

Key Findings

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The Asian and Asian
American Professional
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**The Erasure and Invisibility of Pacific
Islander Professionals**

Introduction

Anti-Asian and anti-Pacific Islander violence in America has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A string of vicious attacks has left the communities shocked, outraged, fearful, and reeling.¹ There was a 164% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes between 2020 and 2021 alone.²

Such racism is not new. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned immigrants from China to the US, to the staged coup d'état by American businessmen that led to the illegal occupation of the islands of Hawai'i to the internment of more than 120,000 people of Japanese descent during World War II, social and political violence against Asian and Pacific Islander populations is ubiquitous throughout US history.³

Still, many feel that Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander (A/AA/PI) populations do not suffer

from as much (if any) racism as other groups in the US.⁴ This narrative is part of the “model minority” myth, which reinforces a misconception that Asian Americans all experience academic, professional, and social success.⁵

At work, A/AA/PI employees face daily indignities of racism through unfounded stereotypes and micro-aggressions, which are connected to large-scale structural inequities in leadership representation, career stall, and limited access to professional networks and sponsors. We identify several possible contributing factors, including a culture clash in approaches to leadership, burnout and unfair work expectations, and generational differences across workplace experiences.

The importance of disaggregation

Throughout this report, we challenge the narrative that there is a monolithic A/AA/PI experience. Currently, the US Census categories of “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” encompass potentially more than 50 ethnic groups, as well as the 15 countries and tens of thousands of islands, islets, and atolls of the Pacific Islands.⁶ Each subgroup within this vastly diverse population has unique perspectives and needs that must be understood and addressed. To illustrate the complexities of the A/AA/PI experience, we share findings across ethnicity, nationality, gender, generation, and sexual orientation, to name a few areas.

“This is a growing, multi-origin, multiethnic, multicultural population. Yet racialization in the US often renders them as one group.”

– Van Tran, PhD, Professor of Sociology and Deputy Director of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York

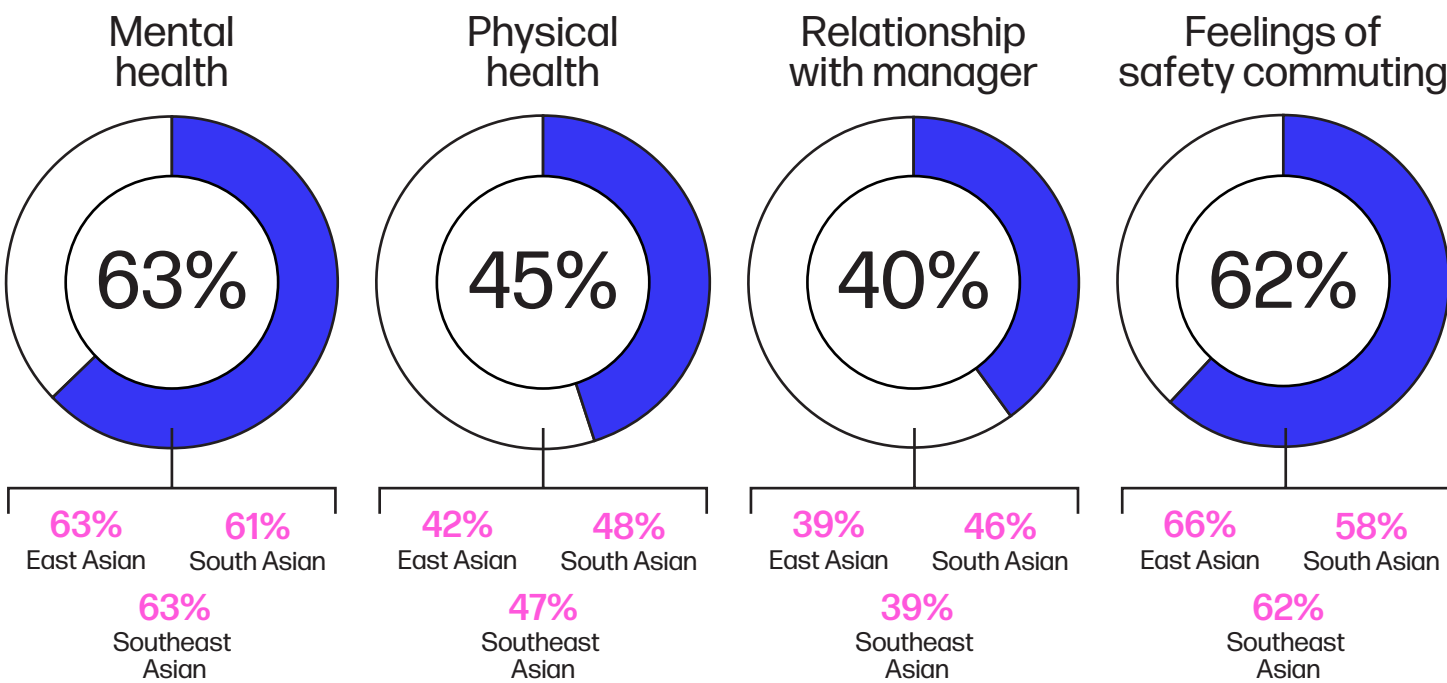
The impact of COVID-19 and anti-Asian violence on A/AA/PI professionals

