

The 'model minority' myth: Why Asian-American poverty goes unseen

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A girls' leadership workshop at the South Asian Youth Action center in Queens, New York. From left, Brittany D'sa, Jillian Cheng, Farrah Vandoten and Saima Sheikh.

IMAGE: MILES GOSCHA/MASHABLE

BY HUIZHONG WU
4 HOURS AGO

NEW YORK — From when he was a baby until he was 14 years old, Suhail Ahmed lived with his parents and older brother in a one-bedroom apartment in Queens.

"It was rough," Ahmed said. "We've always ended up getting what we needed, we've always got the essentials. But we never went above our means."

Ahmed is the son of Indian immigrants. He came to the United States from Abu Dhabi as a four-month-old. While his childhood wasn't easy, he said all of the kids he grew up with in Elmhurst, a neighborhood in Queens, lived similarly. Only after Ahmed turned 14 did his family move into a three-bedroom apartment.

SEE ALSO: [This is what it looks like when people have to wait for medical care \(and too many do\)](#)

Asian-Americans are one of the fastest growing groups in the country and will be the largest immigrant group in the U.S. by 2065, according to a recent [Pew Research Center report](#). They are also widely described as being more educated and better off than the average American. In a recent column, *The New York Times*' Nicholas Kristof celebrated the hard work and strong families behind the [overwhelming success](#) of Asian-Americans. He called it "The Asian Advantage."

But the positive narrative of upward mobility can be damaging when it masks poor Asian-American communities.

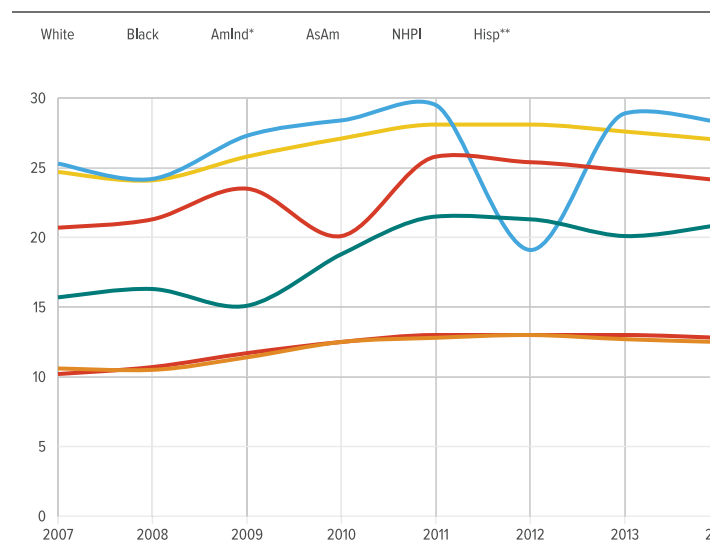
"It's hard to even prove poverty," said Chhaya Chhoum, executive director at Mekong, a community advocacy organization that works with Cambodian and Vietnamese populations in the Bronx. "There's the model minority myth that encompasses, isolates and has this blanket on all Asian populations."

The "model minority" myth presents an image of successful Asian-Americans that leaves little room for the 2 million Asian-Americans living in poverty. They include Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations like those in Ahmed's Queens. They also include Cambodian, Hmong and Laotian communities, which tend to experience more poverty than other Asian-American groups.

"There's a presumption that all [Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders] are rich and educated," said Josh Ishimatsu, director of research and capacity building at the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development. "The people who are not don't have much in the way of services available — they're just not known or seen."

Federal poverty rates by race and ethnicity 2007–2014

This chart shows the poverty rates in each community nationally over several years. As the data show, Asian-Americans track most closely with whites in the poverty rate.



Notes

*AmInd is American Indian. NHPI is Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

**Hispanic includes Hispanics of all ethnicities.

Source: American Community Survey (1-year estimates) 2007–2014

Credit: Huizhong Wu/Mashable

The other model minority

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, a wave of Southeast Asian refugees migrated to the United States after long periods of violence and instability in the region. Among them were Cambodian-Americans, who today have a poverty rate of 17.7%, about five points higher than the average rate for Asian-Americans in 2014.

