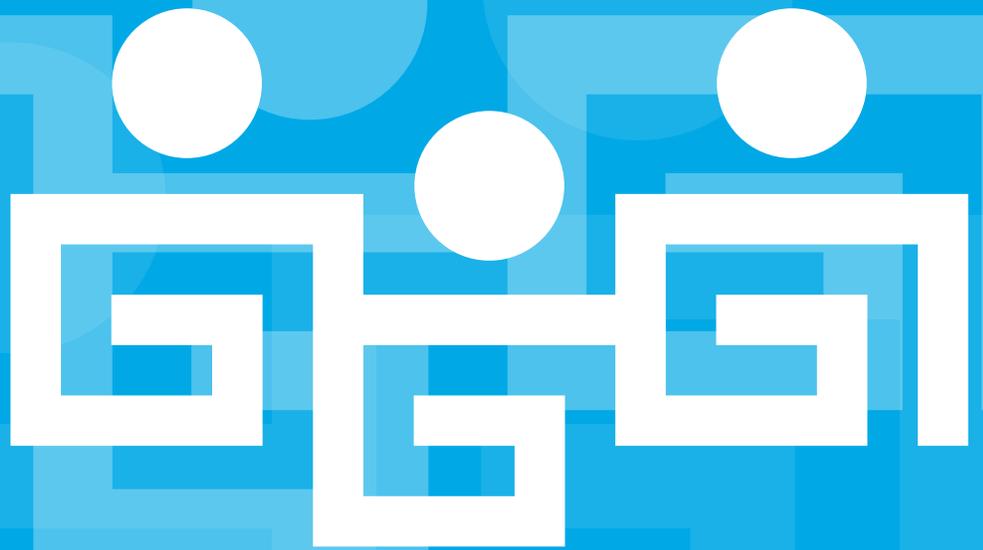


**KOREAN NEEDS ASSESSMENT  
OF THE BAY AREA 2014-2015**

**POLICY BRIEF**

**INTEGRATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT  
OF BAY AREA KOREAN IMMIGRANTS**



Korean  
Community  
Center  
of the East Bay



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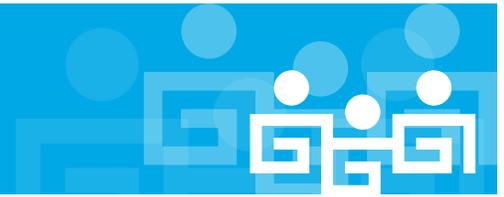
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# INTEGRATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF BAY AREA KOREAN IMMIGRANTS



## Significance

Asian Americans have, for decades, been a rapidly growing population segment in the United States. More recently, their political presence have also been growing significantly, as measured by an average increase of 600,000 registered voters per midterm election cycle and an increase in the number of Congressional candidates from 10 candidates in 2010 to 30 in 2012, and then to 39 candidates in 2014. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of organizations supporting voter registration among Asian Americans; 154 organizations participated in National Voter Registration Day in 2012, and 317 organizations participated in 2014 (AAJC Voter Survey, 2014).

Many Asian Americans are immigrants. Overall, naturalized immigrants have better economic outcomes than their non-citizen counterparts. The naturalized citizens earn more than their non-citizen counterparts, are less likely to be unemployed, and are better represented in highly skilled jobs. Citizenship alone can boost individual earnings by 8 to 11 percent, leading to a potential \$21-45 billion increase in cumulative earnings over ten years that have ripple effects on the national economy (CSII, 2012).

Once individuals obtain their legal permanent residency, they generally become eligible to naturalize after maintaining their continuous physical residency for five years. The exceptions are refugees, those seeking asylum, and those who obtained legal permanent residency (LPR) through marrying a US citizen; in these latter cases,

the wait time may be shorter. There are also other criteria that could affect eligibility to naturalize, such as basic English proficiency, having “good moral character”, and more. In California, over 470,000 Asian immigrants who obtained legal permanent residence in the United States between 1985 and 2005 are eligible to naturalize but have not yet become citizens (CSII, 2011). Approximately 82% of legal permanent residents from Japan, 55% of LPRs from Thailand, and 42% of LPRs from South Korea and Laos who obtained status during this time period are eligible to naturalize but have not become citizens. Over 96% of these Asian immigrants are of voting age. Immigrants from the Philippines, China, Vietnam, India, and South Korea are the largest groups of non-citizen Asian immigrants eligible to naturalize among the top Asian ethnic groups.

Considering that Koreans represent one of the largest groups of non-citizen Asian immigrants eligible to naturalize, and the potential enhancement in quality of life via integration into civically engaged American life, it is critical to explore barriers and enhancers of pathway to citizenship and civic engagement among Korean immigrants.

Korean Community Center of the East Bay (KCCEB) and Health Research for Action at UC Berkeley School of Public Health conducted a survey in the San Francisco Bay Area, which examined the barriers to the pathway to citizenship and civically engaged life among Koreans living in the Bay Area. 342 Korean American adults participated via phone, in-person interviews, and online between July 2014 and February 2015 in the San Francisco

Bay Area. The following are results of the survey and recommendations to increase naturalization, political awareness, and civic engagement among Koreans.

## Discussions

***Over 14,000 Korean immigrants are eligible for U.S. Citizenship in the Bay Area, which is 13% of total Bay Area Asian immigrants eligible for U.S. Citizenship.*** Santa Clara County has the largest number of Korean immigrants eligible (6,559) to naturalize, followed by Alameda County (2,756), San Francisco (1,476), Contra Costa (1,263), and San Mateo (1,038). It is crucial to lower the barriers to naturalization by disseminating information on practical benefits of naturalization, as well as where Koreans could receive assistance in the process.

***Language and unfamiliarity with the U.S. political system are the largest barriers.*** With regard to barriers that Korean immigrants face in becoming U.S. citizens, more than half of the participants in the survey indicated a lack of access to English as a second language and citizenship classes (51%), indicating language barrier as the top barrier to citizenship. Lack of education and unfamiliarity with the U.S. political system was the second major barrier (36%) to becoming U.S. Citizen, followed by unemployment and job issues (20%), lack of time and access to alternative childcare (15%), strong ties to home country (15%), and lack of transportation (5%). The participants who answered “Other” mentioned racism, cost, property in Korea, and inability to have dual citizenship as barriers to becoming U.S. citizens.

Language barrier is the most notable challenge to obtaining U.S. Citizenship among Korean immigrants. Koreans that have limited English

skills tend to wait to become eligible for the language exemption in naturalization, by waiting until they become 50 years old and 20 years from becoming a legal permanent resident. Considering naturalized immigrants have better economic outcomes than their non-citizen counterparts, the fact that many working-age immigrants wait long years to become naturalized mainly due to the language barrier is a huge disadvantage that needs to be resolved. Furthermore, English proficiency is important for immigrants’ social integration and their economic assimilation (Kim, 2003). From the perspective of intergenerational mobility, as immigrants fare better, their economic success will impact future generations, by investing more in their children to lay the groundwork for their socioeconomic success in the future.

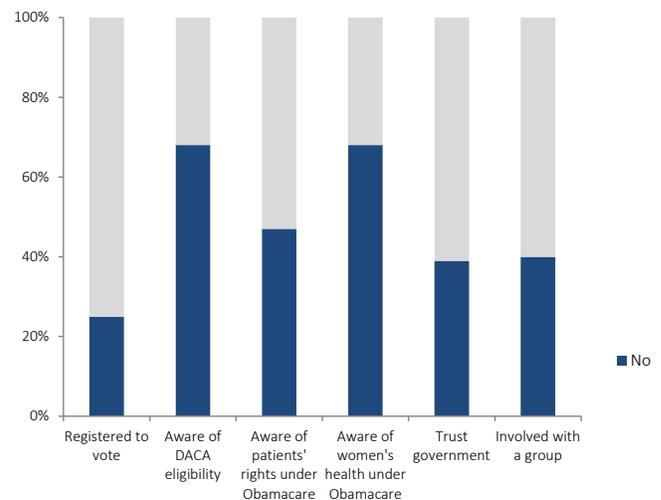
Improving English language proficiency will have multiple effects. Not only will it help the immigrants become naturalized much sooner, but it will enable them to become more assimilated and economically productive. In United States, currently 19.2 million working-age people (ages between 16 and 64), are considered LEP; at the same time, virtually all of the growth in the U.S. labor force over the next four decades is projected to come from immigrants and their children (Wilson, 2014). As the future growth in the U.S. labor force depends strongly on the immigrant families, it is clear that immigrants’ economic success will have a significant positive effect on U.S. economy. This reveals the critical need to invest in increasing English proficiency for immigrants and their families with LEP, so they could become naturalized earlier and provide a greater contribution to the American economy moving forward.

Table 2. Citizenship

Barriers to Becoming a US citizen (n=339)	Valid %
Lack of English language classes / citizenship classes Language barrier	51
Lack of education / unfamiliar with political system	36
Unemployment / jobs	20
Lack of time / childcare	15
Strong ties to home country	15
Lack of transportation	5
Other (e.g., racism, cost, property in Korea, dual citizenship not allowed, planning to return to Korea later, unsatisfying qualification)	14
<b>Benefits of U.S. Citizenship (n=341)</b>	
Voting rights	58
Traveling abroad without need for visas or restrictions of length of stay	49
Access to government programs and assistance	41
Access to government jobs	30
Holding elective office	23
No benefits	4
Other (e.g., retirement benefit, education, financial aid, employment, citizen rights & protection, convenience, military issue, safety, social mobility)	12

**Bay Area Koreans generally consider voting as a benefit of U.S. Citizenship, but are largely unaware of their civil rights and health and social benefits as a U.S. Citizen.** In terms of civic engagement, about a quarter (25%) of the Korean survey participants who identified themselves as U.S. Citizens were not registered to vote. More than two-thirds of the total participants were not aware of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) eligibility (68%) and not aware of the women’s health provisions under the ACA (68%). Awareness of patients’ rights under the ACA was also low, with almost half of the participants (47%) reporting a lack of familiarity. Two-fifths of participants (40%) answered that they do not trust the government always, most, or some of the time. Regarding the advantages of U.S. citizenship, more than half of the participants chose voting rights as the number one benefit (58%), followed by traveling abroad without the need for visas or restrictions on length of stay (49%), access to government programs and assistance (41%), access to government jobs (30%), and holding

elective office (23%). Participants who answered “Other” (12%) mentioned retirement benefits, access to an education opportunity, financial aid, an employment opportunity, and protection of citizens.



**Korean churches can play an important role in community engagement.** When participants were asked about involvement with groups or organizations, almost half (46%) answered that they were involved in a church, followed by Korean school (9%), and dry cleaners associations (4%). The remaining participants mentioned various Korean-related and non-Korean-related community groups. Faith-based institutions, in particular, shape opinions and attitudes about mundane matters of daily life and more significant issues touching the lives of Korean immigrants: where to send children to school, how to negotiate challenges of cultural divides among the generations, and how civic engagement can help them individually and collectively. Korean churches should be key partners in any programs serving Korean immigrants.

