

Asians and Pacific Islanders

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The US census uses the term “Asians and Pacific Islanders” to encompass individuals with ethnic origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent. Asians and Pacific Islanders account for approximately 5.6% of the US population, with the majority living in ten states: California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Increasing numbers of Asians and Pacific Islanders have been settling in the states of Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina. And, although Asians and Pacific Islanders are frequently referred to as a single group, this group actually comprises more than 50 distinct subgroups that speak more than 100 different languages and dialects. The subgroups within this larger category are quite diverse with respect to other features as well. As an example, it has been estimated that 55% of Vietnamese persons older than 5 years of age do not speak English at home, compared to 22% of Asian Indians. This diversity of language, culture, and socioeconomic conditions within the larger grouping of Asians and Pacific Islanders presents challenges in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts.

Incidence, Prevalence, and Risk Factors for HIV/AIDS

Asians and Pacific Islanders have the lowest rate of HIV transmission among all ethnic groups. The rate of AIDS diagnosis among Asians and Pacific Islanders is 3.6 per 100,000, compared to 54.1 per 100,000 for African Americans, 18.0 per 100,000 for Hispanics/Latinos, 7.4 per 100,000 for American Indians and Alaska Natives, and 5.9 per 100,000 for non-Hispanic Whites. According to a report issued by the Centers for Disease Control in 2008, Asians and Pacific Islanders accounted

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for approximately 1.1% of the 37,331 cases of HIV/AIDS that were diagnosed during 2005 and 0.6% of the total number of individuals then living with HIV/AIDS. The majority of the Asians and Pacific Islanders given a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS are men (78%); approximately 1% are children under the age of 13 years, and the remainder, 21%, are women.

Research has found that between 1994 and 2000, Asians/Pacific Islanders had the highest rate of AIDS at the time of their initial diagnosis compared to other racial/ethnic groups, suggesting that access to care may be a significant issue. The majority of Asians/Pacific Islanders with AIDS diagnoses are resident in California, New York, and Hawaii. A significant percentage of individuals with an AIDS diagnosis were born outside the USA; more than a quarter of the individuals diagnosed with AIDS between 1999 and 2002 were born in the three countries of the Philippines, Vietnam, and India. Researchers have suggested that the more open sexual norms in the USA may have allowed immigrants to engage in sexual activities that would have been highly stigmatized in their own countries, and it is these behaviors that have increased the risk of HIV transmission.

Among men, approximately two-thirds of the cases of HIV transmission are attributable to unprotected male-to-male sexual contact, while high risk heterosexual contact accounts for an estimated 15% of all transmission. Among women, more than three-quarters (80%) of cases are attributable to high risk heterosexual intercourse, followed by injection drug use (16%). In at least one study, almost one-fifth of participating Asian/Pacific Islander women reported that they had been pressured to have sex without their consent.

There is significant stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, with homosexual identity, and with injection drug use within many Asian and Pacific Islander communities. This greatly complicates prevention efforts in that individuals may avoid discussion about HIV and, as a consequence, do not have adequate information about how to prevent transmission. As an example, research has found that in some samples, a large percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander men who have sex with men had never taken an HIV test. Anti-immigrant discrimination has been found to be associated with higher levels of unprotected intercourse with secondary partners among Asian and Pacific Islander men who identify as gay.

Implications for Mental Health Care Providers

Asians and Pacific Islanders may encounter significant barriers in addition to the stigma associated with same-sex sexual behavior and HIV in their efforts to obtain HIV/AIDS prevention education, HIV testing and counseling, and HIV care if they are HIV-seropositive. Individuals who are undocumented most often lack health care insurance and consequently may find it difficult to locate sources of care. Even when individuals are able to locate an appropriate source of care, undocumented individuals may fear that they will be reported to immigration authorities. Not infrequently, the staff of a clinic, AIDS service organization, or public health

department that provides HIV-related services cannot communicate in the same language as the client. These findings suggest that competent, culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate case management services may be particularly critical in order for HIV-infected clients to obtain adequate care for both their mental health care needs and their HIV-related care needs.

Related Topics: Access to care, case management, discrimination, HIV counseling, HIV testing, immigration, sexual orientation, stigma and stigmatization.

Suggested Reading

- Chin, J. J., Kang, E., Kim, J. H., Martinez, J., & Eckholdt, H. (2006). Serving Asians and Pacific Islanders with HIV/AIDS: Challenges and lessons learned. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 17*, 910–927.
- Zaidi, I. F., Crepaz, N., Song, R., Wan, C. K., Lin, L. S., Hu, D. J., et al. (2005). Epidemiology of HIV/AIDS among Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States. *AIDS Education and Prevention, 17*(5), 405–417.

Suggested Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2008, August). *CDC HIV/AIDS fact sheet: HIV/AIDS among Asians and Pacific Islanders*. Atlanta, GA: Author. Retrieved April 5, 2012 from <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/pdf/api.pdf>
- National Alliance of State & Territorial AIDS Directors, & Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum. (2009). *Breaking the silence: Key issues and recommendations to address HIV/AIDS among Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the United States*. Retrieved April 5, 2012 from http://www.apiahf.org/sites/default/files/HIV_Report05_2009.pdf