

Pacific Islanders Lagging Behind in Higher Educational Attainment

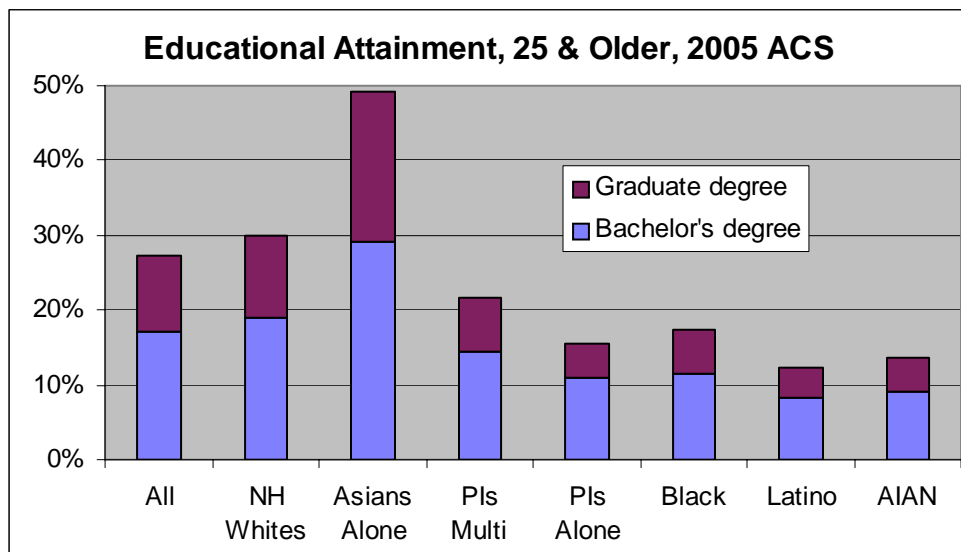
Analytical Brief of New Census Data¹

UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Census Information Center
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Los Angeles, CA (November 14, 2006)

In an economy that increasingly requires a college education to be successful in the labor market, Pacific Islanders (PIs) have fallen behind and current admissions patterns will perpetuate this problem. Newly released statistics from the 2005 American Community Survey (ACS) show that among those 25 years and older, single-race Pacific Islanders (those who reported being only Pacific Islander and no other race, a group also labeled as PIs alone) are only about half as likely as non-Hispanic whites to have at least a bachelor's degree (15% versus 30%). The gap is even wider when compared to Asians (49% with a bachelor's or more advanced degree), and the level of educational attainment of Pacific Islanders is roughly comparable to African Americans (17% with at least a bachelor's or more advanced degree). Pacific Islanders who are multi-racial (those who reported being Pacific Islander and at least one other race, a group also labeled as PIs multi) fare slightly better than single-race Pacific Islanders, but the former still fare worse than non-Hispanic whites and Asians.

