POLICY | OPINION

It's a Myth That Asian-Americans Are Doing Well in the Pandemic

Statistics suggest they are—but numbers often don't include the most vulnerable with limited English

By Amy Yee on March 2, 2021



Credit: Getty Images

Like many low-wage restaurant workers in Boston, Su Hua Mei and her husband lost their jobs last spring as the COVID pandemic took hold. With a toddler to care for, it has been a harrowing time for this immigrant couple from China, They speak little English and only finished high school so have limited job opportunities. Mei and other Asian Americans still face potential threats of eviction and unemployment benefits running out. She has no idea when restaurants will reopen. This uncertainty "is very hard on us," says Mei. "It creates a lot of stress. We can't have a normal life."

Yet Mei and many low-income Asian Americans are grossly overlooked. A widely cited national poll last year from Harvard School of Public Health, NPR and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported that 37 percent of Asians had experienced serious financial problems during the pandemic, compared with 72 percent of Latinos, 60 percent of Blacks, 55 percent of Native Americans.

Seems like Asian Americans are doing well, right? But the survey had a gaping lacuna: it was conducted by phone only in English or Spanish. Of course, that immediately excludes Asians with low proficiency in English, who, ironically, are likely poor, vulnerable and most in need.

And importantly, the poll highlights how skewed data can yield dangerously misleading results and headlines. After all, who is included in statistics in the first place yields results that influence life-changing policy and research.

Contrary to the poll results, working class Asians like Mei are suffering from record job losses and staggering economic hardship. They work in restaurants, salons, hotels, laundries, delivery, health care, housekeeping, construction and factories. These low-wage industries are hit hard by the pandemic.

Yet Asians are woefully neglected by researchers, academics and pollsters. Consequently, they are overlooked by media and the policymakers who control funding and services they desperately need.

Partly, this is because of the limited English of the most vulnerable Asians: low-income, recent immigrants, the undocumented or elderly. The average person may be unaware of them because Asians who can't speak any English toil behind the scenes, in restaurant kitchens, factories and construction sites.

They are also more likely to be victims of racist harassment or attacks on Asians, such as an 84-year-old Thai man who was killed in February during a morning walk in San Francisco. Disturbingly, violence against Asians seems to be escalating across the country, from Los Angeles to New York. Vulnerable Asians are also less likely to report incidents due to language and cultural barriers.

What's more, many Asians are not included in key national statistics, because of language barriers. Accessing government assistance such as unemployment benefits is complicated for native English speakers, much less for those with low English.

Limited English speakers also cannot advocate for themselves if landlords want to remove them. Thus, they are not counted in official eviction numbers, even if they are informally evicted.

These gaps are surely not malicious or intentional. Robert Blendon, co-director of the Harvard/NPR/Johnson poll and professor at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, explains that it is very expensive to conduct surveys in other languages. Asians speak a multitude of languages, which makes capturing their experiences through data more difficult. If funding for multilingual surveys materialized, "I would gladly do it in a second," says Blendon.


Sign up for *Scientific American*'s free newsletters. Sign Up

But without granular data, people must understand that national statistics show only part of the picture. The Harvard survey should have explicitly flagged its language limitations and not buried them in fine print**.** Otherwise, its results about Asians are powerfully misleading.

Data at the state and local level start to show a different perspective. In California, 83 percent of Asian Americans with high school degrees or less filed unemployment claims in California, compared to 37 percent for non-Asians, according to a UCLA report in July. During the lockdown, Asian unemployment jumped to 25 percent in New York City—the largest increase of all races, according to a report from the Asian American Federation (AAF) last October.

Yet even those high numbers underreport Asian joblessness. The statistics exclude Asians thwarted by English and citizenship. Translations help – but some translated websites and applications were not available at the start of the pandemic. And applying for unemployment benefits is still so complicated and intimidating that "people didn't even try," says Karen Chen, executive director of the nonprofit Chinese Progressive Association, based in Boston.

If people are denied unemployment benefits because of mistakes on applications, appealing decisions is extremely difficult without English. And consider that parents with limited English sometimes rely on their young children to translate and fill out complex paperwork.

Online applications also assume people have computers and good internet connections, which many low-income folks don't have. Using mobile phones to fill out small-print applications is a frustrating task. And even if approved, maintaining those unemployment

benefits requires a steady stream of paperwork and administration—in English.