The racialized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has placed an immense strain on Asian and Asian American professionals in and outside of work.

We found that nearly two-thirds of Asian and Asian American professionals say ongoing violence has

damaged their mental health, and nearly half say it has negatively impacted their physical health to some degree. For Asian women living in metropolitan areas, we heard in focus groups and interviews, the rise in public attacks heightened existing safety concerns.

Asian professionals who say the ongoing violence against the A/AA/PI* community has negatively impacted their:



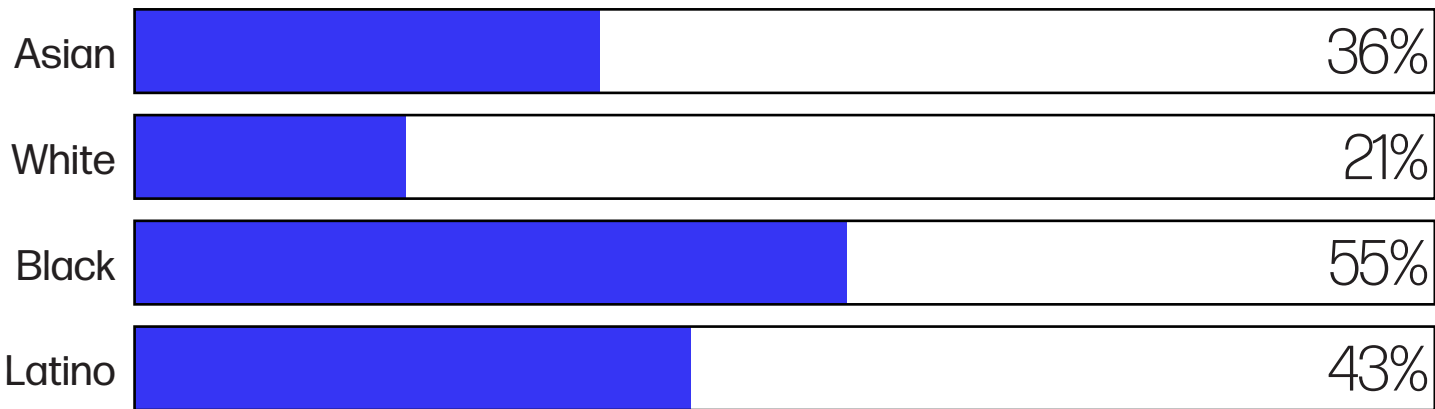
*The survey used "Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)"; we use "A/AA/PI" here for inclusiveness.