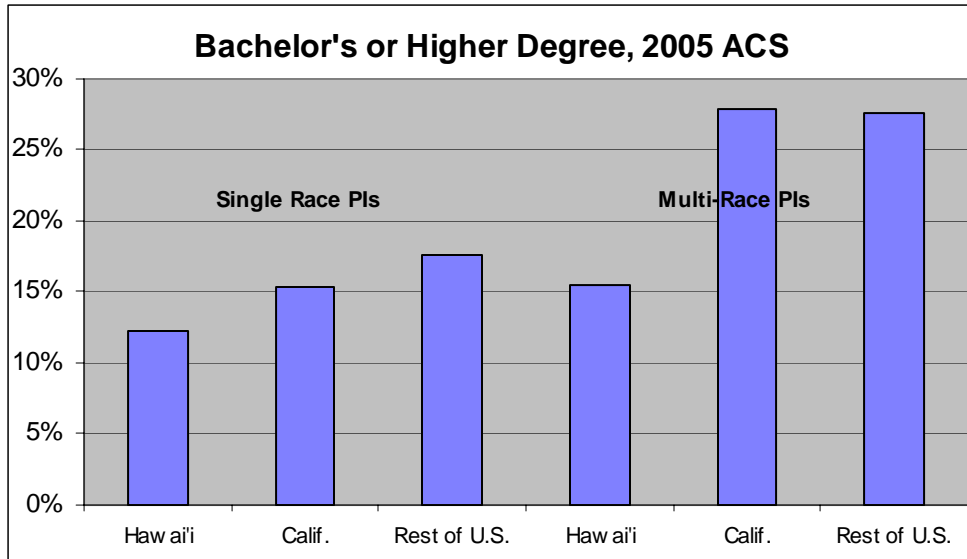
Graph 1



¹ This is a part of the series “Analytical Briefs on New Census Data” sponsored by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center’s Census Information Center in collaboration with other organizations. The first in this series is “The New ‘Sleeping Giant’ in California Politics: The Growth of Asian Americans,” September 7, 2006.

Educational attainment varies by geographic location. Pacific Islanders in Hawai'i have lower educational attainment than those in the other 49 states. Historically, many migrated to the U.S. mainland to seek economic and educational opportunities, and a significant share has stayed. (McGregor, 2003; Moy, 2003) Outside Hawai'i, California has the largest Pacific Islander population. Of the estimated 236,765 single-race Pacific Islanders 25 years and older in the 2005 ACS, 33% reside in California, with another 25% residing in Hawai'i. Pacific Islanders in California tend to have lower educational attainment than the other mainland states.

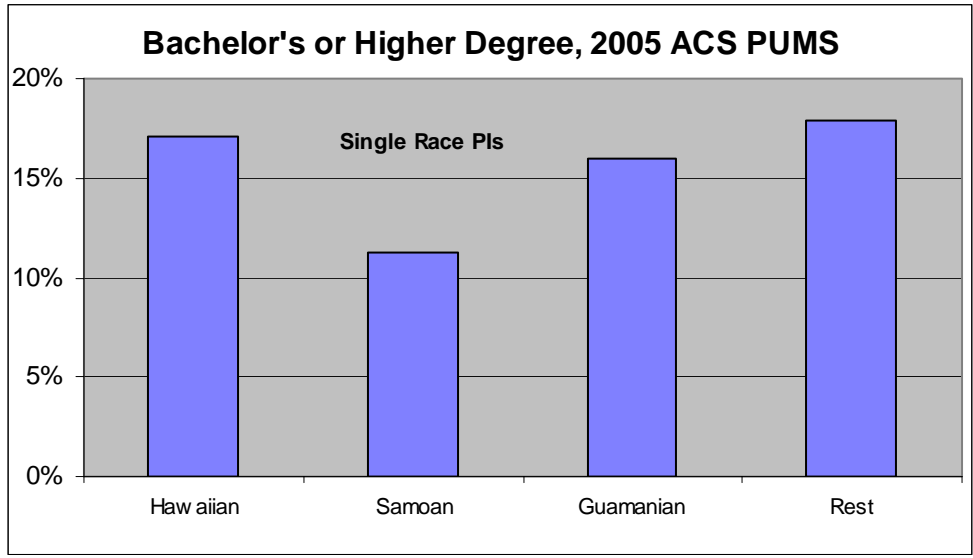
Graph 2



There are considerable differences in educational attainment by ethnicity among Pacific Islanders, as seen in a special tabulation of 2005 ACS data.² Of the population that is 25 years and older with at least a bachelor's degree, slightly less than half are Native Hawaiians and a fifth are Samoans and another sixth are Guamanians (also known as Chamorro). Samoans have the lowest percentage with a college degree.

