



The Invisible Indian

Shining a Spotlight on the Impoverished
U.S. Indian Diaspora

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October 2020



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THE BOTTOM LINE

While the majority of the United States' 4.2 million Indian Americans are thriving, a new analysis estimates 6.5 percent were living in poverty in 2018. Unfortunately, researchers predict the COVID-19 pandemic and recession will push thousands more families into the ranks of the impoverished, potentially driving the poverty rate as high as 10.1 percent. By identifying the demographics, vulnerabilities, cultural links, and geographies that distinguish these at-risk individuals, targeted programs can be developed to mitigate the risks faced by these "Invisible Indians."

INTRODUCTION

The story of America's Indian immigrants and their descendants is one of extraordinary success. Often cited as the most educated and wealthiest ethnic group in the U.S., Indian Americans overall have attained tremendous achievements in their professional and personal lives.

But what about the members of the Indian diaspora who struggle in The States? Too often, underprivileged Indians are overlooked as the spotlight shines on the majority who have prospered.

"The Invisible Indian" aims to profile this less prosperous minority group. On the pages to follow, [Indiaspora](#) shares excerpts from a new study by esteemed researchers Devesh Kapur and Jashan Bajwa of the Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, "A Study of Poverty in the Indian American Population."

While the magnitude of the problem is not massive, poverty among Indian Americans exists, persists, and is undoubtedly growing significantly due to the COVID-19 recession. By illuminating the economic, legal, and health challenges of this group, Indiaspora aims to be a catalyst to encourage organizations and sociologists to take action that aids of the impoverished members of the Indian diaspora in the U.S.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Indian American Population

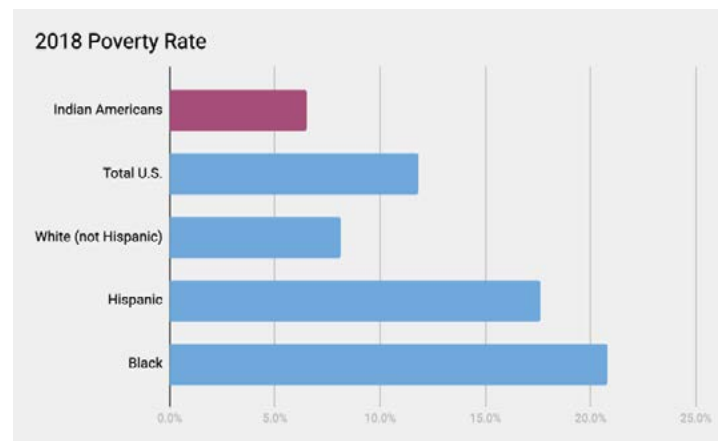
The number of Indian immigrants and their descendants who live in the U.S. has roughly doubled every decade for the past 40 years.

- As of 2018, 4.2 million Indian Americans live in the U.S., up from 2.8 million in 2010.
- With a median income of \$120,000, Indian Americans have a higher income than any other immigrant group in the U.S. and nearly double that of the average U.S. household.
- More than three-fourths have college degrees and 54 percent own their home.

Indian American Poverty Rate

A new analysis quantifies the size and prevalence of impoverished Indians in the U.S.

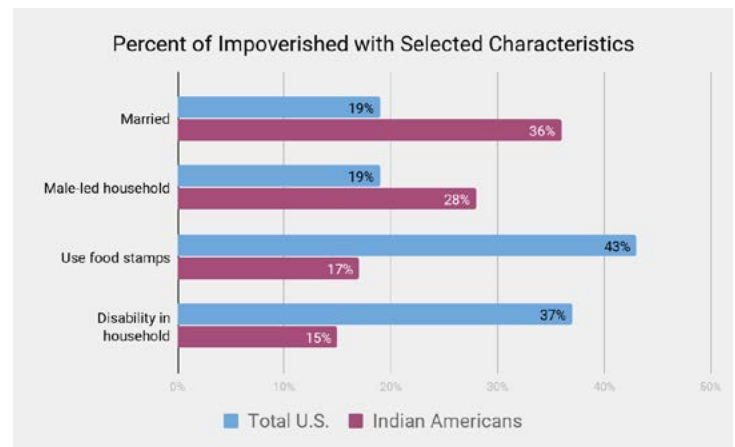
- Approximately 252,000 individuals or 6.5% of all Indian American households live in poverty.
- While poverty in the U.S. overall declined from 15.1 percent in 2010 to 11.8 percent in 2018, Indian American households experienced a more significant drop – from 9 percent to 6.5 percent in 2018.
- Indian Americans are less likely to be living in poverty compared to white, Black and Hispanic Americans.