The daily indignities of racism

More than one in three Asian and Asian American professionals say they have experienced racial prejudice at their current or former companies, we find. Evidence also suggests that Asian and Asian American individuals may have varied perceptions about what constitutes a hate crime, harassment, or discrimination, and may underreport or downplay their experiences.⁷

Pervasive stereotypes about Asian and Asian American professionals affect their workplace experiences, including their being seen as compliant, quiet, deferential, passive, and hardworking outsiders. Many of these stereotypes are tied to a longstanding history: for example, the underlying historical context of the “Orient” has contributed to a “perpetual foreigner” narrative, which is still applied to Asians and Asian Americans today, regardless of citizenship status.⁸

Professionals who have experienced racial prejudice at work



Asian professionals who have experienced racial prejudice at work



Asian and Asian American professionals also experience microaggressions related to the “model minority” myth. Asian and Asian American professionals experience the following significantly more frequently than members of any other racial group: colleagues assume they are naturally harder working because of their race (22%), naturally smarter because of their race (18%), and skilled in math, technology, and/or science (31%). While this may appear positive on the surface, researchers have referred to such stereotypes as “over-validation,” defined by scholars as “a subtle microaggression wherein the perpetrator acts in a seemingly favorable way toward Asians based on positive stereotypes....[T]hese stereotypes often end up harming the target.”⁹ For example, focus group participants shared with us how their managers frequently assigned them more work based on racialized assumptions, pigeonholed them into certain career paths, and assigned them quantitative assignments without considering their strengths or interests.

Several focus group participants described how overvalidation microaggressions contribute to wide-reaching structural impact, such as having their contributions overlooked or being assigned unfair workloads.

Asian professionals experience perpetual foreigner microaggressions more frequently than White and Black professionals do:

- Colleagues assume I was not born in the US
- Even when I say I was born in the US, colleagues ask me where I’m really from
- Colleagues tell me, “Your English is really good.”
- Colleagues assume English is not my first language

Asian professionals experience overvalidation microaggressions more frequently than White, Black, and Latino professionals do:

- Colleagues assume I am good at math, technology, and/or science
- Colleagues assume I am naturally harder working because of my race
- Colleagues assume I am naturally smarter because of my race

A broken career pipeline

Asian and Asian American professionals are 17% less likely than White professionals to say they've received a promotion at their current company. This gap in promotions is statistically significant regardless of tenure at their current company.

We explored this discrepancy in focus groups, where Asian and Asian American professionals spoke to us about how collectivist values can get in the way of promotability. We heard that since childhood, families and communities have instilled the value of lifting up “we” over “me”—the community over the individual. Yet, in US workplace cultures, where self-promotion is a critical part of advancement, employees who display humility and team orientation may be overlooked rather than rewarded.

Diversity in executive representation is critical for advancing structural equity, signaling to junior-level employees that it is possible for someone of their background to attain a senior-level position. Unfortunately, Asian and Asian American professionals are the least likely of any racial group to say they have role models at their company, we find. They are also significantly less likely to report having strong networks compared to members of other racial and ethnic groups.

Due to underrepresentation in senior-level roles, lack of role models, and thin support networks, Asian and Asian American professionals have few, if any, advocates in powerful positions to help in their career advancement. This is confirmed in our data, where we find that Asians and Asian Americans are the least likely of any racial group to have sponsors.

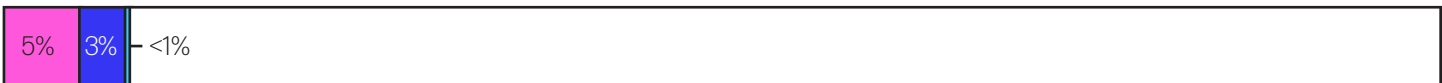
Representation of A/AA/PI adults in the US

● Asian men ● Asian women ● NHOP^{*} men and women

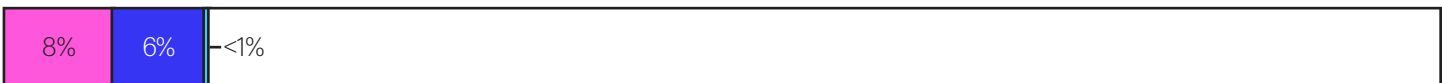
Executive/senior-level officials & managers¹⁰



