

EXPLAINER: ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1965 AND ASIAN AMERICA TODAY



THE FILIPINO VETERANS RECOGNITION
AND EDUCATION PROJECT

TEACHER BACKGROUND

Generally speaking, two factors affect immigration to the United States: U.S. immigration laws and policies, and the economic, political and social conditions in the migrants' homelands. To a lesser extent, the U.S. economy is also a factor, as job opportunities here draw immigrants and lead to more immigration-friendly policies when labor is in short supply.

Prior to 1965, extremely strict quota laws restricted immigration from Asia. Indeed, the first national origins law in U.S. history, in 1886, was designed to exclude Chinese immigrants. National origins quota laws, passed in 1924, sharply cut off the small flow of immigrants from other Asian countries. There were some exceptions: until 1935, Filipinos, as colonial subjects, could immigrate to the United States. Many Asian immigrants were able to migrate to Hawaii, which was a U.S. territory and the site of large-scale plantation agriculture, therefore exempt from some U.S. immigration laws and (in the eyes of U.S. business interests) in need of cheap labor. Those Asian immigrants who were able to migrate before the laws changed established small communities, though restrictive policies enforced painful separation for those who were stranded here far from family members back in their home countries.

There's no denying the fact that U.S. immigration quotas and exclusions were rooted in racism. Ugly caricatures were common in U.S. media and Congress members cited eugenicist "science" and the need for racial purity in defense of quota laws. Many white Americans were threatened by labor and economic competition, and Asian immigrants, usually easy to identify by sight due to physical appearance or distinctive clothing, made them vulnerable to harassment and violence.

The Immigration Act of 1965 struck down quotas. The law prioritized family reunification and the migration of high-skilled workers. The parents, spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens or legal residents can immigrate relatively easily; it takes longer and there are many more hoops to jump through for adult children. High-skilled workers, usually defined as those having a college degree in a high-demand field, still need a job offer or an employer willing to fill out a lot of paperwork. The visas for high-skilled workers are called H1-B visas.

The U.S. also admits a small number of refugees every year, though those numbers have sharply declined since 2016. There is virtually no legal way to immigrate to the United States for low-skilled workers without legal family members already here. And of course, once an immigrant arrives, he or she has to navigate a dizzyingly complex and lengthy process to become a citizen. In 1996 the U.S. passed a new law to step up immigration enforcement. In recent years, despite advocacy and popular support, Congress has failed to pass the DREAM Act, which would enable children of undocumented immigrants, many of whom have lived here most of their lives, to naturalize as U.S. citizens.



EXPLAINER: ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1965 AND ASIAN AMERICA TODAY

Since 1965, the largest share of immigrants have come from Latin America (nearly 1/3 from Mexico alone), but that wave has slowed in recent years. Since 2011, the largest number of immigrants have come from Asia. A 2015 Pew Research study predicted that by 2055, the largest share of immigrants will come from Asia and account for 38% of the U.S.'s foreign-born population. It also predicted that by 2065, about 14% of the U.S. population would be Asian American, up from about 6% in 2015.

Half of new immigrants in 2013 settled in just one of four states: California, Florida, New York or Texas. But chain migration patterns have led to distinctive Asian American communities scattered across the U.S.: Vietnamese immigrants along the Gulf Coast and Oklahoma, a large Burmese community in Indiana, Laotians in Minnesota and Hmong in Wisconsin and North Carolina, are just a few examples.

The earliest Asian immigrants to the United States came primarily from China, with smaller numbers from Japan, Korea, the Philippines and India. Over time, though, the sources of Asian immigration to the United States have changed, as the following charts show. The reasons for migrating have also changed. Constant, however, is the U.S.'s need for labor and migrants' desire to make a better life in the American economy, though the industries (gold and railroads, truck farming, pineapple and sugar plantations, medicine, engineering, Silicon Valley) have varied greatly over time.

There are many linkages between U.S. foreign policy and the arrival of waves of immigration to the United States. Long-standing ties between the Philippines in the United States, going back to when the Philippines were an American colony, have, over time, led to a large migration from the Philippines to the United States. Following the Vietnam War, many people immigrated from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as well Hmong people from the highlands of all three countries. American service members stationed in Japan, Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere have married locals and, in time, military spouses and their families have migrated to the U.S.

