

# AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS®

## Asians *in the* Suburbs

**Forget Chinatown: most Asian Americans live in middle-class suburbs. The biggest markets for Asian suburbanites are in western states, but more than half of the top-25 Asian metros are elsewhere. Asian suburbs are diverse markets, ranging from Filipino Daly City to Chinese Monterey Park. And while suburban Asians are usually assimilated Americans, they also tend to preserve ancestral customs.**

by *William P. O'Hare,*  
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**A**t first glance, Robert Lee, Rita Mah, and Jean B. Chan may look similar. These three Chinese Americans all live in suburban San Rafael, California, an affluent town just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. But Lee is a fourth-generation American who grew up in suburban Burlingame, California, while Rita Mah grew up in New York City's Chinatown, and Chan grew up in China and Hong Kong. Their diverse back-

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grounds reveal the futility of trying to define even a segment of today's Asian-American population as a single market.

Asian Americans' diversity is also reflected in where they live. Cities are historically the gateway for new immigrants, but most Asian Americans now live outside the central city. If you're looking for affluent Asians, look in the suburbs.

In general, Asian Americans who live in the suburbs are more highly educated and have more disposable income than do those living in cities. The average household income of suburban Asian-American households was \$56,300 in 1991, or 23 percent higher than that of Asian-American households in central cities, according to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The gap is even wider in the nation's largest metropolitan areas, where most Asian Americans live. In

metros with populations of 1 million or more, Asian-American average household income is 25 percent higher in suburbs (\$59,000) than in central cities.

### **BIGGEST ON THE RIM**

Twenty-five metropolitan areas in the U.S. had at least 25,000 Asian-American suburbanites in 1990. These metros accounted for 76 percent of all suburban Asian Americans. Los Angeles-Long Beach has the largest number of Asian-American suburbanites; its count (528,600) is almost twice as high as second-place Honolulu's (268,900). Oakland ranks third (196,800), followed closely by Anaheim-Santa Ana (195,600).

Eight of the top-ten metros for suburban Asians are in the West, reflecting the destinations of recent as well as earlier immigrants. Yet more than half of the top-25 metros for Asian suburbanites are outside the West, and metros from all four census regions are on the list.

Some businesses prefer markets with a high concentration of their intended customers, rather than markets that offer sheer size. The most concentrated Asian suburbs are in Honolulu, where 57 percent of suburban residents say they are Asian-American (many are native Hawaiians). Honolulu is well ahead of second-place San Jose, where just 16 percent of the suburban population is Asian American. The next four areas are also in California. The rest range from Washington,

## The Most Suburban Asians

Eight of the ten largest Asian suburbs are on the Pacific Rim.

(metros ranked by size of Asian-American suburban population in 1990)

rank	metro area	number of Asian-American suburbanites in 1990
1	Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA .....	528,608
2	Honolulu, HI .....	268,907
3	Oakland, CA .....	196,847
4	Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA .....	195,589
5	Washington, DC .....	178,890
6	Chicago, IL .....	121,011
7	San Francisco, CA .....	118,723
8	San Jose, CA .....	102,816
9	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA .....	81,066
10	Seattle, WA .....	70,697
11	Bergen-Passaic, NJ .....	64,719
12	San Diego, CA .....	63,326
13	Philadelphia, PA .....	58,413
14	Houston, TX .....	58,009
15	Boston-Lawrence-Salem, MA .....	55,694
16	Middlesex-Somerset, NJ .....	54,494
17	Sacramento, CA .....	50,306
18	Detroit, MI .....	47,269
19	Atlanta, GA .....	47,174
20	Newark, NJ .....	46,615
21	New York, NY .....	42,185
22	Dallas, TX .....	36,237
23	Baltimore, MD .....	34,247
24	Minneapolis-St Paul, MN .....	27,615
25	Denver, CO .....	26,129

Note: Asians include Pacific Islanders.

Source: Compiled from the 1990 census at the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan

D.C. to Detroit, but all have far lower concentrations of Asian suburbanites than do the top six; none are over 5.8 percent.