First-/mid-level officials & managers¹¹



Professionals¹²



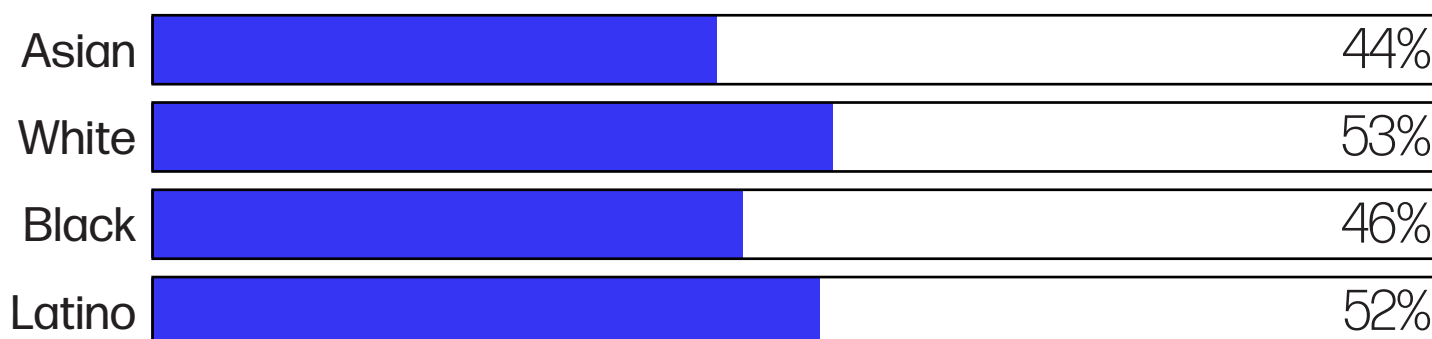
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) data uses the term “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander,” abbreviated here as NHOP.

“We’re told not to stick out, not to bring attention to ourselves... It’s the group, the family, the community that is more important than the individual.

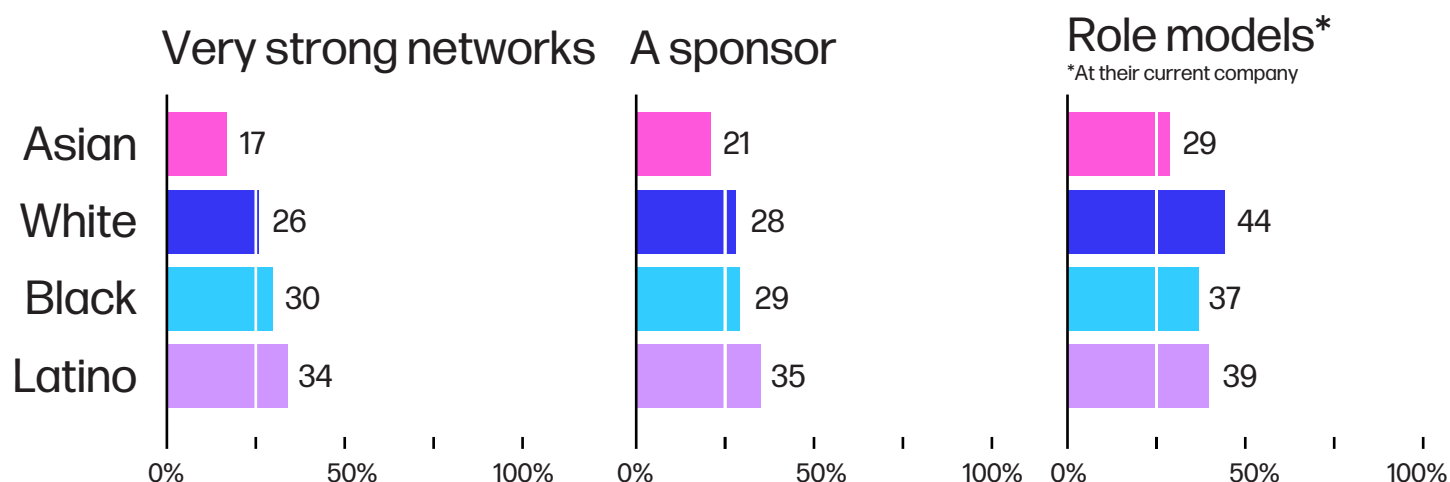
It creates this weird cognitive dissonance—when you’re growing up and being taught in your household, ‘This is how things are supposed to be,’ but the culture that you exist in is telling you the complete opposite.”

