

**UCLA**

**AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community**

**Title**

The Future of Pacific Islander America in 2040

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2b54d2df>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 14(1)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

**Authors**

Ong, Paul

Ong, Elena

Ong, Jonathan

**Publication Date**

2016

**DOI**

10.17953/nx.014.01.1

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Resource Paper

# The Future of Pacific Islander America in 2040

Paul Ong, Elena Ong, and Jonathan Ong

## Abstract

This resource paper analyzes the growth of the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) population over the next quarter century based on projections from the U.S. Census Bureau and supplementary estimates by the authors. Overall, this population will increase from about 1.5 million in 2015 to nearly 2.3 million in 2040, about three times greater than the increase for the total U.S. population. Most NHOPIs are indigenous, but immigrants comprise about a fifth of the population. This group is relatively young, but median age will increase over time. Youth comprised about a third of the population in 2015 and over a quarter in 2014. The elderly share will nearly double to about one in eight by 2040. NHOPIs are more likely to be multiracial than any other racial group, and NHOPIs of mixed-race will comprise over half the population a quarter century from now.

## Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders (NHOPIs) will increase from about 1.5 million in 2015 to nearly 2.3 million in 2040, a 52 percent increase, which is three times greater than the increase for the total U.S. population (18 percent). NHOPIs (a.k.a. Pacific Islanders) will be an integral part of a profound social, cultural, political, and economic transformation as the nation becomes majority minority in 2043. In many ways, Pacific Islanders epitomize the demographic changes. It is the group with the highest proportion of individuals of mixed race, and with the highest proportion of youth. At the same time, the percent of NHOPIs that is comprised of immigrants is above the proportion for the entire nation. This report provides some insights about the historical context and characteristics

of the emerging Pacific Islander population, focusing on the quarter century between 2015 and 2040.

This report is also a part of a larger project that builds on the pioneering work that was published more than two decades ago, “The State of Asian Pacific America, Policy Issues to the Year 2020,” jointly published in 1993 by LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics) and UCLA’s Pacific Islander Studies Center. As with that edited volume, we believe that it is critical to understand key characteristics of the future population of Pacific Islanders, particularly by nativity and age. Doing so enables us to better understand Pacific Islander concerns and priorities, gain potential insights into the nature of social relations among demographic subgroups of Pacific Islanders, and speculate on their political and economic contributions to the nation.

While others have made projections of the Pacific Islander population, this project provides details not available elsewhere (see Pew Research Center, 2012). Rather than use a simple linear extrapolation for all Pacific Islanders, collapsing Pacific Islanders with “others,” or reporting only for “Pacific Islanders Alone,” this project utilizes demographic projection techniques that enhance the most recent 2014 National Population Projections by the U.S. Census Bureau (2015).<sup>1</sup> The project also takes into account differences in racial classifications over time<sup>2</sup> and develops projections of the absolute and relative size of the multiracial Pacific Islanders by nativity and age (i.e., U.S.-born or native-born).<sup>3</sup>

The report is organized into four sections. The first section provides a brief historical background and population projections of NHOPIs who live in the fifty states and the District of Columbia. The counts and projections do not include 168,000 Pacific Islanders who live in the Pacific territories.<sup>4</sup> The second section examines the role of immigration, which contributes proportionately more to the growth of the NHOPI population than for the general population. Section three discusses the age distribution of Pacific Islanders, which is a much younger population relative to the general population, although the growth rate for the elderly will be very high. Section four examines multiracial NHOPIs. The report concludes with some implications.