A look at the fastest-growing Asian-American suburbs reveals even more geographic diversity. High-growth areas for suburban Asians are spread across the country, and only four of the top ten are in the West. In Atlanta, Riverside-San Bernardino, and Dallas, the number of Asian-American suburbanites more than quadrupled during the 1980s. In

Middlesex-Somerset (New Jersey) and Houston, the number more than tripled.

### DOZENS OF MARKETS

Asian Americans can be divided into dozens of markets. A suburban residence may indicate an Asian household's middle-class status, for example. But Asians also fall into at least a dozen distinct ethnic subgroups, and different groups dominate the suburban population in different metro areas. For example, Chinese Americans are almost one-third of Asian suburbanites in Los Angeles-Long Beach, but only 7 percent in Honolulu. Japanese Americans are one-third of the Asian suburban population in Honolulu, but only 4 percent in Washington, D.C. and 8 percent in Oakland. Koreans are 21 percent of the Asian suburban population in Washington, D.C., but only 3 percent in Honolulu.

Asian cultural ties may be less apparent in the suburbs than in dense urban neighborhoods. Yet they still exist, and they manifest themselves in different ways. Filipinos cluster in Daly City south of San Francisco, and Vietnamese shop in their own strip malls

in Orange County's Westminster. In San Jose, the Lions Mall attracts suburban Chinese from Silicon Valley. And in Monterey Park, a once-sleepy farm town near Los Angeles, Asians are in the majority. Monterey Park had 38,000 residents in 1960, 3 percent of whom were Asian. Now it is a town of 60,000, 56 percent of whom are Asian.

"Monterey Park's Chinese residents reflect the changing pattern of Chinese immigration nationwide," writes sociologist Timothy P. Fong. "Chinese newcom-

ers to Monterey Park and elsewhere are not analogous to the historically persecuted and oppressed male laborers who came to this country in the mid-19th cen-

**High-growth areas for suburban Asians are spread across the country. Only four of the top ten are in the West.**

tury. They are men and women generally much better-educated and more affluent than either their Chinese predecessors or their white counterparts."

Wealthy Chinese were initially encouraged to move to Monterey Park during an economic slump in the early 1970s. The suburb developed the nickname "The Chinese Beverly Hills." Subsequently, Chinese immigrants of more modest means began to move in.

Monterey Park has enjoyed a boom in new business openings, says Fong. The businesses fall into three categories: small-scale restaurants and specialty shops run by new immigrants who speak little English and rely on free family labor; medical, legal, accounting, and real-estate offices run by well-educated, bilingual, Chinese-born entrepreneurs; and Chinese-owned and operated banks. Most of the new businesses cater to ethnic Chinese who live in the San Gabriel Valley and beyond, he says.

In the suburbs of San Francisco, a large middle-class group moved directly from the Philippines to the suburbs and stayed there. Daly City, in suburban San Mateo County, is a new homeland for Filipinos. It's "not like Chinatown, where people move out after making it," says Cherie Querol Moreno, managing editor of *Philippine News*, a newspaper with a national circulation of 120,000.

Filipino immigrants often move directly into suburban areas because they can assimilate quickly. Many of them learn to speak English in Filipino schools, and

many travel to the U.S. on business—as Querol Moreno did before making a permanent move. “The United States is an extension of the Philippines for most people in Manila,” she says.

While less-affluent Filipinos are likely to settle in San Francisco proper, Querol Moreno says that many others live in Hercules and Union City, east of San Francisco. In Daly City, Filipinos run small businesses and restaurants; others work as doctors, dentists, lawyers, realtors, and insurance brokers. “Daly City is not a bedroom community for Filipinos,” says Querol Moreno. “Because of the high concentration of Filipinos, there’s a captive market for restaurants and boutiques. If you want to eat Filipino food, the place to go is Daly City.”

#### NATIVE CUSTOMS AND PRODUCTS

Suburban Asian Americans are more affluent than those in cities, but they are not more affluent than other suburbanites. On average, they had a per capita income of \$15,600 in 1989, compared with \$16,500 for suburbanites of all races. Among the top-25 metros for Asian suburbanites, only in Detroit is the per capita

**Filipino immigrants often move directly into suburban areas because they can assimilate quickly.**

income of Asian suburbanites higher than the per capita income of the entire suburban population.

