

Asian American and Pacific Islander Workers Today

By Nicole Woo and Cherrie Bucknor*

This issue brief looks at the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data available¹ to provide an overview of the demographics and economic status of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) workforce in the United States. A key theme that runs throughout this analysis is that the AAPI workforce is exceptionally diverse, so much so that average statistics obscure many important facts about this population.

There are about 8.9 million AAPI workers in the United States.² This is about 20 times more than in 1960, when the Decennial census counted less than half a million AAPI workers.³ Of that total, about 8.5 million are Asian Americans and about 450,000 are Pacific Islanders. At 6.1 percent, AAPIs' share of the U.S. workforce is ten times larger than it was in 1960, when AAPIs comprised only about 0.6 percent of U.S. workers.

AAPI workers hail from dozens of ethnic and national backgrounds (**Figure 1**). The largest ethnic groups within the Asian American workforce are Chinese (1.7 million), Filipino (1.5 million), and Asian Indian (1.6 million), followed by Vietnamese (over 800,000) and Korean (about 700,000). The plurality of Pacific Islander workers identify as being of two or more races (over 200,000), while the largest single ethnic Pacific Islander groups are Native Hawaiian (almost 70,000) and Samoan (about 40,000).

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- 1 For details about data sources and methodology, see Rho, Schmitt, et al. 2011. "Diversity and Change: Asian American and Pacific Islander Workers." Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research. Available at <http://www.cepr.net/publications/reports/diversity-and-change>.
 - 2 CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.
 - 3 CEPR analysis of CEPR extract of Decennial Census PUMS.



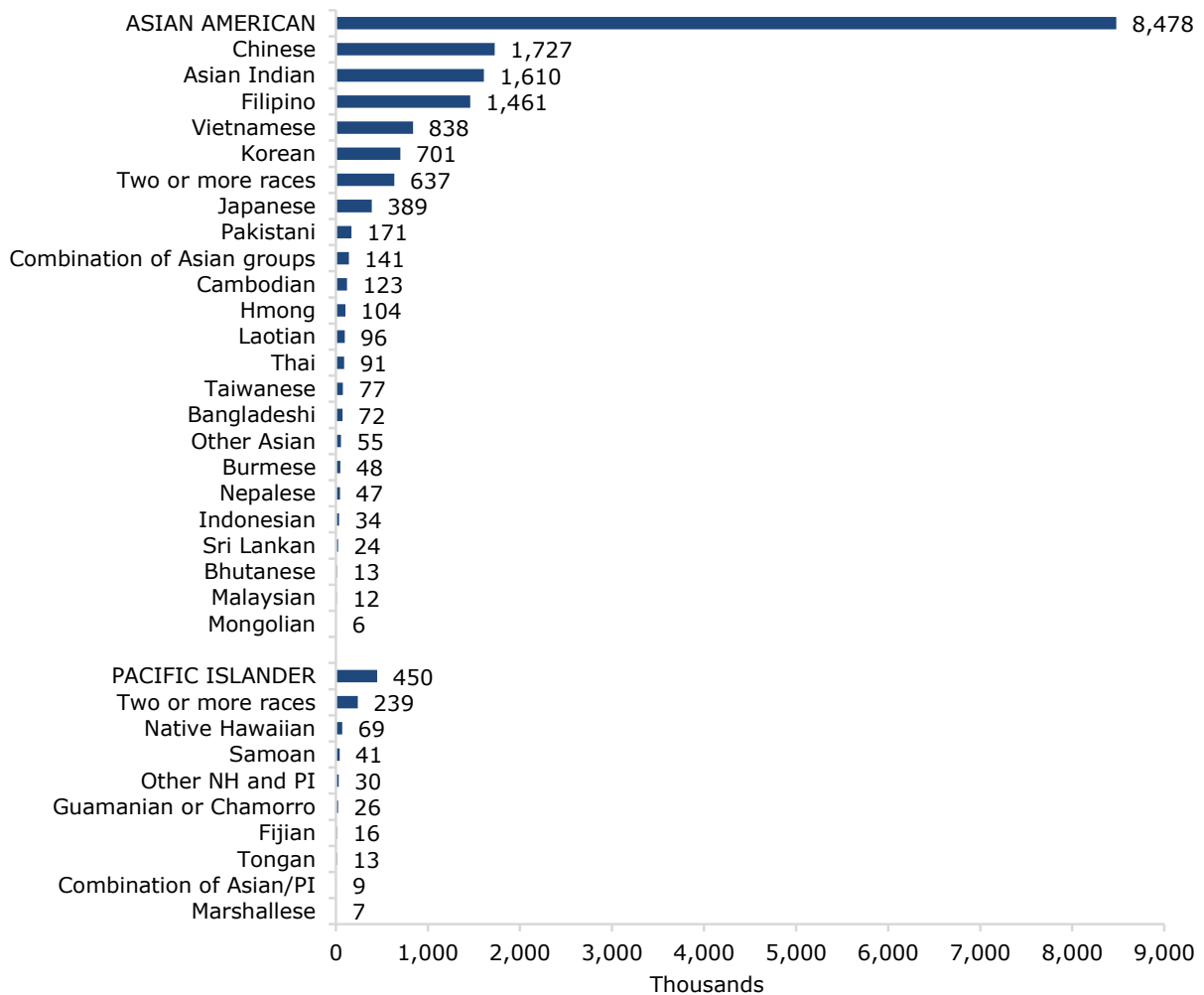
Center for Economic and Policy Research
1611 Connecticut Ave. NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20009

