ISSUE BRIEF

High Rates of Food Insecurity Are Hiding Among Asian Pacific American Populations

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Food insecurity, and its root cause, poverty, do not discriminate: they harm individuals, families, and communities across the U.S., regardless of demographics. One group that rarely receives attention for its alarmingly high levels of food insecurity and poverty is Asian Pacific American (APA). This oversight is detrimental for APA people and the nation as a whole.

Prosperity Now did a three-part series, Racial Wealth Divide Initiative, that looked in depth at racial wealth disparities across the nation. In part three, Prosperity Now drilled down into the divide between Asian Americans and the U.S. overall, and, with the help of Pew Research Center's data, found that APA is the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S., with the fastest-growing — and widest — wealth gap, making APA the most economically divided racial group.

Despite these findings, eligible APA people often do not participate in safety net programs that are designed to help people in need, like them. This brief looks at some of the reasons why, despite high rates of poverty and food insecurity, APA families and individuals are often overlooked, and what can be done to change the paradigm to increase food security for APA populations and communities.

Citing data from the Economic Policy Institute, Prosperity Now found that the poverty rate for APA as a whole is 13.8 percent, but there are much higher rates among numerous APA ethnicities that range from 18.5 percent (Laotian American) to 29 percent (Cambodian American) to as high as 38 percent (Hmong American). The large wealth gaps between APA ethnic subgroups show how the quality of life can vary, sometimes remarkably, because of contrasts in education attainment, economic status, and other factors that can directly and indirectly impact health and well-being.

Despite high poverty levels among some APA populations, participation rates in federal nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can be very low or underreported. Perceived stigma, forgetting to report that they received benefits earlier in the year, or being unaware that other household members received benefits are, according to Urban Institute, some of the reasons why for APA and SNAP participants overall. To illustrate the level of unmet need, Urban Institute's table below compares poverty and SNAP participation rates between three APA subgroups and the U.S. overall, showing that despite relatively similar poverty rates among the listed APA populations and U.S. as a whole, the SNAP participation rate is substantially lower for the listed APA subgroups.

Population	Poverty Rate	SNAP Participation Rate
Malaysian Americans	25.1 percent	3.2 percent
Thai Americans	16.7 percent	2.4 percent
Vietnamese Americans	15.3 percent	3.8 percent
U.S. overall	**15.5 percent**	**13.7 percent**

Source: Urban Institute

The term "APA" typically refers to Americans who are connected by origin to East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Island nations. Despite the variations in origin stories, languages, cultures, education, income, and more, APA people are frequently treated as being part of a monolithic group in media, entertainment, politics, academia, research, and advocacy work. Stereotypes that all APA people are well-off, highly educated, and gainfully employed, or are otherwise deemed as being "model minorities,"[1] obscure the reality that an untold number of APA people struggle with food insecurity and poverty. Two areas that demonstrate such misunderstandings are income and education.

APA Subgroups, Population Percentages, and Projected Growth

APA subgroups, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, may include Chinese (except Taiwanese), Asian Indian, Filipinx, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Pakistani, Cambodian, Thai, Hmong, Laotian, Taiwanese, Bangladeshi, Burmese Nepalese, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian or Chamorro, and Tongan.

In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that the Asian American population (identifying with one race) would account for 5.4 percent of the total U.S. population. Furthermore, it predicted that two populations would be the fastest growing between 2014–2060: the population that identifies with two or more races and Asian Americans. During that timespan, the population identifying with two or more races is expected to triple in size, a 226 percent increase. Asian Americans identifying with one race is forecasted to surge by 128 percent, but Asian Americans identifying with one or more races is expected to shoot up by 143 percent. Although the data for the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population is separated from the data for the Asian American population, it is worth noting that this population is predicted to increase 63 percent; however, when this group is considered alone or in combination with other races, that increase soars to 101 percent.

The 2020 national census is underway. If previous census data are accurate indicators, then the 2020 data could meet or exceed the aforementioned expectations.

APA households above a certain income level too often are touted as proof that the entire racial group is doing well, especially when compared to other disenfranchised groups. Prosperity Now found that while the median income for APA households is relatively high, looking at household income alone misses an essential part of the equation: that the average APA household has more members and more income earners than the national average. In such households, this finding suggests that individual APA employees earn less than wage-earners in comparable single-income households. With Prosperity Now's findings in mind, because APA households are disproportionately concentrated in areas that have a higher than national average cost of living, their financial burdens are that much greater. Related to household income is individual income potential. In private industries with a career ladder, when data are disaggregated by gender and race, AAPI Data discovered that APA men and women are the least likely to become executives, suggesting that APA staff are most often overlooked, including when compared with other minority groups, for opportunities that would help increase their earning potential and economic equality, and, as a result, the economic security for them and their household.