The highest Asian-American incomes are located in the larger suburbs of the eastern seaboard and the Midwest. Only two of the top ten—San Jose and San Francisco—are in the West. The most affluent suburban Asians tend to live in places where housing and land are much more expensive than in the central city. Older metros tend to have sharp city/suburb income disparities for all race and ethnic groups.

Living in the suburbs means success to Asian Americans, just as it does to everyone else. Paul Chow, a 65-year-old retired civil engineer, heads the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, a group trying to get San Francisco Bay’s “Ellis Island of the West” declared a national monument. He was born in San Francisco in 1928, raised in Chinatown, and did not speak English until age 5. “The only white people I knew were the schoolteacher, the milkman, and the police officer,” he says. “I never knew about the world outside.” Then, as a young adult, Chow moved to San Francisco’s Richmond District, a heavily Asian enclave of two- and three-story buildings with residential streets running off business-lined boulevards. “I had arrived,” he remembers.

Fellow San Rafael resident Robert Lee attributes the upward mobility of Asian Americans to two factors: “the escalator of education and the elevator of real-estate investment.” Until the mid-1960s, restrictive covenants often barred suburban homeowners from selling to Asians, he says. A taboo against intermarriage also waned in that era.

Social trends have certainly played a part in the movement of Asian Americans toward the suburbs, according to Eleanor Yu, president and chief executive officer of Adland and Adland Worldwide, a San Francisco-based agency specializing in the Asian market. “Historically, inner-city Chinatowns in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York were created because of discrimination and because the Chinese were not ready to assimilate,” she says. “Today, many

## The Most Asian Suburbs

*In six metros, more than 10 percent of the suburban population is Asian-American.*

(metro areas ranked by percent of suburban population that is Asian-American, 1990)

rank	metro area	percent of suburban population that is Asian-American
1	Honolulu, HI .....	57.1%
2	San Jose, CA .....	15.8
3	San Francisco, CA .....	13.5
4	Oakland, CA .....	12.7
5	Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA .....	11.5
6	Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA .....	10.6
7	Washington, DC .....	5.8
8	Middlesex-Somerset, NJ .....	5.8
9	Bergen-Passaic, NJ .....	5.7
10	Seattle, WA .....	5.2
11	Sacramento, CA .....	5.1
12	San Diego, CA .....	5.0
13	Chicago, IL .....	3.8
14	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA .....	3.8
15	Houston, TX .....	3.7
16	New York, NY .....	3.6
17	Newark, NJ .....	3.2
18	Dallas, TX .....	2.7
19	Denver, CO .....	2.3
20	Boston-Lawrence-Salem, MA .....	2.2
21	Baltimore, MD .....	2.1
22	Atlanta, GA .....	2.0
23	Philadelphia, PA .....	1.9
24	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN .....	1.6
25	Detroit, MI .....	1.5
	National average .....	3.0%

Note: Asians include Pacific Islanders.

Source: Compiled from the 1990 census at the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan.

Asians—even recent immigrants—are ready to assimilate. They speak English, they’ve been exposed to the culture, and they’re buying estates in San Marino, Westchester, and Monterey Park.” Wealthy Asian immigrants have global business interests, professional careers, and travel frequently, says Yu. They place their children in private schools or “the creme de la creme of public schools.”

Although suburban Asians may be better educated and wealthier than their

## Fastest-Growing Asian Suburbs

During the 1980s, suburban Asians increased more than fourfold in Atlanta.

(metro areas ranked by percent increase in suburban Asian Americans between 1980 and 1990)

rank	metro area	percent increase in suburban population 1980-90
1	Atlanta, GA	386.1%
2	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	344.6
3	Dallas, TX	336.8
4	Middlesex-Somerset, NJ	269.3
5	Houston, TX	239.7
6	Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA	190.0
7	Boston-Lawrence-Salem, MA	189.3
8	Seattle, WA	174.1
9	Bergen-Passaic, NJ	173.4
10	Sacramento, CA	161.4
11	Washington, DC	157.2
12	Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA	153.9
13	Oakland, CA	150.4
14	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	135.1
15	Denver, CO	132.0
16	San Jose, CA	130.5
17	Newark, NJ	125.8
18	New York, NY	121.0
19	Philadelphia, PA	119.7
20	Baltimore, MD	108.3
21	Chicago, IL	103.7
22	San Diego, CA	101.1
23	San Francisco, CA	92.3
24	Detroit, MI	82.5
25	Honolulu, HI	24.4

## Most Affluent Asian Suburbs

Asian suburbanites are most affluent in the Northeast.