tel: 202-293-5380
fax: 202-588-1356
www.cepr.net

* Nicole Woo is Director of Domestic Policy at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C. Cherrie Bucknor is a Research Associate at CEPR. This data was originally compiled for and presented at "Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965: the Gateway to America for New Immigrants from Asia," an Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month event presented by the Department of Labor Asian Pacific American Council on May 13, 2015.

FIGURE 1

Distribution of AAPI Workers, by Ethnicity, Ages 16+, 2013



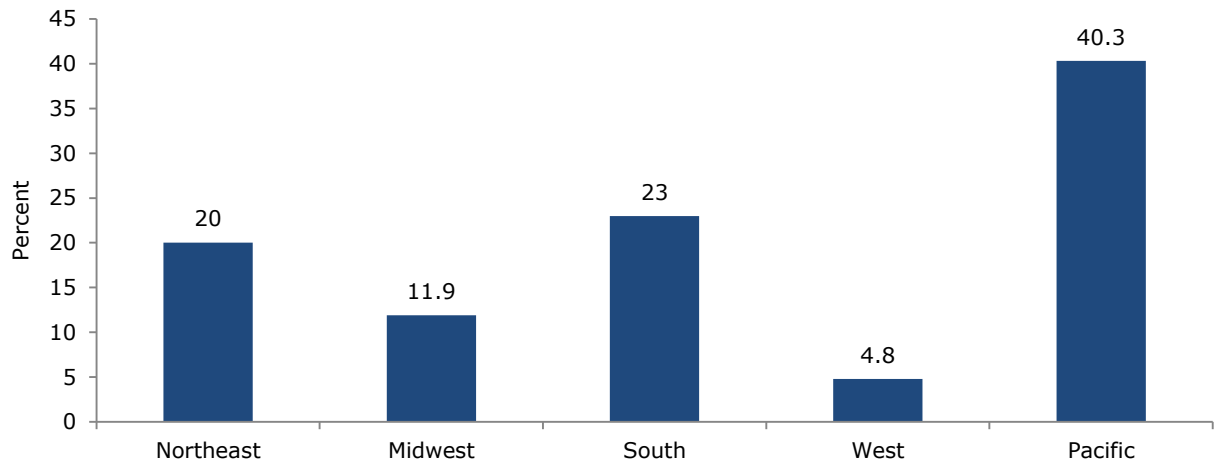
Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

Not surprisingly, four out of 10 (40.3 percent) AAPI workers reside in the Pacific region,⁴ which includes the West Coast states, Alaska, and Hawaii (Figure 2). That's followed by 23 percent of AAPI workers living in the South and 20 percent in the Northeast.

4 For details about data sources and methodology, see Woo, Bucknor, and Schmitt. 2015. "Asian American and Pacific Islander Workers' Union Membership." Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research. Available at <http://www.cepr.net/publications/reports/aapi-union-membership-2015-01>.