After the Khmer Rouge regime killed off the artists and professional workers in Cambodia, those who were left were farmers and peasants. They resettled across the United States as refugees, where many ended up in poor neighborhoods that already had few resources and support.

Added to this was the problem of mental health. Many of the refugees had seen or experienced extreme violence at the hands of both the Khmer Rouge and American forces. These populations, traumatized and barely educated, moved into poor neighborhoods like the Bronx, Chhoum said.

There, they faced "the intersection of refugee poverty and urban poverty," Chhoum said. In the 1980s, the Bronx was the site of battles between drug gangs.

Upward mobility seemed less likely than jail in this environment.

Chhoum was one of these refugees herself. She came to the Bronx as a child with her parents in 1985. Both of her parents worked day and night. Chhoum went to the neighborhood school.

Yet, stereotypes about high-achieving Asians followed her throughout her life. In high school, Chhoum said many of her black friends would tell her, "You're the smart one." Teachers also expected a level of academic excellence from her. Chhoum said that while she did fine in school, she was not an academic overachiever.

"I don't know anything — I came from the same projects that you grew up in," she said to her friends.

Integration into the American poor

Chhoum's narrative of poor immigrant populations integrating into poor parts of American society can be seen again in a study that followed immigrant children from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s.

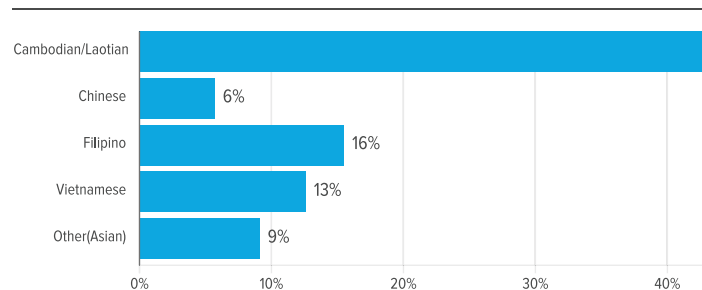
The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study tracked immigrants from Cambodia, Laos, China and the Philippines, among other countries. It found consistent gaps emerged over the years. Immigrants from Southeast Asia were more likely to have children by early adulthood than immigrants from China and the Philippines. They also had lower incomes and were less educated.

"The dictum that the rich get richer and the poor get children is well supported by figures" from the survey, wrote Alejandro Portes, a co-author of the study and of the book *Immigrant America*.

The reasons why this happens are not surprising. Immigrants who end up living in poor environments can suffer if a neighborhood lacks good schools, strong social organizations and role models for children, said Jeffrey Timberlake, a sociology professor at the University of Cincinnati.

Education gaps among Asian-Americans

This chart shows the portion of second-generation immigrants who have attained only a high school education or less. There is a clear gap between Cambodians/Laotians versus other Asian American groups. 46% of Cambodians and Laotians stopped their education after graduating high school versus 6% of Chinese.



Notes

Source: Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study III/Immigrant America: A portrait
Credit: Huizhong Wu/Mashable

Poverty by the numbers

The poverty rate for Asian-Americans has been relatively stable between 2007 to 2014. But as the Asian-American population has grown (from 13 million in 2007 to 16 million in 2014), the total number of Asian-Americans living in poverty has grown as well: from 1.3 million in 2007 to 2 million in 2014. More [recent analysis](#) of Census data shows that some of the biggest increases of Asian-Americans living in poverty are happening out in the American West.

In Arizona, the number of Asian-Americans living in poverty grew by 75% between 2007 and 2013. In the Seattle metropolitan area, the growth rate was 63% over the same period. In California, which is the state with the largest

Asian-American population, the number of those living in poverty increased by 50% between 2007 and 2011.

