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- HOME
- FEATURE
- NATIONAL
- BAY AREA
- CONSUMER
- SPORTS
- ARTS & ENT.
- OPINION

- 1 Calendar
- Talk-Talk
- Archives
- Media Kit
- Contact Us



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[Home](#)

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Scattered But Strong

Korean American results from the 2000 Census

By Sam Chu Lin | *Special to AsianWeek*

With signs of scattering and a leveling off of immigration, the 2000 Census report shows a number of surprising changes for the Korean American community.

According to Eui-Young Yu, a sociology professor at Cal State Los Angeles and director of the Census Information Center for the Korean American Center, just over one million Koreans were counted in the United States, which was a little less than what the community has expected.

The largest concentration of Korean Americans is found in the five-county-area of Los Angeles (Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura counties). About one quarter of all of the Koreans who live in the United States reside in this particular region. The second largest area is the New York region, including New York City, Northern New Jersey and the Connecticut-Long Island area. This area constitutes about 16 percent of the entire Korean population in this country.

Instead of limiting themselves to major Korean population centers like Los Angeles and New York however, Yu pointed out one of the major findings of the new report: Koreans have

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shown a high degree of what he calls “scatterness.” Attracted by work, they have moved to other parts of the country and to places where Koreans have not lived before.

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The highest growth rate for Koreans took place in the South, where hi-tech companies attracted new communities. Georgia is the leader, followed by North Carolina, Florida, Virginia and Maryland. In what looks like a swinging pattern, large numbers of Koreans have also moved north to Delaware, New Jersey and to the Midwest.

Unlike the Chinese and the Japanese populations, Yu said Korean Americans also had the tendency to scatter on a local level. He cited the Southern California area to illustrate this point.

“There is a Koreatown in Los Angeles,” he stated, “but there are several pockets, not just one. Koreans have settled in the East San Gabriel Valley around Rolling Heights, Hacienda Heights, Walnut, Diamond Bar, Cerritos, Fullerton, Glendale and also the La Canada area. Another area of Korean concentration is around Torrance and Gardena.”

Yu has no hard facts to explain why Koreans have this tendency to scatter, but he theorizes new immigrants move to areas where “they perceive they have more business opportunities, more educational opportunities for their children, and a better living environment.” With a chuckle, he added, “Maybe, Koreans are more adventurous!”

Immigration to America has slowed down quite a bit for Koreans. During the 1970s, more than 30,000 immigrants came from Korea every year. In the 1990s, it slowed down somewhat. There are now about 15,000 Koreans arriving from Korea as immigrants every year.

Yu said the high numbers from the 1970s “coincided with the rapid growth of the economy in Korea. The Koreans were never given much opportunity to go outside of their international boundaries, but when the opportunities opened up, they took advantage of it.”

He also credited the Korean economy in the late 1990s for leveling off the rate of immigration to this country, stating, “The Korean economy in the 1990s grew very rapidly and opportunities opened up over there, and people became quite comfortable in living in Korea.”

Basing his remarks on the 1997 economic census, Yu said that many Korean Americans are still “in the beginning stages of business and settlement.” He says they are over-concentrated in retail and service businesses.

“In terms of the average revenue growth,” he explained, “Koreans lag behind the Chinese and the Japanese. In terms of the number of

employees that they hire, they are still lagging too, but they are ahead of other more recent immigrants like the Vietnamese and others. I would say the Koreans are the 'infantry of the U.S. industry' at this stage."

The naturalization rate for Korean Americans is very high. Sixty percent of the Koreans in this country have become U.S. citizens, and they are participating in the American political process.

"Many of them vote," he stated. "But the more important factor is the rising number of 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans who are becoming a very significant factor in American politics. They are already found in many areas of government. We don't have many congressmen or senators yet, but [Koreans] are working as aides to them."

[Top of This Page](#) ▲

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[Feature](#) | [National](#) | [Bay Area](#) | [Consumer](#)
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