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Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Data and Policy Needs in Civil Rights

Taeku Lee and Janelle Wong

In this section, researchers examine the policy priorities and data needs regarding civil rights issues affecting Asian Americans (and, where relevant and possible, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders [NHPIs]). To the uninitiated, the policy relevance of civil rights issues confronting AANHPI members may seem unusual, exotic, or misplaced. Each of the following articles underscores the fact that, for AANHPI communities, the contemporary challenges resulting from discrimination and exclusion remain serious, varied, and evolving. A key theme across all of the pieces featured here is that in order for AANHPIs to achieve full inclusion and fair treatment in the United States, their voices and experiences must be lifted up in the public sphere. Too often, invisibility (or visibility only through a selective and distorted lens) is the hallmark of AANHPI policy issues.

Invisibility and lack of information are particularly acute for those AANHPIs whose identities are multiply marginalized. Ben de Guzman and Alice Y. Hom suggest in their policy brief that institutional data, such as federally sponsored health surveys, are inadequate to assess the policy needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) AANHPIs. They argue that an intersectional approach that recognizes the fact that the experience of being AANHPI is shaped by one's sexual orientation/gender identity and that the experience of being LGBT also depends a great deal on national origin is necessary to meet the specific needs of LGBT AANHPI youth. Guzman and Hom encourage federal and state agencies to be much more proactive in terms of taking into account national origin, sexual orientation, and gender identity in their data-collection efforts.

This call for more and better data to inform policies that affect Asian Americans is echoed in several of the other articles

presented here. With our colleagues Karthick Ramakrishnan and Jane Junn, we present data from the 2008 National Asian American Survey. We detail the data-collection process and how this unique data set, which is based on six national origin groups interviewed in eight different languages, provides new insights about Asian American policy preferences. Yet this data collection effort also serves as a reminder that without consistent and institutionalized funding and data collection, comprehensive national-level information on Asian American policy preferences will inform critical policy debates only sporadically. Similar to Guzman and Hom, we suggest that lack of comprehensive and sufficiently detailed data only contributes to the invisibility of Asian Americans in public policy making.

In the absence of more comprehensive data and a more accurate portrayal of the actually lived conditions of AANHPIs, misperceptions and stereotyped views often prevail. Sangay Mishra's brief on South Asians in the post-9/11 era and Kohei Ishihara's research on Southeast Asian Youth in Providence, Rhode Island, show the vulnerability of Asian Americans to profiling, police brutality, and other forms of institutionalized disparate treatment. In particular, both briefs argue that the legitimate efforts of law enforcement agencies to deter gang activity and prevent terrorist threats often rely on questionable practices as a result of insufficient data and an inadequate knowledge base regarding Asian American communities. Ironically, this kind of intimidating attention by public agencies serves only to further silence the voices of Asian Americans in developing a strong civil rights agenda.

The policy challenges that arise from insufficient and incomplete data about AANHPIs are further exacerbated by the under-supply of descriptively representative and culturally competent human capital in the public sector. As Carson Eoyang's examination of the "bamboo ceiling" in federal service powerfully argues, the underrepresentation of AANHPIs at the senior levels of public management results in a yawning gap in accountability. The commitments to be more fully and deliberately inclusive of African Americans in the federal civil service and military service during the early to mid-twentieth century played a critical role leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and similar commitments are needed today vis-à-vis the advancement of AANHPIs within government.

A final key ingredient is the continuing and coordinated advocacy from within AANHPI communities. Julia Liou, Catherine Porter, and Thu Quach’s case study of nail salon workers in California, for instance, demonstrates that achieving the basic responsibilities of government—such as ensuring safe working conditions—required the sustained and coordinated efforts of a coalition of public health, reproductive health, and environmental justice organizations, along with nail salon workers and champions in government agencies. Ishihara’s brief describes local Southeast Asian youth leaders as catalysts in taking an active role in surveying their own communities and developing policy recommendations based upon youth-led research efforts. Ultimately, whether it is civil rights or any other issue domain affecting AANHPI communities, the policy briefs in this section remind us that good governance and policy innovation depend vitally on adequate and accurate information and on advocacy and accountability across all levels of the public policy making.

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