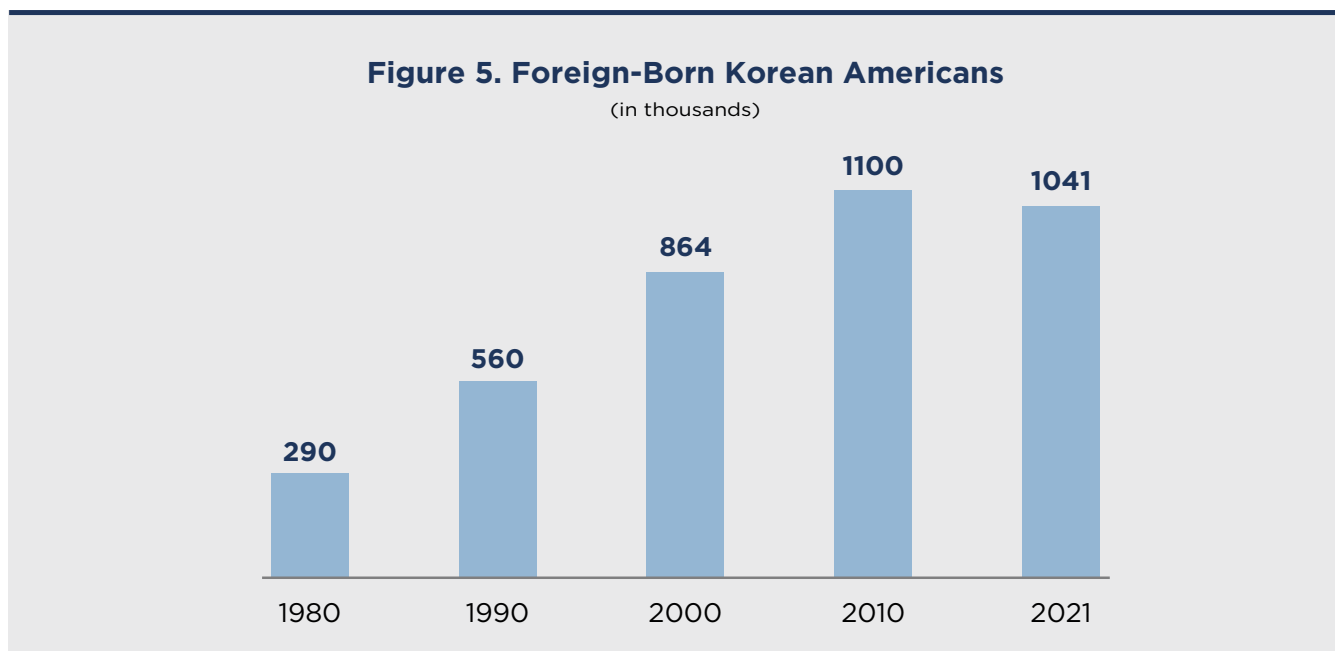


Source: US Census Bureau

This declining growth in the Korean American population is also seen in the number of Korean Americans who are foreign born (i.e., born in South Korea). Figure 5 shows the number of foreign-born Korean Americans since 1980. While the number of first-generation Korean Americans increased steadily between 1980 and 2010, the rates of growth decreased each decade—from 93% between 1980 and 1990 to 54% between 1990 and 2000, and only 27% between 2000 and 2010. Most strikingly, the number of first-generation Korean Americans has actually decreased since 2010 by about 5%.

The slowed growth for Korean Americans, as with migration and population dynamics in general, likely stems from multiple factors. Immigration has long been understood as stemming from a merger of “push” factors—aspects of life in one’s home country that compel displacement, like poverty, famine, war, intolerance, persecution, and other hardships—and “pull” factors—the promises of life in a host society that motivate settlement, like better economic opportunities, personal and political freedoms,

and life prospects more generally.<sup>11</sup> In terms of push factors, South Korea prior to the late 1980s transformation towards democratization and economic modernization was a different society than South Korea today is marked not only by greater economic prosperity but also negative population growth. In terms of pull factors, Koreans may no longer see the United States as a land of unparalleled opportunities and freedoms. In fact, many Korean Americans facing economic hardship, social marginality, and racism increasingly long for a return to Korea, and Korean Immigration Service data show a doubling in the number of return migrations (from the United States back to Korea) between 2005 and 2010, with roughly 40,000 to 45,000 return migrants each year since 2011.<sup>12</sup> Among the implications of these population trends is that much of any future growth in the Korean American population will depend on the organic increase in numbers of US-born Korean Americans.

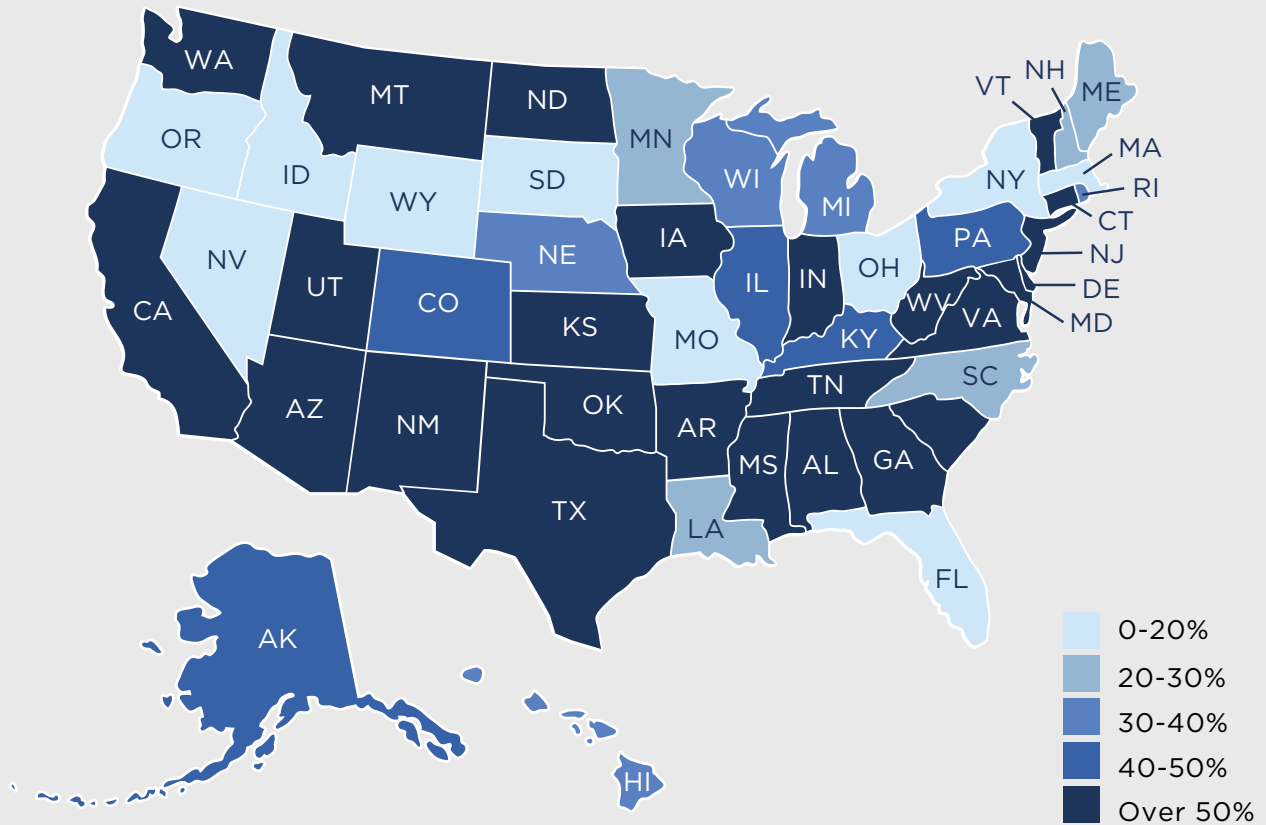


Source: US Census Bureau

## Spreading Out to New Locations

Another notable demographic trend for Korean Americans is the greater geographic dispersal of the community beyond traditional population centers where Asian Americans have historically lived. Korean Americans are increasingly moving to and residing in a greater variety of metropolitans and suburbs across the country other than Los Angeles and New York City. Korean Americans, like many other immigrants, were drawn toward coastal “gateways” like the states of New York and California. As of 2021, the Korean American population still remained heavily concentrated at coastal destinations, with more than half a million in California and a quarter million in New York and New Jersey combined. California and the New York/New Jersey area together account for 42% of the people who identified themselves as the Korean “alone or in combination” population and 47% of the Korean “alone” population.

**Figure 6. Korean American Population Growth in Select States, 2000 to 2020**



\*Produced with the expert research assistance of Grace Kim  
Source: US Census Bureau

Yet the Korean American population today is far more geographically diverse than it has been in past decades. Figure 6 shows how and where the Korean American population has grown between 2000 and 2020, based on Census Bureau data. While Korean American communities continue to grow in gateway states like California, New York, and New Jersey, states that are not associated with Korean Americans—from large states like Arizona, Georgia, and Texas to less populous states like Alabama, Montana, Utah, and Vermont—have also seen their Korean American populations grow by more than 50% since 2000.



## Evolving Self-Identity

Finally, Korean Americans as a population conform less to the popular stereotype of a non-citizen immigrant from Korea, speaking limited, if any, English. According to the most recent 2021 American Community Survey, only the “Korean alone” population remains largely foreign-born: about 31% were born in the US or born abroad to US citizens, about 45% were naturalized as citizens, and another 24% were non-citizens living in the United States. However, one in four Korean Americans today identify as mixed-race—Korean and another race. Thus, of the 1.96 million Korean Americans “alone or in combination,” nearly 47% are US-born. In terms of language, nearly half of all Korean Americans reported speaking English at home, while only 28% reported speaking English less than “very well.”

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*One in four Korean Americans today identify as mixed-race Korean and another race.*

## What Does This All Mean? More Questions

These demographic patterns mean that change is likely to continue in significant ways in the coming decades. The Korean American community of tomorrow will almost certainly look different from the Korean American community of today.

First, the community’s growth will slow with the decrease in immigration from Korea, which has been the main driver of the rapid growth of Korean American communities. As other Asian American groups like Chinese Americans and Indian Americans grow at rates that far outpace Korean Americans, what will this mean for their relative societal influence and political importance in the future?

Second, if immigration and the proportion of foreign-born Korean Americans continue to decrease, the population will be increasingly US-born, English-speaking, and acculturated. Will this diminish ties to Korean culture, values, and the idea of Korea as a “homeland”? As language barriers and cultural gaps recede as challenges, how will the overall needs of the community change?

Finally, as Korean Americans increasingly become multi-racial and more geographically dispersed, will the bonds of common racial and ethnic identity also be weakened in the future? How will Korean Americans, in a United States that continues to be polarized along racial lines, identify? Which groups will they find solidarity with?

# Socioeconomic Status: A Tale of Two Communities



A large majority of adult Korean Americans are **college-educated** and earn a higher median household income than the national median.



At the same time, many are vulnerable—especially **older Korean Americans**.



In addition, income earnings do not match educational achievements for most Korean Americans, and **income inequality** within the community is very high.

**THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS DISCUSSED** in the previous chapter set an important backdrop for understanding the socioeconomic, public health, and political trends occurring in the Korean American community. In this next section, we present data on how Koreans in the United States are faring economically. Popular accounts often portray Korean Americans as a “model minority.” That is, Korean Americans are cast into the trope of an immigrant-based group that enjoys outsized achievements, won by dint of cultural and familial values that emphasize educational achievements and a nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic. This portrayal is easily and often reinforced by conjuring the names of the many Korean Americans who have soared to the highest ranks of their professions, from Jim Yong Kim, Harold Koh, and Lucy Koh in fields like medicine and law to David Chang, Margaret Cho, Chloe Kim, Min Jin Lee, Randall Park, Kim Pegula, and countless others in fields where few expected Korean Americans to succeed.

But does the model immigrant minority trope fit the lives and experiences of most Korean Americans? Behind the popular representations is a cautionary tale of hidden ceilings and daily toils and troubles. This section analyzes available Census Bureau and survey data on the socioeconomic and health status of Korean Americans. Table 1 shows how Korean Americans have fared across a range of profile markers available in the yearly American Community Survey (hereafter, ACS) data from the Census Bureau, comparing Korean Americans, Asian Americans, and the general US population in 2010 and 2021.

### The Checkered Economic State of the Community

The typical account of Korean Americans as a hugely successful immigrant minority often starts with their remarkable educational attainment. In the 2021 ACS, roughly one in three (35%) Americans reported having achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher. For Korean Americans, that figure is 61%, even higher

than the 56% average for Asian Americans as a whole. Moreover, in 2021, 14% of all Americans aged 25 or older reported holding a post-baccalaureate degree. In comparison, 24% of Korean Americans have some kind of graduate degree.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1. Comparative Educational Achievements and Socioeconomic Status of Korean Americans and Asian Americans, 2010 & 2021**

	Korean Americans		Asian Americans		ALL Americans	
	(2021)	(2010)	(2021)	(2010)	(2021)	(2010)
BA degree or higher	60.7%	52.9%	56.4%	49.9%	35.0%	28.2%
Median household income	\$82,946	\$50,316	\$100,572	\$67,022	\$69,717	\$50,046
Highest occupational class*	60.5%	46.8%	57.5%	48.1%	42.2%	35.9%
Unemployment	6.5%	8.0%	5.8%	8.5%	6.3%	10.8%
Self-employed*	7.4%	11.1%	5.2%	5.6%	6.1%	6.3%
Poverty rate	7.9%	11.8%	7.5%	9.1%	9.1%	11.3%
Poverty (65 and older)	17.5%	20.9%	12.9%	13.4%	10.3%	9.0%
No health insurance	7.8%	26.8%	5.9%	15.7%	8.6%	15.5%
Disability	7.5%	5.2%	7.8%	6.2%	13.0%	11.9%
Disability (65 and older)	24.7%	23.6%	28.9%	31.6%	32.6%	36.7%

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Surveys

Table 1 also shows other indications of Korean Americans successes:

- Korean American median income is higher than national average:** The median household income for Korean Americans is higher than the national average (\$82,946 vs. \$69,717), a noticeable improvement from 2010, when the median household income for Korean Americans nearly matched that of all American households.
- Korean Americans tend to work in high-status occupations:** For 2021, 60.5% of Korean Americans worked in management, business, science, or arts professions, a rate that is much higher than the national average (42.2%) and much higher than the rate for Korean Americans in 2010 (46.8%).
- The popular account of Korean Americans as mom-and-pop small business owners appears to be waning:** In 2010, 11% Korean Americans were self-employed in “owned, not incorporated” businesses (compared to a national rate of 6%); for 2021, that figure for Korean Americans declined to 7.4%.
- Poverty rates among Korean Americans are dropping compared to the national average:** The poverty rate for Korean Americans in 2021 was below the national average (7.9% vs. 9.1%). In contrast, the poverty rate in 2010 was slightly higher for Korean Americans (11.8% vs. 11.3%).

At the same time, just beneath the surface of this positive profile are many signs of conditional successes and symptoms of hardship and precarity.

- **Relative gains in poverty rates are not matched by relative gains in unemployment rates:** In 2010, the unemployment rate for Korean Americans was much lower than for all Americans in the work force (8.0% vs. 10.8%). While the unemployment rate for Koreans fell by 2021, it was slightly higher than the national rate (6.5% vs. 6.3%).
- **Older Korean Americans are especially economically vulnerable:** Among those 65 and older, the poverty rate for Korean Americans in 2021 was 17.5%, compared to a national rate of 10.3%. The 2021 data show an improvement from 2010, when the poverty rate among those 65 and older was 20.9% for Koreans and 9.0% for all Americans.
- **Health insurance coverage among Korean Americans has improved in recent years, but it began from a very low level:** The rate of Korean Americans without any health insurance (7.8%) was close to the national average of 8.6% in 2021, but this is largely a result of the successful implementation of the Affordable Care Act. In 2010, when the ACA was first implemented, 26.8% of Korean Americans were uninsured, a rate that was much higher than the national average at the time.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Urban Institute’s analysis of 2014 federal data predicted that 29.9% of Korean Americans would have been without health insurance in 2014 without the ACA, a higher rate than for any other Asian sub-group.<sup>15</sup>
- **While educational attainment is high, there is a conspicuous mismatch between education and income:** In 2010, Korean Americans’ rate of attaining a college degree or higher was 87% higher than the national rate, but there was essentially no difference in the median household income of Koreans compared to the national median. The 2021 ACS data show only a modest improvement: Korean Americans’ rate of attaining a college degree or higher is 73% higher than the national rate, yet their median household income is only 19% higher.

## The Mismatch between Educational Attainment and Income Earnings

The last discussion point highlighted above poses an interesting question regarding the factors that contribute to muted income outcomes among Korean Americans despite their high rate of educational achievements. Table 2 highlights this difference more directly by comparing personal income at each educational level for Korean Americans and Whites, from high school graduates to graduates with a doctoral degree, for 2010 and 2021. At just about every level of educational attainment, the mean personal income for Korean Americans is a fraction of the mean income for that same educational level in the US population. For example, in 2010, the mean annual personal income for a Korean American with a high school degree was under \$18,322, or 73% of the \$25,151 that a White American with a high school degree earned. This income difference at the lower rung of educational attainment worsened slightly in 2021, with Korean Americans with a high school degree making \$23,231, while Whites with a high school degree earned \$32,496.

## Making Some Progress and Closing the Gap

It is worth noting, however, that the income gap between Korean Americans and Whites by educational degree has closed substantially between 2010 and 2021 for those with a college degree or higher.<sup>16</sup> In 2010, Korean Americans with a college degree earned \$37,999 on average, compared to \$54,757 for Whites, or 69 cents on the dollar. In 2021, Korean Americans with a college degree earned \$61,013 on average and Whites earned \$72,382, or 84 cents on the dollar. In fact, Korean Americans with a professional degree (doctors, lawyers, dentists, veterinarians, and so on) fare best, earning 96 cents on the dollar for Whites in 2010 and out-earning Whites in 2021, \$1.11 to the dollar for Whites. Overall, these findings remind us that the economic fortunes of Korean Americans are more than an issue of “glass ceilings” that limit the upward mobility of Asian Americans striving for the executive echelons of their companies and professions. Rather, Korean Americans with low educational attainment are especially likely to be paid less than other Americans with a similar educational background.

*The income gap between Korean Americans and Whites by educational degree has closed substantially between 2010 and 2021 for those with a college degree or higher.*

**Table 2. Personal Income by Educational Degree**

<b>2010</b>	<b>Korean Americans</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Income ratio</b>
High school degree	\$18,322	\$25,151	72.8%
Associate degree	\$31,714	\$36,897	86.0%
Bachelor’s degree	\$37,999	\$54,757	69.4%
Master’s degree	\$46,991	\$70,287	66.9%
Professional degree	\$116,286	\$120,532	96.5%
Doctoral degree	\$79,211	\$96,310	82.2%
<b>2021</b>	<b>Korean Americans</b>	<b>Whites</b>	<b>Income ratio</b>
High school degree	\$23,231	\$32,496	71.5%
Associate degree	\$36,221	\$45,957	78.8%
Bachelor’s degree	\$61,013	\$72,382	84.3%
Master’s degree	\$83,864	\$88,956	94.3%
Professional degree	\$166,153	\$150,269	110.6%
Doctoral degree	\$113,966	\$119,074	95.7%

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Surveys

## Intra-Community Economic Disparities

Census data also show that income inequality is conspicuously high *within* the Korean American community. For instance, consider the 90-10 ratio: the ratio of the mean income of those in the 90th and 10th percentiles of income distribution.<sup>17</sup> Using 2017–2021 5-year ACS data for Korean Americans, that ratio is 22.6 to 1. That is, the mean personal income for Korean Americans in the 90th percentile (\$142,000) is 22.6 times higher than the mean personal income for Korean Americans in the 10th percentile (\$6,280). For non-Hispanic Whites, by contrast, the 90-10 income ratio is still high, but it is substantially smaller at 15.8 to 1.<sup>18</sup> In a country with the highest income inequality among all G7 nations and the fourth highest among the 38 OECD nations, inequality within the Korean American community is even higher.

## Conclusion: Important Highlights and Questions to Consider

Examining the socioeconomic characteristics of the Korean American community highlights some particularities that are both encouraging and disturbing. It also generates important questions to explore in future research regarding the cultural, structural, or societal forces that are driving these results. As a conclusion to this chapter, we highlight a few critical questions worth noting:

1. **Korean Americans are one of the most highly educated groups among AAPI communities and are occupying, in large percentages, top levels of professional careers; however, these accomplishments do not necessarily correspond with high levels of income when compared to other AAPI ethnic groups:** What factors are causing the underperformance of the Korean American community? Do educational accomplishments and business status not correspond to higher economic pay?
2. **Older Korean Americans are especially economically vulnerable:** This suggests that first generation immigrant Korean Americans are facing the toughest economic challenges. Are language, culture, and inexperience with American social support structures the cause of these disparities?
3. **Korean Americans are earning less at each educational level compared to their White counterparts, though the gap has closed at the upper educational levels:** This gap spotlights the factors within the Korean American community that are causing these differences. The trends of narrowing pay disparities between Korean Americans and Whites within the last 10 years also generate interest in the recent factors that have caused this improvement. Is it greater awareness of these disparities, or are greater numbers of people speaking up?
4. **The notably large economic disparity within the Korean American community gives pause to optimism that economic improvements are occurring:** The extremely high levels of economic disparity within the Korean American community seems to mirror what is going on in South Korea. This high disparity may suggest that although the Korean American community is showing signs of economic improvement, analysis is needed on whether this is actually occurring across all Korean American communities or if only the conditions of a few top groups are improving at a dramatic rate, which then skews the overall data results.

