

# A push to investigate health and education needs hidden within the term 'Asian American'

July 6 2022, by Jeff Gammage

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When Laura Zhang Choi testified to New Jersey legislators last month, she told them they needed better information about the state's fastest-growing population—Asian Americans.

Because right now, said Choi, a Warren County school-board member and a first-generation Chinese immigrant, the way the state gathers data is far too broad. And that can hide crucial needs in health and education.

Look at New York City, she told them. About 11% of city residents suffer from diabetes, and the rate among Asian Americans is roughly the same at 12%. But a deeper look showed an alarming figure for Indian Americans, nearly double the city average at 21%. That information disappeared when all Asian ethnicities were lumped together.

"Asian Americans are not a monolith," Choi, an active member of the advocacy group Make Us Visible NJ, told the Assembly committee. "We don't all share the same stories, experiences, and history as Americans."

Now New Jersey legislators are considering a bill that would require state agencies to collect more specific demographic data on Asian, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander populations, along with that of people from the Middle East and North Africa.

It's part of a bigger push among immigrant leaders for what's called "data disaggregation," a mouthful of a term that boils down to splitting big groups into smaller, more revealing categories.

The goal is to enable lawmakers, policy leaders, educators and health-care providers to more clearly see what can be dynamic differences inside larger classifications, so as to make more-informed decisions in providing help.

For example: Only 5.6% of Asian Americans in New Jersey live in poverty, less than half the U.S. rate of 11.4%. But among people from Myanmar it's a shocking 24.7%, nearly one out of every four residents.

"New Jersey is more diverse than we've ever been, more diverse than

many communities in the country," said Amy Torres, executive director of the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice, which backs the legislation. "Yet we have [government systems](#) that don't really respond in the way that they should."

The New Jersey bill says data gathered by state agencies "is often far too general," and more granular demographic information must be regularly collected, updated and published.

"We don't have valuable data about the health of many of these Asian American populations," said the lead sponsor, Assemblyman Sterley Stanley, who represents Middlesex County.

South Asians face a much greater danger of cardiovascular disease, he noted, but "this health threat has been obscured by treating Asians as one monolithic group."

On Thursday the bill passed the Assembly by a 72-2 vote. An identical bill is pending in the Senate.

At least five states including California, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Washington and New York—along with New York City—passed laws requiring data disaggregation among Asian Americans, whom the "model minority" myth inaccurately portrays as uniformly well-off. Some legislation requires deeper looks at other racial groups as well.

"We're at this inflection point, and a lot of advocates are getting involved in making sure people see Asians," said Lloyd Feng, special projects policy coordinator at the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families in New York City.

Not everyone agrees that breaking down larger data is a good idea. In Rhode Island, Chinese Americans protested the law, children holding

signs that said, "I am an American." They said Asians were wrongly singled out and more specific data could be used to promote race-based policies that exacerbate inequalities, according to the Providence Journal.

Asian Americans represent the fastest-growing racial group in the United States—and the fastest-growing in New Jersey, fully 10% of the state's 9.3 million people.

New Jersey has a higher percentage of Asian-American residents than all but three states, California, Hawaii and Washington. Last year the first three Asian American women were elected to the legislature, doubling the size of the AAPI Caucus.

The state's immigrant population surged 40% between 2000 and 2019, even as the number of U.S.-born residents dropped 2%. Today nearly one in four New Jerseyans is an immigrant.

But advocates say government forms generally hide diversity, instead of revealing it, by listing only basic choices for race.

Rania Mustafa is Palestinian American—which means there's no place for her on federal or state demographic surveys. The Census Bureau struck the Middle East and North African categories in 2020, requiring those residents to be counted as "White."

"I don't fit that," said Mustafa, who directs the Palestinian American Community Center in Clifton. "I always check 'Other.'"

That invisibility, she said, impacts everything in community life, even the ability of organizations like hers to support their grant applications.

"The way this country works," she said, "is if there's no data to represent

you, you basically don't exist."

Designating people from the Middle East and North Africa as "White," the New Jersey bill sponsors said, hides the discrimination that many face in housing, employment, and daily life. It also inflates the number of White people, making communities appear less diverse statistically.

South Asian communities can also have trouble seeing themselves in government tabulations, as those two words represent not only people from India but from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

"'Asian American' is a very useful term—solidarity, common experiences," said Assemblywoman Sadaf Jaffer, a bill co-sponsor whose district includes parts of Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex and Somerset counties. "But in many circumstances it doesn't get to the diversity of specific communities."

Today the United States is home to more immigrants than any country in the world, some 40 million residents who were born in another land. Since 1965, when new laws replaced a national quota system, immigrants' origin countries shifted dramatically, from mostly Europe to mostly Asia and Latin America.

Even the nature of "White" is changing in the United States, according to a study in *Population Research and Policy Review*, which found that the term camouflages the needs of people from Eastern Europe and parts of western Asia.

Similarly, Black and African American categories can include immigrants from Africa, South America and the Caribbean, the study noted.

The New Jersey effort follows winning campaigns by activists in a big neighbor state. New York City passed a comprehensive data-disaggregation law in 2016, and last year New York state approved a law focused on Asian Americans.

That state's Asian population grew 37.6% between 2010 and 2020. Asian Americans make up almost 11% of the state, and nearly 80% of those in New York City are immigrants.

Now disaggregated research is revealing new realities.

A study at the New York City public-hospital system found that once Asian groups were disaggregated, South Asians were second to African Americans for COVID-19 hospitalizations and second to Hispanics for infections. Chinese patients had the highest death rate of all.

The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families found that while more than 80% of Asian Americans approved of COVID-19 vaccines, no groups more wanted vaccinations than Bangladeshis and Nepalese, with rates above 90%. Yet, when later asked if they had received at least one dose, only half of Bangladeshis and a mere 13% of Nepalese had gotten a shot.

Those numbers, CACF said, revealed a serious problem—big personal desire to be vaccinated, government inability to make that happen.

"It's not to say that 'Asian American' is outdated," Choi said in an interview. "We wanted a place at the table no matter what you call us. But the needs are so different. Lumping us together as if we all have the same experience does a disservice."

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Citation: A push to investigate health and education needs hidden within the term 'Asian American' (2022, July 6) retrieved 14 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-health-hidden-term-asian-american.html>

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