

Asian American children and youth: Historical context and recommended research methodology as population grows

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To date, developmental research focused on racial and ethnic groups has emphasized children in African American or Latino families. Yet, Asian American migrants now outnumber those from Latin America. U.S. Census data indicate that by 2050, the Asian American population is projected to increase by 79 percent, making this the fastest growing racial and ethnic group in the country. A new special section of the journal *Child Development*, coauthored by members of the Asian Caucus of the Society for Research in Child Development, examines the historical, conceptual, and methodological issues related to conducting research on this growing portion of the American public.

The introduction to this special section, written by Vivian Tseng, emphasizes that while Asian Americans tend to be seen as a unitary demographic group, with differences in the aggregate from other population groups in the United States, there are very important differences within this group. Variations among subgroups in key demographic characteristics can be striking and need to be taken into account in considering how best to support children's development. For example, there is wide variation in poverty rates in specific Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, ranging from a 27% poverty rate among Hmong communities in the United States to a 5% poverty rate among Fijian communities.

The articles and commentaries in this special section together identify

the key aspects of diversity among Asian Americans in terms of culture, language, socioeconomic status, and immigration experiences that are important to their children's development. A paper authored by Lisa Kiang and colleagues, for example, describes how historical contexts have influenced the development of Asian American children. This includes widely differing waves of immigration policies and historical changes in portrayals and stereotypes of Asian Americans within the United States. Using the experiences of Chinese Americans as one among several examples, Kiang and colleagues note that immigration policies have varied from initially welcoming immigrants from China as laborers, to viewing these laborers as competition and their integration into schools, the workplace and communities as a "yellow peril," resulting in exclusionary immigration policies culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banning Chinese laborers and then all Chinese immigrants. In contrast, during World War II, both policies and stereotypes reflected the status of China as an ally and Japan as an enemy of the United States, with repeal of the exclusionary policies for Chinese immigrants, and placement in internment camps of 120,000 Japanese Americans, many of whom were already citizens and half of whom were children. According to Kiang and colleagues, popular articles from this period use terms like "Chinese friends," describing Chinese Americans as "placid and open," and "Japanese enemies," describing Japanese Americans as "dogmatic and arrogant." The special section paper by Jayanthi Mistry and colleagues stresses that children respond not only to such external experiences and portrayals, but also to the meaning that caregivers and other significant adults in children's home, educational and recreational settings assign to them. Furthermore, children actively contribute to their own development through their interpretation of these experiences.

According to the articles in the special section, at present, there is a tendency towards contrasting stereotypes for African American and Latino children as opposed to the children of Asian immigrants. While

the former tend to be depicted using a deficit model that anticipates poor outcomes, Asian American children have been characterized as the "model minority," assuming more positive outcomes especially in academic achievement and school behavior. These stereotypes can pit racial/ethnic subgroups against each other and preclude a focus on key issues that remain challenging for Asian American children. For example, evidence indicates that Asian American youth report higher rates of bullying than their African American and Latino peers. These higher rates of bullying are associated with increased reports of depression, loneliness, and truancy. Further, the positive academic outcomes assumed in the "model minority" stereotype are not unitary but vary by generation and according to the specific Asian American community. For example, studies indicate that 2nd and 3rd generation students fare worse on early academic and socio-economic outcomes than 1st generation students of Asian descent.

A paper in the special section by Hirokazu Yoshikawa and colleagues charts a path forward that can lead to both greater understanding of children in Asian American families overall, and help to understand the key background characteristics that will allow for understanding of variation within this group. Key steps include (1) Increasing the representation of Asian American groups in large national data sets, (2) routinely collecting data that takes into account pre-migration context to adequately reflect the experiences of children and families, and (3) using culturally sensitive measurement that is specific to communities and policy context. In addition, basic information concerning immigration among Asian Americans and other immigrant groups, such as generational status, should be collected in national data sources (the decennial Census has not collected this information since 1970).

In order to best serve the needs of Asian American children, practitioners and policymakers can benefit from research conducted on this growing population. Well-designed research should take into

account the historical, conceptual, and methodological issues raised in this special section. Journalists interested in speaking with any of the authors listed above or gaining access to the complete special section of *Child Development* should contact [Hannah Klein](#).

More information: Vivian Tseng et al, Taking Stock and Moving Forward: Research on Asian American Child Development, *Child Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12574](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12574)

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