## CHAPTER 3

# Mental Health Challenges Facing Korean Americans



More than **two in three** Korean Americans reported experiencing a mental health issue.



Roughly **two in three** reported facing a daily challenge related to finances and other hardships.



Of Korean Americans, **59%** faced hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**THE SOCIOECONOMIC REALITIES FACING** Korean Americans are more complex and multifaceted than the story typically told in accounts of a “model minority.” The Census Bureau statistics present an account of high achievements for some and significant economic and social precarity for others. In this section, the report takes a deeper dive into some of the challenges confronting Korean Americans. As we saw in Chapter 2, the rate of Korean Americans without health insurance before the passage of the Affordable Care Act was very high, and Korean Americans are especially at risk of losing their coverage if the ACA is repealed or if key provisions are carved out. Moreover, as the 2020 CKA report found, Korean Americans also face many physical and mental health issues. The data here were limited and dated, consisting of two primary national surveys of health, the [National Health Interview Survey](#) (NHIS) and the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) (NSDUH); these generally do not disaggregate their public reports to the level of sub-groups like Korean Americans, limiting the availability of raw data for this kind of disaggregated analysis.

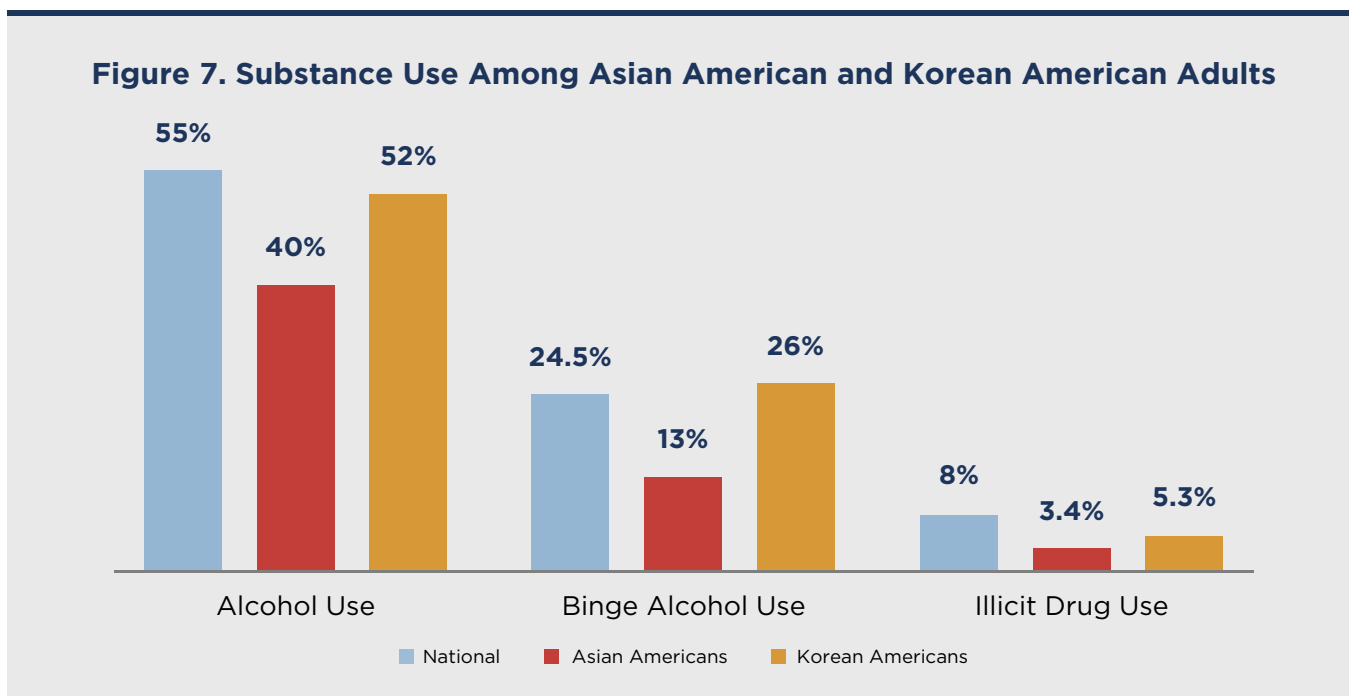
### Signs of Mental Health Challenges

The 2010–2014 NHIS included several health indicators, including a self-assessment of one’s overall health. Here, about one in eight (12%) of Korean Americans reported that their health “in general” is only “fair” or “poor.” This figure closely matches the US average but is worse than for other Asian Americans. The NHIS also included measures of serious psychological stress, diagnoses of multiple chronic health

*Korean Americans appear to face fewer mental health problems than the national population in general, but these numbers may reflect cultural biases in Korean Americans’ health care-seeking behavior.*

conditions, and a measure of disability status. By these measures, Korean Americans appear to face fewer mental health problems than the national population in general, but these numbers may reflect cultural biases in Korean Americans' health care-seeking behavior and taboos against self-reports on their mental health status.

On one specific measure of health status—substance use and abuse—the evidence from the 2010 NSDUH showed a more sobering picture. Figure 7 shows that a majority of Korean Americans reported some alcohol use in the past month, a usage rate close to the national average and significantly higher than that of other Asian Americans. The reported rate of binge alcohol drinking in the past month was higher for Korean Americans (25.9%) than for all adult Americans (24.5%) and twice that of other Asian Americans. Finally, 5% of Korean Americans reported using illicit drugs in the NSDUH; this compares to 8% of all adults in the survey and 3% of Asian Americans.<sup>19</sup>



Source: 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

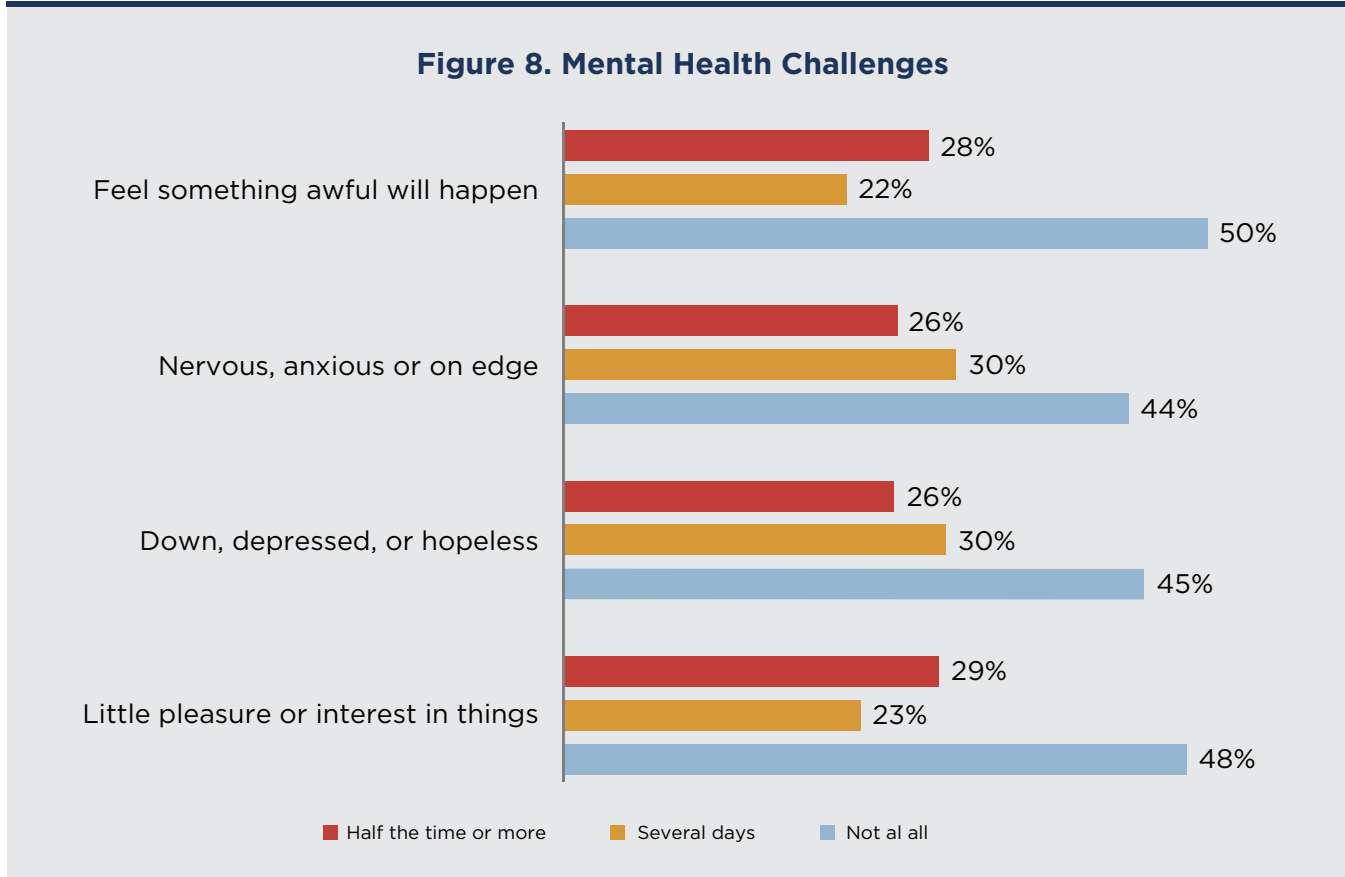
Our scope on health outcomes in the previous report was limited by the availability of data; we update our analysis with results from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which included a sample of 400 Korean Americans.<sup>20</sup> The CMPS includes many items that we use through this report. Here, we present its findings on the following areas: health status, including mental health and substance abuse; everyday hardships, pre-COVID; and hardships due to COVID-19.

Regarding mental health challenges, survey respondents were asked: “Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems? ... Little interest or pleasure in doing things ... Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless ... Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge ... Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen.” These four indicators are not diagnostic of major depressive disorder or major anxiety disorder, but they are among the symptoms commonly associated with anxiety and



depression. Figure 8 shows that more than two in three Korean Americans experienced at least one of these four mental health challenges at least several days in the two weeks before their interview. For any one of the four items, about half of the respondents experienced the challenge for at least several days, and more than one in four experienced it more than half the days in the previous two weeks.

These statistics point to some clear mental health issues in the Korean American community. These health challenges, coupled with the historic high rate of lacking health care coverage, help to explain why health care is consistently one of the top three “most important issues” mentioned by Korean Americans for the government to address. It is important to note that the statistics from the NHIS and NSDUH for Korean Americans reported above are now somewhat dated. More in-depth, granular studies of the health challenges facing Korean Americans suggest significant health stresses and risks. However, these studies largely focus on sub-groups such as Korean immigrants in select cities and particular age groups; thus, the full extent of these challenges on the nationwide Korean American community remains mostly unknown.<sup>21</sup> This is clearly an area warranting investment in better data and further research.



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

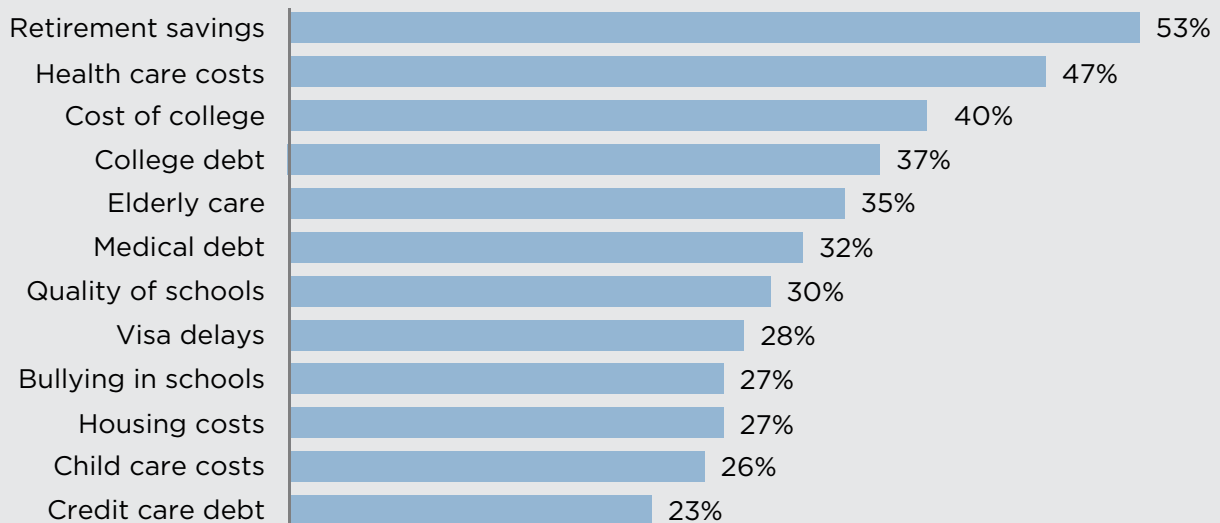
## Common Economic Strains and Hardships

Beyond their health and well-being, Korean Americans also face many economic hardships and everyday challenges. The 2020 CKA report presented findings from the 2016 National Asian American Survey on daily hardships and stresses. Specifically, respondents were asked about a wide range of challenges and how serious they were for respondents and their families. The questions cover a diverse range of challenges and hardships, from financial stressors (e.g., saving for retirement, covering health care, elderly care, childcare, housing, and educational costs) to the challenges of school bullying, school quality, and visa delays. Figure 9 shows the percentage rating each challenge as “fairly” or “very” serious.

The survey results show that significant numbers of Korean Americans face hardships. The most mentioned “fairly serious” or “very serious” challenges were saving for retirement (53%), health care costs (47%), costs of college and paying off college loans (37% and 35%), and elderly care (35%). Overall, 63% of Korean Americans identified at least one challenge as being “fairly serious” or “very serious.”

Even among Korean Americans with family incomes above \$100,000 per year, 53% were worried about saving for retirement, 44% about health care costs, and 48% about the cost of college. Concerns about college affordability were especially serious among younger Korean Americans. Korean Americans aged 18 to 39 were especially vulnerable: 74% were concerned about retirement savings, 75% about health care costs, 69% about college costs, and 67% about debt. Far fewer Korean Americans aged 70 and older, by contrast, saw these challenges as serious, even those related to retirement savings, health care costs, and elderly care costs.

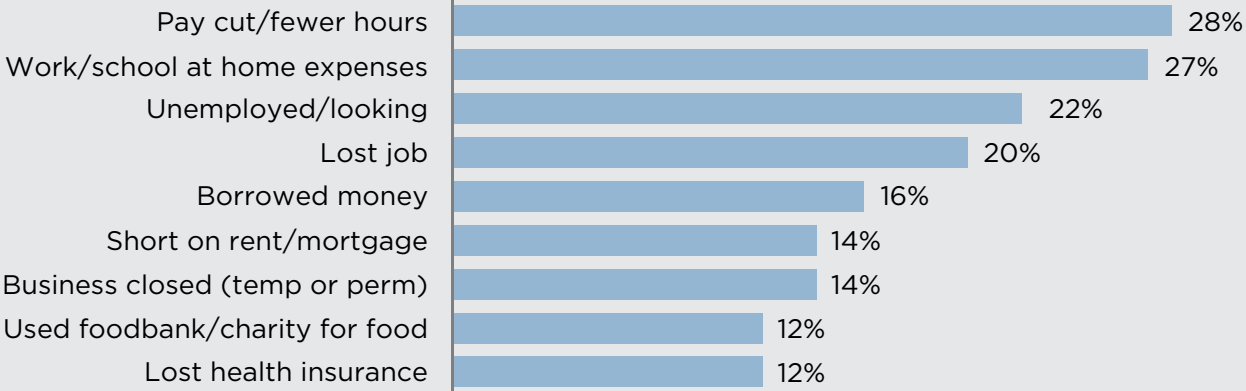
**Figure 9. Everyday Hardships Faced by Korean Americans**



Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

The 2016 NAAS data predate the COVID-19 pandemic, an epoch-making moment affecting Americans everywhere. The CMPS includes data that shed some light on the economic consequences of COVID-19 for Korean Americans. CMPS respondents were asked whether they or someone in their household experienced any of nine specific financial hardships due to the pandemic over the previous year. The findings in Figure 10 show the widespread impact of COVID-19 on many Americans, Koreans included. Most common among these economic challenges were having work hours or pay cut (28%) and having to spend money on technology and equipment to work or attend school from home (27%). Among other hardships, 20% reported losing their jobs; one in seven had to close their business; one in seven fell short on their rent or mortgage; one in eight used a food bank or went to a charity for food and groceries. Overall, 56% of Korean Americans reported experiencing at least one of these nine challenges. The survey also asked about COVID’s impact on families: 45% of Korean Americans with children under the age of 18 reported that their “kids had increased stress and emotional problems.”

**Figure 10. Impact of COVID-19 on the Korean American Community**



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

### **Dated Mental Health Studies Nevertheless Point to a Distressed Community**

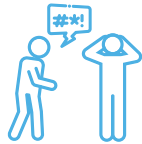
In sum, the current information on the mental health of the Korean American community is dated and limited; further research is needed. Nevertheless, the existing data point to a group under heavy stress caused by financial and health concerns. These strains are exhibited through comparatively high levels of substance abuse (e.g., alcohol). Recently released data about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and violence against Asian Americans also suggest that these pre-existing mental health concerns within the Korean American community may have worsened as many families struggled to navigate the economic disruption of the public health crisis and the threat to their safety with the uptick in race-based attacks.<sup>22</sup>

## CHAPTER 4

# Discrimination, Microaggressions, and Harassment



Of Korean Americans, **57%** say they have experienced discrimination.



Of Korean Americans, **88%** say they have experienced a microaggression.



**One in four** Korean Americans worried that they or someone they knew could be deported.

Of Korean American women, **61%** say they have experienced sexual harassment. When reported, they were less likely to be believed than other women in the survey.

**THE PRECEDING SECTIONS ON** socioeconomic status and economic and mental well-being reveal a mixed portrait of conditional successes and daunting challenges. In this section, we turn to available survey data for more direct, firsthand reports on the hardships and barriers that Korean Americans face.

Like other Asians in America, Koreans are often cast as a prosperous “model minority” free from the vestiges of racial discrimination; however, surveys of ordinary Korean Americans present a more complex and cautionary tale of their lived experiences and daily lives. In 2012, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of Asian Americans that asked if discrimination against their group was a major problem, was a minor problem, or was not a problem. Korean Americans were by far the Asian ethnic group most likely to see discrimination against their group (Korean Americans) as a major problem (24% vs. 12%). Only 27% of Korean Americans answered that discrimination is “not a problem,” compared to 36% of other Asian Americans.

*Examining this breadth of different experiences is critical to get an accurate picture because largely immigrant-based groups like Korean Americans often confront cultural biases that lead to internalizing hardships and make it hard to identify discrimination.*

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 included measures of Korean Americans' experience 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 different experiences is critical to get an accurate picture because largely immigrant-based groups like Korean Americans often confront cultural biases that lead to internalizing hardships and make it hard to identify and name an experience as discrimination per se.

## Facing Discrimination in the Workplace, Housing, and Neighborhoods

Regarding discrimination, the NAAS asked respondents if they had ever experienced discrimination in six contexts: being hired for a job, being promoted in a job, being unfairly fired from a job, being denied housing, experiencing poor treatment from the police, and experiencing poor treatment from one's neighbors. Overall, 30% of Korean Americans reported experiencing at least one of these major discrimination events.<sup>23</sup> For other Asian Americans, the reports of being discriminated against in at least one of these contexts is slightly higher, at 34%. The breakdown of specific contexts (see Figure 11) shows that Korean Americans were most likely to experience poor treatment from neighbors (10.2%), poor treatment from the police (11.4%), or in employment contexts, such as not being hired for a job (12.8%), being unfairly fired (9.4%), and being passed over for a promotion (9.0%). The NAAS then asked what respondents felt to be the basis for their unfair treatment in these contexts. In 75% of the cases, they reported that the basis for their experience was due to their race/ethnicity, language, or accent.



