

The Growth and Spatial Assimilation of the Asian American Population, 1860-2018

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Abstract

The research objective of this study is to document the growth and spatial distribution of the Asian American population from its initial inception in 1860 through the contemporary period. Because prior research on the Asian American population has been rather limited, we assemble data and statistics from various U.S. Censuses to document the long-term growth of the Asian American population. We also use descriptive statistics to analyze the distribution of the Asian American population across the four major U.S. Census regions as well as across the 50 U.S. states. The results show that this racial category has increased substantially both in absolute number as well as a percentage of the total American population. Most of this population growth occurred, however, after 1965. Accompanying this population growth is substantial spatial assimilation. The regional index of dissimilarity declined from 0.98 in 1860 to 0.24 in 2018. No longer located primarily in particular locales in the Pacific, our analysis reveals that the Asian American population now has significant presence in all of the U.S. states. Asian Americans have changed from being an isolated and tiny portion of the American population to a highly visible and widely recognized minority group. Ignoring Asian Americans in contemporary discussions of “race in America” is a lingering but outdated practice.

Keywords

Asian Americans, Population, Population Growth, Spatial Assimilation

1. Introduction

We document the growth and spatial distribution of the Asian American popu-

lation which is not being very well studied in recent research.¹ This neglect probably originates from the fact that, prior to the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the Asian American population was such a tiny and isolated component of the U.S. population. The omission of Asian Americans from classic studies of racial relations in the U.S. has thus been an understandable norm. During the last few decades, however, the Asian American population has grown dramatically so that it is now significantly represented in every region in the U.S. For this reason, the traditional neglect of Asian Americans has become an outdated practice as they have been transformed into a well-established and widely recognized minority group.

The conventional view of the Asian American population is that it is not really “mainstream” but is rather a miniscule and remote sub-population that could be considered “marginal” compared to the overall American population (Okimoto, 1994). Asian Americans had a perceptible presence in only in certain specific parts of the western region of the U.S. (mostly in Hawaii and some areas of California) which is geographically closer to Asia. Among the U.S. states, Hawaii is clearly the closest to Asia and is traditionally the only U.S. state where Asian Americans are the largest racial category (Barringer et al., 1993). However, Hawaii became a U.S. state only relatively recently (i.e., in 1959) and by American standards, Hawaii is not very large (Kitano & Daniels, 1995). Furthermore, Hawaii’s location is quite remote and far away from the U.S. mainland which reduces the social interaction between Hawaii and the “mainstream” American population.

Prior studies of the Asian American population have accordingly focused much on the western region of the U.S. (Barringer et al., 1993; Sakamoto & Ha, 2003; Takei et al., 2012). Famous literary works associated with Asian Americans typically take place in California or Hawaii, and occasionally in Washington (Bulosan, 1946; Okada, 1957; Kingston, 1976; Tan, 1989). Notable qualitative studies of Asian Americans have been conducted in California (e.g., Bonacich, 1972; Woo, 2000; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Indeed, in the early years of research on Asian Americans, the study of Asian Americans who resided “east of California” (e.g., Tang, 2008; Joshi & Desai, 2013) was sometimes considered too individualistic and esoteric to be of much substantive significance (Sumida, 1998).

The history of Asian Americans is typically centered on the western region of the U.S. (e.g., Kitano & Daniels, 1995; Takaki, 1998; Fong, 2008; Lee, 2015). Much of this history reflects the ebbs and flows of immigration patterns and related legal restrictions often associated with California and Hawaii (Min, 2006). These two states have figured prominently in several well-known Asian American histories (Ichioka, 1988; Kitano and Daniels, 1995; Takaki, 1998; Azuma, 2005; Wu, 2014; Lee, 2015).

The largest groups of Asian American immigrations include Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Indians, Vietnamese, and Koreans although of course there are other smaller groups especially in more recent decades (Barringer et al., 1993;

¹The annual meeting of the Population Association of America routinely includes sessions on many smaller sub-population groups *except* Asian Americans.

Kitano & Daniels, 1995; Xie & Goyette, 2004; Lee, 2015; Sakamoto, Iceland, & Siskar, 2022). Beginning with the enumeration of the Chinese in the 1860 U.S. Census and then the Japanese in the 1890 U.S. Census, the identification of Asian American groups in the U.S. Census has tended to increase over time to reflect their rising population sizes associated with historic immigration patterns (Lee, 1993; Lee, 2015; Xie & Goyette, 2004). In recent years, mixed and multi-racial Asian Americans are becoming more numerous as interracial marriages between Asian Americans and other racial groups are increasing (Frey, 2015).

2. Data and Methods

We use published data from the U.S. Census Population Division Working Paper No. 56 (Gibson & Jung, 2002) for the years from 1860 to 1990. Gibson and Jung (2002) report the regional distribution of the American population including for racial minorities such as Asian Americans. For the most recent time period after 1990, we use data from the U.S. Decennial Census for 2000 and 2010, and the American Community Survey 2014-2018 which provide large, nationally representative samples for those years. The data files that we used for the U.S. Decennial Census and the American Community Survey are publicly available (Ruggles et al., 2021). These files are known as the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) data which are available online.²

Asian American population counts prior to 2000 include single-race Asian American and Pacific Islander groups based on how the U.S. Census Bureau defined Asian American for each particular decennial U.S. Census. Multiracial Asian Americans were first enumerated in the 2000 U.S. Census. Although they are a relatively small proportion of the entire Asian American population, multiracial Asian Americans are also included in our total population counts of Asian Americans beginning in 2000.

Native Hawaiians were specifically enumerated beginning with the 1960 U.S. Census while a few other Pacific Islanders groups were added beginning with the 1980 U.S. Census. In the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Censuses, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were officially included in the Asian American racial category. However, due to political pressures (Hall, 2015), Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were removed from the Asian American racial category and reclassified as a separate racial category beginning in the 2000 U.S. Census. In our analyses for the purposes of simplicity and consistency, we follow the U.S. Census classification procedures by including Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders as part of the Asian American racial category only in the 1980 and 1990 figures. None of our basic conclusions are significantly affected by this approach, however, because in 1980 and 1990 Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were quite small populations compared to the other Asian American groups (Barringer et al., 1993: p. 4).³

²The website for the IPUMS data is located at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/about.shtml>.

³Of the total Asian American population in 1980, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders constituted 6.9% while in 1990 they constituted 4.4%.

3. Empirical Results

As shown in **Table 1**, only 34,933 Asian Americans were enumerated in 1860 U.S. Census which constituted about .11% of the total American population at that time. That figure for 1860 implies that only 1 out of 900 persons in the U.S. was Asian American which is miniscule. **Table 1** further shows that, 70 years later, the Asian American reached 264,766 in 1930 constituting .22% of the total American population which was still only 1 out of 464 persons in the U.S. By 1960, the Asian American population had increased to 980,337 so that the percentage of the total American population reached .55% or 1 out of 183 persons in the U.S.

As is well known, the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 notably changed immigration patterns and increased the proportion of immigrants coming from Asia (Min, 2006). As shown in **Table 1**, the percentage of the total American population that is Asian American has consistently increased since then. That percentage was .76% in 1970, 1.55% in 1980, 2.92% in 1990, 4.23% in 2000, 5.61% in 2010, and 6.40% in 2018. In regard to absolute population counts, **Table 1** indicates that the Asian American population numbered only .98 million in 1960 but increased to 20.92 million by 2018. These figures for 2018 imply that about 1 out of 16 persons in the U.S. is currently Asian American. The Asian American population has thus changed from being a tiny portion of the total population—even as late as 1960—to a highly visible minority group in the contemporary U.S.

Table 1. Asian American population, 1860-2018.

Year	Asian American Population	Total US Population	% of Asian Americans	Growth from Previous Decade
1860	34,933	31,443,321	.11%	n/a
1870	63,254	38,558,371	.16%	81%
1880	105,613	50,155,783	.21%	67%
1890	109,527	62,947,714	.17%	4%
1900	114,189	75,994,575	.15%	4%
1910	146,863	91,972,266	.16%	29%
1920	182,137	105,710,620	.17%	24%
1930	264,766	122,775,046	.22%	45%
1940	254,918	131,669,275	.19%	-4%
1950	321,033	150,697,361	.21%	26%
1960	980,337	179,323,175	.55%	205%
1970	1,538,721	203,211,926	.76%	57%
1980	3,500,439	226,545,805	1.55%	127%
1990	7,273,662	248,709,873	2.92%	108%
2000	11,898,828	281,421,906	4.23%	64%
2010	17,331,320	308,745,538	5.61%	46%
2018	20,924,652	327,167,439	6.40%	21%

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860-2010 decennial census; American Community Survey 5-year estimate 2014-2018.