There are other challenges too. Asians may be afraid of interaction because of immigration status. Across the U.S., there are about 1.7 million undocumented Asians, representing one in seven Asian immigrants. More than 463,000 live in California, nearly 167,000 in New York and more than 148,000 in Texas.

To reiterate, vulnerable Asians also might not be counted in evictions, which become "official" when a landlord files a court case against a tenant. However, if a landlord wants a non-English speaker to vacate, the tenant might not fight; without English they simply can't.

Asians *are* being unofficially evicted, yet those displacements are not considered official evictions. They don't get counted in eviction statistics "because they don't even make it to the court system," says Bethany Li, a director at Greater Boston Legal Services.

For Asians with low English, there's a fear of retaliation from threatening landlords. "Not knowing their full rights make people afraid," says Angie Liou, executive director of the Asian Community Development Corporation in Boston.

Displaced Asians then are forced to double and triple up with family and friends in cramped housing. "That's what we don't want during a pandemic," adds Liou.

There are also cultural barriers. Many Asian immigrants hail from countries without democratic processes or with authoritarian governments. They may be afraid to interact with government, institutions or anyone they don't know personally.

The media also plays a role. Coverage about struggling Asian Americans and unemployment are a fraction of similar coverage about other racial groups. And in recent months, I've listened to dozens of online panels with experts at Harvard, the Knight Foundation and other influential institutions about the pandemic's impact on minorities. Asians are not even mentioned.

The general lack of attention "is ridiculous given the need of the Asian community," says Alex Milvae, legal fellow at Greater Boston Legal Services.

The misperception that Asians "are doing fine" is damaging. In fact, income inequality in the U.S. is greatest among Asians, who displaced Blacks as the country's most economically divided racial group, according to Pew Research Center in 2018. Asians at the top of the

economic pyramid are doing well, but many people at the very large base are not.

Consider that in New York City, one in four Asians lives in poverty and 50 percent have limited English, according to the nonprofit Asian American Federation. More than 70 percent of Asians are immigrants, which means they might be unfamiliar with accessing government services.

In Boston, poverty among Asians was nearly 26.6 percent compared to 23 percent among the city's Black population, according to a 2014 report from Boston Redevelopment Authority.

More needs to be done for Asians and others with limited English, such as hiring bilingual interpreters and creating multilingual Web sites, applications and helplines. But simply using Google Translate is not enough; cities should hire trained interpreters and get feedback about translations and to make sure they are accurate and jargon-free.

Skewed or incomplete statistics are a disservice to people who most need help. Surveys like the Harvard one should more explicitly highlight language and cultural barriers.

Broad national statistics only offer a piece of the picture. Local surveys and community organizations have a more granular, nuanced view. Grassroots organizations in Asian communities also need more support. Since they are on the ground helping desperate people, they should have a direct line to policy makers and donors. After all, their staff can actually speak to Asians and others with limited English. Vulnerable Asians like Mei and her toddler are in dire need of help—and influential statistics must not render them invisible.

This is an opinion and analysis article.

This piece was written with support from the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

Author's Note: Between May and December, there were 184 articles with the keywords "Asian American" and "unemployment" in major U.S. media outlets, according to a Media Cloud search. By comparison, there were 1,020 unemployment stories involving Latinos and 5,574 about Blacks. You can create a free account at MediaCloud.org and do a search. (This is not to draw attention away from other communities, but simply to highlight scant attention on an overlooked group that desperately needs help.)

Rights & Permissions

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Amy Yee is an award-winning journalist whose book *Beyond Exile: Tibetan Refugees in India and Beyond* is forthcoming from University of North Carolina Press in Fall 2022. She writes for the *New York Times*, *The Economist* and NPR and is a former *Financial Times* staff reporter in New York and India. You can learn more about her at amyyeewrites.com and Twitter: @amyyeewrites.

Recent Articles by Amy Yee

Research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Is Being Stifled

COVID's Outsize Impact on Asian Americans Is Being Ignored

Vertical Gardens Beat Soil Made Salty by Climate Change

Convert web pages and HTML files to PDF in your applications with the Pdfcrowd HTML to PDF API | Printed with Pdfcrowd.com