FIGURE 2

Regions of Residence of AAPI Workers by Percent, Ages 16+, 2010–2014

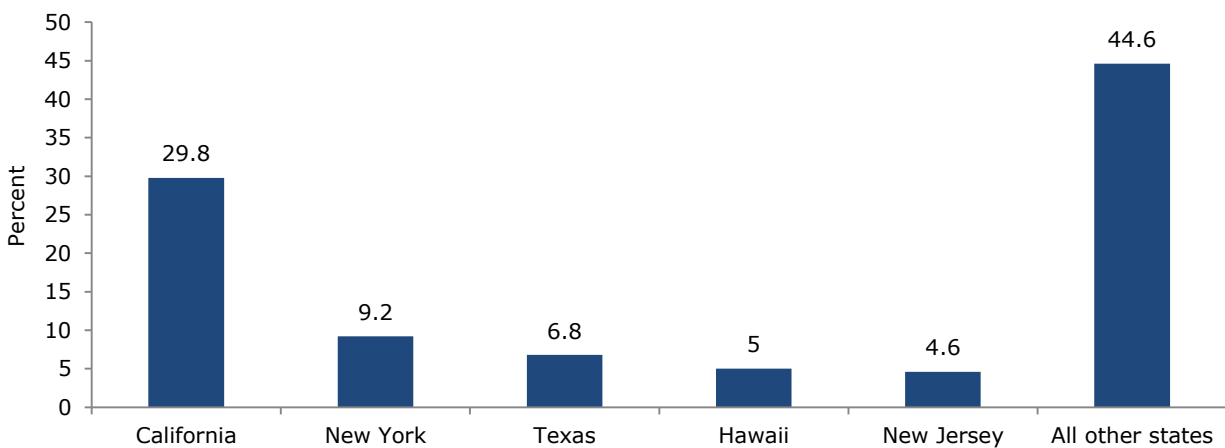


Source: CEPR analysis of CEPR extract of the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group, 2010-2014.

California leads the states with the largest share of the AAPI workforce: about three out of 10 reside there (**Figure 3**). Almost one in 10 live in New York. The next three states with the highest numbers of AAPI workers are Texas (6.8 percent), Hawaii (5.0 percent), and New Jersey (4.6 percent).

FIGURE 3

States of Residence of AAPI Workers by Percent, Ages 16+, 2010–2014

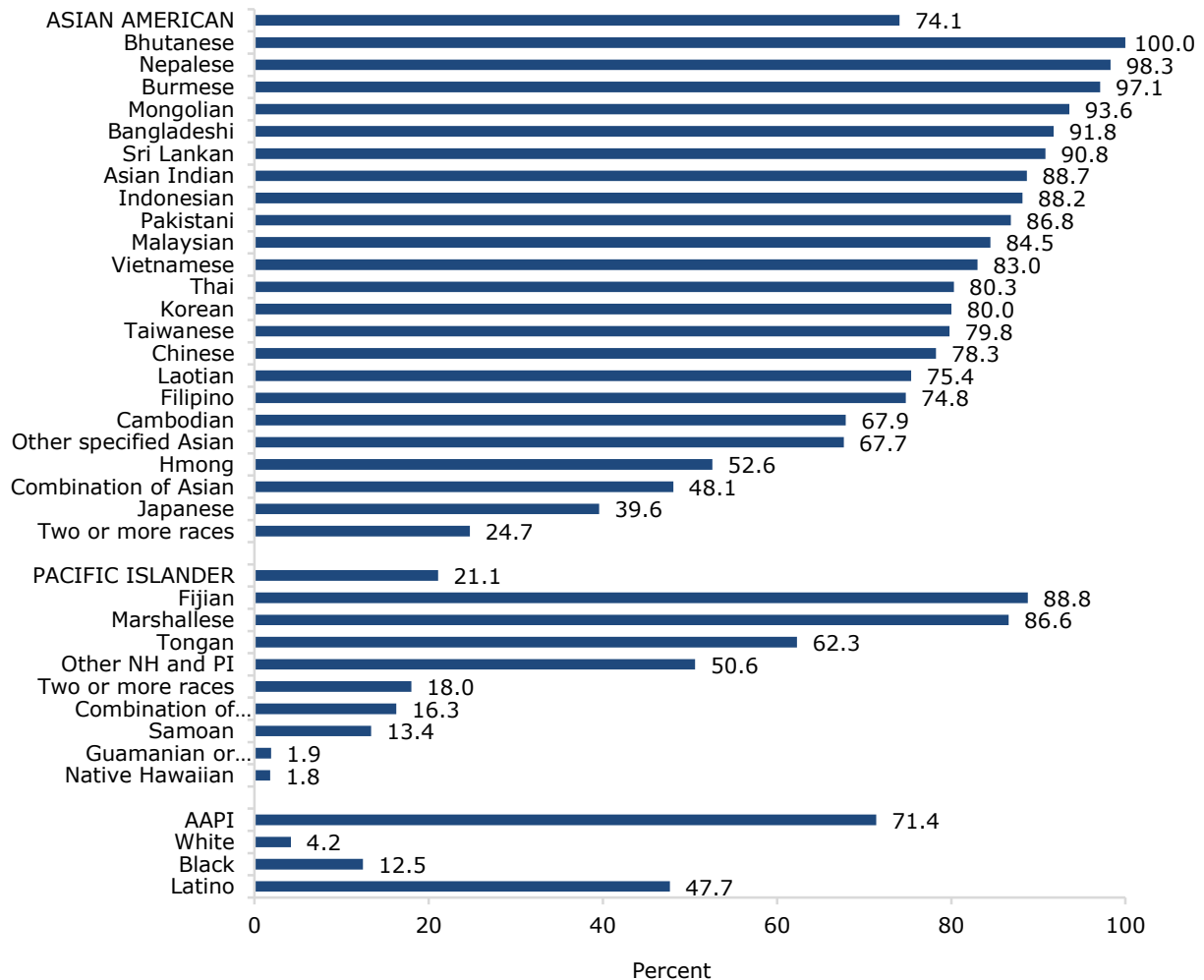


Source: CEPR analysis of CEPR extract of the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group, 2010-2014.

