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## The Need for Asian American Data Disaggregation

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### **Abstract**

What would data disaggregation for Asian Americans look like, and why does it matter? Disaggregating the broad category of “Asian” or “Asian American” into subgroups which take national or ethnic origin into account can help to illuminate the disparities present between different Asian American communities. This would allow for a more accurate assessment of need and thus equitable resource allocation for historically disadvantaged groups, for instance Southeast Asian refugee populations such as the Lao, Cambodian, Hmong, and Vietnamese. In this paper, I will discuss the concept of Asian American panethnicity and how it negatively impacts marginalized subgroups by perpetuating the “model minority” myth, masking the disparities revealed in disaggregated data on educational attainment, for example. I will then use Rhode Island’s 2016 “All Students Count Act” as a case study to explore the debate surrounding this issue, arguing that data disaggregation to substantiate the need for affirmative action should not be considered race-based discrimination, but a race-conscious practice that can support and facilitate success in more disadvantaged Asian American communities.

*Keywords:* Asian American Data Disaggregation; Southeast Asian Data Disaggregation; Disparate educational attainment levels among API subgroups; Model Minority Myth; Affirmative Action

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## **I. Introduction**

What would data disaggregation for Asian Americans look like, and why does it matter? Disaggregating the broad category of “Asian” or “Asian American”<sup>1</sup> into subgroups which take national or ethnic origin into account can help to illuminate the disparities present between different Asian American communities. This would allow for a more accurate assessment of need and thus equitable resource allocation for historically disadvantaged groups, for instance Southeast Asian refugee populations such as the Lao, Cambodian, Hmong, and Vietnamese. In this paper, I will discuss the concept of Asian American panethnicity and how it negatively impacts marginalized subgroups by perpetuating the “model minority” myth, masking the disparities revealed in disaggregated data on educational attainment, for example. I will then use Rhode Island’s 2016 “All Students Count Act” as a case study to explore the debate surrounding this issue, arguing that data disaggregation to substantiate the need for affirmative action should not be considered race-based discrimination, but a race-conscious practice that can support and facilitate success in more disadvantaged Asian American communities.

## **II. Background**

### **A. On Asian American Panethnicity and the Model Minority Myth**

The pan-Asian identity can be traced back to the 1960s, when it was employed by Asian American college activists who came together against racism under a collective, self-proclaimed identity, highlighting a shared struggle against Western imperialism and US racism that transcended ethnic divisions.<sup>2</sup> According to Asian American and Ethnic Studies scholar Yen Le

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<sup>1</sup>Since there is already an ongoing and relatively successful effort to disaggregate Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (NHOPI or NHPI) data from the umbrella API (Asian Pacific Islander) label, this paper will focus on the effort to disaggregate Southeast Asian data from the broad panethnic category of “Asian” in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Espiritu, “Asian American Panethnicity: Challenges and Possibilities”, p. 121.

Espiritu, the social construction and institutionalization of the Asian American pan-ethnic identity was essentially a reappropriation of an imposed, racialized label by other groups in the US. The adoption of the pan-Asian label allowed for more effective organizing as a political bloc. There is power in numbers when it comes to political and civic participation, and the Asian American community was a fast-growing population ready to take advantage of this opportunity to assert their presence in American society.

Importantly, Espiritu also recognizes the transformation of this pan-ethnic concept since the post-1965 surge of Asian immigration, especially considering refugee migration from war-torn countries in Southeast Asia. Before 1965, US-born Japanese and Chinese Americans made up the core of the Asian American population. In contrast, Asian Americans are the most diverse ethnic group today, with twenty-four national origin groups recorded in the U.S. Census of 2000.<sup>3</sup> To highlight how drastically these demographics have changed throughout the years, the Japanese American share of the Asian American population went from 41 percent in 1970, to only 8 percent in 2000.<sup>4</sup> The ethnic, generational, and socio-economic differentiations that have emerged from these demographic shifts call for a complication of the pan-Asian label.

A significant implication of Asian panethnicity is that it can perpetuate the misleading notion that APIs form one homogenous group-- a group that has long been subjected to the myth of the “model minority”. This framing of Asian Americans as one monolithic, high-achieving group masks the diversity of experience and background that exists within the API community. For example, the experience of Southeast Asians who arrived in the US as refugees is vastly different to those who migrate through employer-sponsored H-1B visas, as Lee et al. note. These differences in migration history cannot be ignored, as they manifest in socioeconomic extremes

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<sup>3</sup> Lee et. al, “Accurately Counting Asian Americans Is a Civil Rights Issue”, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> Espiritu, p. 124

when it comes to educational attainment, poverty levels, median household income, and political participation, to start.<sup>5</sup>

Though ethnic-specific and pan-ethnic identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, it must be recognized that these categorizations have real-life implications when it comes to data collection and resource distribution for the disadvantaged subgroups of Asian Americans.