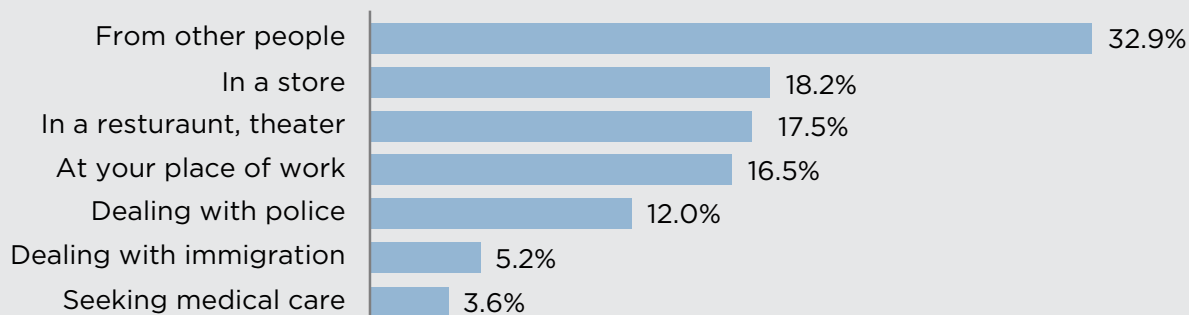
Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

These experiences of discrimination are likelier 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%) and those aged 36 to 55 (10%). Younger Korean Americans, aged 18 to 35 years, are much likelier to be unfairly passed over for a job (15%) and unfairly treated by the police (12%), and they are much likelier than the average Korean American to report poor treatment from their neighbors (20%).

- By gender, a higher proportion of men reported at least one of the above experiences of unfair treatment than women (35% vs. 27%). Korean American men are notably more likely to say they were passed over for a job than Korean American women (14% vs. 8%) and that they were unfairly treated by the police (14% vs. 5%).
- By nativity, US-born Korean Americans are only slightly more likely to report experiencing some kind of discrimination than their immigrant counterparts (33% vs. 30%), but the contexts of unfair treatment differ. Foreign-born Korean Americans are likelier to report being denied housing and being unfairly fired; US-born Korean Americans are likelier to report not being hired, not being promoted, and being poorly treated by neighbors.

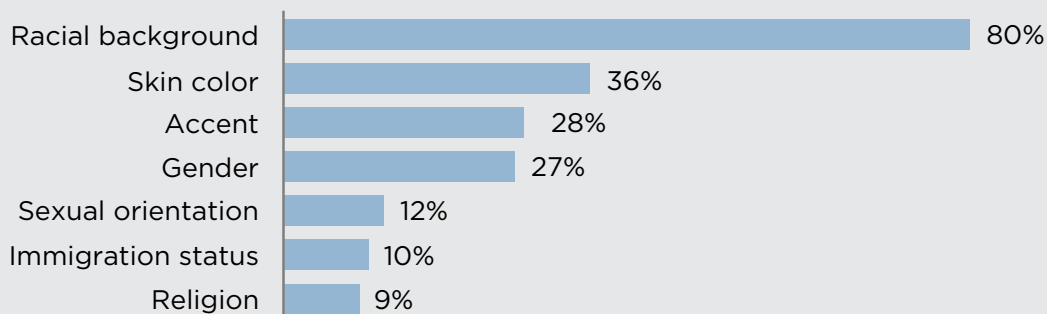
**Figure 12. Types of Discrimination Experiences Encountered by Korean Americans**



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

To update the 2016 NAAS findings with more recent data, we again turn to the 2020 CMPS (see Figure 12). The two relevant items from the CMPS find that roughly one in two Korean Americans face discrimination. First, respondents were asked, “In the past four years, have you experienced discrimination or exclusion in any of the following settings?” Figure 12 shows that the most commonly reported experience in 2020 was discrimination “from other people.” Both surveys asked about discrimination at the hands of the police, with a nearly equal percentage reporting such experiences in both surveys. Notably, based on these questions, 57% of Korean Americans reported experiencing at least one of the seven discrimination items the CMPS asked about. This is a substantially higher estimate of the proportion of Korean Americans who experience discrimination than the 30% from the 2016 NAAS, and the two surveys use different question formats—the CMPS focusing more on where discrimination takes place (workplaces, stores, restaurants, from other people) and the NAAS focusing more on the kinds of discrimination (hiring, firing, promotions, housing).

**Figure 13. When Encountering Discrimination, the Basis of Discrimination Experienced by Korean Americans**



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

At the same time, the CMPS was in the field between April and August 2021, so it is quite likely that these findings also capture the increases in anti-AAPI hate due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup> The fact that one in three reported experiencing discrimination or exclusion “from other people” further adds to this possibility. The CMPS also included a single item that asked, “Have you ever been treated unfairly or personally experienced discrimination because of your race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, being an immigrant, religious heritage or having an accent?” To this question, 52% of Korean Americans said yes, a higher percentage than the 43% of other Asian Americans and the 44% of all others in the survey who said yes.

To those who reported being treated unfairly and discriminated against, the CMPS next asked about the basis for that negative treatment, querying about seven possibilities and allowing respondents to agree with all that applied to them. An overwhelming majority of Korean Americans (80%) reported that it was because of their “racial background or ethnicity.” An additional 36% said “skin color” and roughly one in four agreed with “accent, regardless of whether or not you have an accent” and “gender.”

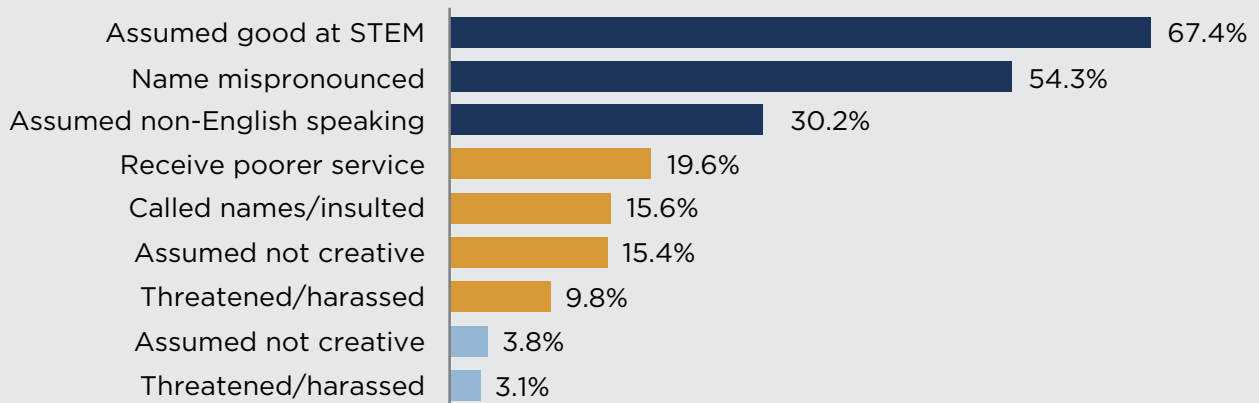
## Encountering Microaggressions

Of course, major discrimination events, such as being denied housing or a job or being denied promotion are not the sum total of hardships and challenges facing minority communities in America. In the last decade, scholars have increasingly turned to less visible, more routinized forms of bias, including microaggressions.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.

A strikingly high 88% of Korean Americans report at least one experience of microaggression monthly. On average, Korean Americans experienced 2.3 of the nine specific microaggressions identified.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, as Figure 14 shows, Korean Americans were especially likely to be assumed to be good in STEM fields (67%), to have had their names mispronounced (54%), and to be assumed to be a non-English speaker (30%). Somewhat less common, yet still fairly prevalent, are Korean Americans who report receiving “poorer service than others at restaurants and stores” (20%), being called names or insulted (16%), being assumed not to be a creative thinker (15%), and being threatened or harassed (10%). Very few Korean Americans report that “people act as if they are afraid of you” or “as if they think you are dishonest.”

*A strikingly high 88% of Korean Americans report at least one experience of microaggression monthly.*

**Figure 14. Types of Microaggressions Korean Americans Face**



Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

The 2020 CMPS also included items on microaggressions that Asian Americans are especially likely to face. Respondents were asked whether “in an average month” they were assumed to be good at STEM, assumed to be a non-English speaker, or assumed not to be American. Half of the Korean Americans in the 2020 CMPS said they were assumed to be good at STEM, 48% were assumed to not be American, and 33% were assumed to not be an English speaker. Even though the CMPS asked only three items rather than the nine items of the 2016 NAAS, 67% of Korean Americans in the CMPS reported experiencing at least one of the three microaggressions.

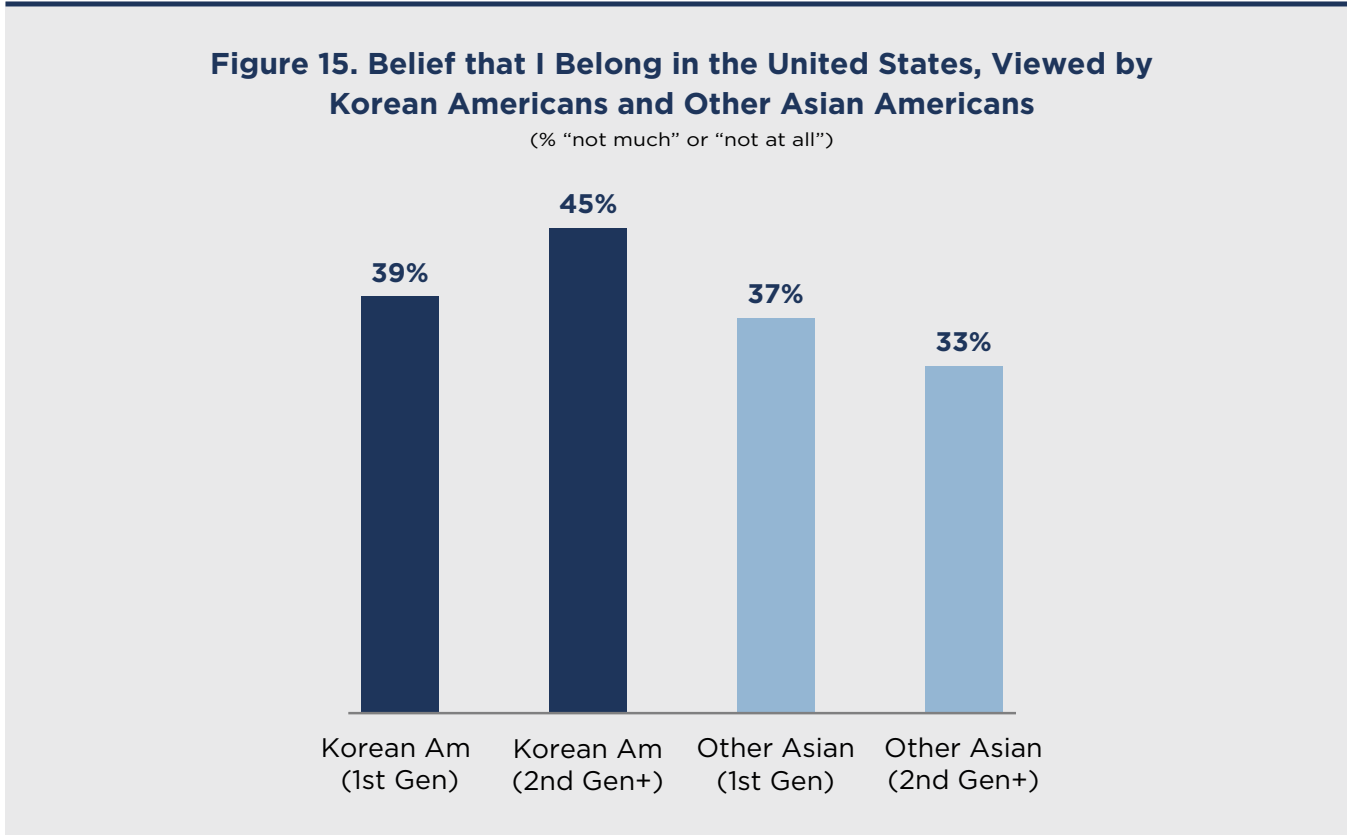
Discrimination and microaggressions against Korean Americans are not isolated, rare events. Moreover, microaggressions can coexist alongside more overt stereotypes and have a cumulative effect of conveying hostility, derogation, and exclusion to Korean Americans. Take the most common microaggressions that Korean Americans face: “being assumed to be good at STEM” feeds into the



belief that Korean Americans are a model minority, while being assumed “not to speak English” or “having one’s name mispronounced” fuels the belief that Korean Americans are outsiders whose loyalties to the United States are perennially suspect. In the next section, we look more deeply into this latter, particularly insidious stereotype.

### Being Viewed as a Perpetual Foreigner

The perpetual foreigner stereotype—the pervasive belief that Asian Americans are somehow not American—dates as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first federal immigration laws targeted immigrants of Chinese descent for legal exclusion from the United States, and mobs of disaffected Whites targeted the Chinese in America with extra-legal violence. Today, despite the presence of nearly 24 million Americans of Asian descent, some 80% of whom are citizens of the United States, such stereotypes are remarkably persistent. The 2020 CMPS asked respondents, “How often are you asked about your family origin or where you are from?”; 63% of Asian Americans and 70% of Korean Americans replied that they had been asked this “occasionally” or “frequently.” While being asked where you or your family are from can usually be a warm opening to casual conversation, it can also be a cold reminder that someone who looks phenotypically “Asian” is foreign and, in these cases, replies like “America,” “Georgia,” or “Flushing, New York” do not satisfy the curiosity of the questioner.



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

Given the persistence of beliefs that Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners, the flip side of that coin is also important—how Koreans and Asians view their own inclusion in the United States. When asked, “How often do you believe you belong in US society?” Figure 15 shows that more than a third of Asian American immigrants, Korean and non-Korean, replied “not much” or “not at all” in terms of believing that they belonged in US society (39% and 37%, respectively). These are high proportions, but what is more striking is that the percentage who do not feel they belong in the United States *increases* in the second generation and beyond, rather than decreasing as it does for other Asian Americans: 33% of other Asian Americans in their second or third generation say they do not really believe that they belong in US society, while 45% of Korean Americans in their second or third generation do not believe they belong.<sup>28</sup>

The CMPS also includes several items that illustrate how the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes are often invoked in tandem to exclude a group like Asian Americans. Non-Asian Americans in the CMPS were asked if they agreed or disagreed with several statements about Asian Americans that capture the flip side of the model minority stereotype. While the modal response was to neither agree nor disagree, 29% of non-Asians agreed that “Asian Americans are often overly competitive for their success”; 24% agreed that “when it comes to education, Asian Americans strive to achieve too much.” Then, on statements that capture the perpetual foreigner stereotype, 28% of non-Asians agreed that “Asian Americans need to embrace American values more,” and 24% agreed that “it is annoying when Asian Americans speak their own languages in public spaces.”

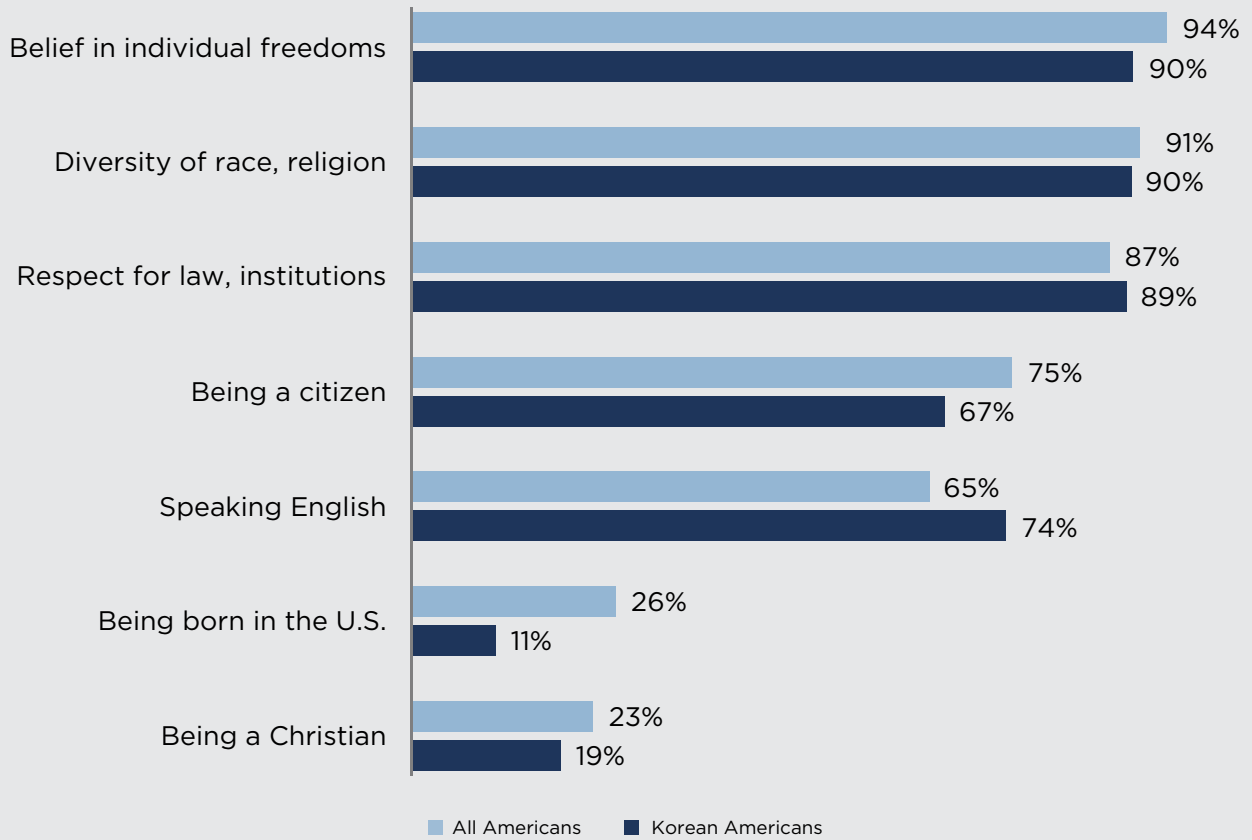
The findings in this section show that the common perception of Korean Americans as a successful immigrant-based group that embodies the American Dream—while a reality for many—is far from the experience of Korean Americans as a whole. Nearly one in two say they have been unfairly treated or discriminated against. The vast majority of Korean have experienced microaggressions. In particular, the stereotype that groups like Korean Americans are forever foreign outsiders remains widespread. At the same time, it is also important to remember that the United States is a nation defined by shared beliefs and values.

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*The stereotype that groups like Korean Americans are forever foreign outsiders remains widespread.*

The 2022 Pew Research Center survey of Asian Americans asked its respondents about seven beliefs that are often associated with “being truly American” and whether they agreed that those beliefs defined being “American.”<sup>29</sup> Figure 16 shows the overwhelming overlap between Korean Americans and all adult Americans in the survey on the key aspects of Americanness. Around or above 90% of Korean Americans and all adult Americans agreed that “believing in individual freedoms,” “accepting people of diverse racial and religious beliefs,” and “respecting US political institutions and laws” are important to being truly American. There is also broad agreement that being a citizen and speaking English are important to being American, with all Americans being slightly more likely to see citizenship as important and Korean Americans slightly more likely to see English-speaking as important. Few respondents saw being a Christian or being born in the US as important to being truly American.