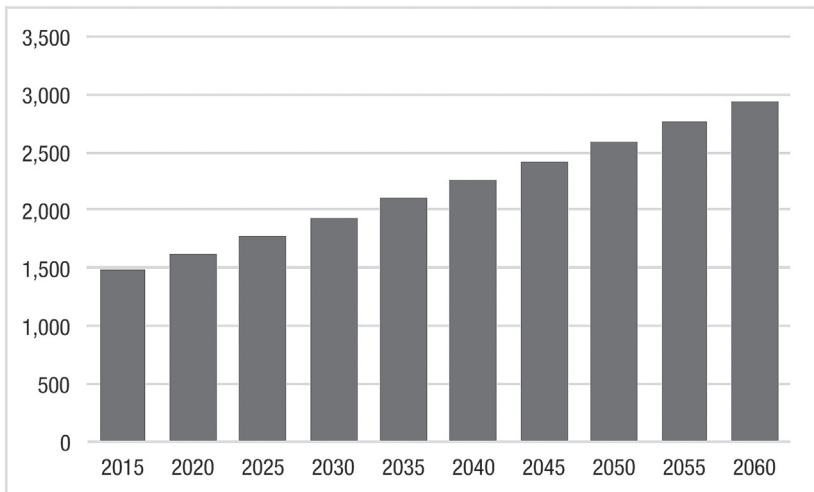
## Historical Background and Population Projections

The NHOPI population has been formed through a rich and complex history that involved colonization, disposition, and near genocide of indigenous groups, and more recently, immigration (Barringer, Gardner, and Levin, 1995; Camacho, 2011; Ong, 2006; Wright, 2002). Because

it is has been a relatively small population, Pacific Islanders have been officially enumerated in recent decades.<sup>5</sup> The 1980 Census counted more than 259,000 Pacific Islanders by race (Barringer et al., 1995, 273).<sup>6</sup> A decade later, the 1990 Census reported 365,000, a 41 percent increase (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a; U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b, 1).<sup>7</sup> Because the 2000 Census allowed individuals to check one or more responses to the race question, there are two official counts, 379,000 who identified as being NHOPI alone, and 861,000 who identified as being NHOPI alone or in combination with another race (the latter is also known as the inclusive count) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). By 2010, the alone count climbed to 540,000, and the inclusive count to 1,225,000. The 40.1 percent increase from 2000 for the inclusive count was four times greater than for the total population (9.7 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, 4).

The NHOPI population is projected to continue to increase at a much more rapid rate than the general population (see Figure 1 for projections).<sup>8</sup> Between 2015 and 2040, the NHOPI inclusive population will increase by 52 percent, while the total U.S. population will increase by 18 percent.

Figure 1. NHOPIS Inclusive (x 1,000)



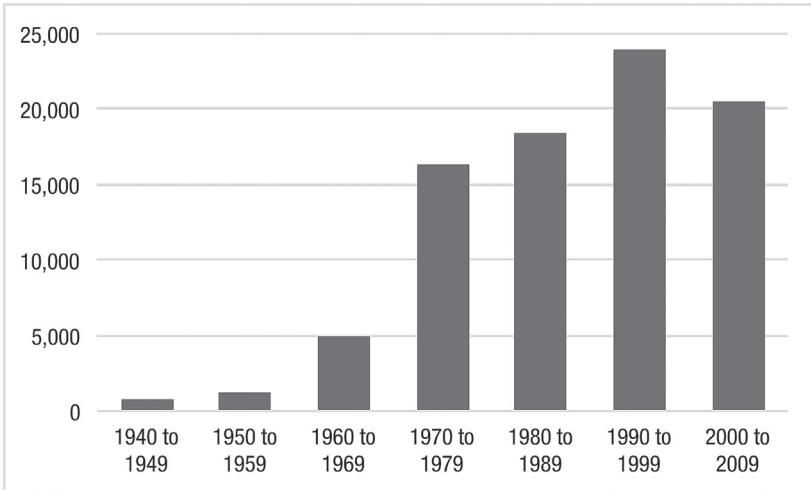
Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

### Pacific Islanders by Nativity

Although most NHOPIs have indigenous ancestry, immigrants comprise a significant minority of this population, due in large part from the

elimination of racially biased restriction on immigration in 1965.<sup>9</sup> Figure 2 shows the number entering from the Oceania region of the world, excluding Australia and New Zealand. While immigrants from “Other Oceania” are ethnically and racially diverse, a significant number are Pacific Islanders.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2. Immigrants from “Other Oceania”