### **B. Disparities within the API Community**

When disaggregating Asian American data, it is clear that a pan-ethnic label does not accurately represent the diversity of experience within the broader Asian Pacific Islander (API or AAPI) community. The disparate levels of educational attainment and related factors in the Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese American communities versus other Asian American subgroups or aggregate data of APIs in general can help to illuminate this reality.

There is a stark contrast between the educational attainment levels of Southeast Asian groups and those of their East and South Asian counterparts. According to AAPI Data,<sup>6</sup> the percentage of Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese with a bachelor's degree or higher rests at 19.8, 16.6, 18.3, and 29.6 percent, respectively-- drastically lower compared to 54.6 percent for Chinese and 74.5 percent for Asian Indians. The aggregate statistic of 53.5 percent for the category of "Asian American" masks the significant gap in educational attainment between these subgroups.

Poverty is a major factor in access to higher education. Financial barriers and lack of resources to pursue a higher education are realities that many living in poverty must face.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Lee et al., p. 194

<sup>6</sup> AAPI Data source: Bureau of the Census, Analysis of PUMS Data ACS 5-Year Estimates: <http://facts.aapidata.com/nationaldata/>

<sup>7</sup> SEARAC's 2013 Fact Sheet- Increase Access to Higher Education: <https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Increase-Access-to-Higher-Education-Why-Are-Southeast-Asian-Americans-Not-Going-to-College.pdf>

may explain why Southeast Asian Americans have a much lower rate of educational attainment: the percentage of children in poverty in the Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese communities are 20.1, 29.8, 20.5, and 15.7, respectively, while the aggregate statistic of Asian American children in poverty falls at a much lower 2.3 percent (5.5 percent for Asian Indians and 12.6 percent for Chinese).

This data is indeed consequential, especially considering its effects on resource allocation. The decennial U.S. census is just one example of how important accurate data collection is. Population and housing data collected in the census is used to create over 52 datasets and statistical indicators, which are then used to determine how federal grant funding is distributed to states, local governments, and other grantees.<sup>8</sup> For Southeast Asian American communities, disaggregated data collection is essential when public investments in targeted programs such as language assistance, academic support services, and college outreach and mentorship programs are at stake.

### **III. A Case Study of Rhode Island's All Students Count Act**

Though there have been many instances of vitriolic opposition against efforts to disaggregate Asian American data (especially from the Chinese American community), let us take Rhode Island's "All Students Count Act" as an example. In July of 2017, Governor Gina Raimondo (D) of Rhode Island signed the H5453A bill into law, which set a new requirement for the Rhode Island department of elementary and secondary education "to use separate collection categories and tabulations for specified Asian ethnic groups in every demographic report on ancestry or ethnic origins of students."<sup>9</sup> The subgroups to be included were: Cambodian,

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<sup>8</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts (February 2020): <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/02/20/the-2020-census-is-coming-and-the-results-will-impact-state-budgets>

<sup>9</sup> Electronic copy of the H5453A bill: <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText17/HouseText17/H5453A.pdf>

Filipino, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, and other Southeast Asian ethnic groups. This was considered to be a win by Southeast Asian community advocacy groups such as the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) who have been campaigning for data disaggregation for years.

However, this legislation was met with significant backlash from members of the Chinese American community. The Providence Journal reported that 50 people had gathered in front of the State House to protest the signing of the bill. A petition to repeal the “discriminatory legislation” garnered 1,943 signatures on Change.org.<sup>10</sup> Opponents claimed that the bill was discriminatory in singling out the Asian American population, which only made up 3.6 percent of the total population of Rhode Island. “No other racial group is subject to such intrusive or divisive measures of inquiry,” one protestor said, while another even compared the bill to Nazi Germany’s 1935 Nuremberg Law, making the argument that the German legislation “singled out Jews in the pretense of data collection, only to be conveniently used as a basis for genocide in the following decade.”<sup>11</sup> This comparison shows the extent to which these Chinese-American protestors saw the legislation as a threat to their own community and livelihoods.

This case of the “All Students Count Act”, meant to bring more attention and resources to the under-recognized Southeast Asian community, highlights the ongoing debate on race-based policy making and affirmative action within the Asian American community. To attempt to understand the rationale behind this opposition to data disaggregation, we must look at the issue within its larger framework of affirmative action and race-conscious policy.

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<sup>10</sup> Link to this petition (closed): <https://www.change.org/p/the-governor-and-state-legislators-of-rhode-island-repeal-the-discriminatory-legislation-all-students-count-act-ri-s0439>

<sup>11</sup> Providence Journal article by Jacqueline Tempera (2017): <https://www.providencejournal.com/news/20170720/protesters-oppose-law-that-requires-schools-to-gather-data-on-asian-americans>

## **IV. Analysis**

### **A. Data Disaggregation in Relation to Affirmative Action**

Speaking on Chinese American opposition to new legislation to disaggregate Asian American data, Dr. Karthick Ramakrishnan asserts that affirmative action is a main issue driving this fight over data collection, as many of the immigrants from mainland China who are protesting these measures are worried about their children's schooling.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, their opposition is based on the fear that this data will be used to revive affirmative action, which is perceived to negatively impact their children's chances of getting into top universities.

