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Fueled by immigration, Asians are fastest-growing U.S. group

Surpassing the influx of Latinos, Asian Americans lead the general public in education and income, according to the Pew Research Center.

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By Rebecca Trounson, Los Angeles Times

Asian Americans are now the nation's fastest-growing racial group, overtaking Latinos in recent years as the largest stream of new immigrants arriving annually in the United States.

In an economy that increasingly depends on highly skilled workers, Asian Americans are also the country's best educated and highest-income racial or ethnic group, according to a new report from the Pew Research Center.

In fact, U.S. Asians, who trace their roots to dozens of countries in the Far East, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, are arguably the most highly educated immigrant group in U.S. history, the study shows. And although there are significant differences among them by country of origin, on the whole they have found remarkable success in their new land.

"These aren't the poor, tired, huddled masses that Emma Lazarus described in that inscription on the Statue of Liberty," said Paul Taylor, the research center's executive vice president.

In fact, the Asian newcomers' achievements are likely to change the way many Americans think about immigrants, typically as strivers who work hard in the hope that their children and grandchildren will have easier lives and find greater success in this country, Taylor said.

For U.S. Asians, especially those who arrived in recent years, the first generation itself is doing well, outpacing Americans as a whole when it comes to education, household income and family wealth, according to the report released Tuesday.

Asian Americans also tend to be more satisfied than most Americans with their own lives, the survey found, and they hold more traditional views than the general public on the value of marriage, parenthood and hard work.

As a whole, Asian Americans are more likely than the general public to prefer a big government that provides more services. They also lean Democratic and a majority approves of President Obama's job performance.

Although the first large wave of Asian immigrants came to the U.S. in the early 19th century, the population grew slowly for more than a century, held down by severe restrictions and official prohibitions, some explicitly racist. Most Asian Americans now living in the U.S. arrived after 1965 legislation that allowed immigration from a wider range of countries.

Asian Americans now make up nearly 6%, or 18.2 million, of the U.S. population, the latest figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show. Nearly three-quarters were born abroad, and about 8 million came to this country in the last 30 years.

Geographically, nearly half of all U.S. Asians live in the Western states. California, the traditional gateway for Asian immigrants, has by far the largest number, almost 6 million. Of the major Asian subgroups, in fact, only those from India are relatively evenly distributed throughout the country, with the largest share, 31%, living in the Northeast.

Asian immigration has grown rapidly in recent years, with nearly 3 million arriving since 2000. At the same time, Latino immigration, especially from Mexico, has slowed sharply, mainly because of the weakened U.S. economy and tougher border enforcement.

As a result, the number of newly arrived Asian immigrants has outpaced Latinos each year since 2009, according to Pew's analysis of census data. In 2010, for instance, 36% of new U.S. immigrants were Asian, compared with 31% who were Latino.

The most recent immigrants have arrived even as the economy has boomed in many Asian countries and the standard of living has risen. Taylor said the reason many Asians move to the U.S. include shifts in U.S. immigration policies, changes in their home countries and U.S. labor needs for science, engineering and math graduates.

The Pew study combines recent census and economic data with an extensive, nationally representative survey of 3,500 Asian Americans. The interviews, conducted from January to March, were done in English and seven Asian languages.

Chinese Americans are the largest Asian immigrant group, with more than 4 million who identified as Chinese, followed by Filipinos, Indians, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese.

U.S. Asians as a whole are more satisfied than most Americans with their lives overall (82% compared to 75%), with their personal finances (51% compared to 35%) and with the general direction of the country (43% compared to 21%).

More than half of adult Asian Americans say that having a successful marriage is one of the most important things in life; 34% of all American adults agree. Asian Americans are more likely than American adults in general to be married (59% compared to 51%) and their newborns are less likely than U.S. infants as a whole to have an unmarried mother (16% compared to 41%).

Experts praised the study, saying that it was likely to change views of U.S. Asians for scholars and the public alike.

"This really opens up a conversation and sheds light on a community that is extremely heterogenous and very complex," said Tritia Toyota, a former Los Angeles television reporter who is now an adjunct professor of anthropology and Asian studies at UCLA.

Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor of political science at UC Riverside, also noted that in terms of their education, recent Asian immigrants are an elite group. More than two-thirds of recent adult immigrants are either college students or college graduates, the study showed. So, he said, experts should be careful when comparing their characteristics with other Americans.

"This is a select group even in their own countries," he said.