



Asian American Federation

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Poverty Is Serious and Widespread for Asian Americans in New York City, Asian American Federation Reports in Census Analysis

Study Shows Asians Are Working Poor and Have Highest Elderly Poverty Rate; Nonprofit Suggests Broad Measures to Help Raise Asians' Living Standard

NEW YORK – Poverty among Asian Americans in New York City is serious and widespread although the general public is largely unaware of it, according to a census-based report released today by the nonprofit Asian American Federation. The fact that Asians are the fastest-growing major race or ethnic group in the city magnifies the issue. Poverty is particularly severe for senior citizens, as well as Cambodian, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese and Pakistani Americans.

Working but Poor: Asian American Poverty in New York City is the first detailed analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey and Census 2000 data regarding poor and low-income Asian New Yorkers. The report reveals little-known Asian characteristics and points out many demographic distinctions between Asians and city residents overall. It also suggests comprehensive measures to help Asians improve their lives. (An executive summary is available at www.aafederation.org/research.)

The Federation will hold a briefing and panel discussion on its study Thursday, Oct. 30, from 8:30 to 11 a.m. at the United Way of New York City office at 2 Park Ave. The event is open to the public, but seating is limited and preregistration is required. To register or obtain more information, contact Julie Chan at julie.chan@aafederation.org.

"Our findings counter the widely held perception of Asian Americans doing well financially," said Cao K. O, executive director of the Asian American Federation. "Almost one-fifth of Asian New Yorkers lived in poverty and close to half of this largely working-poor, immigrant population was in the low-income bracket in 2006."

Noting a contradiction, O added: "New York City's Asian American community contributes significantly to the city's economy. Yet many Asians are vulnerable and unprotected, trapped on the low rungs of the economic ladder. Our analysis indicates they are hampered by effects of their immigrant status, including language barriers, as well as limited access to health and retirement benefits."

Key Findings

Among the report's major findings:

Asians in New York City have extremely high poverty and low-income rates.

- About 18.5 percent of Asian New Yorkers lived below the poverty level in 2006, exceeding 10.8 percent of the city's non-Hispanic whites. The 19.3 percent poverty rate for the total city population was only slightly higher. The same patterns applied in 2000, when the Asian poverty rate was 19.6 percent.
- About 41 percent of New York City's Asian residents were low-income, with income less than twice the poverty level, in 2006. That rate topped 24 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 39 percent of all city residents.
- Some Asian ethnic groups are extraordinarily poor. Cambodians, with a 31 percent poverty rate; Bangladeshis (29 percent); Vietnamese (28 percent); and Pakistanis (27 percent) had the highest poverty rates in 2000, the most recent year for which this information is available for all Asian ethnicities. These rates were much higher than the overall Asian rate of 19.6 percent in 2000.

Poor and low-income Asian working-age adults (age 18 to 64) are more engaged in the labor force than the total New York City working-age population.

- Almost half (47 percent) of working-age Asians below the poverty level and 71 percent of Asians that age in the near-poor bracket (between the poverty level and the top of low-income standing) had a job or were actively seeking one in 2006, compared with 42 percent and 68 percent, respectively, of all working-age New Yorkers.

- The unemployment rate for poor working-age Asians was 16 percent, lower than 27 percent for all poor city residents in that age group.
- Poor and low-income Asians were concentrated in service, production, transportation and material-moving occupations and in the food services, retail, manufacturing and construction industries.
- Educational attainment and income level were less linked for Asians than for the general population.

Asian senior citizens are the poorest of any major elderly race or ethnic group in the city.

- Nearly 1 in 3 Asian seniors (age 65 or older) lived in poverty in 2006. Their 31.3 percent poverty rate made them more likely to be poor than Hispanics (29.8 percent), blacks (19.8 percent), non-Hispanic whites (13.6 percent), and New Yorkers overall (19.4 percent).
- From 2000 to 2006, the Asian elderly poverty rate jumped by one-third (from 23.6 percent), coinciding with 46 percent growth in the city's total Asian senior population.
- More than half (54.1 percent) of Asian seniors had low-income status in 2006, surpassing 42.6 percent of older New Yorkers overall, 47 percent of elderly blacks, and 34 percent of non-Hispanic white seniors.
- Almost all elderly Asians in poverty (97 percent) in 2006 were immigrants, and 91 percent of the poor Asian senior population had limited English ability.

About one-fourth of Asian children in the city are poor, and many experience language isolation.

- The 25.6 percent Asian child poverty rate in 2006 far exceeded 14.5 percent for non-Hispanic whites and was only slightly lower than 28.3 percent city-wide.
- The child poverty rate for Asians rose by 13 percent (from 22.6 percent) from 2000 to 2006, while these rates fell slightly for all other major race and ethnic groups, as well as the general population.
- Almost one-third (32 percent) of poor school-age Asian children (age 5 to 17) had limited English proficiency, more than twice the 15 percent rate for all city children in that age group. Nearly half (49 percent) of Asian children in poverty lived in linguistically isolated households, in which no adults spoke English very well and no adults spoke English only.

Households headed by married couples are most common for Asians in poverty, as opposed to single heads of households for the city's poor population overall.

- The majority (56 percent) of poor Asian households in 2006 were headed by married couples, while about one-fourth (26 percent) of all poor city households had that structure.
- More than half (55 percent) of Asian children in poverty lived with both parents, of whom only the father worked. In contrast, the majority (58 percent) of all poor children in the city lived with only their mothers, slightly more than half of whom were employed.
- About two-thirds (64 percent) of poor Asian senior citizens lived in households headed by married couples, frequently as part of an extended family.
- Asians in non-family households had the highest poverty rates (26 percent overall and 58 percent for seniors), while households led by single women were most likely to be poor in the general population.

Policy Considerations

The report outlines several steps to enable Asian New Yorkers, and in some cases, the broader immigrant population, to break out of poverty or low-income circumstances. It calls for:

- Increasing economic opportunities for immigrants, aiming for diversified business opportunities to reduce vicious competition, and for higher wages and job advancement.
- Improving economic conditions and business practices in immigrant enclave economies, encouraging employers to comply with tax and labor laws, and educating workers to establish and document their employment history to qualify for Social Security and related benefits upon retirement.
- Expanding the supply of affordable housing in immigrant neighborhoods.
- Investing in affordable, licensed child care; extended school programs; and youth development in immigrant communities to better position their children for future success in breaking the poverty cycle.
- Broadening health-insurance availability, and make health care linguistically and culturally accessible.
- Offering additional opportunities for active seniors to hold jobs and paid volunteer positions.

Working but Poor: Asian American Poverty in New York City received funding from the C.J. Huang Foundation, the Ong Family Foundation, and the United Way of New York City.

The Asian American Federation (www.aafederation.org) is a New York City-based nonprofit organization that advances the civic voice and well-being of Asian Americans by collaboratively fostering community philanthropy, undertaking research to inform policies, and supporting community service organizations.