

Preface

The State of Asian Pacific America: Reframing the Immigration Debate is the third major joint public policy research report produced by our two institutions — Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. We hope this policy study, like others we have already released and those we will publish in the future, will serve to inform public discussions and shape public policy deliberations about the most important and compelling policy issue-areas facing the nation's rapidly growing and diverse Asian Pacific American population.

This report is being released during a year when heightened governmental and public attention is focused on our nation's immigration policies. The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives are expected to debate and vote on major legislative bills which would lead to sweeping changes in the numbers and characteristics of future immigrants, and immigration could become one of the most contentious and emotion-laden topics of discussion during the 1996 presidential elections. And although there is a sizable body of rigorous and insightful social science research on immigration and the adaptation and contributions of immigrants to American society, the public debate on immigration has often been swayed by speculation, misinformation, and ideological advocacy. This is clearly unfortunate because immigration has played an indispensable role in our nation's past and present greatness and uniqueness, and would likely contribute significantly to the realization of our nation's finest and fullest future potential.

This policy report is intended to respond to the significant public interest in immigration issues by providing the most comprehensive empirical analysis of the contemporary Asian Pacific American immigration experience. By doing so, we are interested in infusing the policy decision-making process with fresh and accurate information as well as rigorous analysis of recent Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees, who have accounted for over a third of all legal immigrants and most refugees who have joined our society since 1970. As Professor Bill Ong Hing, the principal investigator of the study writes, "This project concerns controversy, context, and information. The controversy is over policies related to immigration and immigrants. In addressing the controversy, one goal is to place the debate in proper context; and another is to provide more information that will enable the public and policy makers to make informed judgments."

The report focuses on four highly significant, but largely misunderstood aspects of the contemporary Asian Pacific immigration experience:

the patterns of demographic growth and diversification, the high rates of entrepreneurial activity, the short-term and long-range economic and social benefits from their high educational attainment levels, and the extremely high rates of naturalization and electoral participation which they exhibit in relation to increased acculturation. Through the use of state-of-the-art quantitative and qualitative research methods, these empirical findings challenge an array of harmful and inaccurate myths that have been promulgated in recent years about not only Asian Pacific immigrants and refugees, but also other groups of new Americans. In sharing this information, as well as providing the proper policy and analytical contexts, we hope this report will contribute to reframing our nation's current immigration debate.

To be sure, immigration has had an unprecedented, multifaceted impact on the Asian Pacific American population during the past few decades. From a largely American-born group of 1.5 million in 1970, the Asian Pacific population has been transformed through large-scale immigration to a predominantly foreign-born population of 7.3 million in 1990 (with projections that they will reach 11 million by 2000, and nearly 20 million by 2020). This demographic impact of immigration is visible in many parts of the nation — from Lowell, Massachusetts to the San Gabriel Valley in Southern California, and from Houston, Texas to La Crosse, Wisconsin. At the same time, recent Asian immigrants have gained substantial media notoriety such as during the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest when thousands of Korean and other Asian businesses were targeted and destroyed, as well as in the horrifying discovery of Thai women garment workers who toiled in slave-like conditions in El Monte, CA. However, the vast majority of recent Asian Pacific immigrants are not in the media spotlight, although their contributions to this society are substantial. Asian Pacific Americans, for example, represent a sizable proportion of the physicians and other health care workers in America's public health system, as well as the engineers and scientists in the nation's advanced technological and scientific sectors.

Recent efforts to drastically change existing immigration policies have generated deep anxiety and concern among a broad cross-section of Asian Pacific American community-based organizations and leaders across the nation. They have joined with other organized groups and leaders to advocate against legislation which would substantially curtail legal immigration, and would virtually eliminate long-standing family reunification provisions. Over a million Asian Pacifics, who have been on waiting lists for

upwards of ten years seeking to be reunited with their families would be affected. They also have raised concerns about recent efforts within Congress to deny a number of social service benefits to legal immigrants who have yet to become naturalized. We hope this report provides relevant information and analysis to further illuminate the indispensable benefits which American society has gained from immigration.

Like our other joint policy research activities and publications, this report reflects the special strengths and goals of our two institutions. The UCLA Asian American Studies Center, established in 1969, is one of four ethnic studies centers at UCLA, and one of the nation's oldest programs in Asian American Studies. Through its research, teaching, publishing, library acquisitions, and public educational activities in fields ranging from literature to urban planning, the faculty staff, and students of the Center have sought to advance scholarly and policy understanding of Asian Pacific Americans.

LEAP is a nonprofit organization founded in 1982 to develop, strengthen, and expand the leadership roles played by Asian Pacific Americans within their own communities as well as in mainstream institutions. LEAP's mission to achieve full participation and equality for Asian Pacific Americans through leadership, empowerment and policy is being realized through the innovative Leadership Management Institute (LMI), the Community Development Institute (CDI), and the nationally recognized Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute (APA•PPI).

We would like to pay special tribute to Professor Bill Ong Hing of Stanford University Law School for serving as the principal investigator of this major policy report, and for coordinating this important research endeavor. We also would like to thank the researchers for this project, as well as the individuals who worked on producing this publication. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the Board of Directors of LEAP and the Faculty Advisory Committee of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center for their continued support of our joint policy research endeavors.

Don T. Nakanishi, Ph.D.
Director
UCLA Asian American Studies Center

J.D. Hokoyama
President and Executive Director
Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics