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U.S. Births Hint at Bias for Boys in Some Asians

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

The trend is buried deep in United States census data: seemingly minute deviations in the proportion of boys and girls born to Americans of Chinese, Indian and Korean descent.

In those families, if the first child was a girl, it was more likely that a second child would be a boy, according to recent studies of census data. If the first two children were girls, it was even more likely that a third child would be male.

Demographers say the statistical deviation among Asian-American families is significant, and they believe it reflects not only a preference for male children, but a growing tendency for these families to embrace sex-selection techniques, like in vitro fertilization and sperm sorting, or abortion.

New immigrants typically transplant some of their customs and culture to the United States — from tastes in food and child-rearing practices to their emphasis on education and the elevated social and economic status of males. The appeal to immigrants by clinics specializing in sex selection caused some controversy a decade ago.

But a number of experts expressed surprise to see evidence that the preference for sons among Asian-Americans has been so significantly carried over to this country. “That this is going on in the United States — people were blown away by this,” said Prof. Lena Edlund of [Columbia University](#).

She and her colleague Prof. Douglas Almond studied 2000 census data and [published their results](#) last year in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).

In general, more boys than girls are born in the United States, by a ratio of 1.05 to 1. But among American families of Chinese, Korean and Indian descent, the likelihood of having a boy increased to 1.17 to 1 if the first child was a girl, according to the Columbia economists. If the first two children were girls, the ratio for a third child was 1.51 to 1 — or about 50 percent greater — in favor of boys.

Studies have not detected a similar preference for males among Japanese-Americans.

The findings published by Professors Almond and Edlund were bolstered this year by the work of a [University of Texas](#) economist, Prof. Jason Abrevaya. He found that on the basis of census and birth records through 2004, the incidence of boys among immigrant Chinese parents in New York was higher than the national average for Chinese families. Boys typically account for about 515 of every 1,000 births. But he found that among Chinese New Yorkers having a third child, the number of boys was about 558.

Joyce Moy, executive director of the Asian American/Asian Research Institute of the [City University of New York](#), said that family values prevalent in China, including the tradition of elder parents depending on their sons for support, have seeped into American culture even among younger immigrants, and even when some of the historic underlying reasons for the preference are less relevant here than in China, Korea and India.

“Inheritance in the old country is carried through the male line,” she said. “Families depend on the male child for support.”

Dr. Norbert Gleicher, medical director of the Center for Human Reproduction, a fertility and sex-selection clinic in New York and Chicago, said that from his experience, people were more inclined to want female children, except for Asians and Middle Easterners.

The preference for males among some immigrant Asians may fade with assimilation, experts said. And no one expects it to result in the lopsided male majorities like those in China, where, according to a study published this year in the *British Medical Journal*, the government’s one-child policy has resulted in the world’s highest sex disparity among newborns — about 120 boys for every 100 girls.

“The patients come in and they all think they owe me an excuse, but the bottom line is it’s cultural,” said Dr. Jeffrey Steinberg, medical director of the Fertility Institutes, a California clinic that began sex-selection procedures in New York in March.

The Fertility Institutes, which does not offer abortions, has unabashedly advertised its services in Indian- and Chinese-language newspapers in the United States.

“Culturally, there are a lot of strange things that go on in the world,” Dr. Steinberg said. “Whether we agree with it, it’s not harming anyone.”

Efforts by clinics to appeal to Indian families in the United States provoked criticism and some community introspection in 2001. Some newspapers and magazines that ran advertisements promoting the clinics, which offered sex-selection procedures, expressed regret at the perpetuation of what critics regard as a misogynistic practice.

In this country, some Asian families are having more than the two children they had planned for if the first two are girls. “I do have girlfriends who have had multiple children in anticipation there will ultimately be a boy,” Ms. Moy said.

Experts say that Asian-American families are using sex-selection techniques, also called family balancing.

In China, sex selection is usually achieved by aborting female fetuses, which doctors say also occurs in this country, although few parents were willing to be interviewed about it.

“It’s a real touchy thing,” Dr. Steinberg said. “It’s illegal in Asia, and culturally, it’s private.”

One New York couple, Angie and Rick, Chinese immigrants who were brought here by their parents as young children and now own several food markets in the city, agreed to be interviewed only if their last name was not used.

The first time Angie became pregnant and learned that the baby was a girl, she and her husband were merely disappointed. They had planned on having a second child anyway. When she learned she was pregnant with a girl again, though, the couple considered an abortion.

Their doctor argued against terminating the second pregnancy, they said. The couple reluctantly agreed to try for a third child.

“Our theory was that to raise kids, it’s tough already, so we didn’t want too many,” Rick recalled.

They explored various forms of sex selection, which could cost \$15,000 or more, but they feared that because Angie was so fertile, the process would result in multiple births. She became pregnant a third time naturally. The couple were delighted to learn they were finally having a boy.

“If the third one was going to be a girl, then I would say probably I would have terminated,” Angie said.

A 1989 study of sex selection in New York City, conducted by Dr. Masood Khatamee, a clinical professor at N.Y.U. Langone Medical Center, found that all the foreign-born couples — mostly from Asia and the Middle East — preferred boys, predominantly for cultural and economic reasons. Often, the pressure comes from the husband’s parents.

“I have two daughters and am married to an only child,” said a Chinese-American professional woman who is married to an engineer. “Early on, after the two girls were born and another two years went by and there was not a third, I found myself in the living room with four or five older relatives in a discussion of ‘Wouldn’t it be lovely for you to have a boy?’ It’s extremely uncomfortable.”

Dr. Lisa Eng, a Hong Kong-born gynecologist who practices in Chinatown and Sunset Park, Brooklyn, said she tried to discourage couples who prefer boys from having abortions.

But, she said, "If it's going to be a third, they're pretty determined to have a boy. If it's a boy, they keep it. If it's a girl, they'll abort."

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