Just over seven out of 10 AAPI workers were born outside the United States (**Figure 4**), while just under half of Latino workers are immigrants. In addition, the diversity among AAPI ethnic subgroups is very large. For example, over 95 percent of Bhutanese, Nepalese, Burmese workers are immigrants, while only about 40 percent of Japanese workers were born outside the United States.

FIGURE 4

Immigrant AAPI Workers as Share of AAPI Workforce, by Ethnicity, Ages 16+, 2013

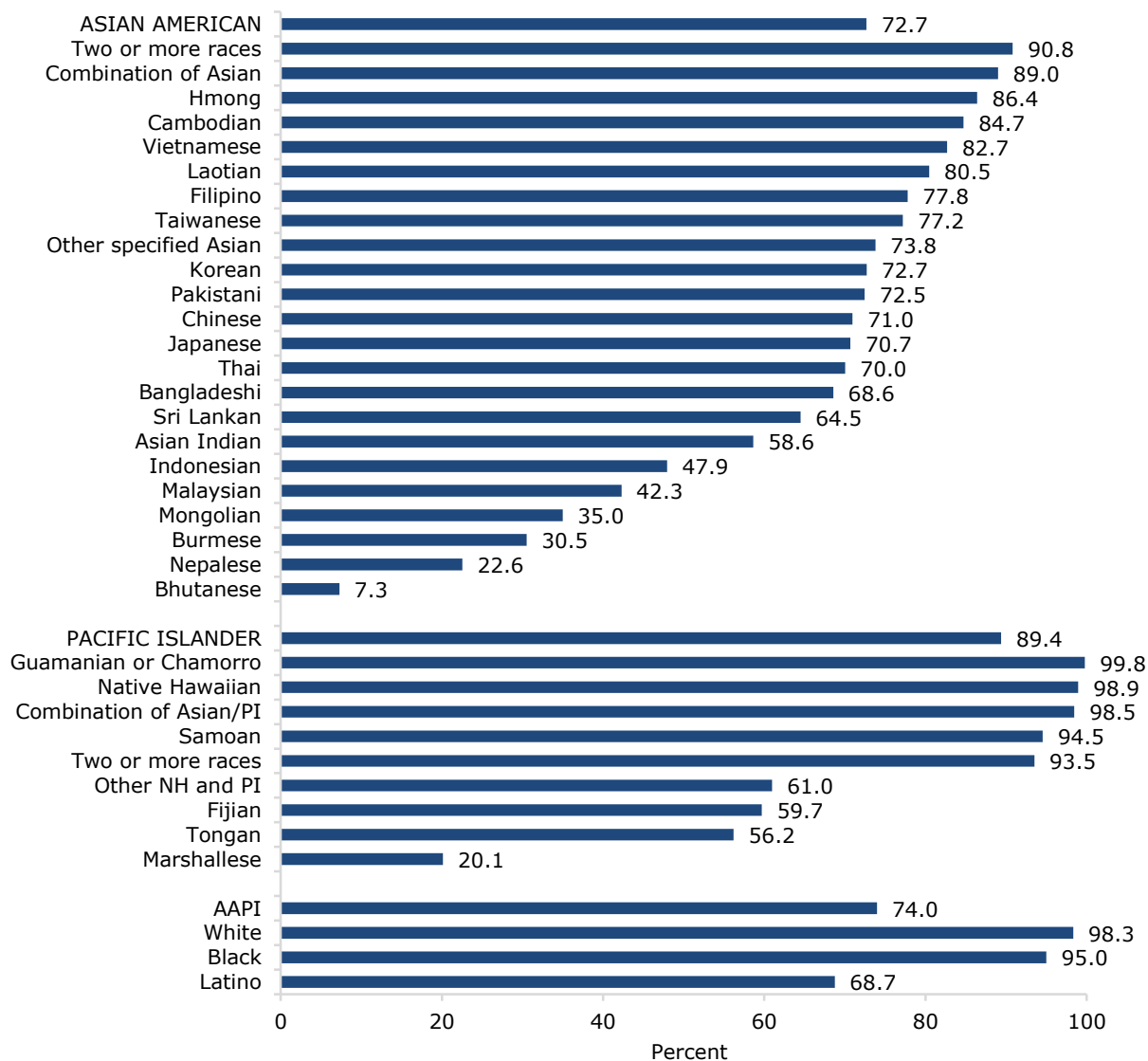


Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

Despite the large share of immigrants in the AAPI workforce, almost three-quarters (74.0 percent) of AAPI workers are U.S. citizens (**Figure 5**). In fact, they are slightly more likely to be citizens than Latino workers (68.7 percent). Again, the range between AAPI ethnic subgroups is wide. For example, close to all Native Hawaiian (98.9 percent) and Guamanian or Chamorro (99.8 percent) workers are U.S. citizens, while less than one-quarter of Nepalese (22.6 percent), Marshallese (20.1 percent), and Bhutanese (7.3 percent) are citizens as well.