(metro areas ranked by per capita income of suburban Asian Americans, 1989)

rank	metro area	Asian-American per capita income
1	New York, NY	\$22,785
2	Bergen-Passaic, NJ	20,102
3	Newark, NJ	19,897
4	Detroit, MI	19,477
5	San Jose, CA	18,941
6	Middlesex-Somerset, NJ	17,820
7	Chicago, IL	17,538
8	Baltimore, MD	17,491
9	San Francisco, CA	17,172
10	Boston-Lawrence-Salem, MA	16,890
11	Philadelphia, PA	16,724
12	Oakland, CA	16,278
13	Washington, DC	16,123
14	Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA	15,694
15	Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA	15,567
16	Seattle, WA	14,295
17	Honolulu, HI	14,012
18	Houston, TX	13,819
19	Dallas, TX	13,631
20	Atlanta, GA	13,202
21	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	13,029
22	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	12,164
23	San Diego, CA	12,028
24	Denver, CO	12,001
25	Sacramento, CA	11,468

Note: Asians include Pacific Islanders.

Source: Compiled from the 1990 census of the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan.

urban counterparts, Yu says that "they still prefer Asian food, music, and videos—Asian society. They're staying with their Asian identity, more by choice than out of necessity." The newest migrants to the suburbs may speak English, but they "prefer to speak, read, and receive information in their own language," says Yu. "They are not so assimilated that they predominantly rely on general media for information. They watch Chinese TV, even though other channels are available to them. You are sure to find stacks of Asian-language newspapers in the homes of sub-

urban Asians."

"Asians in the suburbs assimilate like anyone else," Yu continues, "but they do maintain a certain level of Asianness. At Yaohan Plaza in Queens, 90 percent of the customers are Japanese. Although they live in a mixed neighborhood, Japanese are still attracted to Japanese stores."

This wasn't always the case. Paul Chow says that early Chinese Americans hid their culture to avoid the era's prevailing racism. "The first generation of Chinese Americans despised being Chinese," he says. "But now you have Asians grow-

ing up in white suburbs. By the time the kids get to college, they want to learn about their culture."

"When [our] children go to school, they're not exposed to Chinese culture," says Dr. Jean B. Chan of San Rafael, a mathematics professor. "They want to be like everyone else." That's why Chan is active in the Marin Chinese Cultural Group, which sponsors classes in Cantonese and Mandarin for young Sunday-schoolers, as well as a summer encampment at a state park. "We tell Chinese stories, have massage, and do arts and crafts. It's mainly for the children," she says.

Robert Lee has taken things a step further. Although he sees some Asians trying to "be 105 percent more Yankee than the Yankees," he avoided that trap by taking his five children on a trip to China. "They had a sense of recovering their roots," he says. "They began to own them, not reject them." •

### Behind the Numbers

In this study, suburban is defined as the portion of a metropolitan area outside the central city or cities. This analysis of census data used constant metropolitan-area boundaries for 1980 and 1990 to examine changes over time. Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) and Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) were used

rather than Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSAs) to provide more geographic detail. The Nassau-Suffolk MSA was excluded because it has no central city to compare with its wholly suburban population. The term Asian American here includes Pacific Islanders.

For more information about the Asian-American market, see *Asian Americans: America's Fastest Growing Minority Group*, by William O'Hare and Judy Felt, available from the Population Reference Bureau, Suite 520, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20009; telephone (202) 483-1100. See also *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park*, by Timothy P. Fong, and *The Asian American Movement*, by William Wei, both available from Temple University Press, Broad and Oxford Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19122; telephone (800) 447-1656.