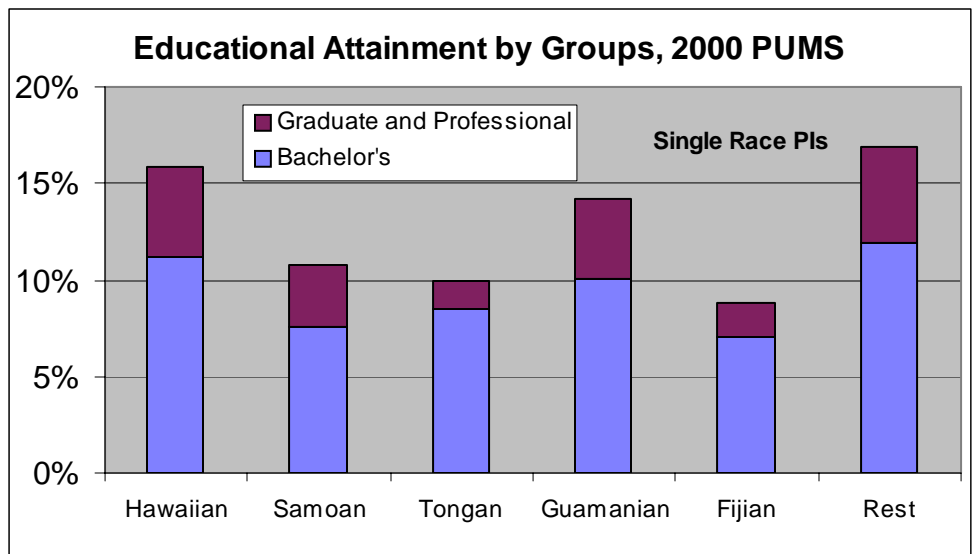
² The Bureau of the Census does not publish ethnic specific statistics from the 2005 ACS. Because the sample in the ACS PUMS is relatively small for some of the PI ethnic groups, the number of reported groups is limited.

Graph 3



Additional group-specific data by type of higher-education degree come from the 2000 Decennial Census. Native Hawaiians and Guamanians had the highest level of educational attainment, with roughly about 1 in 6 and 1 in 7 with at least a bachelor's degree. Nonetheless, those proportions were considerably lower than the levels for non-Hispanic whites and Asians. Samoans, Tongans and Fijians have similarly lower levels of educational attainment.

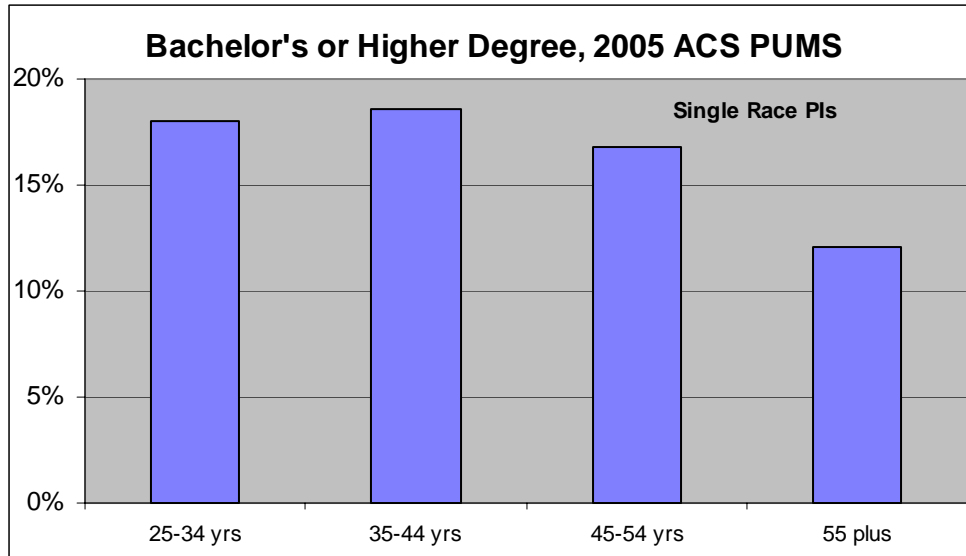
Graph 4



Additional special tabulations of the 2005 ACS reveal that Pacific Islanders have made modest progress across generations. For Pacific Islanders in the three cohorts over the age of 35, younger cohorts have a higher level of educational attainment than older cohorts, both because of increasing educational opportunities and increasing economic returns to education. However, there is little difference between the 25-34 and 35-44 cohorts. While