**Figure 16. Views About What It Means to Be “Truly American”**



Source: 2022 Pew Research Center

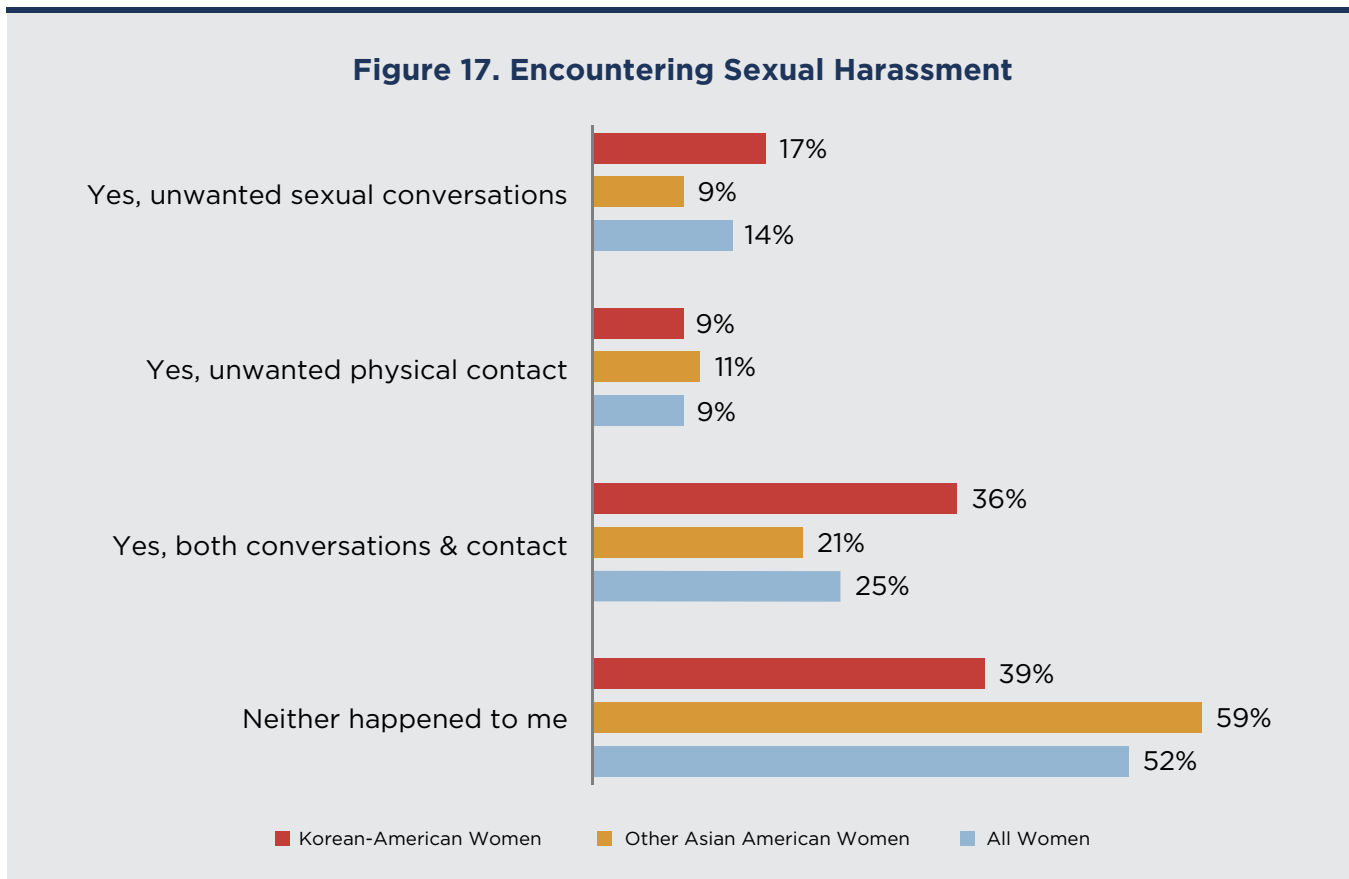
## **Race and Gender Identities Heighten the Likelihood of Discrimination and Harassment**

Finally, many forms of exploitation and adverse experience affect particular segments of the Korean American community especially hard; as we have already seen with income distribution, it is important to be attentive to differences within the Korean American community in addition to the differences between Korean Americans and other groups in the US. It is also crucial to keep in mind that the lived experience for many Korean Americans is *intersectional*, where the challenges they face are both shaped by being Korean American and shaped by some other axis of identity and difference, like their age, gender, generation, sexual orientation, disability, and legal status.

The race-gender intersection is an especially important area to examine, as Asian American women are particularly likely to be targets of abuse, violence, and discrimination. Data from Stop AAPI Hate find that 62% of reported anti-AAPI hate incidents between March 2020 and December 2021 targeted Asian American women.<sup>30</sup> A more recent national survey of AAPI women found that 74% of AAPI women reported experiencing racism or being discriminated against in the last 12 months; 38%

reported experiencing sexual harassment; 12% said they experienced gender-based and/or race-based violence.<sup>31</sup> To these sobering statistics, there is also the fact that disaggregated data are often unavailable or incomplete, making it difficult to shed light on the extent of the multiple, intersectional challenges confronting many Korean Americans specifically.

The CMPS includes several items on sexual harassment that underscore some of the challenges confronting Korean American women and the Korean American community. First, respondents were asked, “Sometimes people find themselves the object of unwanted sexual advances or propositions in the workplace, at school, in public, and in private. The advances sometimes involve physical contact and sometimes just involve sexual conversations. Has this ever happened to you?” Figure 17 shows that Korean American women are more likely than other Asian American women and all other non-Korean women in the CMPS survey to report being the object of unwanted sexual advances or propositions: 62% of Korean American women reported being harassed in conversations or through physical contact, compared to 41% of all non-Korean women in the survey. Korean American women were the likeliest to report being harassed both in conversations and through physical contact.<sup>32</sup>



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

CMPS participants who responded that they were harassed were then asked the following: “Have you ever reported unwanted sexual conversations or physical contact to an authority such as your employer, school administration, or religious leader?” “Was action taken when you reported the incident?” “On the scale below, how would you rate your experience reporting unwanted sexual discussions to authorities?” The respondents gave their rating on a scale from “I was believed and my claims were taken seriously” to “I was not believed and my claims were dismissed.” Only 21% of Korean American women who reported experiencing sexual harassment said that they reported their experience to an authority; 27% of non-Korean women in the CMPS reported their experience. Of those who reported their experience, only 55% of Korean American women and 57% of all women in the CMPS said that some action was taken. Finally, of the Korean American women who reported their experience to an authority, 56% percent did not feel that their claims were believed and taken seriously, while 34% of all other women in the CMPS said the same.

These statistics about Korean American women’s experiences with harassment are alarming, highlighting the need for research to further explore how intersectional identities such as gender and ethnicity may reveal varying experiences within a population group. It opens up the question of how other intersectional identities—including race, socioeconomic status, age, and type of occupation—may shape nuanced realities of Korean American experiences with discrimination and harassment. More extensive analysis is also needed because the sample sizes for these follow-up questions are quite small, and the statistics above come with large margins of error.<sup>33</sup> Regardless, the data point to another area of critical exploration for a fuller and more nuanced picture of the challenges that Korean Americans face and the tough realities that some sub-communities may be facing.

In sum, varying forms of discrimination and harassment—from the overt to the microaggressions—appear to be a common life experience of a majority of Korean Americans. Notably, in many cases, Korean Americans indicated that this mistreatment was more broadly felt than by even other AAPI community members. This chapter took an additional step to highlight how race/ethnicity and gender shaped the challenges that Korean American women faced with sexual harassment. Although current research is still preliminary, it points to disturbing trends where Korean American women express greater challenges than even their AAPI counterparts and American women in general. There is a greater need for analytical examinations of the race-gender nexus and the exploration of other intersectional identities for a fuller understanding of the Korean American community.

# Identity and the Ties that Bind



Two in three Korean Americans identify as **“Korean Americans”** or just **“Koreans.”**



About **two thirds** believe that Asian Americans share a common race and common culture; about half believe they share common political and economic interests.



About **two thirds** of Korean Americans believe that what happens to other Koreans affects what happens to them.

**IN THIS CHAPTER, THE ANALYSIS** turns to examine 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 several ways: what labels Korean Americans use to describe themselves, their perceptions of what Asian Americans have in common, 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 US.

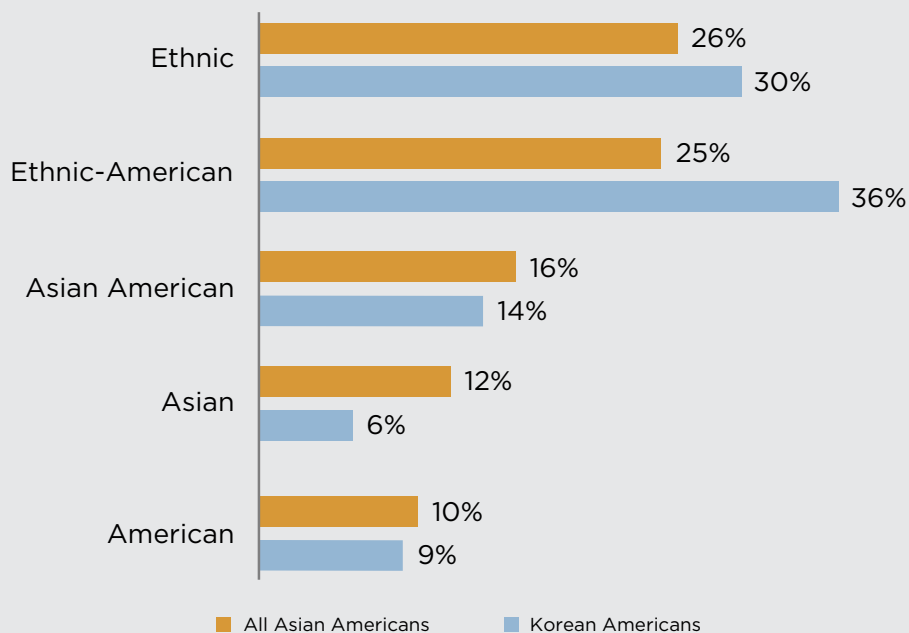
### Strong Ethnic Identification

To start, there are many ways that Asian Americans might describe themselves in racial or ethnic terms. The 2020 CKA report shared results from a 2012 National Asian American Survey, which found that Korean Americans tend to describe themselves first and foremost as “Korean,” either alone or modified as “Korean American.”<sup>34</sup> More

recent data from a 2022 Pew Research Center survey of Asian Americans finds similar patterns. Pew asked its respondents, “People use different terms to describe themselves. Which one of the following terms do you use to describe yourself most often?” Figure 18 shows the identity labels that Korean Americans and all Asian Americans chose to describe themselves. Korean Americans were most likely to say they described themselves as “Korean Americans” (36%), followed by just as “Koreans” (30%); combined, roughly two out of three Korean Americans describe themselves with the term “Korean.” For all Asian Americans in the Pew study, about one in two described themselves in terms of their ethnicity, either alone or as an ethnic American. Only 14% of Korean Americans and 16% of all Asian Americans identified with the pan-ethnic label “Asian American.”

*Roughly two out of three Korean Americans describe themselves with the term “Korean.”*

**Figure 18. Usage of Self-Identifying Ethnic Labels**



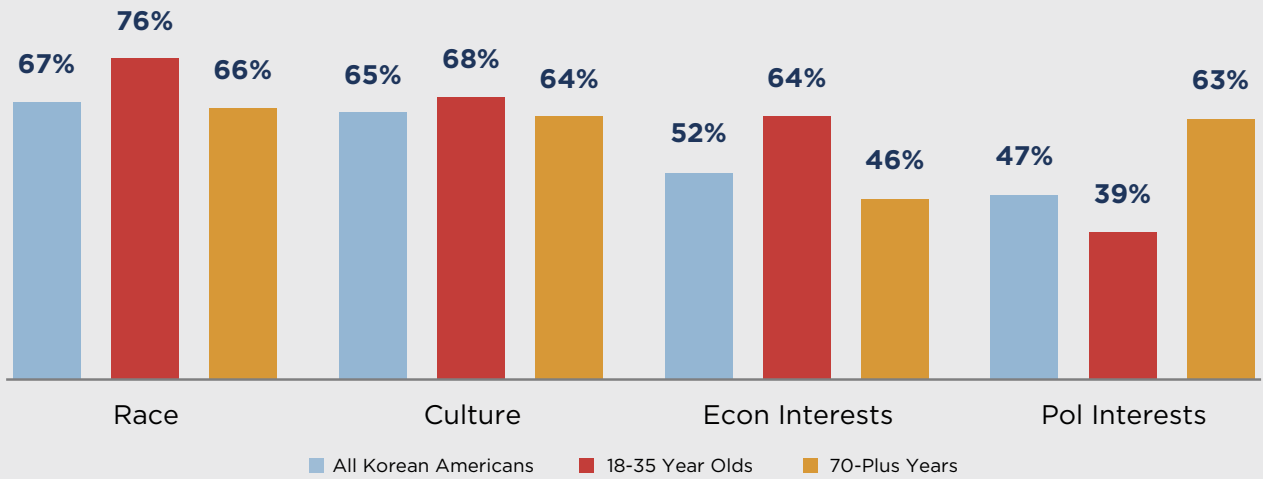
Source: 2022 Pew Research Center

## Sharing Common Collective Interests and a Linked Fate

However, the fact that most Korean Americans describe themselves in terms of their ethnic origin (i.e., as Koreans) rather than in pan-ethnic terms (i.e., as Asian Americans) does not mean that Korean Americans do not see their commonality with other Asians in the United States. The 2016 National Asian American Survey 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?” The term “Asian American” is now well-established in the American racial vernacular, yet it is used to describe a remarkable diversity of people of different national origins, religions, languages, cultures, and so on. Thus, we cannot assume that individuals who are commonly thought of as “Asian American” believe that they share a basis of common identity or interests with other Asians in the US.

The first finding of note is that relative to the diversity of the Asian American community, a remarkably high share of Korean Americans see multiple bases of commonality as Asian Americans. Whether it is race, culture, economic interests, or political interests, between about one half and two thirds find something in common among Asians in the United States. Korean Americans are most likely to see Asians in the US as sharing a common race and a common culture (see Figure 19).<sup>35</sup> 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 likelier to see Asians as sharing common economic interests and racial definition than are their older (aged 70 and up) co-ethnics. Younger Korean Americans are also far less likely to see common political cause among Asian Americans, especially in contrast to their older counterparts.

**Figure 19. Belief Among Korean Americans on “What Asians Have in Common”**

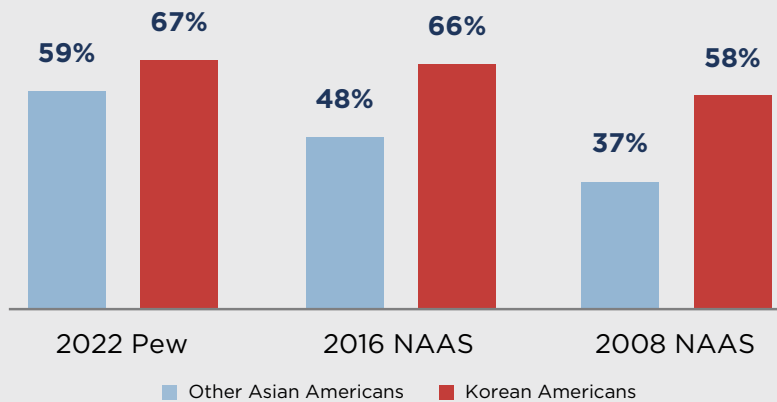


Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

This affinity in seeing shared group definitions and interests also extends to another commonly examined dimension of identity—the sense of a “linked fate.” A linked fate orientation is a widely used measure of identity and group orientation in the social sciences. The gist of the linked fate is to ask whether a person believes that what happens to others in a reference group (e.g., Asian Americans or Korean Americans) will affect what happens in their own life. Korean American and other Asian senses of a linked fate are shown in Figure 20 from three different surveys: the 2008 National Asian American Survey, the 2016 National Asian American Survey, and the 2022 Pew Research Center survey of Asian Americans.

**Figure 20. Linked Fate to Asian Americans**

% “some” or “a lot”



Source: 2008 and 2016 NAAS; 2022 Pew Research Center



There are two notable findings shown in Figure 20. First, Korean Americans' sense of a common destiny with other Asian Americans is consistently higher than for other Asian Americans. In each of the three surveys, Korean Americans stand out as the Asian group that is most likely to believe that what happens to other Asian Americans will affect their own lives; roughly two in three Korean Americans hold this belief, according to the 2022 Pew study.<sup>36</sup> Second, levels of belief in a linked fate for non-Korean Asians have been increasing, from 37% in 2008 to 59% in 2022. The 2008 and 2016 National Asian American Survey also asked about one's ethnic linked fate—that is, the degree to which Korean Americans, for instance, feel strongly that what happens to other Korean Americans shapes their own fate. For the 2008 NAAS, 58% of Korean Americans agreed either “somewhat” or “a lot” compared to only 37% of other Asian Americans about their ethnic linked fate. In the 2016 NAAS, the sense of a common destiny with others in one's ethnic group was even more prevalent, with 66% of Koreans and 48% of other Asian Americans agreeing that what happens to other co-ethnics affects them.

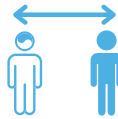
With both ethnic and pan-ethnic measures of linked fate, we also find some interesting age differences. In the 2016 NAAS, younger (18–35 years old) Korean Americans are much likelier to see their fate as linked to the groups they identify with than older (70 years and up) Korean Americans, roughly 75% compared to 55–57%. The data also show differences in the sense of linked fate by immigrant status. US-born Korean Americans are much likelier than their foreign-born counterparts to agree (roughly 80% vs. 63%) that they have a linked fate to all Asian Americans. In contrast, both US-born and foreign-born Korean Americans are equally likely to agree that they have a linked fate to all Korean Americans.

In conclusion, we see a curious parallel trend occurring within the Korean American community, where there is a strong ethnic self-identification as Korean or Korean American alongside viewing their well-being and interest linked with the broader AAPI community. The linkage to the broader community is even stronger than for other Asian American community groups. This connection is getting stronger over time within the Korean American community. Further research should explore the factors driving this closer connection to the AAPI community. Moreover, what are the implications for a greater feeling of sharing a common fate and interest with other AAPI groups over time? Does it lead to greater civic engagement, increased voting, or greater interaction between Korean Americans and other racial groups? These are all worth further research in the future.

# Allies and Adversaries in Race Relations



Korean Americans are much likelier to have a lot of **daily social contact** with other Asian Americans and Whites than with Blacks or Latinos.



Korean Americans are also **furthest from Blacks** in terms of preferred neighborhood composition, beliefs about how well groups are getting along, perceived linked fate with others, and belief in common political interests.



Younger Korean Americans share **greater affinity** for, connection to, and interaction with Blacks and Latinos than older Korean American by the measures above.

**THE LAST SECTIONS SHOWED THE EXTENT** to which Korean Americans, like other Asian Americans, experience a much greater degree of hardship, discrimination, and microaggressions than is typically recognized in popular accounts of “model minorities.” They also showed that Korean Americans have a strong group orientation—in terms of both finding a basis of commonality with other Asian Americans and viewing their life outcomes as linked to the fate of other Asian Americans. This group orientation, moreover, is stronger for Korean Americans than it is for other Asian Americans.

In this section, we examine how Korean Americans relate to other racial and ethnic groups in America. Race is fundamentally relational; constructions like Asian Americans as a “model minority” are all too often deployed to prize the allegedly “model” attributes and achievements of one group (Asian Americans) while simultaneously maligning the attributes and achievements of another (African Americans). This dynamic, which Claire Kim dubs “relative valorization,” sits alongside the “civic ostracism” of Asian Americans as unassimilable and alien, and it helps fuel conflict and competition between racial minority groups.<sup>37</sup> This potential for intergroup conflict and competition is especially acute given the history of conflict between racial minority groups—in particular, between African Americans and Korean Americans—and the post-COVID-19 intensification of anti-AAPI hate and violence.

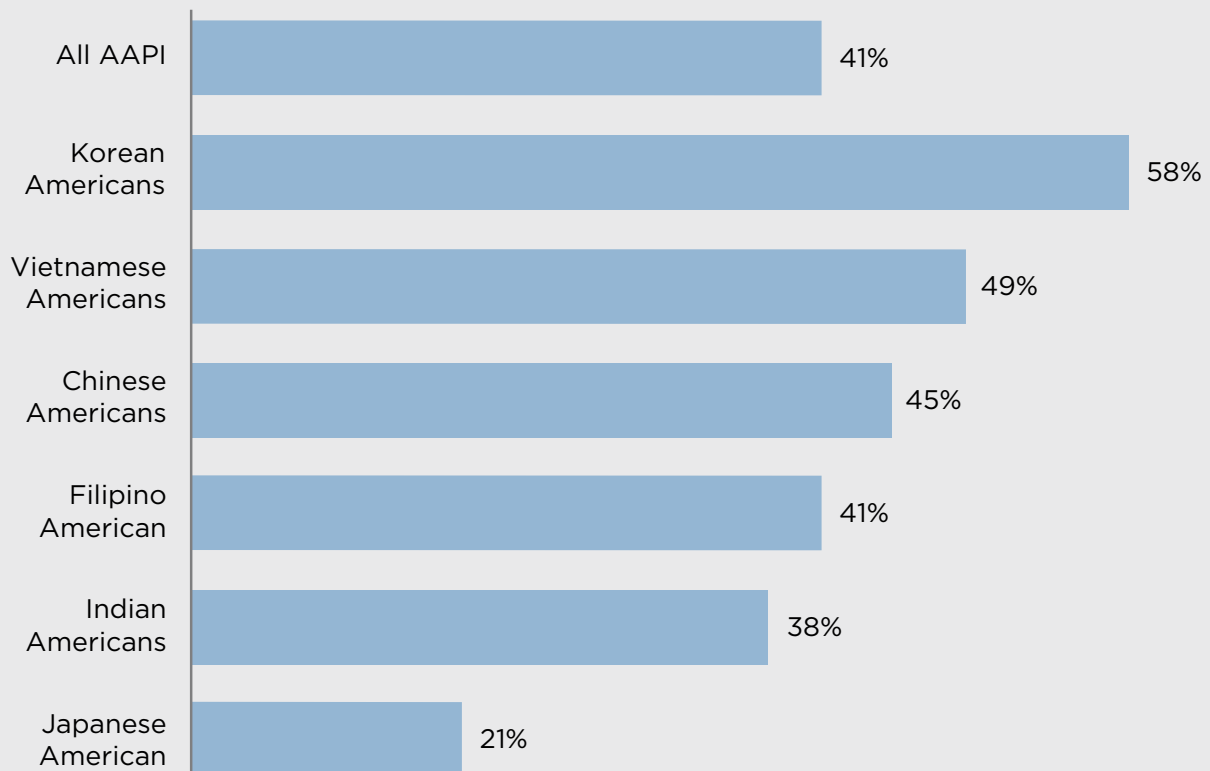
This chapter analyzes available data on several dimensions of Korean Americans’ race relations with other groups: the extent of daily social interactions with other groups, preferences for other groups as neighbors, views on how well Korean Americans get along with others, beliefs in linked fate with other groups, and perceptions of political commonality with other racial and ethnic groups in America.

