

A PORTRAIT OF ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE LAW

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A Portrait of Asian Americans in the Law provides a systematic account of how Asian Americans are situated in the legal profession. Since 2000, the number of Asian American lawyers has grown from 20,000 to 53,000 today, comprising nearly 5% of all lawyers nationwide. Through wide-ranging data analysis, focus groups, and a national survey, we have assembled a comprehensive portrait documenting the rise of Asian Americans in the law, their distribution across practice settings, and the challenges they face in advancing to the top ranks of the profession. Our key findings include the following:

- Over the past three decades, the number of Asian Americans in law school has quadrupled to roughly 8,000, now comprising nearly 7% of total enrollment—the largest increase of any racial or ethnic group.
- But since 2009, Asian American first-year enrollment has fallen by 43%—the largest decline of any group. The number of Asian Americans who entered law school in 2016 was the lowest in more than 20 years.
- After law school, Asian Americans are more likely than other groups to work in law firms or business settings, and they are least likely to work in government. Few Asian Americans report that gaining a pathway into government or politics was a primary reason they attended law school.
- Although Asian Americans comprised 10.3% of graduates of top-30 law schools in 2015, they comprised only 6.5% of federal judicial law clerks.
- For nearly two decades, Asian Americans have been the largest minority group in major law firms. But they have the highest attrition rates and the lowest ratio of partners to associates among all groups.
- Although a significant number of Asian Americans serve as line prosecutors and government attorneys in some agencies and jurisdictions, their numbers dwindle at the supervisory level. In 2016, there were only 3 Asian Americans serving as United States Attorneys, and in 2014, there were only 4 Asian Americans serving as elected district attorneys nationwide.
- Despite recent progress, only 25 Asian Americans serve as active Article III judges, comprising 3% of the federal judiciary. Asian Americans comprise 2% of state judges.
- Many Asian American attorneys report experiencing inadequate access to mentors and contacts as a primary barrier to career advancement for Asian American attorneys.
- Many Asian American attorneys report implicit bias and stereotyped perceptions as obstacles to promotion and advancement. Among Asian American attorneys, women are more likely than men to report experiencing discrimination on the basis of race.
- Asian American attorneys may experience mental health challenges at a higher rate than the legal profession as a whole.

Overall, Asian Americans have penetrated virtually every sector of the legal profession, but they are significantly underrepresented in the leadership ranks of law firms, government, and academia. Our study provides a descriptive account of this central finding, laying the groundwork for future exploration of causal mechanisms and potential solutions. Asian Americans have a firm foot in the door of the legal profession; the question now is how wide the door will swing open.