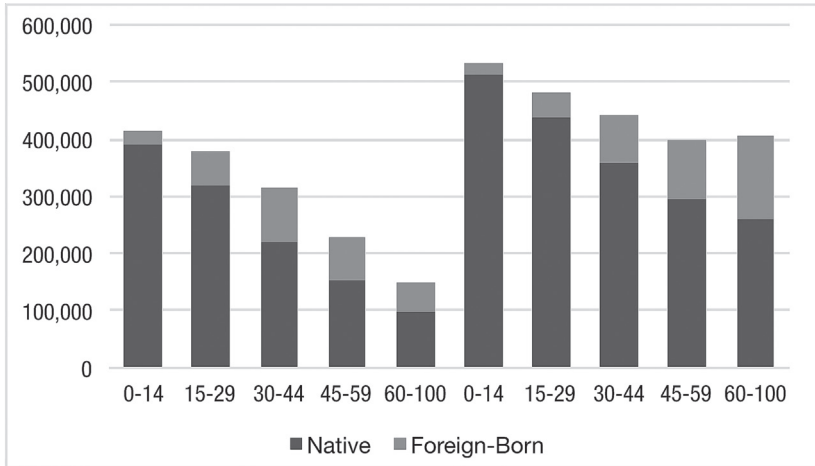


Source: Office of Immigration Statistics' 2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics

As a result, immigrants (foreign-born individuals) comprise a significant minority among NHOPIs. In 1980, they comprised about 11 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a, B-26).<sup>11</sup> That proportion increased to about 13 percent in 1990, with the majority having already entered the country in the previous decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993a, 25; U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b, 3).<sup>12</sup> By the turn of the century, nearly one in five was foreign-born, with nearly three-quarters entering since 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, 20).<sup>13</sup>

The foreign-born segment also comprises roughly one in five of the inclusive Pacific Islander count in the Census Bureau's 2015 baseline for its population projections. While the absolute number of immigrants will continue to increase, their share will decrease.<sup>14</sup> By 2040, they will comprise 17 percent (compared to 20 percent in 2015). The relative size of the immigrant segment varies by age. Figure 3 shows composition by nativity in 2015 (first five bars) and 2040 (last five bars).

Figure 3. NHOPIs by Age and Nativity

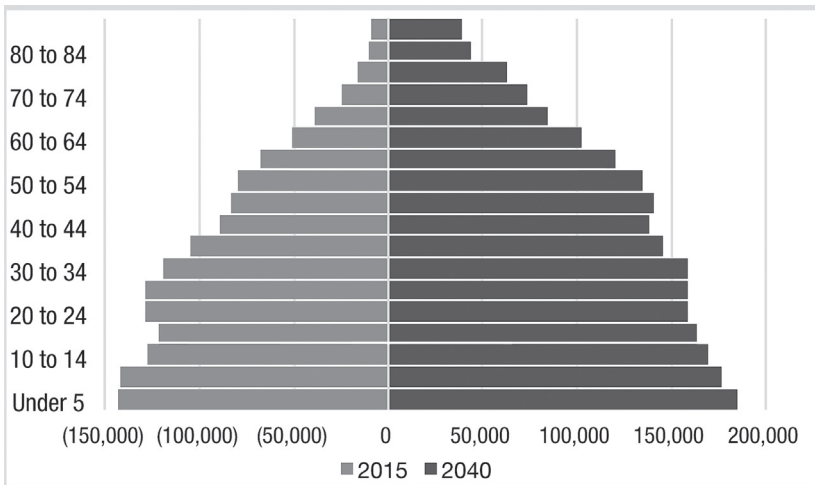


Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

Distribution by Age

Figure 4 depicts the distribution of the Pacific Islander population in 2015 and 2040. There is a distinctive bulge among prime working-age adults, noticeable among younger adults (twenty-five to thirty-four years old) in 2015 and extending up to age forty-four in 2040.