- White and Filipino professional

Professionals who have received a promotion at their current company



Professionals who have:



+ From our white paper

The Erasure and Invisibility of Pacific Islander Professionals

Due to small sample size, our survey data did not allow us to feature Pacific Islander professionals as a comparative group alongside East, South, and Southeast Asian professionals. To avoid contributing to the systemic erasure of Pacific Islander populations, we redoubled our efforts to capture their experiences through qualitative methods (focus groups and interviews).

1.6 million people identify as “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” (alone or in combination with one or more races) in the US today. This is 0.4% of the population.¹⁶

Using aggregated data obscures the unique obstacles and experiences of groups within the umbrella term of “AAPI,” including the 1.6 million “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” US population, those who trace their heritage in part or whole to Indigenous cultures of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia.¹⁷

One 2022 study conducted by Pacific Islander researchers and volunteers found that Pacific Islander individuals may have the highest infection and death rates from COVID-19 of any racial-ethnic group in the US.¹⁸ Data on this group is scarce—Pacific Islanders are an understudied cohort, a problem with lethal consequences.¹⁹

From Pacific Islanders who participated in six of our focus groups, we learned that while they share some workplace obstacles with Asians and Asian Americans, their distinct history of oppression translates to the workplace. Most notably, by being grouped with Asian and Asian American employees, their underrepresentation in the workplace too often goes ignored on their teams and within DE&I efforts.

Polynesia: A triangular region that stretches from Tonga to the west, Easter Island to the east, Hawai‘i to the north, and New Zealand to the south¹³

Melanesia: Comprises roughly 2,000 islands spanning from the Arafura Sea in Indonesian waters to the eastern side of the Pacific Ocean, and from the island of New Guinea in the north to New Caledonia and the surrounding waters to the south¹⁴

Micronesia: Includes the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau (Belau), the US territory of Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands¹⁵

“Pacific Islanders have the right to have their own say in the world.”

- Native Hawaiian professional

“Pacific Islanders are not Asian. We have distinct languages, distinct cultures, distinct histories of colonization. And as a result, we should be considered as our own distinct amalgamation of groups that is separate and apart from those that exist on the Asian continent.”

- Micronesian, Mexican, and White professional

“The erasure is so real. I think that the patterns of the outside world and how we’re treated are repeated at work day to day.”

- Samoan professional

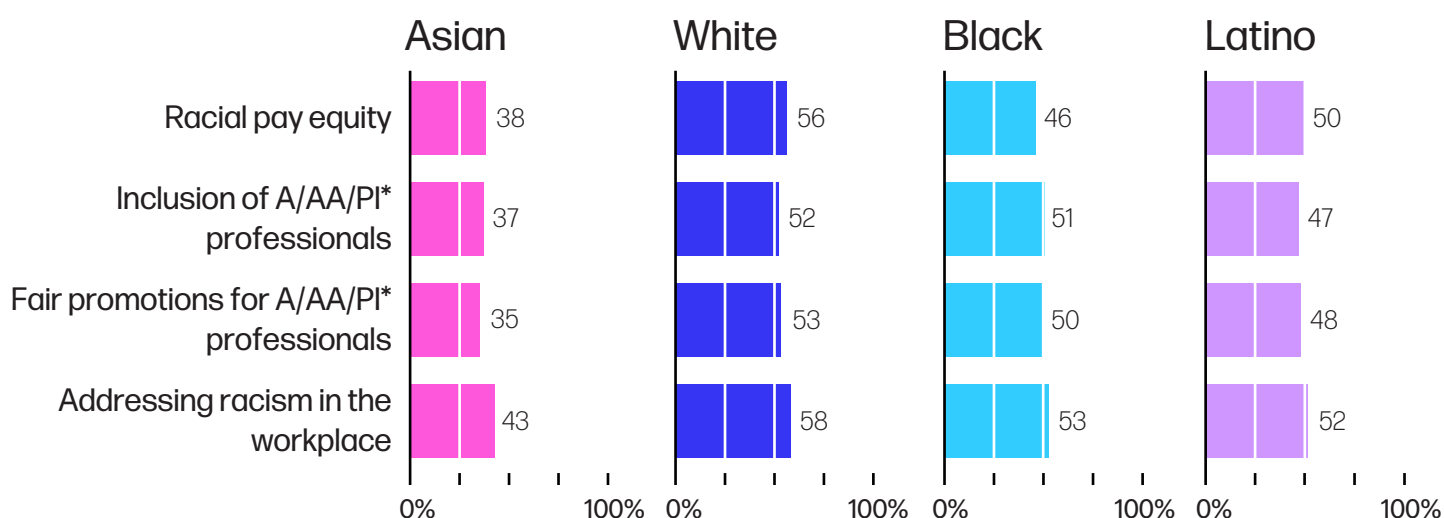
“Just seeing someone like me in a higher position within the company [would] mean that it’s possible. Right now, I don’t see anybody. It makes it feel like an impossible ladder to climb.”