**Koreans have a sizable undocumented population.** There are about 230,000 undocumented Koreans living in United States (out of a total of 11.2 million undocumented

immigrants nationally), which makes them one of the three largest Asian undocumented immigrant populations in the country, and also the seventh largest undocumented immigrant population nationwide (Baker and Rytina, 2013). Within Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and San Mateo counties, there are approximately about 419,000 undocumented immigrants, and around 43,000, or more than 10% of them are eligible for DACA (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Given that San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont area and San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara are two of the top ten Metropolitan Areas with the highest concentrations of Korean immigrants (Zong and Batalova, 2014), it is reasonable to assume that a significant number of undocumented Koreans live in these areas. According to a report in the Korea Times, nearly a third of the estimated 600 students at University of California, Berkeley, with either indeterminate or undocumented immigration status, are from Korea (Schurmann, 2011). It is noteworthy that despite the significant number of undocumented individuals in the Korean population, the community itself seems to have a low awareness of the issue. Within our survey participants, 68% of them showed unfamiliarity with DACA, even though a number of undocumented populations can benefit from it. Undocumented Koreans are very difficult to reach, with challenges in identifying them, and their reluctance to come forward due to stigma and fear of exposure. Hence it is crucial to raise the overall awareness and sense of acceptance within the general community, so these undocumented and underserved individuals can feel safe to seek help.

## Recommendations

Low naturalization rates have important implications in political integration, because the greatest barriers to immigrants' political participation, especially in elections, are gaining citizenship and registering to vote after becoming a citizen. Improving the efficacy of the naturalization program requires greater investments in culturally and linguistically competent and comprehensive civic engagement track programs:

- Integrate naturalization services with direct civic education and outreach to the Korean immigrant community regarding procedures and benefits of becoming naturalized, with focus in the areas that are culturally relevant and applicable to them;
- Support more Korean-serving community-based organizations to become legitimate immigrant legal resources to provide accurate information on naturalization process and provide language classes that assist even limited English Proficient Koreans to become U.S. Citizens;
- Track newly-naturalized Korean U.S. Citizens to raise their political awareness by having practical workshops that support Korean community members to become informed voters through education on how to register to vote, GOTV (Get Out the Vote) events, and voting parties; tailor these workshops to different local groups, age groups, and target audiences;
- Collaborate with local faith-based organizations to hold naturalization and political education workshops, as well as the voting parties. The outreach efforts should target various groups within a congregation using different communication strategies for each group: youth group, young adult group, senior group, etc. They are at different levels of political awareness and are incentivized by

different factors to civically engage.

The most common barriers preventing Asian American Dreamers (including Koreans) from applying to DACA are no different than those with other eligible youth. However, the prevailing stigma against undocumented immigrants in Asian American communities has been particularly difficult to overcome. Community leaders, ethnic media reporters, and Dreamers emphasize that undocumented Asian American immigrants face a greater level of shame in their communities, because undocumented immigration issues are not widely discussed, nor are they covered by ethnic media. Many adults are reluctant to have their children come forward to seek deferred status, fearing that it could bring shame to the family and heighten the risk of deportation to other family members. To promote success of Asian Americans including Koreans to be aware of and apply to DACA, funders should prioritize community education and outreach by:

- Investing in organizations with strong connections to the target Korean and other Asian American populations and ethnic enclaves, including individuals living in the informal economy ready to coordinate grassroots education and outreach activities, and capable of shaping and influencing community views on undocumented immigrants and immigration reform;
- Working with educators, parent associations, and school boards at high schools and community colleges; developing faith leaders as validators of the DACA/immigrant service program; and building partnerships with consulate offices of Korean and other select Asian countries;
- Supporting creative multi-media strategies, combining ethnic media for much larger audience of potential beneficiaries, their family members, and broader Asian American

communities who are digitally connected, with consistent and compelling messages. Engage additional partners for effective social media strategies;

- Engaging the undocumented Korean and other Asian immigrants and empowering them to raise their voice within the community, to advocate for their rights at the policy level, and to become leaders, activists, and supporters. Dreamers and their families are impactful messengers for immigration reform, immigrant integration, and immigrant rights, and they would benefit from projects designed to build their organizing skills;
- Increasing research on the undocumented population: encourage partnership with researchers to better understand the Korean and other Asian undocumented immigrant groups. This type of information could help create a richer population profile, identify needs, and improve outreach tactics and services.

## References

All references cited in the text are available in the on-line. [<http://kcceb.org/konabayarea/>]



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