Figure 1 graphs the absolute population size of Asian Americans from 1860 to 2018. The dramatic growth after 1965 is evident in **Figure 1**. We also calculated the total Asian American person-years lived which is shown in **Figure 1** to be 545,653,995 from 1860 to 2018. That quantity is equivalent to the total blue area under the population curve shown in **Figure 1**. In other words, Asian American history constitutes over 500 million person-years the vast majority of which has obviously been in the post-1965 era. Spanning over a century and a half, and encompassing such a large number of person-years of lived experience, we caution against making strong generalizations about Asian American history based on a small number of individualistic stories (e.g., Takaki, 1998; Lee, 2015).

Accompanying the population growth of Asian Americans is spatial assimilation. **Table 2** shows the index of dissimilarity for region of residence for Asian Americans versus non-Asian Americans computed across the four standard regions of the U.S. (i.e., Northeast, Midwest, South, and West). Due to their overwhelming concentration in the West during the 19th century, the index of dissimilarity was .98 in 1860 and declined only slightly to .75 in 1900. **Table 2** indicates that even as late as 1960, the index of dissimilarity was still .66. This later result implies that about two-thirds of the Asian American population residing in the West would have needed to be living in other regions (i.e., Northeast, Midwest, and South) in order for Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans to have proportionately equal representation across the four regions.

Table 2 also shows the substantial reduction in the index of dissimilarity as the Asian American population began increasing dramatically after 1965. The index of dissimilarity declined to .54 in 1970, .41 in 1980, .35 in 1990, .29 in 2000, .26 in 2010, and .24 in 2018. In other words, in only about two or three generations since the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the regional concentration of Asian Americans has been reduced by more than half.⁴

Figure 2 graphs the distribution of the Asian American population in 1960 immediately before the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. In 1960 as shown in **Figure 2**, California had an Asian American population of 318,376 while it was 310,722 in Hawaii. Washington had an Asian American population of 29,253 and Illinois had an Asian American population of 24,708. In all of the other states, the Asian American population was less than 10,000, and in ten states the Asian American population was even less than 1000 in 1960. The Asian American population was thus clearly concentrated in California and Hawaii as late as 1960.

Since that time, the Asian American population has continued to grow as discussed above in regard to **Table 1** and **Figure 1**. Due to continued Asian American immigration to California as well as an expanding second-generation, that state surpassed Hawaii in Asian American population in 1990 in contrast to 1960 when the two states were fairly similar. Asian American immigration to California and New York was high during the last few decades of the 20th century

⁴We also computed the index of dissimilarity across the 50 U.S. states for the post-1965 era finding that same basic conclusion that is evident at the regional level as shown in **Table 2**.

whereas the Hawaiian economy did not foster the sort of job opportunities needed to support substantial immigration (Min, 1995, 2006).

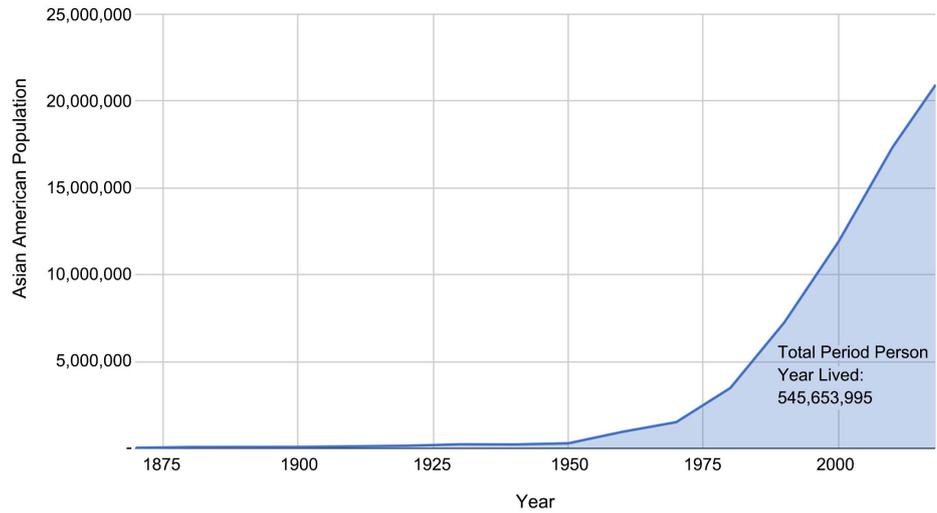


Figure 1. Asian American Population, 1860-2018.