- Guamanian professional

Audit, Awaken, Act

Many Asian and Asian American professionals have felt unsupported and ignored by their companies in the crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. But as we heard in focus groups, their inequitable workplace experiences far predate this moment, and members of this cohort are not hopeful about change. To address their DE&I disillusionment—and the burnout, mental health strain, and career stall that are all too common among A/AA/PI professionals—companies can use Coqual's Audit, Awaken, Act framework.

Professionals who say their company is very committed to:



*The survey used "Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)"; we use "A/AA/PI" here for inclusiveness.

Audit

Assess where your organization stands today using a mix of methods. Check on the health of DE&I practices, and how they impact A/AA/PI employees. Understand that representation data is useful, but not sufficient to get a full picture of employee access to opportunities.

Disaggregate the data Treating A/AA/PI professionals as a monolithic cohort subjects smaller subgroup communities to systemic erasure.²⁰ Through disaggregation of employee data, you will understand whether these subgroups face different inequities and structural barriers.

Take inventory of overlooked leadership qualities Which leadership styles are rewarded in your company—and which are ignored? Companies can benefit from supporting employees with different communication and leadership styles.

“Disaggregated data is much more powerful because you’re not telling one story to represent multiple lived experiences....It can tell the stories of those of us who are in the shades of America, the marginalized, the uncentered.”

– Peter T. Keo, PhD, CEO, Rapid Research Evaluation LLC

Awaken

Share audit results with leaders and employees, educating them on the structural racism that A/AA/PI professionals face broadly and at your organization. Build bridges for communication and solidarity. With audit findings and understanding of the systemic racism that A/AA/PI employees face, connect the dots across and within employee and leader cohorts.

Cultivate intraracial and intergenerational solidarity Asian and Asian American professionals are least likely to feel supported by members of their own racial group, we find. We also find generational differences among A/AA/PI professionals in attitudes about race. Open dialogue about these issues can be a vital step toward community healing. Companies must provide safe listening spaces, facilitated by experts and community leaders, in which A/AA/PI employees can speak openly between ethnic backgrounds, generations, and beyond.

Continue to cultivate cross-racial coalition-building for collective healing Less than half of professionals say racial solidarity exists at work, we find. Given the importance of employee resource groups (ERGs) for A/AA/PI communities, organize programs and events that encourage collaboration and community-building between various identity-based ERGs, and be intentional about distributing resources equitably among them.

Educate and reverse-mentor leaders Create targeted education and reverse-mentorship programs for middle managers and senior leaders. Successful programs expose senior leaders to the strength of different approaches to leadership, demonstrate how to advocate on behalf of employees with great leadership potential (but who may not feel comfortable with self-advocacy), and hold leaders accountable to follow through on commitments to advocacy.

Enlighten managers Educate managers on the racism to which A/AA/PI employees are subjected and on how to actively include them—don’t leave that work to the employees experiencing racism and exclusion.

Act

Take action to drive systemic change. Build solutions that dismantle barriers for A/AA/PI professionals, with accountability at their core, in order to drive lasting change.

