

UC Berkeley

Cal-in-Sac Undergraduate Research Products

Title

Behind the Statistics: The Housing Struggle Within the Model Minority Myth

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2d0506rc>

Author

Raga, Simdane A

Publication Date

2025-08-12

Behind the Statistics:
The Housing Struggle Within the Model Minority Myth

Simdane A. Raga

Cal-in-Sacramento

Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley

Behind the Statistics: The Housing Struggle Within the Model Minority Myth

"Housing is the largest annual expenditure for households in the United States," and low-income households are the most vulnerable to becoming housing-cost-burdened (McConnell, 2013, p. 173). Significantly, immigrants and low-income individuals are more likely to struggle with housing affordability (McConnell, p. 173; Hernández et al., 2016, p. 77). According to existing research, many factors contribute to the inaccessibility of housing at the intersection of low income and first-generation immigration: language barriers, race, immigration status, gender, age, education, and income. (Shier et al., 2014, p. 173; Iceland, 2021, pp. 657-58; Aiken et al., 2021, pp. 151-52; McConnell, p. 173; Hall & Greenman, 2013, p. 1712; Allen, 2022, p. 433; Weingart Center, 2023; Wu et al., 2018, p. 783). Even where low-income or first-generation immigrant households do secure and retain housing, they tend to overcrowd the place they find (that is, the household size is too large for the home), and the home itself is more likely to suffer from poor structural conditions or pest infestations (Hernández et al., 2016, p. 77). But how well do these factors and experiences apply to the unique position and experiences of the Asian immigrant, who on one hand are first-generation yet on the other collectively enjoy a relatively comfortable median personal income (at \$56,100 [Im, 2025])?

Asian Americans are often popularly characterized by the "model minority myth": in part, that they are quick to assimilate to American culture and society and that they excel academically, financially, and in their careers. While this might be supported by their higher income and education statistics at-large, the Asian American demographic couldn't be further from a monolith. Their experiences are as varied and many as the subgroups the community comprises, and there are even more variations *within* subgroups. There are significant populations within the general Asian American population and each of its subgroups that are

struggling, low-income, first-generation immigrants, a fact that applies no less to the Asian American experiences in accessing housing.

The Filipino Housing Experience

To find out what this unique experience looks like, I interviewed three low-income immigrants¹ of one Asian subgroup, Filipinos, living in Fairfield, California. Nationwide, Filipino immigrants enjoy an income near the median for Asian immigrants overall, and Filipino immigrants speak English proficiently at a higher rate than Asian immigrants overall (Im, 2025). One might expect that these statistics would put Filipinos at an advantage in seeking and securing housing, but again: there are variations of experiences *within* as much as *between* Asian subgroups. As these interviews revealed, those experiences demonstrate a real and unique struggle to secure housing.

Multiple Sources of Household Income

All three interviewees reported having to work more than one job at some point to afford their housing, with Interviewee C reporting working around 56 hours each week and Interviewee A working over 80 each week. Worse, two of the respondents reported that this alone still wasn't enough: A had to rely on alimony and a daughter's income to be able to pay rent, and Interviewee B's household relied on a total of four people in the household working.

Overcrowding

Even when respondents succeeded in finding and retaining housing, their homes weren't big enough for their household. A's household of four lives in a three-bedroom apartment — a step up from their previous one-bedroom — while B lives with four others in a two-bedroom apartment.

¹ Interviewees' names have been redacted for the sake of anonymity.

Ignorance About Housing Support Programs

As much as respondents struggled to find and retain their housing, two of the three reported that they were not aware of and didn't make use of any housing support services. When asked, both responded that they may have been too occupied with work to search for housing in-depth, which may explain why they were unaware of assistance programs.

Lack of a Network

While all respondents reported that language barriers and sociocultural differences with the greater community didn't affect their search for housing, A did report that she found her current home through a reference from a predominantly Filipino network of friends. It's possible that being socially connected almost solely to Filipino cultural enclaves may have isolated respondents from connections to housing opportunities in the larger community.

The Median and the Model Minority Myth

These are the stories that hide behind the high income and education statistics at-large. This is only for a subgroup close to or above the Asian American median in most categories — a subgroup to which one might expect the model minority myth would most readily apply. One can imagine how much more difficult the housing experience must be for Asian American subgroups below the at-large median in categories like income or proficiency in English. Either way, the model minority myth shouldn't discredit the struggles of those below the median, no matter how few they may be, to secure housing. With housing being such a crucial yet scarce foundation in which to live and work towards a better life, there can be no better first welcome to the country than to closely examine the housing struggles of all low-income immigrants, regardless of background, and to help them find solutions.

References

- Aiken, C., Reina, V. J., & Culhane, D. P. (2021). Understanding low-income Hispanic housing challenges and the use of housing and homelessness assistance. *Cityscape*, 23(2), 123–158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27039955>
- Allen, R. (2022). The relationship between legal status and housing cost burden for immigrants in the United States. *Housing Policy Debate*, 32(3), 433–455. <https://doi-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/10.1080/10511482.2020.1848898>
- Hall, M., & Greenman, E. (2013). Housing and neighborhood quality among undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants. *Social Science Research*, 42(6), 1712–1725. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.07.011>
- Hernández, D., Jiang, Y., Carrión, D., Phillips, D., & Aratani, Y. (2016). Housing hardship and energy insecurity among native-born and immigrant low-income families with children in the United States. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 22(2), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10796126.2016.1148672>
- Iceland, J. (2021). Hardship among immigrants and the native-born in the United States. *Demography*, 58(2), 655–684. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48687129>
- Im, Carolyne. (2025) *Facts about Filipinos in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/fact-sheet/asian-americans-filipinos-in-the-u-s/>
- McConnell, E.D. Who has housing affordability problems? Disparities in housing cost burden by race, nativity, and legal status in Los Angeles. *Race and Social Problems* 5, 173–190 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-013-9086-x>

Shier, M. L., Graham, J. R., Fukuda, E. et al. (2014). Predictors of living in precarious housing among immigrants accessing housing support services. *Journal of International*

Migration & Integration, 17, 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0396-7>

Weingart Center. (2023, September 25). LA's homeless migrants.

<https://www.weingart.org/weingart-blog/stranded-without-help-las-homeless-migrants>

Wu, Y., Sah, V., & Tidwell A. (2018). Housing preferences of Asian and Hispanic/Latino immigrants in the United States: A melting pot or salad bowl. *Real Estate Economics*, 46, 783-835, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6229.12178>