FIGURE 5

U.S. Citizen AAPI Workers as Share of AAPI Workforce, by Ethnicity, Ages 16+, 2013



Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

AAPIs work across a wide spectrum of industries. For AAPI women, five of the top 20 industries (**Table 1**) are in the health-care arena (hospitals, physicians’ offices, nursing care, outpatient care and home health care). For AAPI male workers, restaurants are the top-ranked industry (**Table 2**), followed by a varied selection of both high- and low-income industries.

TABLE 1

Top 20 Industries of Female AAPI Workers, Age 16+, 2013		
Rank	Industry	Percent of AAPI Workers
1	Hospitals	9.8
2	Restaurants and Other Food Services	7.1
3	College, Universities, and Professional Schools, including Junior Colleges	4.5
4	Elementary and Secondary Schools	4.4
5	Nail Salons and Other Personal Care Services	2.8
6	Banking and Related Activities	2.4
7	Computer Systems Design and Related Services	2.4
8	Grocery Stores	1.9
9	Insurance Carriers and Related Activities	1.8
10	Traveler Accommodation	1.8
11	Office of Physicians	1.7
12	Nursing Care Facilities	1.7
13	Department and Discount Stores	1.6
14	Outpatient Care Centers	1.5
15	Individual and Family Services	1.5
16	Other Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation Industries	1.5
17	Beauty Salons	1.5
18	Clothing Stores	1.4
19	Child Day Care Services	1.3
20	Home Health Care Services	1.3
	<i>Other Industries, Total</i>	46.2

Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey, 2013.

TABLE 2

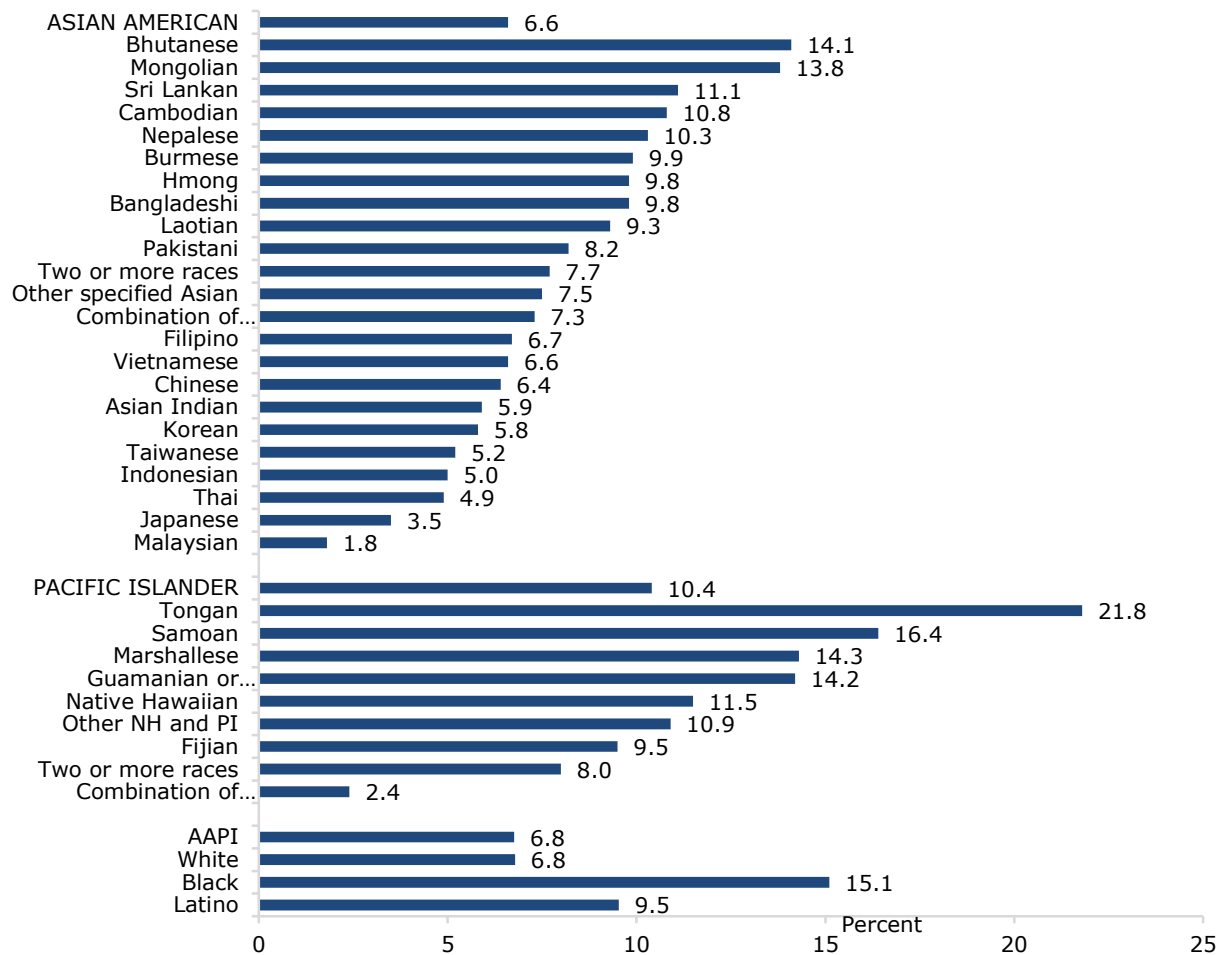
Top 20 Industries of Male AAPI Workers, Age 16+, 2013		
Rank	Industry	Percent of AAPI Workers
1	Restaurants and Other Food Services	7.6
2	Computer Systems Design and Related Services	6.8
3	College, Universities, and Professional Schools, including Junior Colleges	4.5
4	Hospitals	4.3
5	Construction	3.4
6	Grocery Stores	2.3
7	Electronic Components and Products	2.2
8	Management, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services	2.0
9	Architectural, Engineering, and Related Services	1.8
10	Banking and Related Activities	1.7
11	Securities, Commodities, Funds, Trusts, and Other Financial Investments	1.4
12	Elementary and Secondary Schools	1.4
13	Insurance Carriers and Related Activities	1.4
14	Traveler Accommodation	1.3
15	Other Amusement, Gambling, and Recreation Industries	1.2
16	Office of Physicians	1.1
17	Real Estate	1.1
18	National Security and International Affairs	1.0
19	Department and Discount Stores	1.0
20	Justice, Public Order, and Safety Activities	1.0
	<i>Other Industries, Total</i>	51.7

Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey, 2013.

Along with the entire U.S. workforce, AAPI workers' unemployment rates have declined since the recession.⁵ While the average unemployment rate for all AAPIs is as low as that of white workers, the range of rates among AAPI ethnic subgroups is very wide (**Figure 6**). For example, the unemployment rates of Tongans and Samoans are higher than that of black workers. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate of Japanese workers is practically half that of white workers.

FIGURE 6

Unemployment Rate, AAPI Workers, by Ethnicity, Ages 16+, 2013



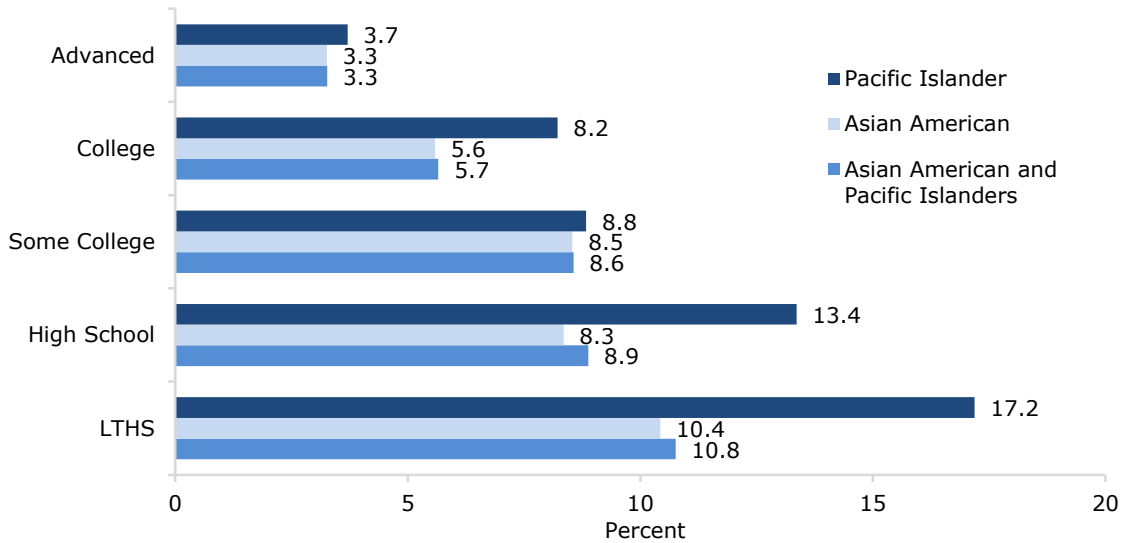
Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

Looking at how educational attainment and unemployment rates interact for AAPI workers (**Figure 7**), it is not surprising that higher levels of education correlate with lower unemployment rates. Interestingly, however, Pacific Islanders' unemployment rates are higher than those of their Asian-American counterparts at all educational levels.