## Korean Americans Engage Primarily with Other Asian Americans

Social interactions between Korean Americans and other racial groups is an important starting point to the extent that the “contact hypothesis” remains valid. This is the long-standing view in psychology that interpersonal contact under the right conditions will reduce prejudice and foster better race relations.<sup>38</sup> One measure of social interactions is from a 2012 Pew Research survey, which shows that Korean Americans largely interact with other Korean Americans.<sup>39</sup> Figure 21 shows that the survey found 58% of Korean Americans reporting that “all” or “most” of their friends were other Korean Americans.

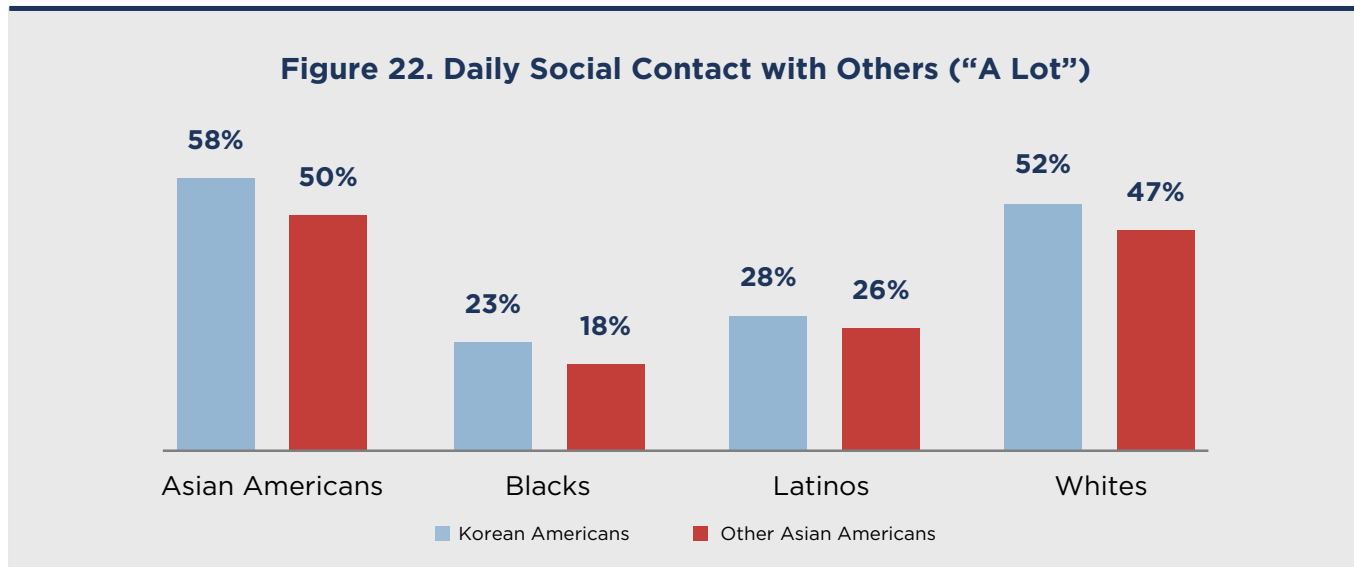
*This lack of regular social contact between Korean Americans and Blacks and Latinos suggests that race relations between these groups are more likely than not to be shaped by episodic interactions and biased preconceptions.*

**Figure 21. Friendships within US Asian Groups: % Saying All or Most of Their Friends in the US Have the Same Asian Country of Origin**



Source: 2012 Pew Research Center

These Pew survey questions illustrate the high degree of in-group social contact but do not tell us how often Korean Americans interact with non-Koreans and non-Asians. The 2016 NAAS (see Figure 22) asked its respondents, “In your daily life, how much contact to you, personally, have with people who are ... White ... Hispanic or Latino ... Black or African American ... Asian or Asian American?” Korean Americans and other Asian Americans were most likely to report having “a lot” of daily social contact with other Asian Americans, with a nearly equal number (around or above 50%) reporting a lot of daily social contact with Whites. In contrast, only about one in four Korean Americans reported a lot of daily contact with Latinos and less than one in five with African Americans.

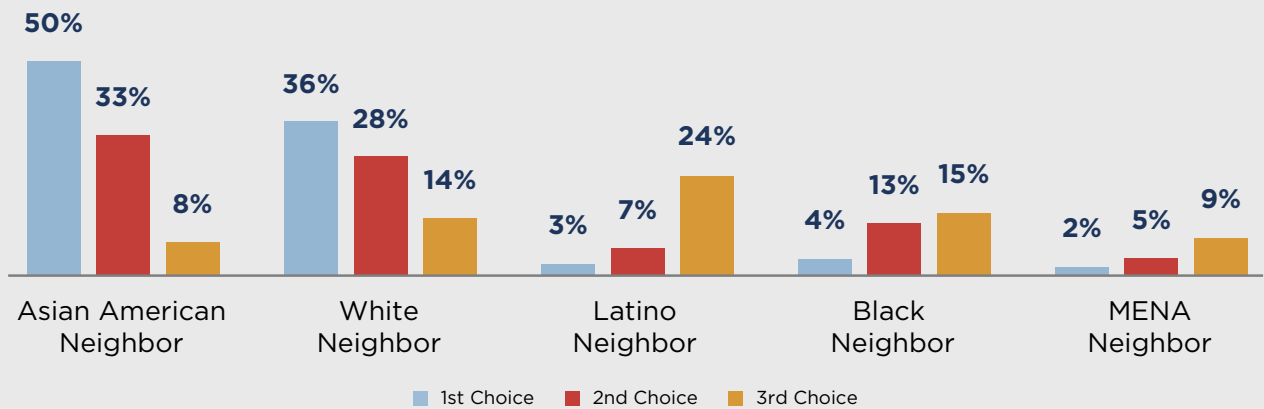


Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

### Younger Korean Americans Are More Engaged with Outside Groups

These results are moderated by age groups: younger Korean Americans are most likely to report regular daily contact with Blacks and Latinos than Whites.<sup>40</sup> To take one prominent example, 26% of Korean Americans aged 35 and under report “a lot” of daily contact with African Americans compared to only 10% of those aged 50 and over. The contrast is even starker for Latinos: 38% of Korean Americans aged 35 and under report a lot of contact with Latinos compared to 15% of those aged 50 and over. Overall, however, this lack of regular social contact between Korean Americans and Blacks and Latinos suggests that race relations between these groups are more likely than not to be shaped by episodic interactions and biased preconceptions.

**Figure 23. Rank Order of Preferred Neighborhood Race**



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey

### **Korean Americans' Preferred Neighbors**

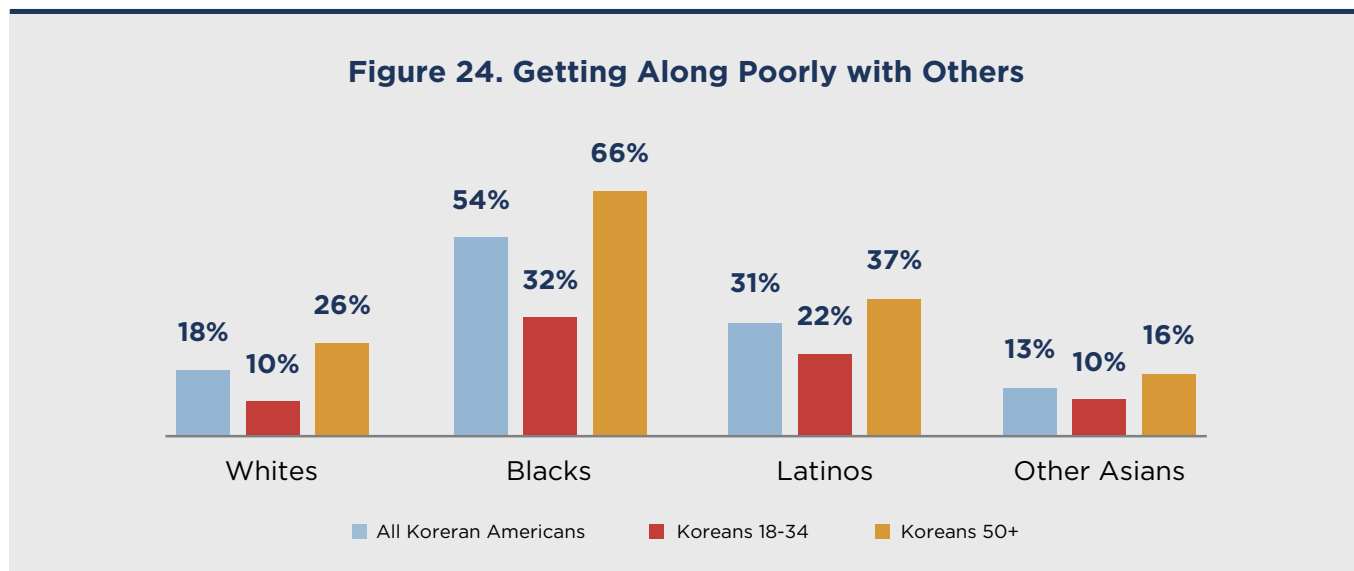
While Korean Americans may interact less with Blacks and Latinos, these patterns could result at least in part from residential and employment segregation patterns that make it less likely for Koreans to have opportunities to interact with certain communities of color. Thus, it is often useful to compare social interactions that are shaped by where people live and work with their preferences for more diverse social interactions. The 2020 CMPS survey (see Figure 23) asked about one's preferred neighborhood racial composition. Specifically, respondents were asked, "If you could live anywhere, in any type of community, please rank from 1 (top choice) to 6 (last choice) the racial or ethnic make up of the neighborhood you would prefer. While it might be somewhat mixed, a neighborhood in which a majority are ... White ... Latino ... Black ... Asian American ... Native American ... Middle Eastern or North African (MENA)."

The top three ranked preferences for Korean Americans are shown in Figure 23. Fully half of Korean Americans said their ideal neighborhood composition would be majority Asian American, with an addition 33% ranking a majority Asian American neighborhood as second best. Another 36% ranked a majority White neighborhood as their top choice; a majority White neighborhood was ranked as a second choice by 28% of Korean Americans. Notably, very few Korean Americans chose a majority Latino, majority Black, or majority Middle Eastern or North African neighborhood as their preferred residential composition: only 3%, 4%, and 2% ranked these neighborhoods as their top choice. Korean Americans were most averse to living in a majority Middle Eastern or North African neighborhood: 32% ranked such a neighborhood as their lowest (sixth) preference, while 29% ranked a majority Black neighborhood lowest and 12% ranked a majority Latino neighborhood lowest.

### **Perceptions about Korean American Race Relations**

In addition to low levels of daily interaction with Blacks and Latinos and a greater aversion to living in majority Black and Latino neighborhoods, Korean Americans are also likelier to perceive poor race relations with Blacks and Latinos. The 2012 Pew survey of Asian Americans asked about how well different groups get along. Specifically, respondents were asked how well different groups "get along with each

other these days” on a scale from “very well” to “not well at all.” Figure 24 shows the responses of Korean Americans who responded “not too well” or “not well at all” to this question about getting along with Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and non-Korean Asian Americans. Korean Americans were most likely to say they got along poorly with African Americans, followed by Latinos and then Whites; they were least likely to say they got along poorly with other Asian Americans. Fully 54% said they got along “not too well” or “not well at all” with African Americans, while only 31% said they did not get along with Latinos, and only 18% and 13% said the same about getting along with Whites and other Asians, respectively.



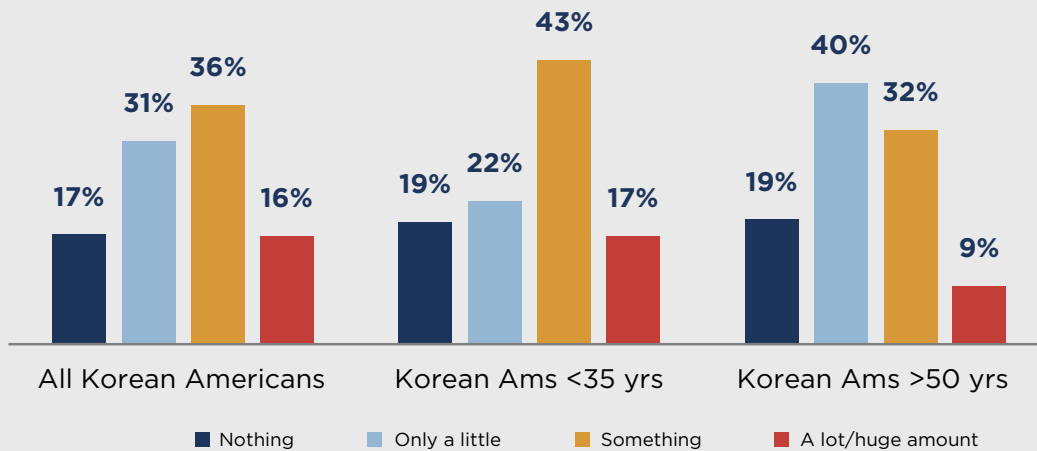
Source: 2012 Pew Research Center

Figure 24 further shows some interesting variation in perceptions of poor race relations by age. Only 32% of those aged 18–34 said they get along poorly with African Americans, but 66% of Korean Americans aged 50 and older believe race relations with Blacks are poor. Younger Korean Americans in general are the least likely to report not getting along with any group, including Blacks, giving some hopeful grounds for better race relations in the future. At the same time, the general rank order of groups that Korean Americans get along with—from other Asians on one end to Blacks on the other—is consistent across age groups.

### Perceived Linked Fate with Black Americans

Another window into attitudes about race relations is the perception that different groups share common interests or are divided by dissimilar interests. A question that is often asked of emerging immigrant-based groups like Korean Americans is whether they are more like Whites or more like Blacks. Here, we consider two additional sets of findings from recent surveys. The 2020 CMPS asked about perceptions of linked fate not just to individuals and the groups they identified with but also to individuals and their relations to other groups. That is, respondents were asked, “How much do you think what happens to the following groups here in the US will have something to do with what happens in your life?” where nine different groups defined by race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation were listed. Figure 25 shows the results for Korean American respondents asked about whether they saw their fate as being linked to what happens to African Americans.

**Figure 25. Perceived Linked Fate with Blacks**



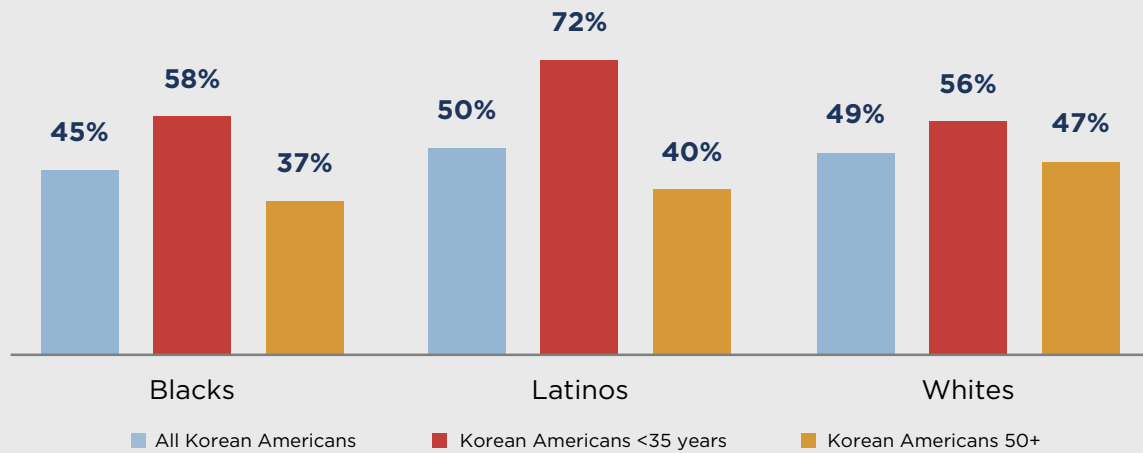
Source: 2020 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey

Overall, only a small minority (one in six) of Korean Americans said that what happens to Blacks has “a lot to do” or “a huge amount to do” with what happens in their own life. At the same time, more than one third said that it had “something to do” with what happens in their life. Thus, about half of Korean Americans saw some connection between what happens to African Americans and their own lives. Again, there were age differences in this sense of linked fate to African Americans, with 60% of Korean Americans aged 35 and under saying that what happens to Blacks has at least “something” to do with their life and only 41% of those aged 50 and above with the same sense of connectedness to African Americans. This connectedness to African Americans is roughly comparable overall to Korean Americans’ connectedness to Whites in the CMPS, with the notable difference between that younger Korean Americans (aged 35 and under) were appreciably less likely to feel a linked fate to Whites than they were to African Americans; older Korean Americans (aged 50 and above) felt more connected to Whites than they did to Blacks.<sup>41</sup>

### **Political Commonality with Other Racial Groups: Age as a Factor**

Finally, the 2020 CKA report also showed data on a more direct measure of Black-Asian cooperation: their perceived political commonality and, by implication, their willingness to enter into 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 agreed that Asians had “some” or “a lot” in common with Whites and Latinos; that figure goes down slightly to 45% with Black Americans. The lion’s share of this perceived political commonality is in the category of “some” commonality; only 6% (with Whites) and 12% (with Blacks and Latinos) of Korean Americans perceive “a lot” of political commonality.

**Figure 26. Political Commonality with Other Groups**



Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

The general pattern of age differences in views about race relations also holds here. Younger Korean Americans are noticeably more likely to see common political interests with other non-Asian groups than those who are older. They say that Asians have “some” or “a lot” in common with other races compared to those who are older: 58% of Koreans aged 35 and younger see commonality with Blacks, 72% with Latinos, and 56% with Whites. In contrast, only 37% of Koreans older than 50 see common political interests with Blacks, 40% with Latinos, and 47% with Whites. Put otherwise, younger Korean Americans are likelier to see political commonality with Latinos and Blacks, while older Korean Americans are more likely to see political commonality with Whites. Interestingly, there are only modest differences on this question between Korean Americans who identify as Democrats and those who identify as Republicans.

### **Cross-Racial Interactions and Relations Remain a Challenge**

Overall, these findings offer a sobering reminder of the challenges facing Korean Americans in their interactions with other racial and ethnic groups in America, especially between Koreans and Blacks. Some three decades after the Red Apple boycotts in Flatbush, Brooklyn in 1990, Soon Ja Du’s killing of Latasha Harlins in LA 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. At the same time, there is also the possibility of hope in these results, with the greater tolerance and openness of younger Korean Americans; they are more likely to interact daily with Blacks and Latinos, to see Asians as getting along well with Blacks and Latinos, to see their lives as linked to what happens to Blacks and Latinos, and to see political commonality with Blacks and Latinos.



# An Emerging Electorate: Partisanship and Issue Positions



Since 2008, between two in three and three in four Asian Americans vote Democrat; similarly, about **70%** of Korean Americans have voted Democrat.



Although Korean Americans tend to support **Democratic issues**, many identify themselves as independent and not as a Democrat.



Korean Americans have mostly **liberal** views across a broad range of policy issues.



On race-based college admissions, Korean Americans are **mixed** in their support.

**IN THE LAST TWO SECTIONS** of this report, we turn explicitly to the arena of politics. For a long time, the story of Asian American politics has been a dual narrative of under-participation in electoral politics and underrepresentation in elected offices. Until recently, Korean American political power has been most notable for its striking invisibility in the corridors of government. Looking at federally elected offices, there were 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 for political corruption) and the 2018 midterm elections (when Andy Kim was elected to represent New Jersey's 3rd district). Thus, over the two decades when Korean Americans grew—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 US House of Representatives.