Table 2. Dissimilarity index for region of residence for Asian Americans versus non-Asian Americans, 1860 to 2018.

Year	Dissimilarity Index
1860	0.98
1870	0.97
1880	0.93
1890	0.85
1900	0.75
1910	0.76
1920	0.74
1930	0.72
1940	0.71
1950	0.58
1960	0.66
1970	0.54
1980	0.41
1990	0.35
2000	0.29
2010	0.26
2018	0.24

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860-2010 decennial census; American Community Survey 5-year estimate 2014-2018. Based on the four standard regions as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

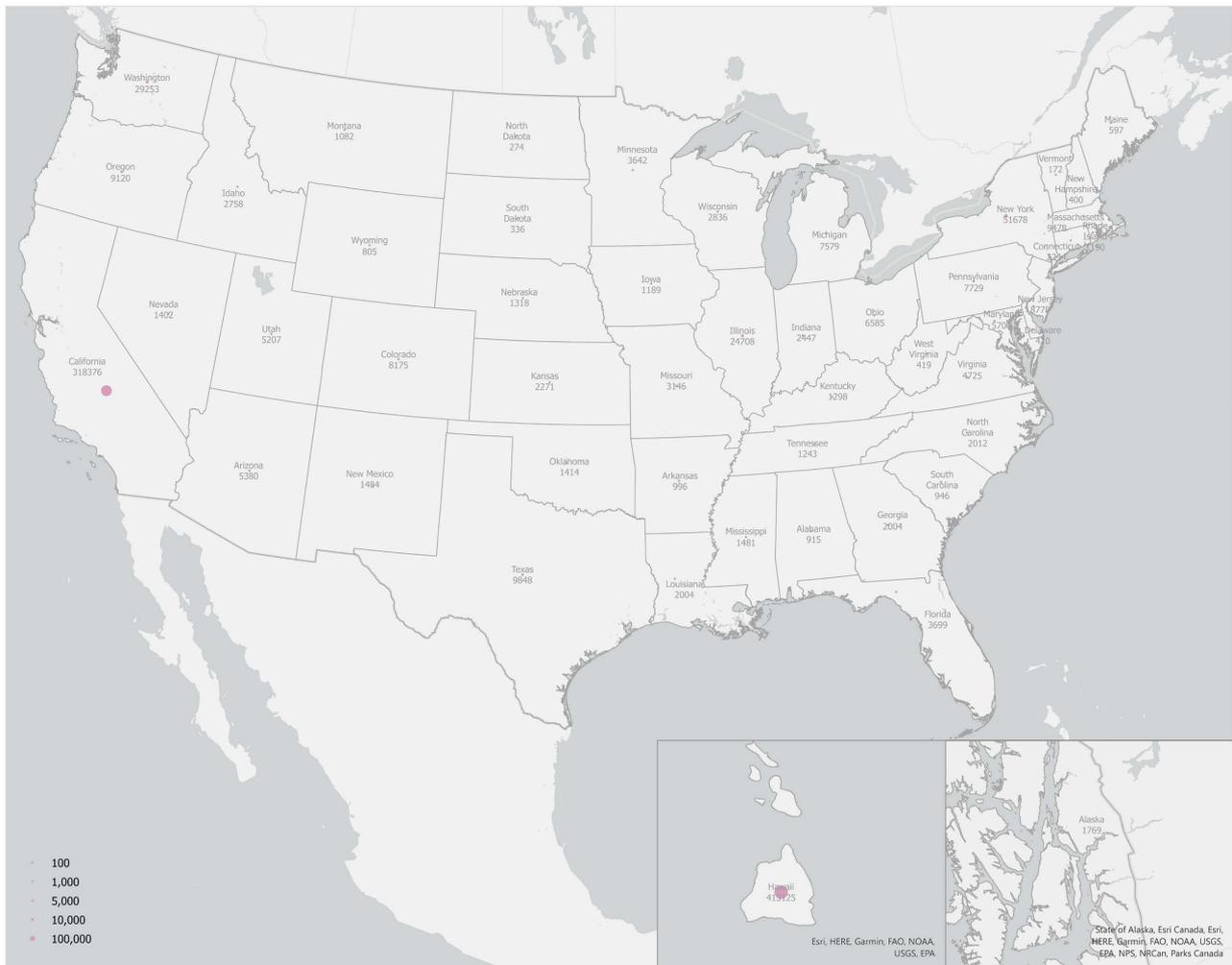


Figure 2. Spatial distribution of the Asian American population, 1960.