Figure 4. NHOPI Age Distribution

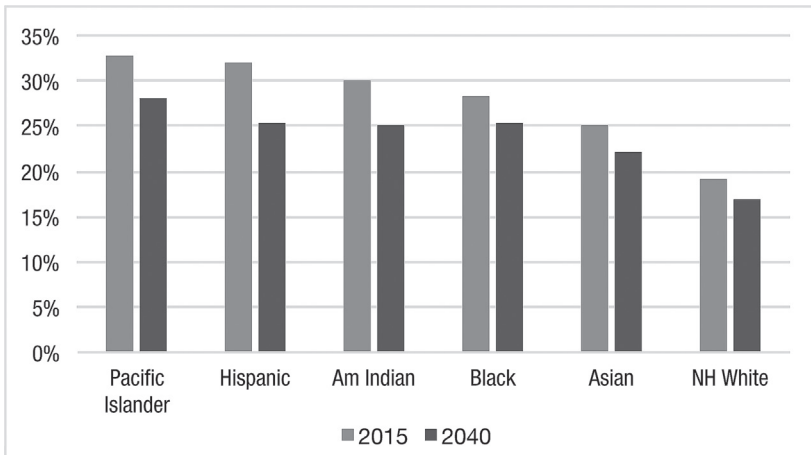


Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

Like the nation as a whole, the Pacific Islander population will age over time. The median age of the Pacific Islander population will increase from twenty-seven years old in 2015 to thirty-two years old in 2040.<sup>15</sup> While all age groups will increase in absolute numbers, there are noticeable differences in the relative share. Over the next quarter century, youth (persons seventeen and younger) will decline from 33 percent to 28 percent of all Pacific Islanders, while elderly (persons sixty-five and older) will increase from 7 percent to 13 percent. Unlike the U.S. population as a whole, there is no baby boom bulge in 2015 among NHOPIs, due to the specific demographic history of Pacific Islanders.

Despite the differential growth rates by age group among NHOPIs, this group will continue to have the highest proportion comprised of young people. Figure 5 reports the percent that is seventeen and younger for the major racial groups (inclusive count) and Hispanics. Over the next half century, that percent will decline for all racial groups and Hispanics, a product of falling fertility rate and continued immigration of adults. The percentage for Pacific Islanders will decline from 33 percent in 2015 to 28 percent in 2040, but nonetheless will be more than 2 percentage points higher than the next three groups (Hispanics, blacks, and American Indians).

Figure 5. Percent Seventeen and Younger



Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

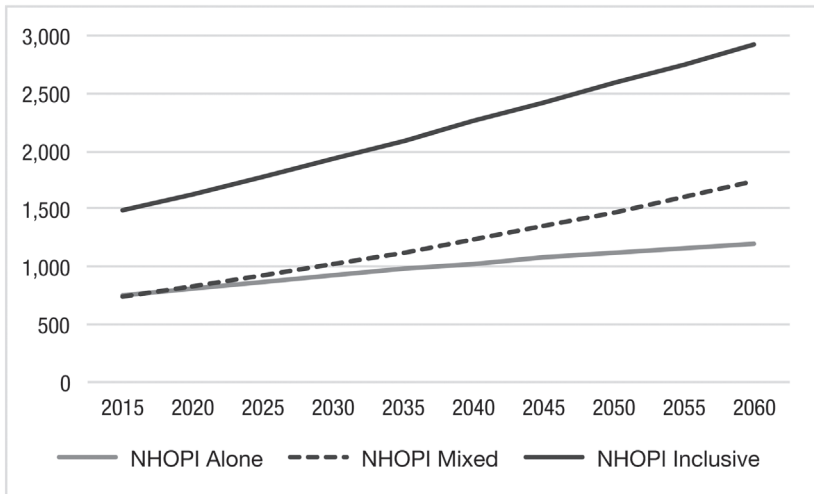
### Multiracial Pacific Islanders

Pacific Islanders have extremely high rates of out-marriage, or con-

versely very low rates of in-marriage. An analysis of the 2011–13 American Community Survey shows the extent. Among married couples where at least one of the partners is Pacific Islander, only 17.6 percent is comprised of couples where both partners are NHOPIs alone. More recently married (those married in 2005 or later) have a lower in-marriage rate, at 16.8 percent. Place of residents has an influence, with the rate being higher in Hawaii, at 20.3 percent. Given this pattern, it is not surprising that a high proportion of Pacific Islanders are of mixed racial heritage.

In 2015, the number of NHOPIs alone (those who reported only one race) is roughly equal to the number of NHOPIs who are multi-racial (see Figure 6).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a disproportionate number of Pacific Islanders are more likely to be more than multiracial. About a third of multiracial Pacific Islanders reported three or more races, while only one in twelve other mixed-race individuals reported three or more races.<sup>17</sup> However, there is a significant difference in the growth rates of these two segments over the next quarter century: 38 percent for Pacific Islanders alone and 66 percent for mixed-race NHOPIs. Consequently, the number of multiracial Pacific Islanders will surpass the number of NHOPIs alone. By 2040, multiracial individuals will comprise 54.5 percent of the NHOPI inclusive count.