## A Rising Tide of Political Representation

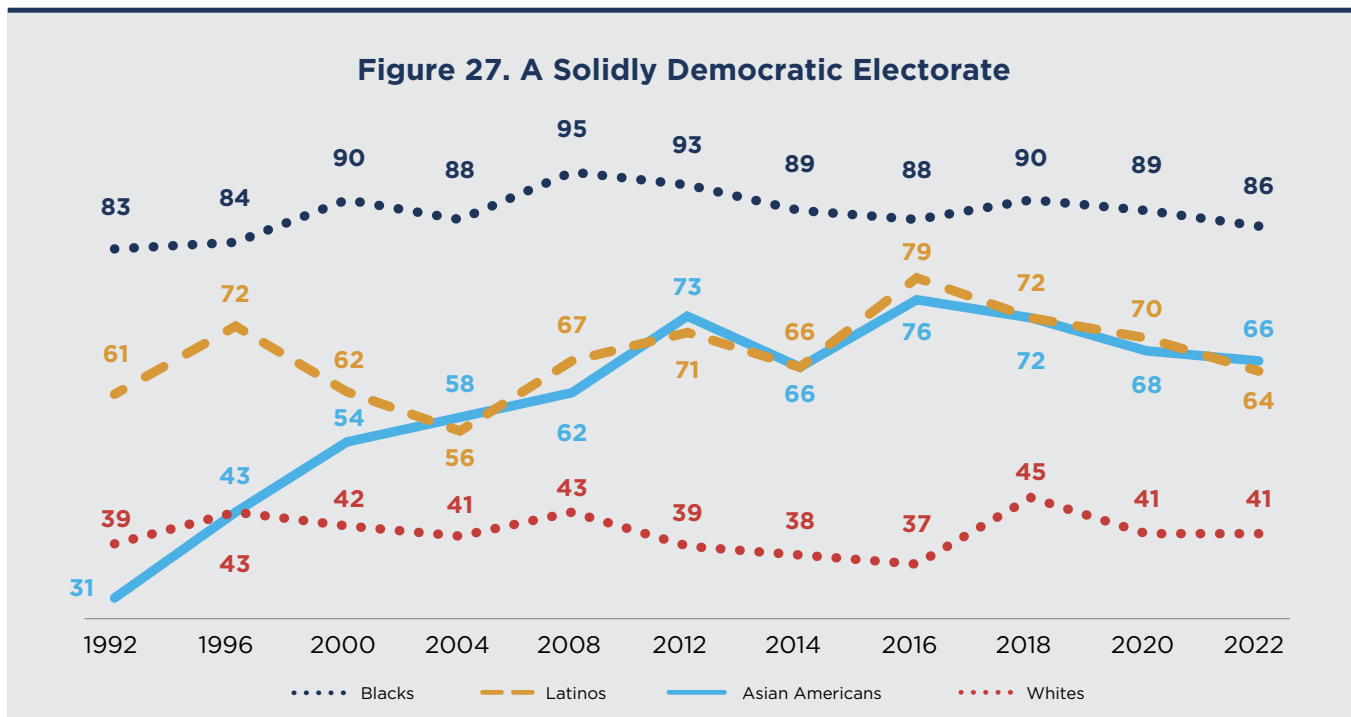
This contrast between growing visibility in the population and persistent invisibility in political office is also true of Asian Americans generally. While AAPIs are more than 6% of the US population today, they occupy only 3% of all seats in the US House of Representatives and an even smaller 2% of all seats in state legislatures.<sup>42</sup> As of 2016, there were 56 Korean Americans holding political office at the state and local levels, making up over 12% of all AAPI elected officials nationally. Since Korean Americans are 10% of the US AAPI population, they are slightly more highly represented *among* Asian American elected officials, but Asian Americans are far less likely to be represented in elected offices overall.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, this picture of underrepresentation is only half the story of Asian American representation in political office. The other half is the perhaps even more striking fact that there has been a dramatic increase in Asian American representation in just the last few years. Of the 22 AAPIs

in federal elected offices—19 in the House of Representatives, two in the Senate, and Vice President Harris—all but Bobby Scott of Virginia were elected to their current office in 2008 or later. As noted above, Andy Kim became the first Korean American elected to Congress in almost 20 years in 2018, followed by a tripling of that number with Young Kim, Michelle Steel, and Marilyn Strickland elected in 2020. This trend is also true at the state level. In the 2018 midterm elections, a then record 137 Asian Americans ran for state legislative offices, and well over 70% of those candidates won their campaigns.<sup>44</sup>

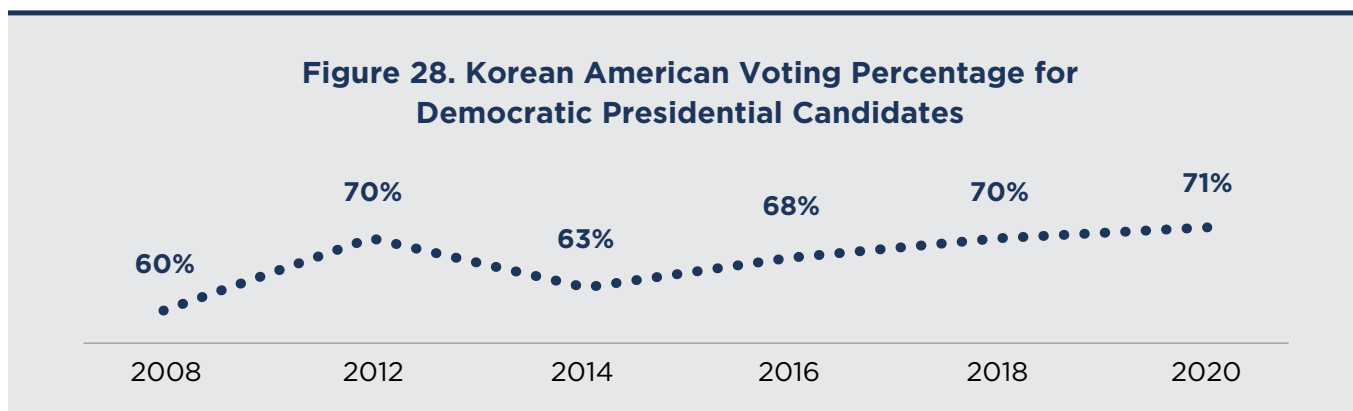
### Korean Americans Solidly Vote Democrat

Furthermore, this increase in Asian American representation has largely occurred in elections where Asian Americans have run as Democrats. Of the record 137 Asian American candidates for state legislative offices in 2018, for example, more than 75% ran as Democrats. In 2020, an identical 75% of the 158 Asian American candidates for state legislative offices 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 party preferences found an even split between Democratic and Republican identifiers. As Figure 27 shows, since 1992 (the earliest date in which exit poll data for Asian Americans exist), Asian Americans have shifted their presidential voting preferences to become a heavily Democratic electorate.<sup>45</sup> In 1992, exit polls reported that only 31% 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% and 76%.



Sources: 1992–2012 Voter News Service and the National Election Pool exit polls; 2014–2020 Election Polls; 2022 Midterm Election 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 Americans or Japanese Americans due to the dominance of foreign policy concerns in the Cold War and post-Cold War era. In the last six US presidential elections, in contrast, Korean Americans have voted consistently and solidly in favor of Democratic candidates: from 60% in 2008 to 70% in 2012 and 2018 and 71% in 2020.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, while Korean Americans have become far more Democratic in their partisan orientation in recent decades, Vietnamese Americans remain more likely than not to support Republican candidates.<sup>47</sup> This pattern of favoring Democratic candidates is even strong among younger Korean Americans, with 85% of Korean Americans aged 18–34 voting for Clinton over Trump in 2016 and 84% voting for Democratic congressional candidates in the 2018 midterm elections.<sup>48</sup>



Source: 2008 National Asian American Surveys; 2012-2020 Asian American Election Eve Poll

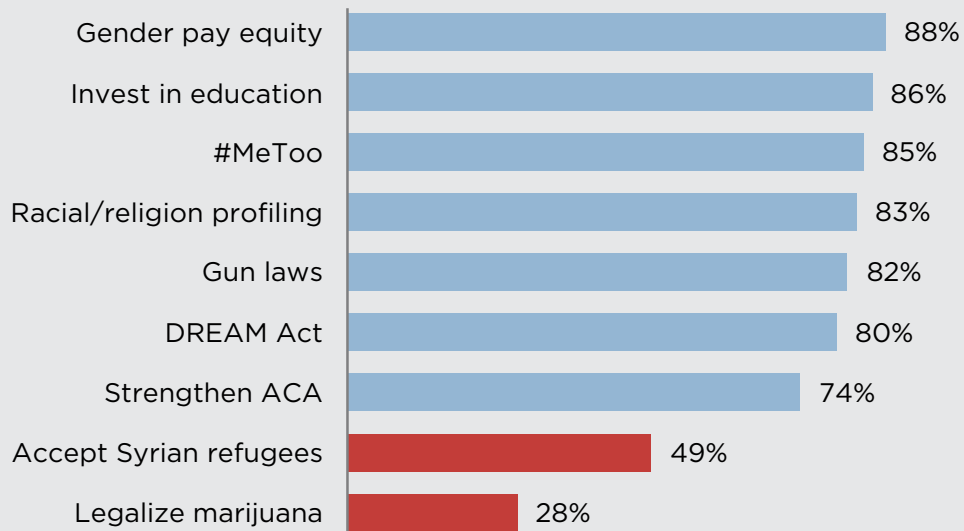
### **Despite Past Voting Behavior, Korean Americans Largely Identify as Independents**

It is important to keep in mind, however, that while a large majority of Korean Americans vote for Democratic candidates for elected office, Korean Americans do not identify as Democrats in similar numbers. In the 2008 NAAS, when asked about their party identification, 38% of Korean Americans said they thought of themselves as Democrats, 17% as Republicans, and 44% identified with neither party. In the 2022 Pew survey of Asian Americans, the distribution of responses was similar, with 43% of Korean Americans identifying as Democrats, 15% as Republicans, and 43% identifying either as independents or “something else.”<sup>49</sup> One important implication of this gap between partisan voting and party identification is that candidates and campaigns cannot take the Korean American vote for granted, if they are Democratic candidates and campaigns—nor can they ignore Korean American votes and assume they are lost, if they are Republican candidates and campaigns. This implication is reflected in findings on partisan mobilization discussed in the next section.

## Korean Americans Support Government Involvement and Liberal Issues

If so few Korean Americans think of themselves as Democrats, then what explains their partisan voting? For one thing, 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?” In response, 68% of Korean Americans preferred a bigger government, compared to 53% of all other Asian Americans. In a version of the same question asked in the 2012 American National Election Study, only 46% of the general American public favored a larger role for the government.<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 29. Korean Americans Are Liberal on Most Issues, 2018**

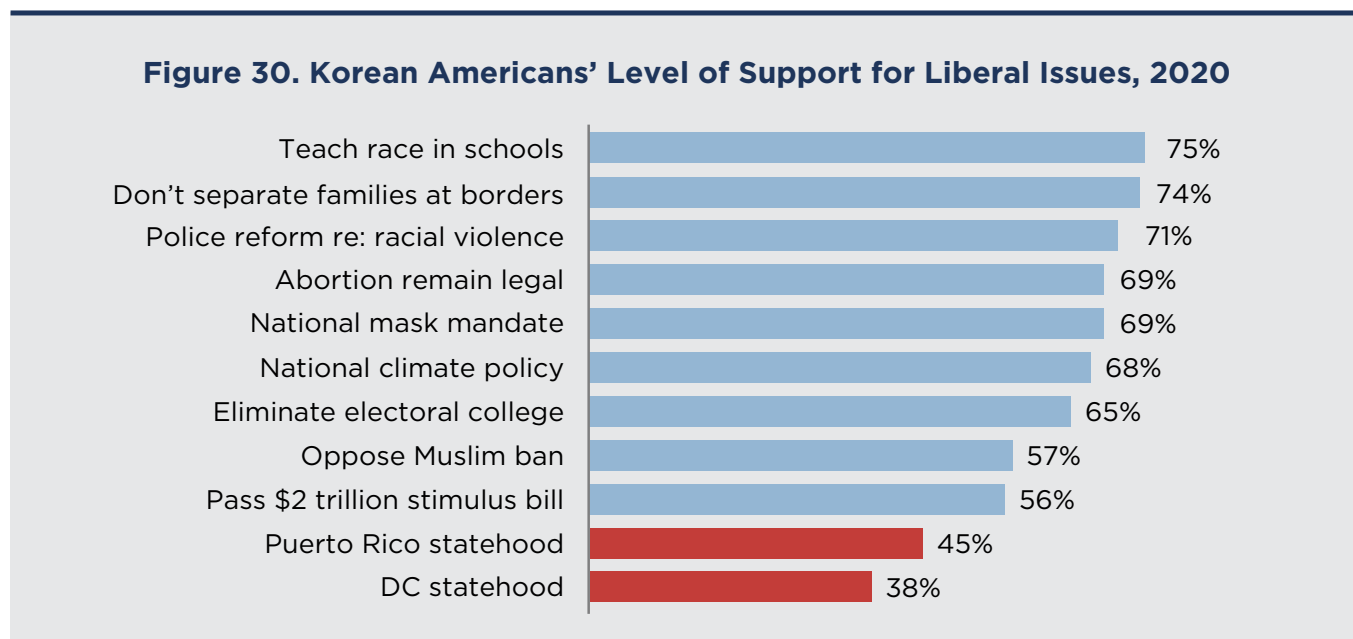


Source: 2018 Asian American Election Eve Poll and 2016 National Asian American Survey

More generally, Korean Americans are liberal across a wide range of policy issues. Figure 29 shows the policy issues in the 2018 Asian American Election Eve Poll and the 2016 National Asian American Survey. Korean Americans somewhat or strongly agreed with the liberal side of issues: they want pay equity between men and women, favor greater investments in public education, agree that 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. In the 2016 NAAS, for instance, fewer 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.<sup>51</sup>

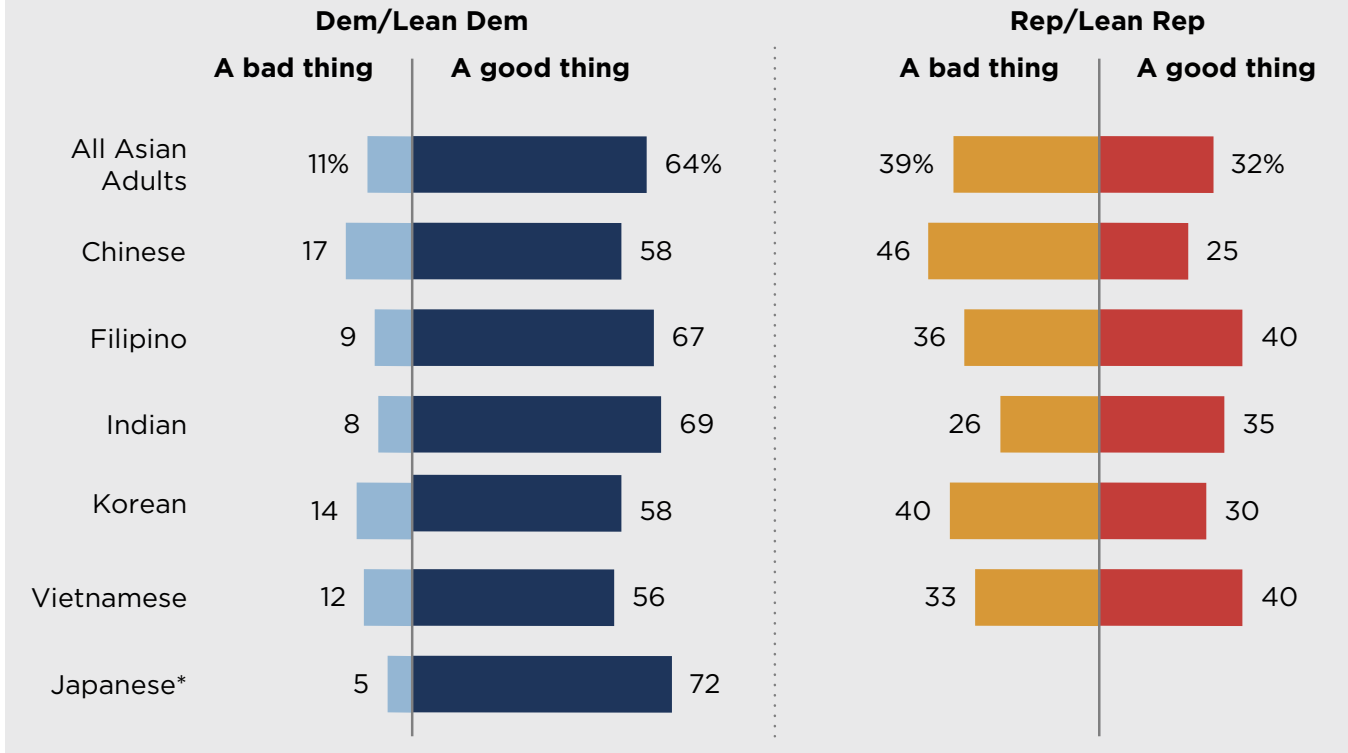
Figure 30 shows that this continues to be true with an even greater range of policy questions from the 2020 CMPS. Large majorities of Korean Americans somewhat or strongly agreed with the liberal position on issues ranging from teaching about race in schools, banning the separation of children from their parents at the southern US border, implementing police reform to stop racial violence, maintaining abortion as a legal option, having a national mask mandate to address COVID-19, enacting a “bold national climate policy agenda,” and eliminating the electoral college in lieu of a popular vote. As with previous surveys, Korean Americans are not uniformly liberal on all issues. A majority take the liberal position in opposing President’s Trump’s ban on migration from predominantly Muslim countries and passing President Biden’s comprehensive stimulus bill, but opinion is not one-sided. Then, on some issues—such as Puerto Rican statehood and statehood for the District of Columbia—only a minority take the liberal viewpoint, because most Korean Americans do not have a view; they neither support nor oppose these positions.



Source: 2020 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey

**Figure 31. Among Asian Americans, Democrats are More Likely to Say Affirmative Action is Good Than Bad, While Republicans are More Divided**

Among Asian adults who have heard of affirmative action, % who say it is...



\*Shares of Republican and Republican-leaning for “Japanese” not shown due to small sample sizes. Source: 2023 Pew Research Center

### **Korean American Have Mixed Feelings about Race-Based College Admissions**

On issues, it is important to keep in mind that with polls, what you see depends on what you ask and how you ask it. Public opinion, especially on contested issues, is shaped by multiple, often cross-cutting factors, including how politicians and mass media frame the issue. Affirmative action is an emblematic case where Asian American opinion can either appear overwhelmingly supportive or quite opposed. For example, in the 2022 Asian American Voter Survey, respondents were asked: “Do you favor or oppose affirmative action programs designed to help Black people, women, and other minorities get better access to higher education?” Asked this way, fully 82% of Korean Americans and 69% of Asian Americans overall favored such programs.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, in the 2020 CMPS, when respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Colleges and universities should consider grades and test scores only as part of students’ applications for admission, and not race or ethnicity.” To this statement, 62% of Korean Americans and 68% of all Asian Americans agreed, seemingly opposing affirmative action programs.

Most recently, in the 2022 Pew survey of Asian Americans, respondents were first asked if they had heard of “affirmative action.” Those who responded that they had heard of the program were then asked if it was a “good thing” or a “bad thing.” To this follow-up question, 50% of Korean Americans saw affirmative action as a good thing, 21% as a bad thing, and 28% replied “don’t know.” Asian Americans overall were only slightly likelier than Koreans to say that affirmative action was a good thing.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in the Pew Research Center chart based on this question shown above, support levels differ sharply if we divide up the Asian American groups into Democrats/Democrat-leaning and Republicans/Republican-leaning Asian Americans are more balanced in their views of affirmative action, while Democratic-Asian Americans skew strongly toward support. Opinion on affirmative action among Korean Americans is similarly divided sharply along partisan lines.

This conditional and contested feature of Korean Americans’ views on affirmative action is critical to keep in mind given the US Supreme Court’s recent ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College*, effectively ending affirmative action admissions policies in higher education. Affirmative action is certain to be a touchstone for future efforts to build political coalitions and organize for collective political interests. This is true both for efforts within the Asian American community and for efforts between Asian Americans and other communities of color. What is at stake, moreover, is not only the future of America’s universities and their ability to conceive diverse, inclusive microcosms of society, but also how we, as Korean Americans and as Americans, understand the underlying values at stake – like merit, freedom, equal opportunity, and justice.

In conclusion, recent trends highlight that Korean American community voting behavior and support for issues are predominantly in favor of the Democratic Party. Interestingly, this is a recent development over the last two decades, as Korean Americans in the past had been viewed as more evenly balanced between the Republican and Democratic Parties. Moreover, this shift in support for Democratic Party candidates is not matched to an equally dramatic increase among Korean Americans identifying as Democrat. Rather, many still self-identify as independents, suggesting that the community is open to influence and could still evolve. The recent controversial Supreme Court decision against race-based college admissions and the Korean American and Asian American mixed response is an example where Korean Americans are not necessarily aligned with liberals on all issues. As stated in previous chapters, further investigation into Korean American political beliefs and attitudes is needed.

# Building Community Power: Political Mobilization and Engagement



Asian American turnout increased by nearly **350%** between 2000 and 2020.