In a report on life in San Gabriel Valley, California, otherwise known as "the capital of Asian America," Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Los Angeles shatters the "model minority" myth by focusing on an ignored Asian American community that struggles with poor health and well-being. Asian Americans in San Gabriel Valley have lower educational attainment than Whites, and are more likely to die of cancer than any other group. This is partly because numerous Asian Americans who live there are not U.S. citizens and do not receive health care.

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[1] The term "model minority" refers to a minority group, often based on race, that is perceived to be successful, especially when compared or contrasted with other minority groups. This term is often applied to Asian Americans, as individuals and as a group, for their presumed achievements in academic, economic, and cultural arenas. These stereotypes are detrimental to Asian Americans on racial, psychological, political, and social levels, to name a few, and these incorrect and dangerous assumptions are weaponized when Asian Americans are contrasted with other minority groups that are wrongly characterized as being inferior.

As a whole, APA people earn more and higher levels of college degrees nationally when compared to other groups, according to Prosperity Now, which cited Pew Research Center data. Nearly half of APA people who are 25 years or older have a B.A. (U.S.: 28 percent); and 21 percent have advanced degrees (Whites: 14 percent), but that does not mean that APA alumni have equal earning potential and status when compared to others who are equally or less educated. Like household income, digging deeper into the numbers gives a more complete view of which APA groups are included and ignored in such statistics that appear to be positive. Referencing Pew Research Center data, a Washington Post Wonkblog noted that about three-quarters of Indian Americans have a college degree, whereas less than one-third of Vietnamese Americans and less than one-fifth of Laotian Americans and Cambodian Americans can say the same. In addition to individual struggles, the disparities in education contribute to income inequalities within APA as a whole and when the entire racial group is contrasted with other racial groups.

To help change the narrative surrounding APA as a whole and within subgroups, a critical first step is to include a comprehensive sample of APA data in the research. APA people are not always included in the research when they should be, and if they are, the data are not always handled correctly. Compared to other racial groups, APA is small, so when it is included in research, it tends to be undersampled and erroneously treated as a homogeneous group. These missteps often lead to results that hide the high levels of inequalities and inequities between APA subgroups, and give a false impression that there are no or few APA individuals, families, and communities in need of SNAP and other social safety net programs. For example, in a study published in *Annals of Epidemiology* on the lack of health data for Asian Americans, some of the reasons for the lack of information are that studies often group Asian American subjects into one group, studies examine only one ethnic subgroup, and Asian Americans are omitted from research reports. The study concluded that when Asian Americans are treated as one group, the aggregated data results mask differences between subgroups.

Even when data are disaggregated, APA communities can be hidden. When data on poverty and hunger are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the data often focus primarily on the categories of "White, non-Hispanic," "Black, non-Hispanic," and "Hispanic" (of any race). In such frameworks, APA people are assigned to the category "Other." This vague grouping contributes to the lack of understanding by the general public about food insecurity and poverty in APA communities, and a lack of focus by nonprofits, government, and media on addressing APA needs. Despite this, disaggregated data — even when imperfect — is essential for understanding more fully who is impacted by food insecurity and poverty, and where resources need to be allocated.

APA people not only are without representation in the data, they are frequently missing in conversations about food insecurity and poverty, which means they are not factored into policies and programs that could affect them. In order for food insecurity and poverty to be fully addressed nationwide, there needs to be a better understanding of APA poverty and food insecurity. This should exist on a racial group level, and, because of such wide-ranging different experiences across subgroups, on an ethnic subgroup level.

Lifting oneself out of food insecurity and poverty is difficult. It can be much harder, even impossible, if you factor in racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, educational, professional, financial, and other barriers. For too long, APA people, especially those who are food insecure, have been ignored and have not received public and private sector assistance that would have helped them thrive. The time is now to help low-income APA people get the basic needs that they lack, and address the challenges that prevent them from improving their health and well-being.

Recommended Actions

- Advocate for APA people to be included in research and reports that include race and ethnicity.

- Push for broad research samples that include numerous APA subgroups.

- Support efforts to disaggregate data into specific APA subgroups so it is clear which APA population is represented.

- Invite APA people and perspectives into conversations on food insecurity, poverty, and other social injustices so that policies and programs can be created that will reach APA communities, especially those with limited English proficiency.