it is expected that educational attainment will increase for the youngest cohort over time as more complete college and universities, that increase would likely be modest. Moreover, the youngest Pacific Islander cohort has a lower level of educational attainment than for non-Hispanic whites and Asians of the same age. While 18% of Pacific Islanders between the ages of 25-34 have at least a bachelor's degree, 35% of non-Hispanic whites and 61% of Asians do. In comparison, only 19% of African Americans have at least a bachelor's degree.

Graph 5



Another indicator that Pacific Islanders are lagging behind educationally is their proportionately low enrollment in college education. Slightly less than a third (29%) of Pacific Islanders between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in a college or university, a rate comparable to African Americans (29%). In contrast, the college enrollment figures are 39% for non-Hispanic whites and 57% for Asians.

Analysis of other information shows that Pacific Islanders are underrepresented in top universities such as the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). According to the most recent data on applications and admissions for this institution, there were only 166 Pacific Islander applicants, which is about half of the number expected based on their share of the youth population.³ Among the applicants, only 26 Pacific Islanders were admitted; an admission rate lower than non-Hispanic white and Asian applicants (16% versus 26% and 33%, respectively). In all, only 11 Pacific Islanders enrolled, which is only a third of what is expected relative to their share of the population. According to Dr. Don Nakanishi, Director of UCLA's Asian American Studies Center and Professor of Education, the problem is due in part to change in policy:

³ UCLA data provided by Professor Don Nakanishi. We use the 2000 counts for those between the ages of 11 and 14 as the base for a parity analysis, an age group that includes those who would have applied for college in 2005. Since the 2000 Census includes both single-race and multi-race Pacific Islanders, we use the average of their percent of the age group.

"This is another alarming consequence of the passage of Proposition 209 ten years ago, as well as the ever-increasing competitiveness in getting admitted to UCLA and other selective colleges. There definitely should be more than 11 Pacific Islanders in UCLA's new freshman class of 4809 students. However, there also should have been more than 166 Pacific Islander students who applied in relation to 45,563 total applicants. That raises a number of other questions and concerns."

Data for Hawai'i also reveal a similar problem of underrepresentation. Native Hawaiians are underrepresented at the University of Hawai'i, particularly at the main campus of Manoa. The Native Hawaiians who do attend college in that state are concentrated in the community colleges. (Kana'iaupuni, et al., 2006; Ong, 2006)

An important factor in the low attendance at major universities is poor performance in public schools. An analysis of data from the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program illustrates the magnitude of the problem. The high school dropout rate is 5% for White students, 9% for Black students, 11% for Native Hawaiians, 8% for Samoans, and 12% for Guamanians. For language proficiency of 11th graders, 25% of white students, 55% Black students, 34% Native Hawaiians, 59% Samoans, and 36% of Chamorro students are below a basic proficiency level. For low math proficiency, the percentages are 35% whites, 69% Blacks, 47% Native Hawaiians, 59% Samoans, and 36% Guamanians. According to Iosefa Aina, Associate Director of the Pomona College Asian American Resource Center and long-time community activist, many of the issues facing Pacific Islander high school youth "started way back in elementary school." Despite these difficulties, however, many Pacific Islander youth show adequate academic performance in elementary school. This indicates that part of the problem is due to the inability of middle and high schools to provide an education that addresses the needs of adolescent Pacific Islanders. Public schools in Hawai'i also experience similar problems in educating Pacific Islanders. (Kana'iaupuni, et al., 2006)

The problems facing Pacific Islander youths are compounded by social and cultural alienation. (Mayeda et al., 2006) Many schools are ill equipped to accommodate culturally appropriate programs, often leading to an unfriendly or even hostile environment. Fuifuilupe Niumetolu, host of a Tongan Radio program in the Bay Area states, "The pejorative treatment of Tongan students have led youths to view academia as a space that is hostile to Tonganness and a space that they must resist in order to survive."