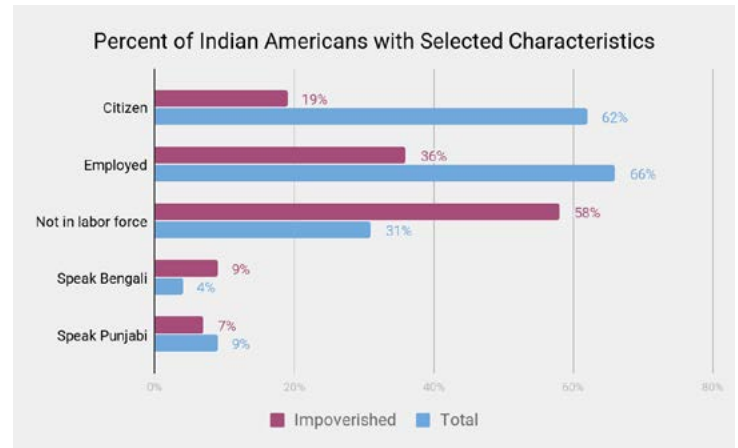
Profiling Poverty among Indian Americans

A closer look at “Invisible Indians” reveals they are unique in many ways from other impoverished Americans and other Indian Americans, too.

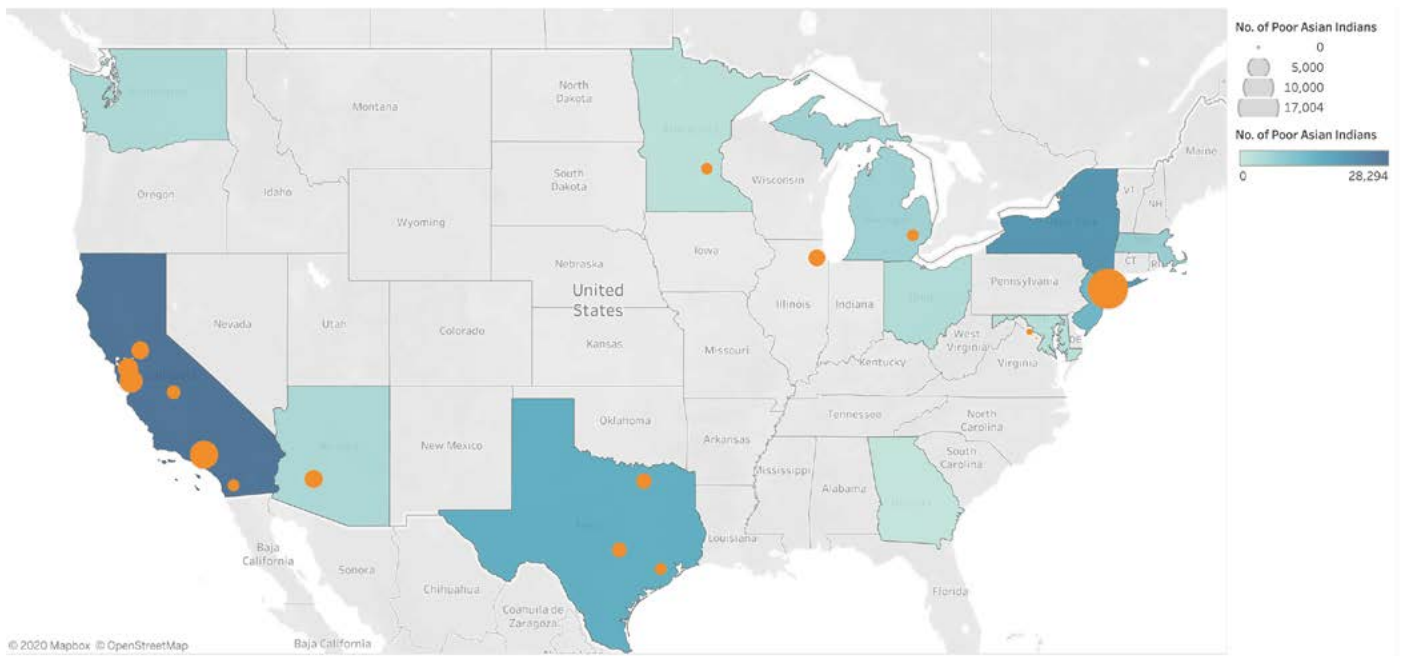
- A disproportionate portion of impoverished Indian Americans are “not in the labor force,” perhaps due to their legal status: four-fifths of this group does not have citizenship.
- Impoverished U.S. households overall are twice as likely to have a female head-of-household while those in the Indian American community are far more likely to be married.



- Underprivileged Indian Americans are largely concentrated in the same states as their brethren living above the poverty line.
- Indian Americans in poverty are likely to live in rural/semi-rural and inner-city areas, matching the most impoverished areas of the U.S.
- Bengali and Punjabi speaking households are more likely to be living in poverty than Indian Americans overall.
- Compared to other impoverished Americans, Indians are much more likely to own their home and have health insurance and much less likely to have a disability or use food stamps.



Geographical Distribution of Indian Americans in Poverty

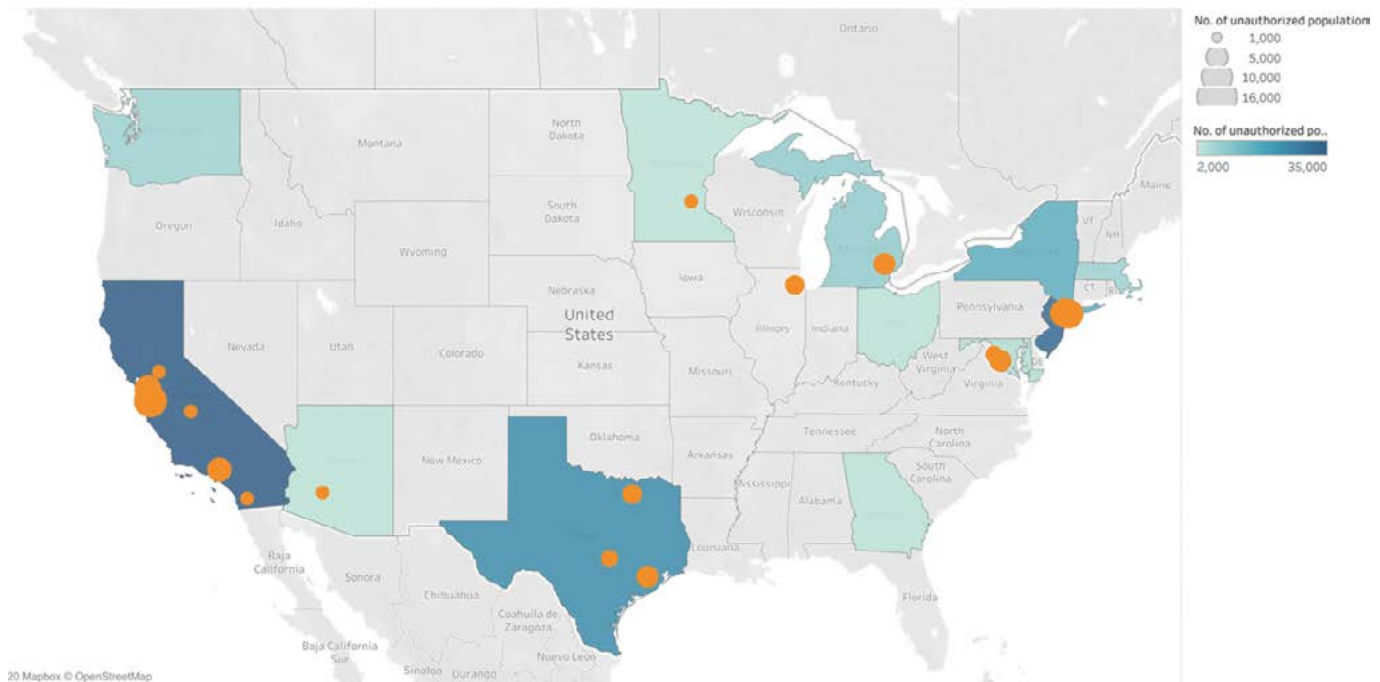


Unauthorized Immigrants

While not included in the above estimates, the population of unauthorized Indian immigrants living in the U.S. are already at-risk of economic, food and health insecurities given their lack of legal status.

- An estimated 470,000-525,000 unauthorized Indian immigrants reside in the U.S., but researchers speculate that number could be 50 percent higher.
- Unauthorized immigrants are likely to live in the same geographical areas as Indian Americans in poverty.

Geographical Distribution of the Unauthorized Indian Immigrants



Impact of COVID-19 Epidemic

Importantly, the data used for this analysis was gathered in 2018, two years before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, demographers believe these statistics may represent a “high-water mark” for positive poverty news in America.

- A total of 86 percent of Impoverished Indian Americans suffer from one or more economic, housing and health characteristics that make them vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Approximately 17 percent of Indian Americans in poverty are working in COVID-19 “high-risk” industries, such as retail, transportation, and childcare.
- Estimates show that when economic vulnerabilities are compiled, COVID-19 could raise the Indian American poverty rate to 10.1 percent given this group’s dependence on their employers for maintaining legal resident status, health insurance, and economic well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPISTS

The researchers outlined the following four types of poverty risk mitigation strategies for the Indian diaspora in the U.S.

- *A Spatial Strategy* – Focusing on counties where poverty is most concentrated.
- *A Sectoral Strategy* – Targeting those employed in the sectors most susceptible to COVID risks, such as hospitality and travel.
- *A Legal Assistance Strategy* – Providing legal assistance to undocumented workers and families who are particularly vulnerable and to others facing eviction due to their inability to pay rent.