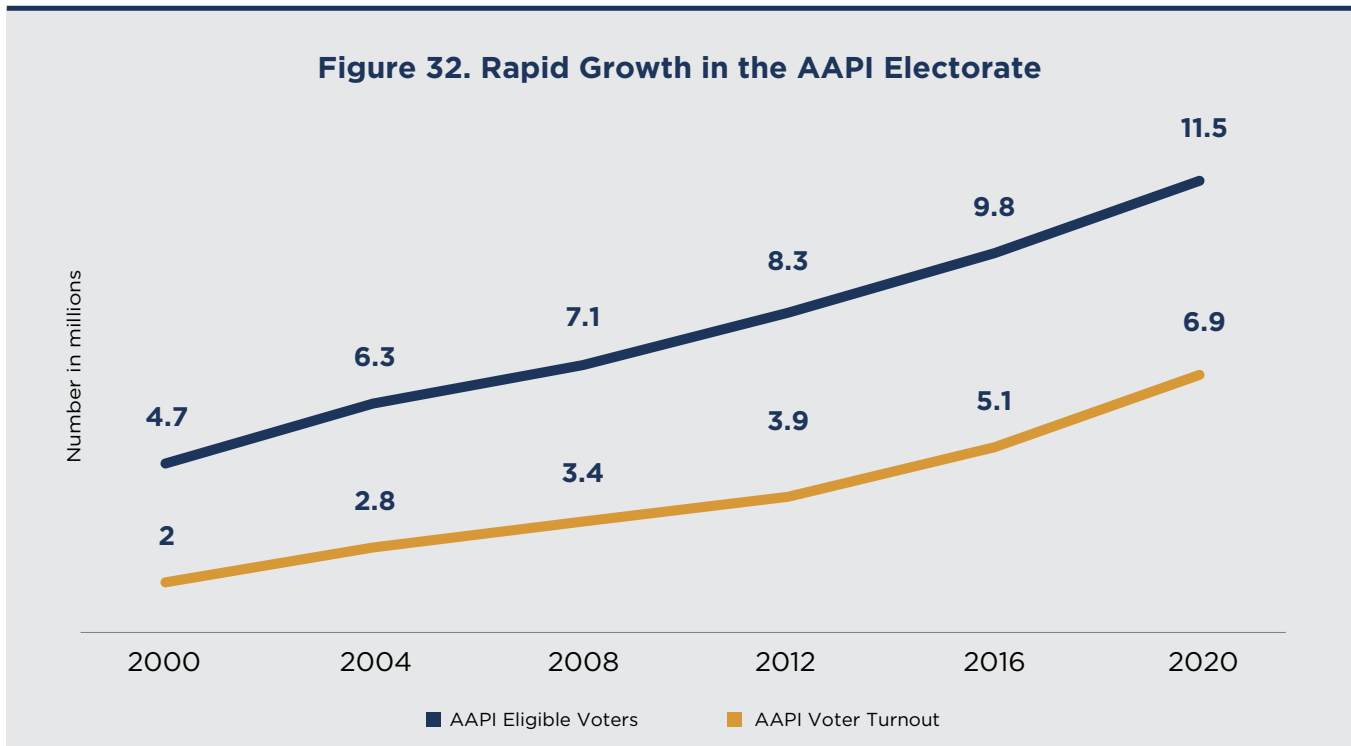
Outreach to Asian Americans also increased, from about **20-30%** in 2008 to about **50%** in the most recent elections.



Korean Americans are **less likely** to be mobilized into politics and also less likely to be civically and politically engaged compared to other AAPI groups.

**IN THIS LAST SECTION, WE TURN MORE** directly to the opportunities and constraints to building community power for Korean Americans. The recent change in Asian Americans' willingness to run for office and their success in winning office also relates to a dramatic increase in Asian Americans as a share of the electorate. Figure 32 shows that between 2000 and 2020, the number of Asian American and Pacific Islander citizens of voting age grew by nearly 250%, from 4.7 million in 2000 to 11.5 million in 2020. Between 2016 and 2020 alone, the number of eligible AAPI voters increased by 1.7 million, and turnout increased by 1.8 million. The growth in the number of AAPI citizens who vote is even more dramatic, increasing from about 2 million in 2000 to 6.9 million by 2020, or a nearly 350% growth rate. Current Population Survey Voting and Registration data, on which these statistics are based, do not allow for disaggregation to subgroups like Korean Americans. However, it is reasonable to extrapolate from Figures 1 and 4 that the Korean American electorate is also growing in size in parallel with Asian Americans as a group.<sup>54</sup>





Source: Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplements

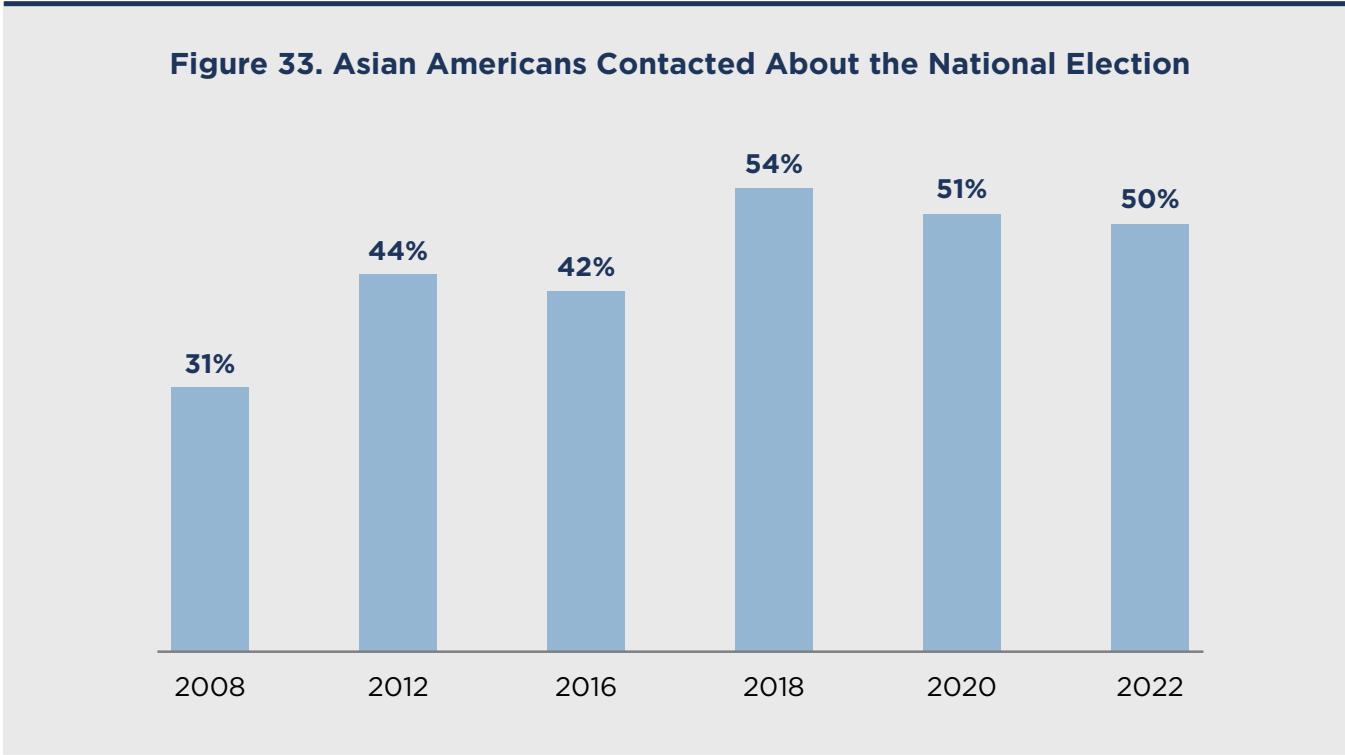
## The Evolution of the Korean American and AAPI Electorate

Of course, as the persistent gap between AAPI eligible voters and AAPI turnout shows, not all adults citizens will register to vote and cast a ballot. The gap between those who are eligible and those who vote is especially large for Asian Americans. Historical data show that voter registration rates among those citizens of voting age have been quite low for Asian Americans. In part, this is a function of the high proportion of foreign-born Asian Americans, including Korean Americans; there is a process and sequence involved in immigrants becoming citizens and then naturalized citizens becoming sufficiently politically aware enough to register to vote and to remain registered to vote.

In addition, what is true of voting in general is also true of voting and registering to vote for Asian Americans: mobilization and outreach beget participation. People register to vote more often when they are asked to do so. They vote more often when they are asked to do so.<sup>55</sup> Here, a key fact is that Asian Americans, historically, have been less likely than any other group to be asked to engage politically. In the 2008 presidential election, a year with very high overall levels of voter mobilization, the American National Election Study (ANES) found that 47% of Whites reported being contacted by political parties and asked to vote. The comparison figures were 38% for Blacks, 33% for Latinos and, notably, only 21% for Asian Americans.<sup>56</sup>

Asian Americans are thus also vulnerable to a vicious cycle of assumptions and outcomes. Because a majority of Asian Americans are foreign-born, a high proportion are newly naturalized citizens with no prior voting history and no record of registering to vote. This bumps up against candidates and campaigns with limited funds that aim to optimize votes, a constraint that generally advises against expending resources on potential voters who are either too expensive to reach, too uncertain to mobilize, or both. Because Asian Americans are likelier to have no record of having voted, they are likelier to be seen as too expensive and too unreliable to mobilize; then, because candidates and campaigns are not mobilizing Asian Americans, they are likelier to remain unregistered and to have no record of having voted.

The positive news is that data from recent elections suggest that this cycle is being broken. For one thing, social science research on “get out the vote” mobilization campaigns finds that the assumption that immigrant-based electorates like Asian Americans and Latinos are a poor return on the campaign investment is misguided. Campaigns that adopt personalized, conversational phone calls and targeted, multilingual mailers are very effective means to increase turnout among Asian Americans and Latinos.<sup>57</sup> Using the ANES as a yardstick, data from the 2020 ANES showed that 41% of Whites reported being contacted, compared to 36% of Blacks, 36% of Latinos, and 32% of Asian Americans. This 32% figure for Asian Americans in 2020 is notably higher than the 21% for Asian Americans in 2008, but it still lags behind reported rates of contact for Whites.

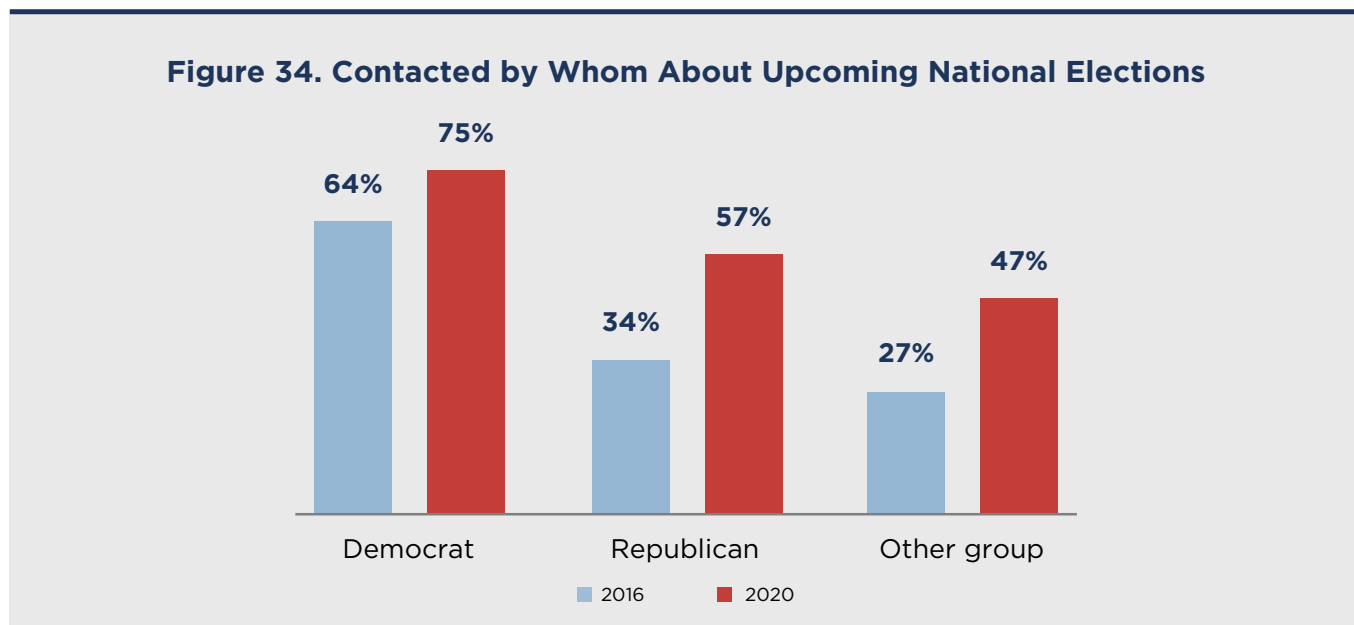


Source: 2008 National Asian American Survey; 2012, 2016, 2018, 2020 Asian American Election Poll; 2022 Midterm Election Voter Poll

While the ANES is the standard bearer for social science data on US politics, the Asian American sample in ANES surveys is admittedly quite small, and the ANES question about mobilization asks only about contact from political parties. Figure 33 shows a similar pattern of increased Asian American mobilization from various surveys that target larger, nationally representative samples of Asian Americans and that ask more broadly about multiple sources of mobilization. In the 2008 NAAS study, which asked about whether a “political party or a candidate” had contacted the respondent, 31% of Asian Americans reported being contacted. For the 2012 to 2022 polls, respondents were asked about contact from a “campaign, political party, or some other group not related to a political party like a community organization.” In 2012 and 2016, 44% and 42% of Asian Americans reported being contacted about registering or voting. Since 2018, more than half of Asian Americans in election surveys have reported being contacted about registering or voting.<sup>58</sup>

These findings show that while the rising tide of electoral participation among Asian Americans and Korean Americans may have many sources, key among them are the increased efforts to mobilize potential voters to register and turn out. This increased mobilization, moreover, is not just from partisan campaigns. Figure 34 shows the extent of election-related contact from the Democratic Party and its candidates, the Republican Party and its candidates, and non-partisan groups like community organizations for 2016 and 2020. There are several findings of note:

- Asian Americans are much likelier to be contacted by someone from the Democratic Party than someone from the Republican Party.
- Large numbers of Asian Americans are contacted by non-partisan groups.
- The rates of being contacted from all three sources (political parties and non-partisan groups) increased in 2020 compared to 2016; between 2016 and 2020, the increases in rate of contact from the Republican Party and its candidates and from non-partisan community groups were especially large.

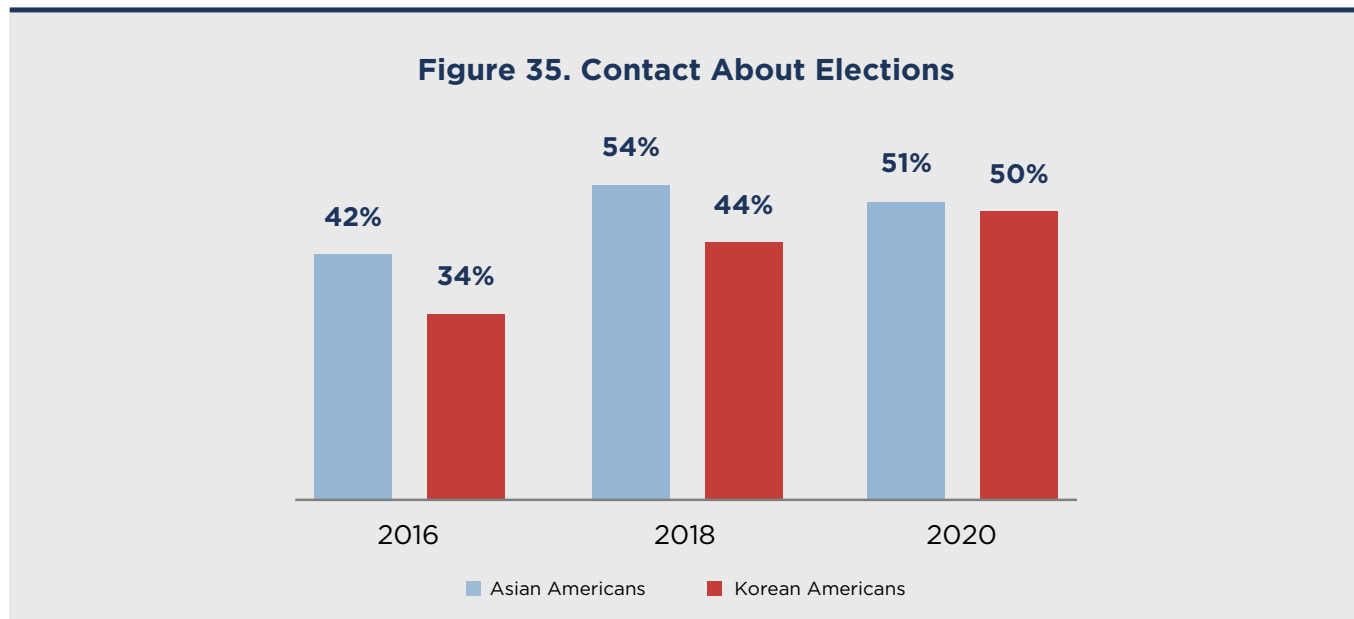


Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey, 2020 American Election Eve Poll

How do Korean Americans compare to Asian Americans in general on mobilization and contact? The 2016 to 2020 Election Eve Polls show several patterns of interest:

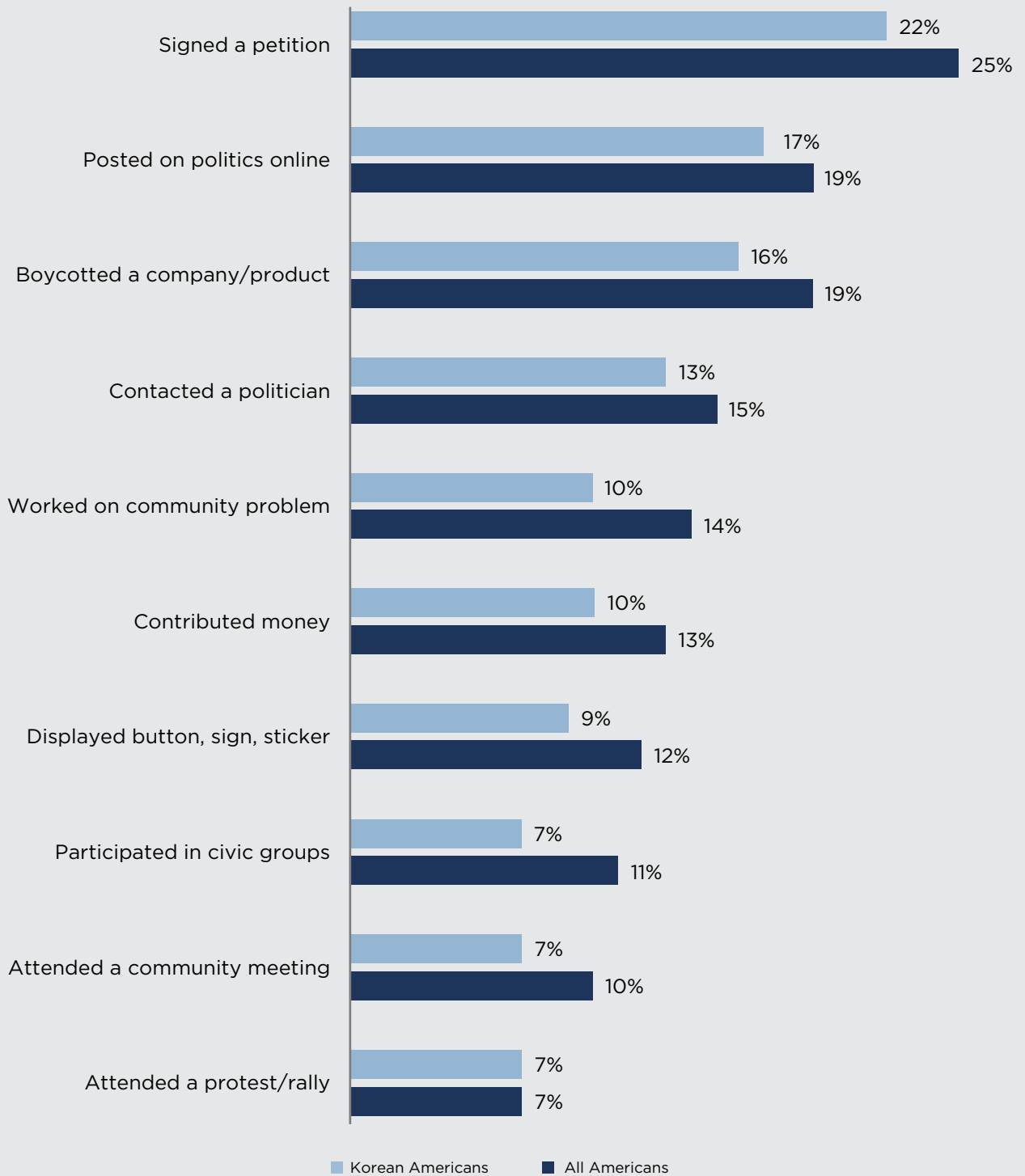
- Korean Americans in 2016 and, to a lesser extent, in 2018 were less likely to be the targets of outreach and mobilization than Asian Americans in general. In 2018, there was a 10% gap between Korean Americans and other AAPI groups.
- The AAPI and Korean American engagement gap had effectively closed by 2020. The 2020 Election Eve Poll found that 51% of Asian Americans and 50% of Korean Americans reported being contacted about voting or registering to vote in the elections. The sources of contact and mobilization for Korean Americans in 2020 were similar to those for Asian Americans in general: 72% of Korean Americans who were contacted were contacted by Democrats; 60% by Republicans; 44% by a non-partisan community organization.