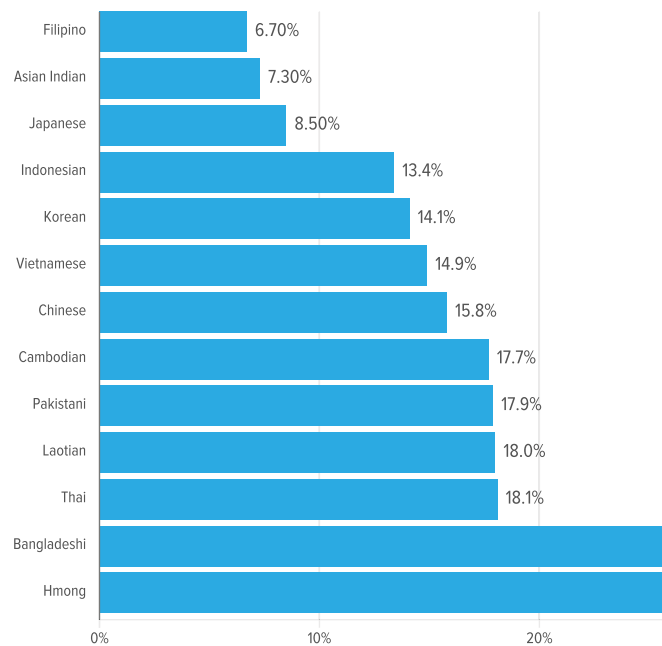
"I think that the word on the street has tended to be that Asian-Americans experience very low poverty. But this masks significant difference within the Asian-American community," said Rachel West, a senior policy analyst at the Poverty to Prosperity Program at the Center for American Progress. "With high levels of population growth among Asian-Americans, the population of those living in low-income or experiencing poverty has become much more sizable in recent years."

It's a recurring theme: Different identity groups tend to get subsumed under the blanket label, Asian.

For example, Minnesota is home to a significant community of Hmong, who nationally have a poverty rate of 28%. Yet, there is no unemployment or poverty data that systematically tracks the Hmong there.

Poverty rates among different Asian-American nationalities

This chart illustrates the stark difference in how different Asian-American groups experience poverty. It shows the poverty rate among Asian-Americans for whom the government measures poverty in 2014.



"When you don't have that detailed reporting, those groups get hurt because government officials don't think those need outreach, because they are Asian," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political science professor at the University of California, Riverside.

Buying into the model minority myth

Asian-Americans themselves often believe the larger narrative of Asian-American success because upward mobility does happen for many immigrants.

Yet, Ramakrishnan, who created an Asian-American statistics site called AAPIData.com, said that the Asian-American community can harm itself when it doesn't recognize the poverty in its communities.

For those who do well, "chances are they're less likely to make charitable contributions, because they think that most other Asians are doing as well off as they are," he said.

Poverty is not always a visceral thing. It is not necessarily found in dramatic photos of families who live in public housing with the walls crumbling down or vacant lots where weeds replace green manicured lawns. It can also be described in terms of want. It means not being able to afford private violin lessons or SAT

tutors.



Suhail Ahmed, SAYA!'s college leadership and planning director and center director, said it is only within the past few years that things have changed financially for him.

IMAGE: MILES GOSCHA

It is in these invisible spaces where groups like Mekong and South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!), a group that works with teenagers in New York, step in.

Ahmed, the teenager from Queens, grew up attending SAYA!'s programs with his brother. Now Ahmed serves as the organization's college leadership and planning director and center director.

SAYA! attempts to close the resource gap for poor families by offering college application help, leadership groups and career-related programming, SAYA! Executive Director Sonia Bhuta said. The organization primarily works with low-income families — many of whom are immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — though it also serves middle-class families.

On a Friday afternoon over the summer, 22 girls gathered in the basement of a church in Elmhurst. The basement room where the girls sat in a large circle shielded them from the bright light outside.

The girls, part of a student leadership program at SAYA!, were debriefing after two recent trips. They had visited thrift shops and an ecology center as part of a lesson in becoming more aware of how they consume and what they consume.

They readily shared stories about how they managed their own closets — and how they would fight with their parents to throw things out. One girl talked about how her father would wear a pair of shoes until it was almost unwearable and only then he would buy another. She and her mother, though, were a completely different story.

"My mom needs a new handbag almost every month," another girl chimed in.

In a different room that afternoon, a group of high school students filled out a part of the Common Application to prepare for applying to college. They asked questions about campus visits and how to reach out to admissions counselors at different colleges.