SUGGESTED TEACHING STRATEGIES

- › Talking about Asian immigration to the U.S. fits in many places in middle school and high school curricula, including in U.S. history, state history, Asian American Studies and/or Ethnic American Studies courses.
- › Asian America is diverse: it's composed of people from different national origins, arriving in different waves caused by a variety of economic, political and social conditions, and scattered across the U.S. There's no "one size fits all" description of Asian immigration or of the Asian American experience. A way to have students understand this rich diversity is to have them investigate the characteristics of the local Asian American community, including Asian immigrants. Students can use these methods and resources as they research:



EXPLAINER: ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1965 AND ASIAN AMERICA TODAY

- » U.S. Census Bureau: Look up your city or zip code for a high-level overview of recent demographics. <https://www.census.gov>
- » Pew Research surveys: There are many Pew Research Center studies on immigration and demographics, but this 2021 report charts the top three Asian-origin groups in each state: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>
- » Newspaper/media search: Look for reporting and human research stories about immigrant communities to get a sense of who’s here, where they live and what drew them to the area
- » Oral histories: Students can conduct interviews with Asian Americans about their families’ experiences in the U.S., including when they arrived, where they settled, what law or policies shaped their journey to the U.S., etc. *Duty to Country* oral histories that include immigration stories are veteran Celestino Almeda, veteran Rey Cabacar, activist Blesilda Ladines-Lim (recounting her father’s immigration story) and activist Sonny Izon (recounting his father’s immigration story.) <https://dutytocountry.org/oral-histories/interviews/>
- › Asian Americans have been racialized as “other” from the beginning. New York University’s “Keywords for Asian American Studies” includes a short but incisive essay to help you think critically and proceed carefully in discussions about race and Asian immigration in the U.S.: <https://keywords.nyupress.org/asian-american-studies/essay/race/>

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Common Core: Middle School

- › CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7 Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Common Core: High School

- › CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, 1965-2015

Country of Origin	Total	Percentage of immigrants to U.S. overall
China	3,175,000	5
India	2,700,000	5
Philippines	2,350,000	4
Korea	1,725,000	3
Vietnam	1,500,000	3

Source: Pew Research Center, “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065,” 28 September 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>

NATIONAL ORIGINS OF ASIAN AMERICANS, 2019

This chart shows the size and growth of the 13 largest origin groups among Asian Americans. In addition to total size, it also shows how much each group has grown since 2000 and what percentage of the Asian American population each group is. Note, this chart includes people born in the United States of Asian descent and immigrants from Asia. It does not include Asian Americans who identify as more than one race on the census.

Country of Origin	2019 Population	Growth since 2000	Percentage of Asian American population
Chinese	5,399,000	88%	23%
Indian	4,606,000	142%	20%
Filipino	4,211,000	78%	18%
Vietnamese	2,183,000	78%	9%
Korean	1,908,000	55%	8%
Japanese	1,498,000	29%	6%
Pakistani	554,000	171%	2%



**EXPLAINER: ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES
SINCE 1965 AND ASIAN AMERICA TODAY**

Thai	343,000	128%	1%
Cambodian	339,000	64%	1%
Hmong	327,000	75%	1%
Laotian	254,000	28%	1%
Bangladeshi	208,000	263%	<1%
Nepalese	198,000	2,005%	<1%
Burmese	189,000	1,031%	<1%
Indonesian	129,000	105%	<1%
Sri Lankan	56,000	127%	<1%
Malaysian	38,000	106%	<1%
Mongolian	27,000	358%	<1%
Bhutanese	24,000	11,288%	<1%

Source: Pew Research Center, “Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S.,” 29 April 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>

Focus Question:

- › Overall, what is the largest source of Asian immigrants to the U.S.? What are the largest national-origin groups among Asian Americans overall?
- › Which Asian-origin groups are fastest growing in the U.S.? Which ones are slowest-growing?
- › What factors may account for the difference in the overall size of each national-origin group, as well as for how much it has grown over the last 20 years?
- › Pick one of the national-origin groups and do some additional research. Find out what factors are contributing to that group’s migration to the U.S. since 2000, where most Asian Americans in the group live, and characteristics (age, education levels, professional niche, etc.) of the group. Look for factors in the group’s country of origin as well as changes in the U.S.
- › What factors have shaped Filipino migration to the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries? How does the Filipino American community compare to other national-origin groups?