Beyond voting, the 2020 CKA report noted, based on data from the 2018 Asian American Election Eve Poll, that Korean Americans were less likely to be engaged across a wide range of activities than other Asian Americans. Figure 36 shows that, based on the 2020 CMPS data, the same pattern holds even as the differences narrowed. The CMPS asked respondents if they had participated in any of the following 10 types of civic and political engagement since January 2020. For every kind of participation aside from attending a protest, march, or rally, Korean Americans were slightly less likely to engage than Americans in general. The CMPS also asked respondents if they “discussed politics with family and friends”: 57% of Korean Americans had discussed politics, compared to 59% of all respondents to the CMPS.<sup>59</sup>



Source: 2016, 2018, 2020 American Election Eve Poll

**Figure 36. Participation Across Multiple Contexts**

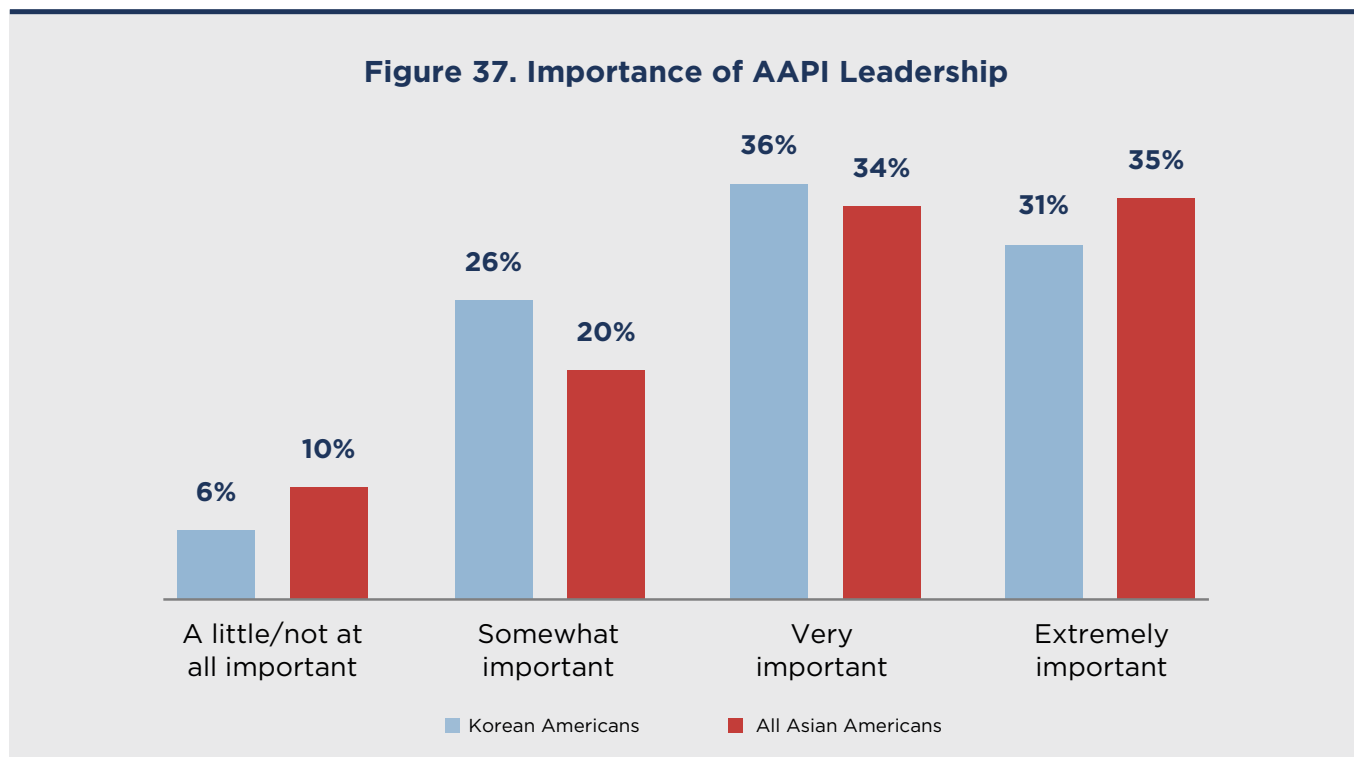


Source: 2020 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Survey

## A Hunger for Greater Representation and Mobilization

One upshot of these findings on civic and political engagement is that there is more work to do to assemble and organize Korean Americans, and that work represents the difference between a Korean American population and a Korean American *community*. This work of building community depends in many ways on having representation and leadership. The last two findings in this report offer hope because Korean Americans themselves are hungry for that representation and leadership. The 2020 CMPS asked, “How well represented do you think Asians are among U.S. politicians today?” In response, 72% of Korean Americans said Asians were “underrepresented,” 27% said they were “fairly represented,” and only 1% said “overrepresented.”

In comparison, 63% of other Asian Americans said Asians were “underrepresented,” 34% said “fairly represented,” and 3% said “overrepresented.” Finally, the 2020 CMPS asked, “How important is it for the U.S. Asian community to have a national leader advancing its concerns?” Here, Koreans were similar to other Asian Americans: 67% of Korean Americans said “very” or “extremely” important, compared to 69% of all Asian Americans. In sum, while the mobilization of the Asian American electorate and the successes of Asian American candidates for political office are impressive, Korean Americans and Asian Americans generally clearly see the need for more efforts to build political power and community.



Source: 2016 National Asian American Survey

## CONCLUSION

This updated report on the status of Koreans in the United States has captured a data panorama of where the community is today, spanning a range from demographic changes and health and socioeconomic status to reports of bias and hardship, perceptions of group belonging and race relations, and political orientation and engagement. It covers more terrain than can be justly discussed in a concluding section, but the panorama, taken in all at once, offers a unique look into the triumphs and tribulations, patterns, and paradoxes that represent the national Korean American community today. Here are a few key findings of focus to consider based on the analyses in this report:

- **GROWING, YET SLOWING:** Demographically, Korean Americans as a population have grown remarkably in size over the past half century. At the same time, the rate of that growth has slowed significantly in conjunction with the declining rate of Korean immigration from abroad. The implication is that the character of the Korean American population is changing. Korean Americans are transforming from a primarily first generation and majority Korean-speaking community to a more US-born, English-speaking, acculturated community with possibly weaker connections to traditional Korean culture and values and current affairs in Korea.
- **SUCCESSFUL, YET LAGGING:** Socioeconomically, Korean Americans are among the most highly educated groups in the US and earn above median in income. At the same time, income lags significantly behind education, and many Korean Americans live in economic precarity—especially older Korean Americans. Surveys also show that many Korean Americans face mental health challenges, sexual harassment in the workplace, racial discrimination, and microaggressions, and they are treated as perpetual foreigners in the United States.
- **RACIAL SOLIDARITY, BUT INTERRACIAL SCHISMS:** Many Korean Americans see their experience through a racial and a collective lens—identifying as Korean Americans, seeing many dimensions of commonality unifying Asians in America, and expressing a sense of a linked fate with other Korean and Asian Americans. At the same time, Korean Americans seldom interact with Blacks and Latinos, and surveys suggest continued friction and distance, especially with African Americans.
- **POLITICIZED, YET UNDER-MOBILIZED:** Korean American voters, like other Asian Americans, have grown in number and become solidly Democratic, with largely liberal positions on policy issues. At the same time, Korean Americans remain underrepresented in political office 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 patterns and paradoxes 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 PARADOX OF SLOWING GROWTH** means that we cannot bank on continued increases in population number to do the work of building power and influence for the Korean American community.
- **THE PARADOX OF SOCIOECONOMIC STRUGGLES** topples popular accounts of Korean Americans as a model minority. While many have achieved soaring heights in their professions and their communities, too many Korean Americans remain left behind, and too many experience daily hardships and reminders of being a perpetual outsider in American social and economic life.
- **THE PARADOX OF RACE POSES** a challenge for organizing and acting collectively as a group. Many issues of particular concern to Korean Americans—health care, education, immigration, inequality, and race relations—require collaboration and coalitions with other racial and ethnic communities. Organizations like the Council of Korean Americans need to invest in relational work with allied organizations representing Black, Latino, and other racial communities.
- **THE PARADOX 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 patterns, perhaps because they are paradoxical, 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 the data are either absent, incomplete, or aggregated only to the level of Asian Americans on many issues concerning the Korean American community. The many knowledge gaps include example topics, such as:

- Finer-grained data on public health and mental health outcomes
- Economic precarity facing both older and younger Korean Americans
- Workplace harassment
- Bullying in schools
- Opinions on specific policy areas (e.g., US trade and security policy affecting the Koreas, higher education policy affecting Korean Americans)
- The sources of conflict between Blacks and Korean Americans
- The roots of the underrepresentation, under-mobilization and under-participation of Korean Americans in politics

In conclusion, the hope of this research initiative is that it will stimulate greater curiosity, deeper conversations, and additional analytical endeavors to understand this multifaceted and dynamic Korean American community and its evolving relationship with other groups in American society.



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Lee (2020). The 2020 report can be found online at: <https://councilka.org/2020-cka-national-report/>
- <sup>2</sup> This report uses the term “Latino” to describe self-identified Hispanics, Latinos, Latinas, and Latinx Americans and uses “black” and “African American” interchangeably. The report also uses “Asian Americans” and the more inclusive “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders” (or AAPIs). Although Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are distinct in many ways, they share important commonalities as minority groups in the United States. For the empirical analysis, where data are only available for Asian Americans, I will only use the term “Asian American.”
- <sup>3</sup> For more on this history, see Chang and Park (2019) and Hong (2018).
- <sup>4</sup> 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” category 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 “Koreans alone” for those who only identify as Koreans, or “Koreans alone or in combination” to also include those who identify as Koreans *and* another racial category (i.e., “Chinese” or “white”). For historical population counts, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> See <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popproj/data/tables.html>. These population projections make sometimes strong assumptions that key factors, such as political support for maintaining, decreasing, or increasing levels of immigration remain constant.
- <sup>6</sup> In the 2000 decennial census, the Census Bureau changed its “race” question from a format in which individuals were expected to choose only one racial category to identify with, to a “mark one or more” format in which individuals of multiracial background could identify with all the racial categories that describe their background. Since 2000, Census Bureau data by race have thus been reported in two formats: “alone” to describe the population counts, for a given racial category, of all individuals who only identify with that category and no others; “alone or in combination” to describe the population counts, for a given racial category, of all individuals who identify with that category, including those who identify with multiple categories.
- <sup>7</sup> See Espíritu (1992) and Maeda (2012).
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2023/asian-american-pacific-islander.html>. Population counts are for subgroups defined by “alone or in combination.” “Other Asian” combines any group that the American Community Survey estimates as smaller than 200,000 and includes Bhutanese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Mongolian, Sri Lankan, and counts described by the Census Bureau as “Other Asian, specified” and “Other Asian, unspecified.”
- <sup>9</sup> Source: <https://pewrsr.ch/31s3twf> and <http://data.cmsny.org>. Population counts of undocumented Americans typically undercount the true numbers.
- <sup>10</sup> Source: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2000/briefs/c2kbr01-16.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Lee (1966).

- <sup>12</sup> On reverse migration, see, e.g., Helene K. Lee’s *Between Foreign and Family: Return Migration and Identity Construction among Korean Americans and Korean Chinese* (Rutgers University Press, 2018); Stephen Cho Suh, 2019, “Racing ‘Return’: The Diasporic Return of US-raised Korean Americans in Racial and Ethnic Perspective,” *Racial and Ethnic Studies* 43(6): 1072-1090. Data for reverse migration rates are from Jessie Yeung and Jake Kwon, “They Left South Korea for the American Dream. Now their Children are Moving Back,” *Time* (May 14, 2023), accessed online at: <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/korean-american-migrants-south-korea-challenges-intl-hnk-dst>.
- <sup>13</sup> 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 Micro-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.
- <sup>14</sup> 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.
- <sup>15</sup> Clemans-Cope, Buettgens, and Recht (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Korean Americans also fare more poorly than other Asian American groups that are widely seen as successful immigrants. For Asian Indians, for example, the median household income in 2018 was an estimated \$119,858; only 4.5% were without health insurance; poverty rates among Asian Indians 65 and older was only 7.6%. Asian Indians, however, have substantially higher educational levels than Korean Americans (75.8% had a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2018).
- <sup>17</sup> The 90-10 ratios give a perhaps more intuitive comparison than the more commonly used Gini coefficient of the top and the bottom of an income distribution. Gini coefficients are perhaps the most commonly used measure of income inequality, calculated as the difference between observed cumulative income distribution and what that distribution would look like if income were distributed equally.
- <sup>18</sup> 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 year.
- <sup>19</sup> 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.”
- <sup>20</sup> The CMPS is a national survey of voters and non-voters that aims to draw representative samples from a diversity of racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States. The sample design of the CMPS aimed for a representative sample of Asian Americans, but not necessarily of Korean Americans. For a sample size of 400 respondents, the margin of error is +/- 5%, not considering additional error due to design effects. For more details, see <https://cmpsurvey.org/2020-survey/>.

- <sup>21</sup> For example, Yoonsun Choi and her colleagues' study of Korean American youth in the greater Chicago area found that up to 16% manifested suicidal ideation (Choi *et al*, 2020). Another study (Na *et al*, 2017) estimated that 15% of older Korean Americans in the greater Baltimore area also manifested suicidal ideation. And in the 2011 California Health Interview Survey, 40% of Korean Americans did not have access to a "usual source of care" (i.e., a primary health care provider), compared to 20% for AAPIs in general. And Koreans ranked the highest among all AAPIs on measures of psychological distress in the CHIS.
- <sup>22</sup> For example, many Black and Asian Americans have indicated in recent surveys that they have experienced an uptick in discrimination during the pandemic. See Neil Ruiz, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Christine Tamir's 2020 article: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/> Also, recent Pew Research work by Luis Noe-Bustamante, Neil Ruiz, Man Hugo Lopez, and Khadijah Edwards, suggests that Asian Americans feel anti-Asian American violence and threats are on the rise. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/05/09/about-a-third-of-asian-americans-say-they-have-changed-their-daily-routine-due-to-concerns-over-threats-attacks/>.
- <sup>23</sup> 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.
- <sup>24</sup> The Principal Investigators of the Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey referenced here designate the survey as the "2020" CMPS in reference to the 2020 election, even though the interviews were conducted in 2021 after the election.
- <sup>25</sup> Another routinized form of bias related to micro-aggressions 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).
- <sup>26</sup> Sue et al 2007
- <sup>27</sup> For other Asian Americans, the rate of experiencing micro-aggressions is slightly lower than for Korean Americans: 86% report at least one micro-aggression and on average, 2.1 kinds of micro-aggression in total in the past month.
- <sup>28</sup> The CMPS also asked, of half its sample, "How much do you believe you are an outsider in the United States?" To this question, 29% of Korean Americans replied that they believed "a lot" they were outsiders. This was a higher percentage for any other Asian American group, which ranged between 17% for Japanese-Americans and 24% for Asian Indians.
- <sup>29</sup> See <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2023/05/08/diverse-cultures-and-shared-experiences-shape-asian-american-identities/> and Ruiz, Noe-Bustamante, and Shah (2023). The exact question wording for this item was: "Some people say that the following things are important for being truly American. Others say that they are not important. Do you think each of the following is important to being truly American? ... believing in individual freedoms ... accepting people of diverse racial and religious beliefs ... respecting U.S. political institutions and laws ... being able to speak English ... being a Christian ... having been born in the U.S. ... being a U.S. citizen."
- <sup>30</sup> See <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/22-SAH-NationalReport-3.1.22-v9.pdf>.

- <sup>31</sup> See <https://www.napawf.org/our-work/march-2022/state-of-safety>. The National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum survey interviewed 2,414 adult AAPI women in January and February 2022; the publicly released findings do not disaggregate any of the above statistics by AAPI sub-group.
- <sup>32</sup> For comparison, only 27% of Korean American men and 30% of all non-Korean men in the CMPS reported being subject to unwanted sexual conversations or physical contact.
- <sup>33</sup> While the CMPS interviewed a nationally representative sample of nearly 15,000 respondents, its Korean American sample is only 392 respondents with 219 women and 173 men. The sample sizes of Korean American women for the follow-up items are 136 on reporting the experience and only 28 on whether action was taken and whether the report was believed.
- <sup>34</sup> The 2012 NAAS allowed respondents to identify with more than one of these identity labels. Looking just at the first identity labels chosen to “describe themselves” 48% described themselves as just Korean and another 33% identify as Korean American. By contrast, only 7% describe themselves firstly as Asian American and another 7% identify just as Asian firstly.
- <sup>35</sup> These questions was 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.
- <sup>36</sup> Ruiz, Noe-Bustamente, and Shah, 2023
- <sup>37</sup> 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 blacks and whites in the American racial hierarchy. On the history and continuing challenges of black-Korean conflict, see also Abelman and Lee (1995), Kim (2000), Lee (2002), and Kim (2008).
- <sup>38</sup> The still classic statement of the contact hypothesis is Gordon Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice*, Perseus Books (1954).
- <sup>39</sup> See Pew Research, *The Rise of Asian Americans Report*, Chapter 3: Intergroup Relations (2012). Report found: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2012/06/19/chapter-3-intergroup-relations/>
- <sup>40</sup> Younger Korean Americans in this analysis are those 18 to 35 years old; middle-aged Korean Americans are those 35 to 55 years old.
- <sup>41</sup> The age-based relationship for linked fate to Latinos is similar to that for African Americans, if not even more pronounced. For Korean Americans overall, 16% say what happens to Latinos affects them “a lot” or “a huge amount” and another 34% say “somewhat.” Among Korean Americans aged 35 and younger, the respective percentages are 19% and 39%; for those aged 50 and older, they are 5% and 23%.
- <sup>42</sup> New American Leaders Project (2016).
- <sup>43</sup> Lien and Esteban (2018).
- <sup>44</sup> Source: <http://aapidata.com/blog/aa-state-leg-elections-2018/>. The number of AAPI candidates running for state legislatures grew to an even higher 158 in 2020 (<https://aapidata.com/blog/aa-state-leg-elections-2020/>).
- <sup>45</sup> The voting numbers are mostly from the Voter News Service and the National Election Pool exit polls. These mainstream media 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.
- <sup>46</sup> The 2008 figure is the percentage of two-way vote intention in a pre-election poll among likely voters. The 2010 through 2020 figures are people who either report having voted (early or absentee) or who say they are absolutely certain to vote, in surveys fielded in the week prior to Election Day.
- <sup>47</sup> For example, see Ruiz, Noe-Bustamente, and Shah 2023



- <sup>48</sup> 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 Korean Americans likely voters intend to vote for Joe Biden over Donald Trump, including about 70% 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>.
- <sup>49</sup> Ruiz, Noe-Bustamente, and Shah 2023
- <sup>50</sup> 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 government should be doing.”
- <sup>51</sup> Based on an analysis of the 2018 Asian American Election Eve poll and the 2016 National Asian American Survey.
- <sup>52</sup> See <https://apiavote.org/wp-content/uploads/2022-Asian-American-Voter-Survey-Report.pdf>.
- <sup>53</sup> Source: Ruiz, Tian, and Krogstad, 2023: <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2023/06/08/asian-americans-hold-mixed-views-around-affirmative-action/>.
- <sup>54</sup> Data are from the biennial the Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplements. The CPS supplements are the primary federal reports on the US 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 data are also limited by not interviewing in any Asian language. See <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting.html>.
- <sup>55</sup> Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).
- <sup>56</sup> The ANES question was worded as follows: “As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?”
- <sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Janelle Wong, Mobilizing Asian American Voters: A Field Experiment, 601 *Annals. Am. Assoc. Pol. Soc. Sci.*, 102-114 (2005); Lisa Garcia Bedolla and Melissa Michelson, What Do Voters Need to Know? Testing the Role of Cognitive Information in Asian American Voter Mobilization, 37 *Am Pol Research* 2: 254-274 (March 2009).
- <sup>58</sup> By comparison, the 2008 NAAS question was worded thus: “In the past 12 months, has a political party or candidate contacted you about a campaign?” The 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020 Election Eve polls, by contrast, asked respondents, “Over the past few months, did anyone from a campaign, political party, or some other group not related to a political party like a community organization ask you to vote or register to vote?”
- <sup>59</sup> The 2020 CKA report noted that participation gaps were especially large among younger Korean Americans, compared to their age peers in the rest of the Asian American community. Based on the 2020 CMPS data, most of these differences are no longer detectable in part because the CMPS has a smaller sample of Korean Americans and thus most differences are not greater than the margin of error. For example, the CMPS’ sample of Korean Americans under age 35 is 136 respondents, which carries a margin of error of about ±8%.



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Born in Masan, South Korea, Lee spent his childhood years in rural Malaysia, lower Manhattan, and suburban Michigan. In his free time, he is a crossword enthusiast, tennis junkie, and a Golden State Warriors and Tottenham Hotspur fanatic.



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