There is also a conflict between family obligations and schooling. According to Natasha Saelua, Development Associate at Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP):

"I can't count how many times we'd hear students talk about family obligations stemming from fa'a Samoa (family events which included taking time off school to travel for weddings or funeral; the role older siblings take in caring for younger siblings) taking time away from their studies. The schools, especially the high schools, are not equipped with the support services PI students need to juggle those responsibilities while at the same time steering a course to college."

One of the consequences of limited educational opportunities, along with limited employment opportunities, is marginalization. For example, among young adults (18 to 24) in 2005, Pacific Islanders are nearly one and a half times as likely as non-Hispanic whites to be not enrolled in school and not working. The difference is even larger when compared to Asians, and the level of idleness for Pacific Islanders is nearer to that for African Americans (19% and 26% respectively). Another sign of the marginalization is that among younger youths, Pacific Islanders are more likely to be in the juvenile justice system. In California, for example, Pacific Islander youths are twice as likely to be in incarcerated relative to their share of the age-appropriate population. (Arifuku, et al., 2006) In Hawai'i, the arrest rate for Native Hawaiian youths is over as twice as high as for whites and Asians. (Kana'iaupuni, et al., 2006)

Improving the educational attainment of Pacific Islanders will require both a change in public policy and enhanced services provided by community-based organizations. So far, Pacific Islanders have not been a part of the policy discussion about the need to increase diversity in higher education and to redress underrepresentation of minority groups. At the same time, community-based organizations have been struggling to get the resources to adequately serve PI youths. According to Stewart Kwoh, President and Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center:

"Despite having significant needs, Pacific Islanders are often ignored in policy discussions. Policy makers, community organizations, funders, and others working to address educational disparities need to take affirmative steps to ensure Pacific Islanders have equal access to educational opportunity."

To develop sound policies and effective programs, further research is needed to better understanding the causes, consequences and cures for the low educational attainment of Pacific Islanders, a recommendation strongly endorsed by June Pouesi, Director of the Office of Samoan Affairs, one of the few community-based service organizations serving Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles County.

Organizational Information

The UCLA Asian American Studies Center is the nation's leading research center in the field of Asian American Studies and houses a Census Information Center, which will continue to analyze data from the ACS as they become available.

The UC AAPI Policy Initiative brings together University of California researchers and community organizations to conduct research focusing on the policy concerns of the AAPI community.

The Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) is the nation's largest legal organization serving the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities, and also houses a Census Information Center.

Technical Note

The statistics in this press release are based on tabulations of the 5% Public Use Micro Sample (PUMS) from the 2000 Census, 1% Public Use Micro Sample (PUMS) from the 2005 American Community Survey, and published statistics from the 2005 American Community Survey. To adjust for differences in coverage (the Census includes persons in group quarters and the ACS does not), the analysis includes tabulations of the decennial data for only the population residing in households. Because the Bureau of the Census collects information on Hispanic ethnicity separately from race and allows individuals to select one or more race, the following definitions are used.

Blacks include single-race Blacks regardless of Hispanic origin.

Asians include single-race Asians regardless of Hispanic origin.

Anyone who self reported being Hispanic is classified as Hispanic.

Non-Hispanic whites include those self reported being White alone and did not report to be Hispanic is classified as being non-Hispanic White.

Unless otherwise noted, the statistics on Pacific Islanders are for single-race Pacific Islanders. The 2000 statistics on the educational attainment of Fijian come from SF4 because the 2000 PUMS does identify Fijians.

The analysis for this press release was conducted by Professor Paul Ong with assistance from Melany Dela Cruz-Viesca, Doug Houston, Elena Soohoo-Ong, and Don Nakanishi. The brief was prepared by Paul Ong and Melany Dela Cruz-Viesca with the assistance of Sefa Aina, Natasha Saelua, Meg Thornton, Stephanie Santos, Dan Ichinose, and Mary Kao.

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