Figure 3 shows the spatial distribution of the Asian American population aggregated to the state level based on micro-data from 2014-2018. Several states have overtaken Hawaii in terms of the absolute size of the Asian American population including New York, Texas, and New Jersey. **Figure 3** also indicates that several other states are beginning to rival the Hawaiian Asian American population including Illinois, Washington, Florida, and Virginia (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In general, **Figure 3** reveals that significant Asian American populations are evident in all of the major regions and in most of the states by 2014-2018 which is quite different from **Figure 2**.

The foregoing discussion has focused on population growth and spatial assimilation, but has not considered the issue of the percentage that is Asian American in any given state. For example, although no longer among the top two states in regard to the largest absolute number of Asian Americans, Hawaii nonetheless remains distinctive as the only state where the majority of the population is Asian American or multi-racial Asian American (State of Hawaii Census Bureau, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). While our research focus is not on the

within-state percentage distribution, some suggestive results are provided in **Figure 4**. It shows the cross-tabulation of the percentage Asian American in the population of the state in 2018 versus the percentage growth of the Asian American population in the state between 1960 and 2018.

For example, **Figure 4** indicates that seven states (i.e., Minnesota, Nevada, Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia, Texas, and Georgia shown in darkest blue) have a relatively high percentage of Asian Americans in 2018 as well as a high percentage growth rate of Asian Americans between 1960 and 2018. Other states also have a relatively high percentage of Asian Americans in 2018 but their percentage growth rate of Asian Americans between 1960 and 2018 was low (i.e., Alaska, Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, California, Illinois, and New York). In the case of California, its growth in the Asian American population has been large in absolute terms as we mentioned above, but in percentage terms that growth has been low because California already had a large Asian American population in 1960 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1961).