⁵ For a detailed analysis, see U.S. Department of Labor. 2014. "The Economic Status of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the Wake of the Great Recession." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

FIGURE 7

Unemployment Rate of AAPI Workers, Ages 16+, by Educational Attainment, 2013

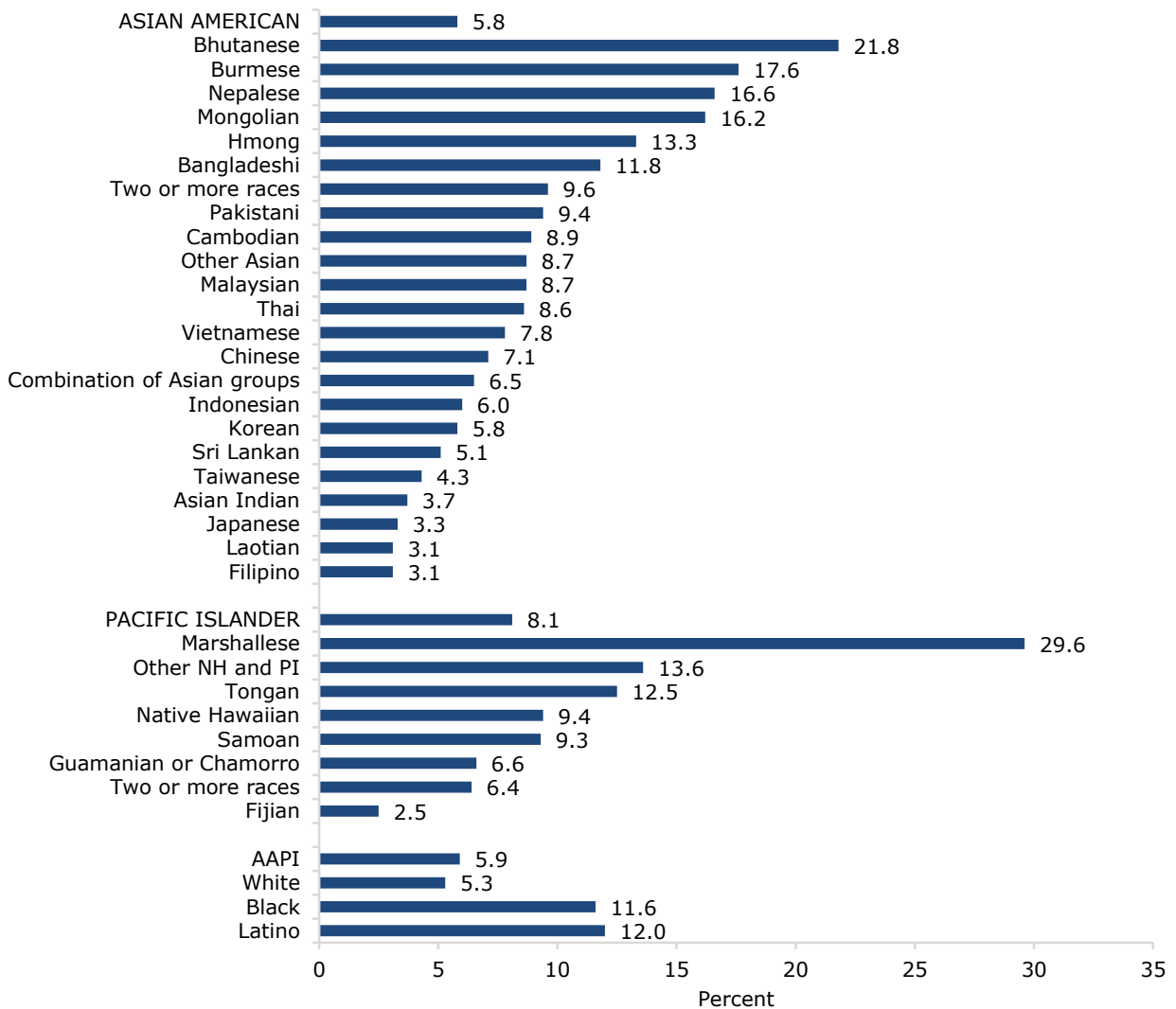


Source and notes: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013. “LTHS” indicates less than a high school diploma.

While AAPI workers’ aggregate poverty rate is almost as low as that of white workers (**Figure 8**), the variance of rates among AAPI ethnic subgroups is very large, from half to six times the average AAPI poverty rate. In addition, the fact that AAPI workers are more likely to live in states with high costs of living may mask some financial hardship among them.