Figure 6. NHOPI Projections by Race (x 1,000)



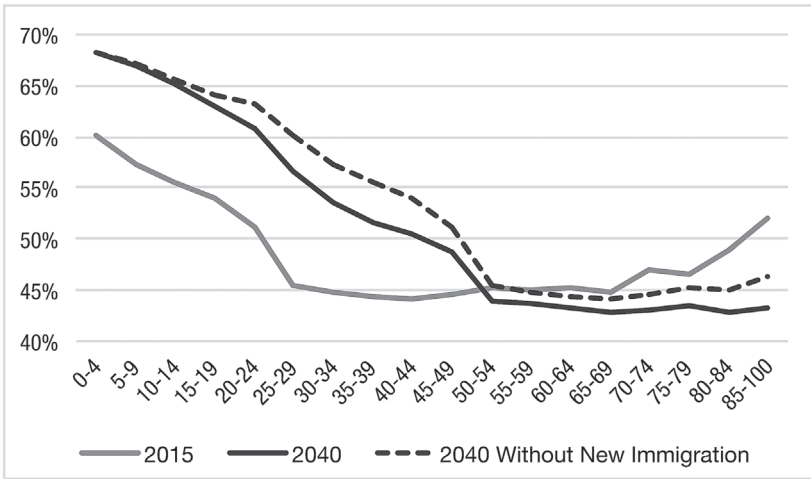
Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

Figure 7 shows the percent that is multiracial by age group. The



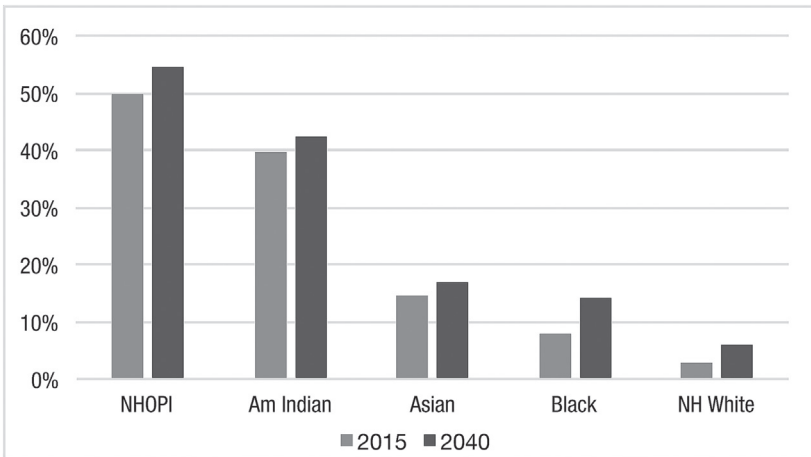
projections indicate that the rates are highly age related. Among those nineteen and younger, multiracial Pacific Islanders will go from a large majority in 2015 (57 percent) to a super majority in 2040 (66 percent). The percentage point increase among adults is less dramatic because immigration will add to the alone category. The elderly segment will actually move in the opposite direction, that is, the mixed-race percent will decline.

Figure 7. Multiracial Percent of NHOPIs



Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

Figure 8. Percent Multiracial



Source: Authors' analysis and compilation of U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections

Not only is the mixed-race rate high for NHOPIs, it is higher than for any other racial groups, as shown in Figure 8. In 2015, the rate for Pacific Islanders is about 10 percentage points higher than for American Indians, another population that is predominantly indigenous.