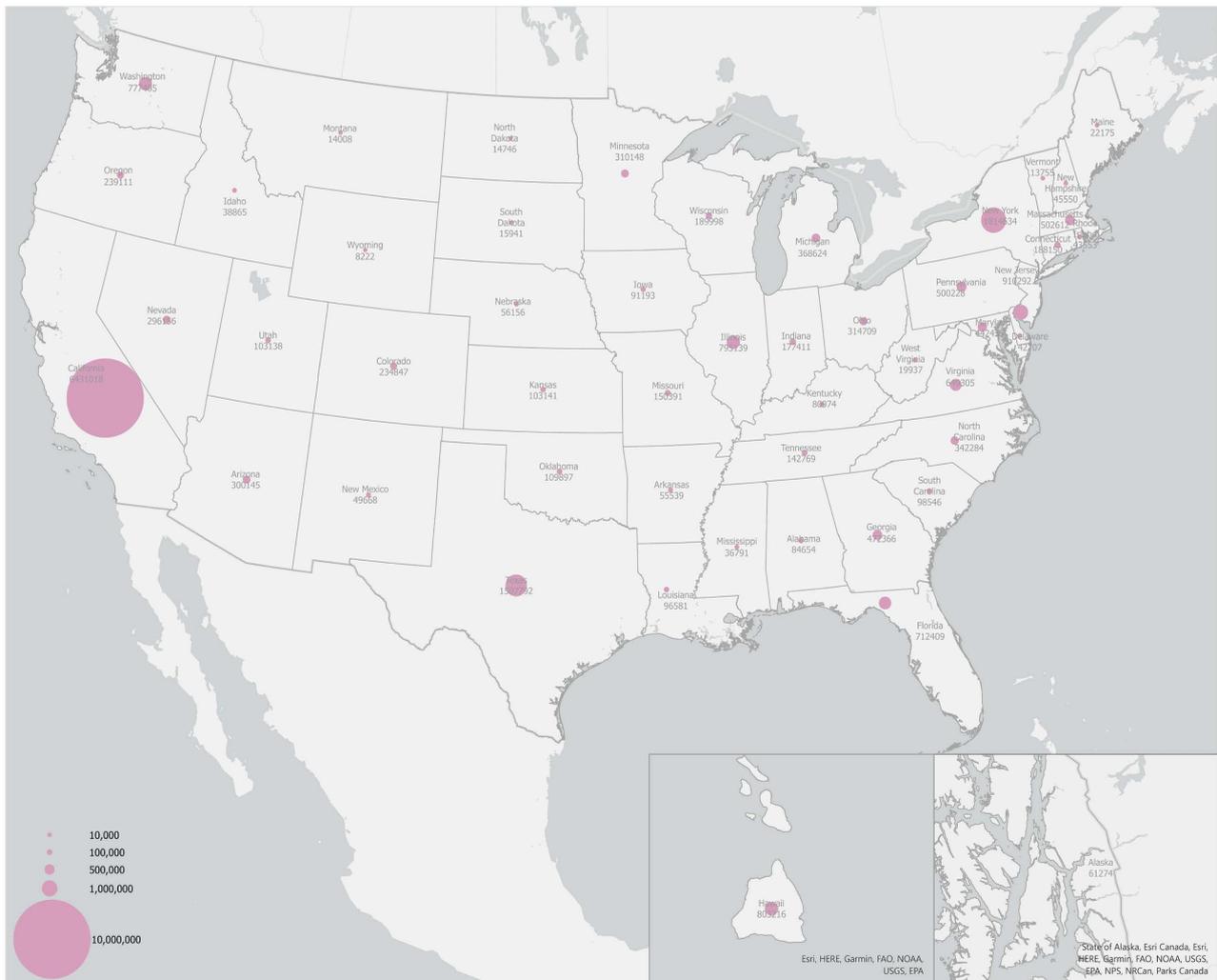


Figure 3. Spatial distribution of the Asian American population, 2014-2018.