- *A Vulnerability Strategy* – Developing programs to aid specific types of impoverished people, such as victims of domestic violence, children, elderly single households, and those incarcerated.
- *A Skills-Employment Strategy* – Helping impoverished households escape the vicious cycle of poverty by helping them find new jobs and possibly new occupations with re-training where needed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Devesh Kapur is the Director of Asia Programs and Starr Foundation Professor of South Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Kapur has a BTech and MS in chemical engineering (from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Varanasi and the University of Minnesota respectively) and a Ph.D. in public policy from Princeton University. Prior to Johns Hopkins, he was at the Brookings Institution and a faculty member at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania where he was director of the Center for the Advanced Study of India.

Jashan Bajwa is a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

M.R. Rangaswami is a software executive, investor, entrepreneur, corporate eco-strategy expert, community builder and philanthropist. Following his tenure as an executive and investor in the rapidly-expanding Silicon Valley software industry, M.R. founded both the Corporate Eco Forum and Indiaspora.

Sanjeev Joshipura is Indiaspora's Executive Director. He was formerly active in the US-India corridor in a public policy and business capacity, via his own consulting firm. In the corporate realm, Sanjeev has worked at Fortune 500 multinational organizations in different industries, in the areas of strategy, finance and project management. Since 2008, he has been actively engaged in public policy, American politics and global government relations.

About Indiaspora

Indiaspora is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization established to transform the success of the Indian diaspora into meaningful impact worldwide. Founded in 2012 by **M.R. Rangaswami** and led by an esteemed **Board** and **Founders Circle**, our members are a powerful network of global leaders from diverse backgrounds and professions who are committed to building stronger communities with a culture of giving and inspiring social change. By sharing insight, hosting **events** and connecting people, Indiaspora aims to unite the professionally, geographically and religiously diverse Indian diaspora **community** toward collective action worldwide.

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