FIGURE 8

AAPI Workers in Poverty, by Ethnicity, Ages 16+, 2013

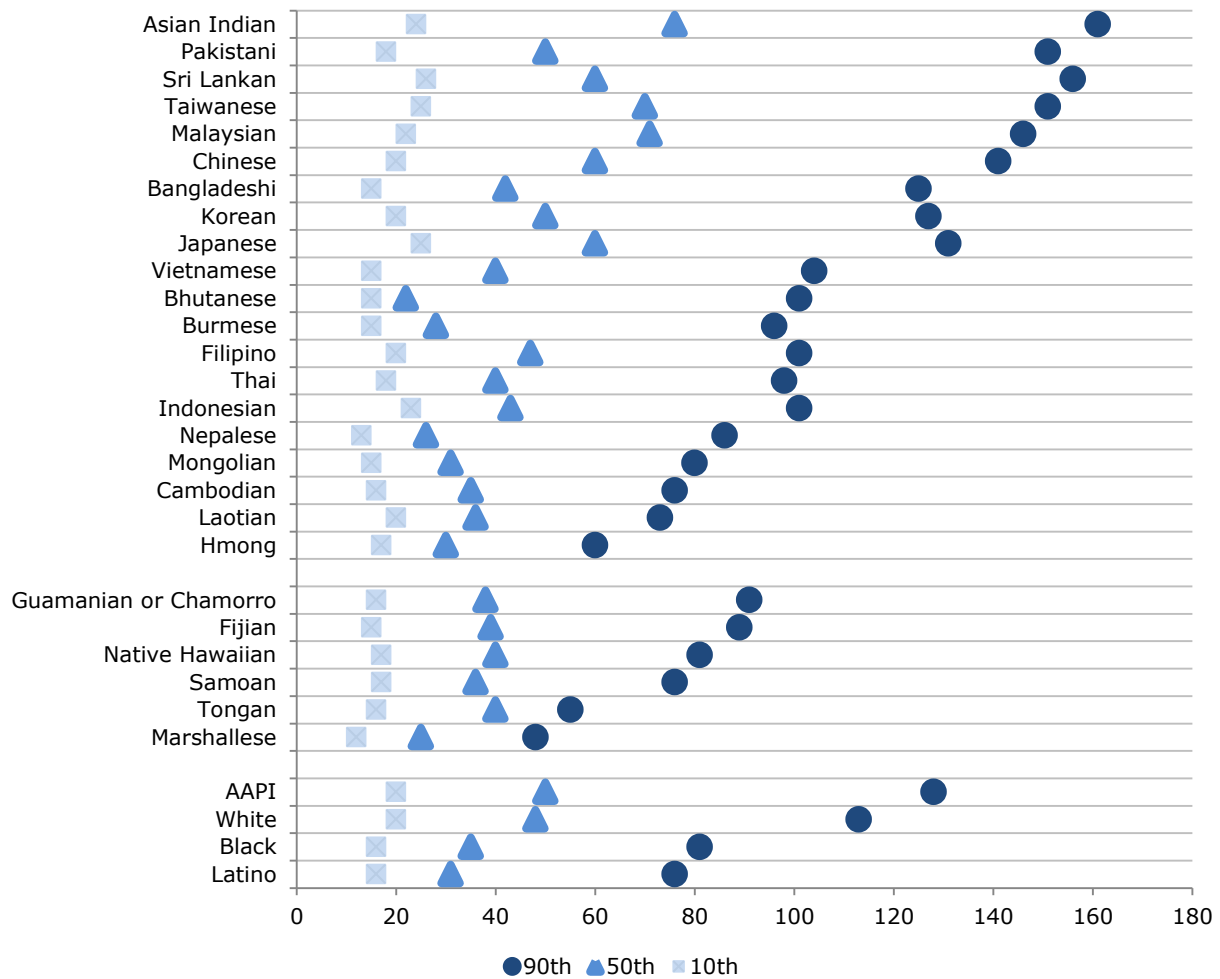


Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

AAPI workers' median annual earnings are the highest among the major racial/ethnic groups (**Figure 9**), surpassing that of white workers. At the same time, AAPI workers exhibit the greatest inequality of earnings between workers at the 10th and 90th percentiles of the wage range. In addition, the diversity among AAPI subgroups is great. While a handful of subgroups (especially Laotian, Hmong, Tongan, and Marshallese) are compressed at the bottom of the wage scale, other subgroups (especially Asian Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and Taiwanese) include workers at both the extreme low and high ends of the wage range.

FIGURE 9

Annual Earnings of AAPI Workers, By Selected Wage Percentiles and Ethnicity. Thousands of Dollars, Full-Time and Full-Year, Ages 16+, 2013.



Source: CEPR analysis of American Community Survey (ACS), 2013.

With such diversity within the AAPI workforce, aggregate data obscure many important facts about this population. The tremendous variance among AAPI ethnic subgroups underscores the importance of maintaining and developing disaggregated data sources. Without such detailed data, it would be almost impossible to gain an accurate understanding of AAPI workers.