When I asked, the students casually told me the names of universities they wanted to attend. Among them: MIT and Cornell.



Samara Ahmed leads a workshop on the Common Application for high school students at SAYA!'s center in Queens on July 31, 2015.

IMAGE: MILES GOSCHA

How do you count who's poor?

The federal government has been calculating the official poverty rate in the same way since the 1960s. As the country and economy have grown, experts say the methodology has not been adjusted to reflect a different standard of living for all Americans. While the Census Bureau does offer a [supplemental poverty index](#), some experts have also developed their own ways to measure poverty.

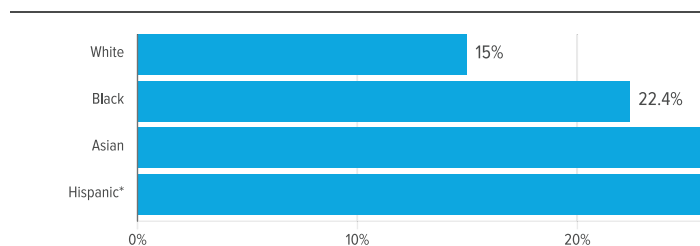
New York is the only major city to create its own poverty standard measure, which accounts for factors like the cost of housing and whether residents receive non-cash public assistance, like tax credits for lower-income people. They found that, in New York, the Asian population had the highest poverty rate out of all groups in the city at 25.9% in 2013, though the Hispanic population was not far behind at 25.8%.

In Wisconsin and California, independent researchers have also developed their own ways to measure poverty in their states.

According to the revised poverty measure used by researchers in California, the Asian-American poverty rate was 18.4%, in contrast with the federal level of 16% for the state. That brought the Asian population's poverty rate more in line with the black poverty rate, which under the revised measure stood at 20.8%.

NYC poverty rates 2013

This graph shows the adjusted poverty rate from 2013 of different ethnic groups in the city. This poverty rate takes into account factors such as amount of public assistance received, tax credits and the cost of living.



Notes

*Hispanic is inclusive of black, white and Asian Hispanics.

Source: Poverty Research Unit, NYC Center for Economic Opportunity, Mayor's Office of Operations
 Credit: Huizhong Wu/Mashable

It's hard not to see the reality of these numbers when one visits New York's Chinatown, where old, dilapidated buildings are crammed together.

As the real estate market brings more development to the area, Chinatown

residents who live in rent-controlled apartments can face a challenge from their landlords who want to sell to a more upmarket crowd. For young Chinese-Americans who live there now, some can face an unstable home life because of threats from a landlord or building conditions, or having to take on adult responsibilities by translating for their parents.

These can all be reasons why upward mobility doesn't work out, said Wai Yee Poon, an organizer with CAAAV, an organization based in Chinatown that advocates for tenants' rights.

Yet, the myth still persists.

Those who work with low-income Asian populations say that people outside the community sometimes find their work surprising.

Shahana Hanif, a public housing organizer also with CAAAV, said people often "overlook" who lives in public housing.

Hanif works with Asian-Americans in public housing. Many have limited English proficiency and need help getting proper access to public services.

When she tells her parents about the Bangladeshi, Korean and Chinese-American tenants she works with, she encounters pushback. There is "this idea that South Asians don't live in public housing," she said. The belief is, "the Indians, the Bangladeshis — they're the doctors and the engineers," not the ones living in public housing.

Brittany D'sa, an Indian-American student and one of the girls in SAYA!'s workshop, recognizes the sacrifices and economic hardships her parents have gone through to give her a comfortable life now.



Rising high school junior Brittany D'sa says it's her responsibility to accomplish more with what her parents gave her.

IMAGE: MILES GOSCHA



"I think it's my responsibility and it's my due diligence to carry it out where I say, 'You struggled so now I don't have to,' and because I don't have to, I should take advantage of everything I do have and do much more with it," she said. "I think a lot of Asian-American families have the same stories."

Yet, at the end of our interview, she asked me, "Are there a lot of poor Asian-Americans?"

Fatima Malik, SAYA!'s director of development and communications, jumped in before I could answer, "Yes."

Have something to add to this story? Share it in the comments.

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