Respond strongly to anti-A/AA/PI violence

This is the baseline for employers. Staff-wide emails from your CEO to pledge support in the wake of violence are just the beginning—and if they stand alone, can be perceived as hollow. Mental health resources, safe spaces within ERGs, and public commitments with transparency about the company's level of investment in community organizations signal a true dedication to change.

Partner with community-based organizations

Companies can provide community-based organizations with financial support, and in exchange, community leaders can educate and guide company leaders to better support A/AA/PI employees.

Invest in ERGs and their leaders ERGs are critical community spaces, but are often led by volunteers who are at risk of burnout. By compensating ERG leaders and giving them dedicated work time, you can quickly address this challenge—and improve ERG efficacy.

Apply disaggregated insights to support A/AA/PI employees

Welcome and center Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian voices in ERGs that are “pan-Asian” or representative of A/AA/PI employees. If employee populations are large enough, create sub-groups within the ERG where they can connect and provide one another support.

Provide safety and flexibility Only one in three Asian and Asian American professionals say their company's options for remote work meet their personal needs, we find. Making work, and commuting to work, safer and more flexible will help this cohort—and all employees.

Support employee mental health The mental health resources companies offer today don't adequately address the needs of A/AA/PI professionals, especially in comparison to other racial groups. Companies need to make their offerings culturally nuanced and easily accessible.

In the wake of the racial reckoning precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, few companies have even acknowledged the racialized reality of their A/AA/PI employees. The experiences and talent of so many A/AA/PI individuals have been buried for too long, and it is time for companies to take accountability and address these issues. Employers competing for the talent of this fast-growing population need to disaggregate the experiences of their A/AA/PI employees, dispel myths that surround the community, and create space for multiple modes of leadership.

“I feel less safe when I go to work and come back from work. I’m hypervigilant of when an attack may happen. If you’re a woman, cities are never safe from the start, so now it’s even worse for some of us. We’re less adventurous. And in terms of work, we are grateful to have hybrid situations or fully remote jobs.”

- Tibetan professional

“When you join [the company], it’s assumed that you’ll be moved into a certain career path, so they don’t really consider you for leadership positions. My leaders were like, ‘Okay, you’re going to grow in this technical path. Right now, you’re handling two projects...four projects...in the future, eight projects,’ without even asking me, ‘What are your interests?’”

- Indian immigrant

“I care very much now, not just [about being] promoted and [being] able to present to the CEO or senior leadership. I need to know that the people that I’m working for have some alignment in their fundamental human belief system. When I’m speaking about assimilation, when I’m speaking about belonging, when I’m speaking about how the world events are impacting my mental health, it’s something that they understand. That’s important for me to be able to do my work well, to feel like this is a place where I want to come to every single morning...where I want to stay.”