This larger debate on affirmative action within the API community is best demonstrated through the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard* case, which began in 2014 when a coalition of Asian Americans accused Harvard of using race-based discrimination to artificially limit the proportion of Asian students admitted.<sup>13</sup> They cite evidence from the fact that the proportion of Asian Americans at Harvard has remained constant at around 20 percent over the past 20 years despite significant increases in Asian American applications. In comparison, the proportion of APIs at UC Berkeley, banned by state law from factoring race or ethnicity into admissions<sup>14</sup>, is 43.2 percent (as of 2019 fall admissions<sup>15</sup>). However, this comparison overlooks the underrepresentation of particular API subgroups on these campuses.

Notably, although Asian Americans are often seen as overrepresented on UC campuses, the Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander communities remain proportionally underrepresented

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<sup>12</sup> NPR article by Hansi Lo Wang (2017): <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/05/541844705/protests-against-the-push-to-disaggragate-asian-american-data>

<sup>13</sup> Information on Harvard case primarily drawn from this Brown Political Review article by Ashley Chen (2018): <http://brownpoliticalreview.org/2018/03/data-disaggregation-matters-asian-americans/>

<sup>14</sup> Proposition 209 (1996) "Prohibits the state, local governments, districts, public universities, colleges, and schools, and other government instrumentalities from discriminating against or giving preferential treatment to any individual or group in public employment, public education, or public contracting on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin": [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_Affirmative\\_Action\\_Proposition\\_209\\_\(1996\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Affirmative_Action_Proposition_209_(1996))

<sup>15</sup> UC Berkeley Enrollment Data: <https://opa.berkeley.edu/uc-berkeley-fall-enrollment-data>



relative to their representation in the state. Take two Asian subgroups for example: Chinese and Cambodian. In California, the percent representation of the Chinese population within the state's AAPI community was 26.1 in 2010, while their percent representation of AAPI at UC Berkeley was 40.9; In contrast, the percent representation of the Cambodian population within California's AAPI community was 1.8, while at UC Berkeley it was 0.6.<sup>16</sup>

As demonstrated here, disaggregated data can expose issues that disproportionately impact particular Asian American subgroups. Counter to the opponents of affirmative action such as the plaintiffs of the Harvard case, I argue that a certain level of race-conscious policy is needed to remedy these disparities in educational representation.

### **B. Race Consciousness vs Race Classification**

Race-conscious policy that supports a “historical-race” perspective is necessary to remedy the disparities that are evident within the Asian American community. According to professor of law Neil Gotanda, historical race ascribes social meaning to race and embodies past and continuing racial subordination,<sup>17</sup> as opposed to “formal-race”, which is the conceptualization of race as a neutral, apolitical category. Opponents of affirmative action typically advocate for a “color-blind” position which equates race with formal-race<sup>18</sup>, disconnecting racial categories from their social and historical meaning.

Race-conscious policy recognizes historical-race as our reality in which historical subordination must be accounted for. To draw on an example mentioned previously, the experience of a Southeast Asian refugee coming from a war-torn country is vastly different than that of an H-1B sponsored immigrant. This is only one example, but there is no denying the

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<sup>16</sup> Information drawn from 2013 iCount report by CARE (National Commission on AAPI Research in Education): [http://care.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2013\\_iCount\\_Report.pdf](http://care.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2013_iCount_Report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Gotanda, “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution is Color-Blind’”, p. 2

<sup>18</sup> Gotanda, p. 19

diversity of experience and background that exists within the API community. Policies which consider this diversity are necessary to address the needs of historically disadvantaged communities and help promote their success. In education, this may mean using race as a plus-factor in college admissions, or providing more funding and support for outreach and retention programs. It is important to note the distinction between these sorts of race-conscious policies and policies which employ race classification to primarily use race as a defining characteristic of a person or group, which is not the intention of affirmative action.

## **V. Conclusion**

Disaggregated data is needed to draw attention to the disparities that exist within the Asian American community and support affirmative action to address these disparities. Essentializing the Asian experience in America as one of success, whether through the perpetuation of the model minority myth in common discourse or through the aggregation of API data, masks the struggles of disadvantaged subgroups which remain marginalized through this narrative. The movement for Asian American data disaggregation, promulgated by various API advocacy groups such as the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC) and National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE), has led to some success in the legislative front, such as the Obama Administration's \$836,000 grant to improve data collection in 2016.<sup>19</sup> However, more work is needed to make this cause for Asian American data disaggregation widely known and implemented in local, state, and federal policy.

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<sup>19</sup> TendersInfo, 2016 :<https://advance.lexis.com/document?crd=542b454c-f85e-481d-8a49-f0709f02693f&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A5M61-3SM1-JDJN-640J-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=343637&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true>

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