### Concluding Remarks

The United States is undergoing a dramatic demographic transformation. By 2043, America will become “majority minority” and reach a new historic social, economic, and political configuration. In many ways, Pacific Islanders have been and will continue to be a microcosm of an ever-increasingly diverse multicultural and multiracial America. The U.S. Census Bureau reported two dozen NHOPI ethnic groups from the 2010 enumeration, each with its own distinct cultural traditions, language, and relationship within the United States. The NHOPI population is further diversified because a majority will come from mixed-marriage families, as documented in the previous sections. Unfortunately, the U.S. Census does not provide detailed information on each NHOPI group, in part because of the “small number” challenge. NHOPIs constitute the smallest population among the five major racial categories covered by federal minimum reporting standards. The lack of adequate reporting, however, does a disservice because it obscures the distinct historical trajectories and contemporary conditions experienced by each NHOPI community. We believe that data disaggregation is important, but given the limited resources and information for this report, we were unable to disaggregate the NHOPI projections. The good news is that producing specialized NHOPI reports is less challenging these days because of advances in data technologies. As we move forward to 2040, we expect better reporting of this population.

### Acknowledgements

We are indebted to David Armstrong and Jennifer Ortman of the U.S. Census Bureau for their technical review and expertise; and to Chhandara Pech and Silvia Jimenez at UCLA’s Center for Neighborhood Knowledge for their technical assistance.

### Notes

1. The U.S. Census Bureau reports projections by nativity only for Pacific Islanders alone. We supplement those projections with our own estimates for multiracial Pacific.
2. The project also accounts for the differences in the racial/ethnic categories used for the Census Bureau’s population projection models and the

categories used for other Census Bureau data sources, such as the decennial census and the American Community Survey. The projections' categories are consistent with those used by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. For a discussion on the differences, see National Center for Health Statistics, 2015.

3. This also includes a small number who were born in the U.S. territories or abroad to American citizens. We use microlevel data from the American Community Survey to estimate the age distribution of multiracial NHOPIs by nativity. To project the number of mixed-race Pacific Islanders in 2040, we developed a crude fertility rate for mixed-raced Pacific Islander adults (whose children would also be mixed race) and an adjusted fertility rate for Pacific Islander alone adults who are likely to have mixed-race children.
4. This 2010 count covers American Samoa, Guam, and North Mariana Islands (American Fact Finder, 2010). NHOPIs comprise about 62 percent of the total population in those islands, and Asian Americans comprise 34 percent.
5. The 1960 U.S. Census questionnaire included "Hawaiian" and "Part Hawaiian" for the state of Hawaii only, and the 1970 U.S. Census included "Hawaiian" for all states except Alaska. In subsequent decades, the number of Pacific Islander categories increased. The U.S. Census reported 102,403 who were either Hawaiian and part Hawaiian residing in Hawai'i in 1960, and 100,179 Hawaiians in the United States (except Alaska) in 1970 (Gibson and Jung, 2002).
6. There were 172,346 Hawaiians, 39,520 Samoans, and 31,393 Chamorro. These counts did not include many who were of mixed race and ancestry. There were 406,413 individuals who reported being Pacific Islander by race or ancestry or both.
7. The 1980 and 1990 counts are not completely comparable because of changes in questionnaire and collection method.
8. The Census Bureau's population projection models use racial/ethnic categories that differ from those for the decennial census and the American Community Survey. The projections' categories are consistent with those used by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. For a discussion on the differences, see National Center for Health Statistics, 2015.
9. For details on the changes in immigration policy and laws, see Ong, Ong, and Ong, 2015.
10. Migration from U.S. territories is not included in the immigration numbers. An analysis of the 2011–13 American Community Survey microdata indicates that roughly one in twelve Pacific Islanders are from U.S. territories.
11. Based on statistics in Barringer et al. (1995, 285–6): 83,037 (out of 259,566) were born outside of the United States, including those in U.S. territories and trusts (9,361 American Samoa, 36,782 Guam, 2,137 Northern Marianas, 5,066 Trust Territories). The Census Bureau defines a native as a person born in the United States, Puerto Rico, or an outlying area of the United

States, including those born abroad to U.S. citizens. Foreign-born are those born abroad without citizenship.