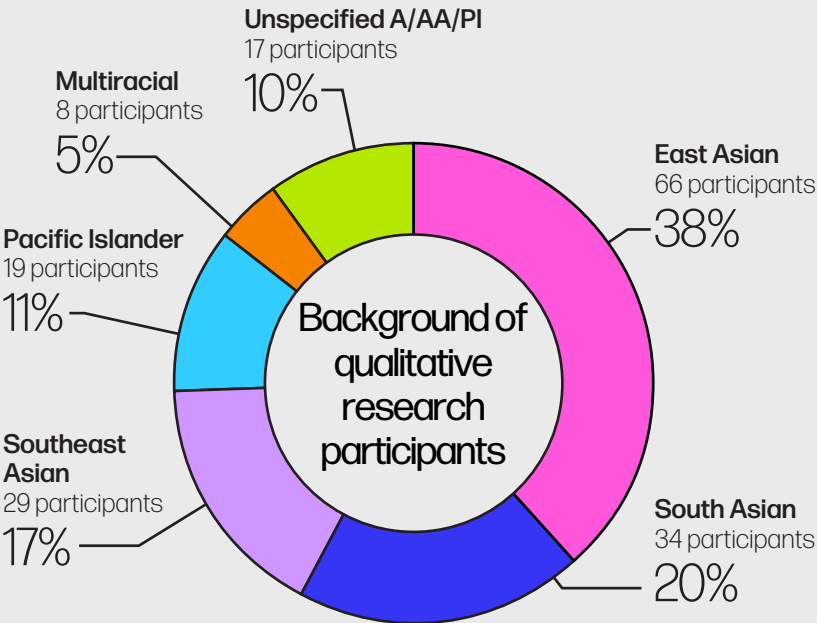
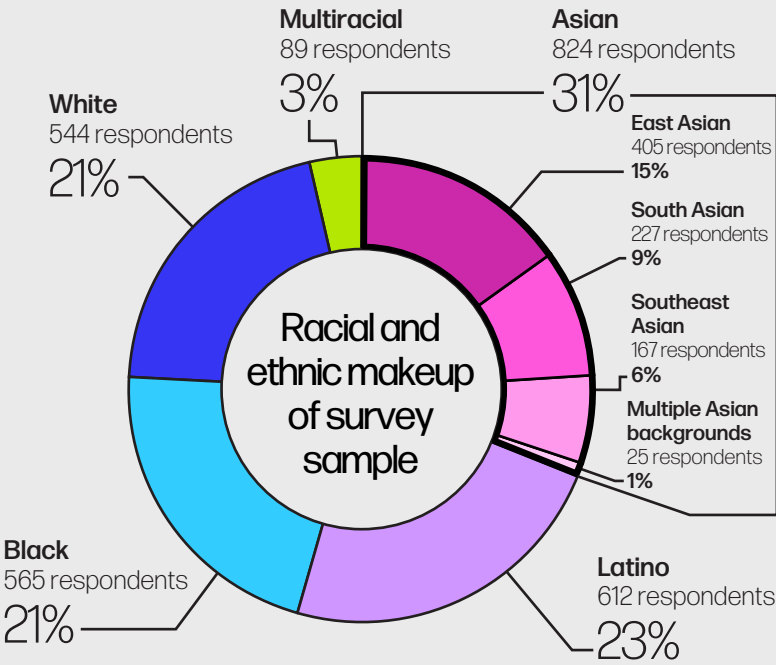
- Chinese professional

Methodology

The primary sources of data for this research report consisted of a survey; virtual focus groups; *Insights In-Depth*® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups); and one-on-one interviews. Through our qualitative methods, we reached more than 170 professionals, experts, and practitioners who have expertise on A/AA/PI experiences in the US. The survey was conducted online in August and September 2022 among 2,634 respondents (824 Asian and Asian American professionals, 612 Hispanic/Latino professionals, 565 Black professionals, 544 White professionals, and 89 multiracial professionals), who were at least 21 years old, were currently employed full time in professional occupations in the US, and had earned at least a bachelor’s degree. While we hoped to receive adequate samples for specific A/AA/PI subgroups, we had only 11 Pacific Islander respondents and nine multiracial Pacific Islander respondents to the national survey. As a result, we did not analyze the data from these respondents as a disaggregated group or combine them with the experiences of Asian and Asian American respondents in this research due to the possibility of mischaracterizing their experiences with the small sample size.

In the body of this report, we refer to the groups "Asian" and "Asian American" as distinct from one another. Our charts use "Asian" as an umbrella term for brevity. Our survey data was weighted to be representative of the US population on key demographics (age, gender, education, race/ethnicity, and census division). The base used for statistical testing was the effective base, and unless otherwise stated, all stated differences between groups are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the charts, percentages may not always add up to 100 because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple responses. The survey was distributed by NORC at the University of Chicago under the auspices of Coqual. NORC was responsible for collecting the raw survey data, while Coqual’s research team constructed the survey and conducted the analysis.

Please refer to the full report for a more detailed explanation of our methodology and limitations.



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Sonia Cargan
Anna Marrs

Baker Tilly
Shane Lloyd

Bristol Myers Squibb
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Credit Suisse
Jennifer Andrews
Della Sabessar

Cushman & Wakefield
Nadine Augusta

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Joanne Watson

Johnson & Johnson
Wanda Bryant Hope

Morgan Stanley
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Crystal Langston