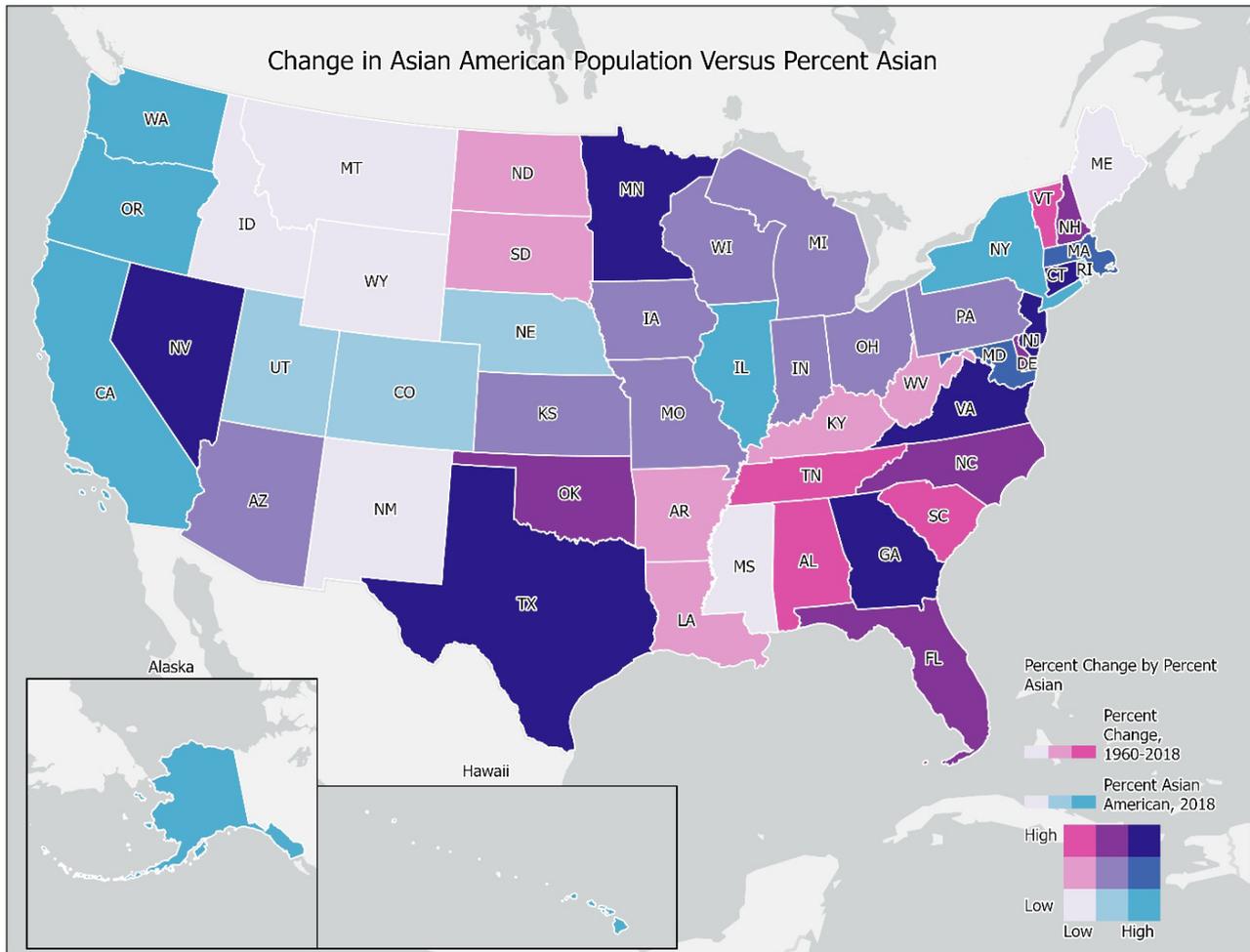


Figure 4. Changes in the Asian American population from 1960 to 2018 versus percentages of Asian American population in 2018 by State. Note: The bivariate map shows the change of Asian American population from 1960 to 2018 and the percentage of Asian American population in 2018. Gray indicates a low percentage of Asian American population in 2018 and a low percentage change of Asian American population from 1960 to 2018. Purple indicates both a high presence of Asian Americans in 2018 and a high percentage change of Asian American population from 1960 to 2018.

Some states have had a high percentage growth of Asian Americans but still have a low percentage of Asian Americans in 2018 (i.e., Vermont, Tennessee, South Carolina and Alabama shown in dark pink). Only six states—Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Maine, New Mexico, and Mississippi—have both a low percentage growth of Asian Americans and a low percentage of Asian Americans in 2018. Intermediate cases are also shown in **Figure 4**.

4. Conclusion

In sum, we have documented the growth of the Asian American population. Since its initial count in the U.S. Census of 1860, the Asian American population has grown substantially both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the overall American population. Most of this population growth occurred, however, after 1965. Accompanying this population growth is substantial spatial assimilation. The regional index of dissimilarity declined from .98 in 1860 to .24 in 2018.

When it was first enumerated in 1860, the Asian American population was miniscule. A century later in 1960, the Asian American population still numbered less than a million and constituted only about one-half of a percent of the total American population. Since the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, however, the Asian American population has been growing steadily. By 2018, the Asian American population was approximately 21 million which was about 6.4% of the total American population.

Accompanying this population growth is spatial assimilation. Since the 19th century on through 1960, the majority of Asian Americans resided in Hawaii or California which were their original settlements in the U.S. historically. That pattern has changed, however, due to rapid spatial assimilation in the few decades. While Asian American population growth has continued in California, Hawaii no longer has one of the largest Asian American populations as in 1960. Absolute population growth along with spatial assimilation has increased Asian American population sizes in the Northeast, Midwest, and South. The regional index of dissimilarity declined from .66 in 1960 to .24 in 2018. In three generations since the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, the regional concentration of Asian Americans has been reduced by more than half.

No longer located primarily in particular locales in the Pacific, the Asian American population now has significant presence in all of the regions and states of the U.S. Asian Americans have changed from being an isolated and tiny portion of the American population to a highly visible and widely recognized minority group. By long-standing custom and continuing convention, many discussions of “racial inequality in America” neglect any serious consideration of Asian Americans (e.g., Reich, 1981; Conley, 2010). We suggest that this tradition of ignoring Asian Americans is outdated and increasingly parochial. The growing population size of Asian Americans implies that they have indeed become “mainstream” (Nee & Holbrow, 2013) and that their existence should no longer be routinely disregarded in studies of “race in America” (e.g., Wilson, 2009) which often consider only Whites and African Americans.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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