12. Percentages based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census note that Tongans having the highest percent (61 percent) (1993b). U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993a, 25) also reported 45,397 (out of 350,592) were foreign-born, with 24,612 immigrated between 1980 and 1990.
13. There were 75,477 single-race NHOPIs where were foreign-born (20 percent of all NHOPIs alone), and 161,601 inclusive NHOPIs (18.8 percent of the inclusive count). For inclusive population, year of entry (14,470 entered before 1970, 28,515 during the 1970s, 50,040 during the 1980s, and 68,576 during the 1990s).
14. The Census Bureau assumes an annual rate of 4,000 to 5,000 net immigration for NHOPIs alone. In absolute terms, the number of Pacific Islander immigrants is projected to increase from 304,000 in 2015 to 309,000 in 2040.
15. NHOPIs have been a relatively young population. For example, "In 2000, Pacific Islanders had a median age of 28 years, compared with 35 years for the total U.S. population" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, 5).
16. This is certainly not a recent phenomenon. In 1960, there were 11,294 Hawaiians and 91,109 part Hawaiians residing in Hawai'i (Gibson and Jung, 2002). In 1980, 44 percent of Pacific Islanders by ancestry were of multiancestry (a combination of Pacific Islander and non-Pacific Islander ancestries) (Barringer et al., 1995, 273).
17. Estimates by authors based on 2011–13 American Community Survey microdata.

## References

- American Fact Finder. 2010. Demographic Profiles. <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml> (accessed August 26, 2015).
- Barringer, Herbert, Gardner, Robert W., and Michael J. Levin. 1995. *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Camacho, Keith. 2011. *Cultures of Commemoration: The Politics of War, Memory, and History in the Mariana Island*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Gibson, Campbell, and Kay Jung. 2002. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States." U.S. Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 56.
- National Center for Health Statistics. 2015. "U.S. Census Populations with Bridged Race Categories." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged\\_race.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged_race.htm) (accessed February 17, 2016).
- Ong, Jonathan, Ong, Paul, and Elena Ong. 2016. "The Future of Asian America in 2040." *AAPI Nexus Journal: Policy, Practice, and Community* 14(1): 14–29.
- Ong, Paul. 2006. "Trouble in Paradise: Marginalization of Native Hawaiians." Pp. 155–72 in *Wealth Accumulation and Communities of Color in the United States*,

- ed. Jessica Gordon Nembhard and Ngina Chiteji. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pew Research Center. 2012. "The Rise of Asian Americans." Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends. 19 June. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2015. 2014 National Populations Projections Methodology. <https://www.census.gov/population/projections/files/methodology/methodstatements14.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- . 2012. "The Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Population: 2010." <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-12.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- . 2005. "We the People: Pacific Islanders in the United States." Census 2000 Special Reports. <https://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-26.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- . 1993a. "1990 Census of Population: Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States." <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cp3/cp-3-5.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- . 1993b. "We the Americans: Pacific Islanders." <https://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-26.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2015).
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Office of Immigration Statistics. 2014. "2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security. [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois\\_yb\\_2013\\_0.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_yb_2013_0.pdf) (accessed April 12, 2016).
- Wright, Debbie Hippolite. 2002. *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and across the Pacific*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

---

PAUL ONG is a professor at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs and UCLA's Asian American Studies Department. He is currently the Director of the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, founding editor of *AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community*, and founding director of the UC AAPI Policy Multi-Campus Research Program. He has conducted research on immigration, civic and political participation, economic status of minorities, welfare-to-work, health workers, urban spatial inequality, and environmental inequality.

ELENA ONG is the Vice President of Ong and Associates, where she is a public policy and public affairs consultant to elected officials and nonprofits. Committed to advancing America's health and economic well-being, she served as the President/CEO of the Asian and Pacific Islander Caucus for Public Health prior to being elected to APHA's Executive Board. Committed to public service, Elena has served in a leadership capacity on several U.S. presidential and gubernatorial campaigns, as the governor's appointed First Vice Chair to the California Commission for Women, as Rob Reiner's appointee to the California Children and Families Commission's TA Advisory Board, and as President of the Los Angeles Women's Appointment Collaboration. A recent CORO Executive Fellow, Elena studied Asian American studies at UC Berkeley prior to earning her BSN/PHN from UC San Francisco, and her masters in Health Policy and Management from the Harvard School of Public Health while cross-enrolled at the Kennedy School of Government.

JONATHAN ONG is a data analyst and statistical programmer. He has worked and published on the socioeconomic status of American Indians in Los Angeles, New York's Chinatown, and fair housing in California. Jonathan is a graduate of UCLA, with a major in Japanese and a minor in film, and is currently studying computer science.