



Some Demographic Characteristics of Farm Operators in Hawai'i: A Century of Change

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At first every ten years, and now every five years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts a census of commercial farm operations across the U.S. and occasionally in the U.S. Territories. The first U.S. Census of Agriculture was conducted in 1840. The Territory of Hawai'i was included for the first time in the 1900 census. Data emanating from the census have been used to understand trends, fund research, and establish policy, among other outcomes. The race, ethnicity, and gender of farmers in Hawai'i is explored in this factsheet.

Who are Hawai'i's farmers?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the principal farm operator is "the person primarily responsible for the on-site, day-to-day operation of the farm or ranch business. This person may be a hired manager or business manager." The number of principal farm operators in Hawai'i increased from 2,273 in 1900 to 7,013 in 2012 (U.S. Census of Agriculture, various years). This trend increase was not constant but rather cyclical over time. The count actually reached its first peak, of 5,669 principal operators, in 1930, and its sec-

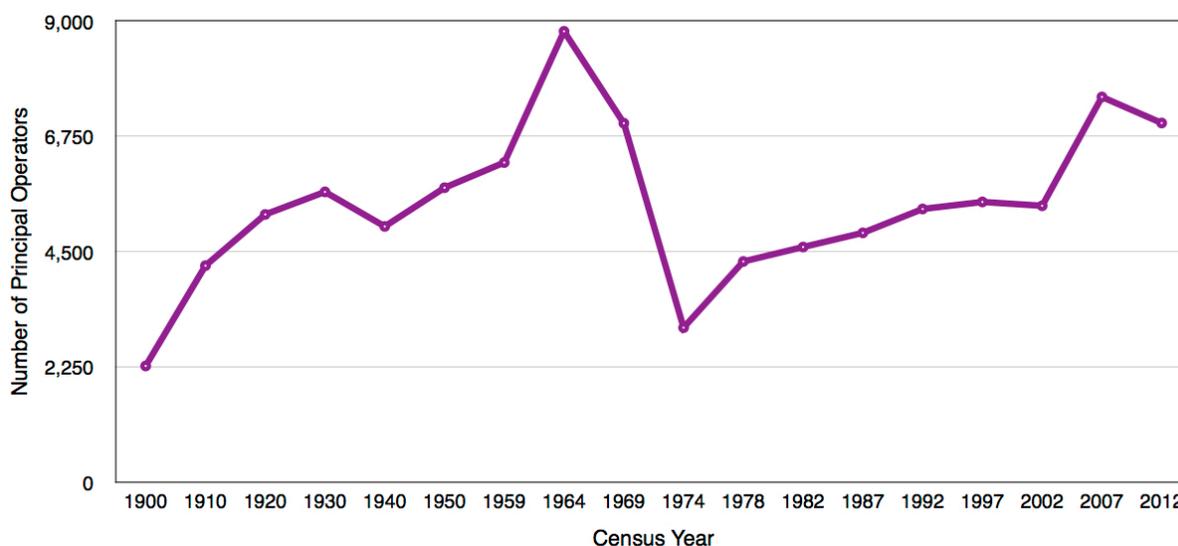


Fig 1. Number of principal farm operators in Hawaii, 1900-2012.

ond peak, of 8,802 principal operators, in 1964, before diving sharply to a low of 3,020 farmers a decade later in 1974. Thereafter, the count recovered ground steadily to reach its third peak, of 7,521 principal operators, in 2007, before settling down to 7,013 operators in 2012 (Figure 1).

USDA collected race and ethnicity data at different times and using different formats over the years so not all data continues from census to census. By race, principal farm operators in Hawai'i were predominantly Asians (45%) and Caucasians (43%) in 2012. In 1900, Hawai'i's principal farmers were distributed as Asians (56%), Caucasians (22%), and Hawaiians (22%). The count of principal farm operators of Asian descent fluctuated over the period of analysis (1900 to 2012) and ended up 123% higher. The count of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander descent also experienced milder fluctuation and ended up 41% higher in the same time period. In contrast, Caucasian principal farm operators have increased rather steadily, growing by 440% over the same time period (Figure 2).

Further analysis indicates that ethnic Chinese (33%) and Japanese (23%) were the leading Asian principal farmers in Hawai'i in 1900. By statehood in 1959, the number of Chinese farmers had dropped to a meager 3% of all principal farm operators, but the number of Japanese farmers, in sharp contrast, soared to 57%. Ethnic Filipino farmers appeared for the first time in the 1940 Census of Agriculture and grew to 10% of total principal farm operators in Hawai'i by 1959. The count of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander farmers also declined by half from 22% in 1900 to 11% in 1959.

In the post-statehood period, the number of Japanese farmers in Hawai'i increased to a peak of 57% of total principal farm operators in 1974 and then declined precipitously to 22% in 2007. In 2012, the measure increased surprisingly, albeit marginally, by 130 farmers to 23% of the total. The proportion of Filipino farmers dropped to 7% of the state total in 1974, bounced back to 8% in 2007 and remained flat in 2012.

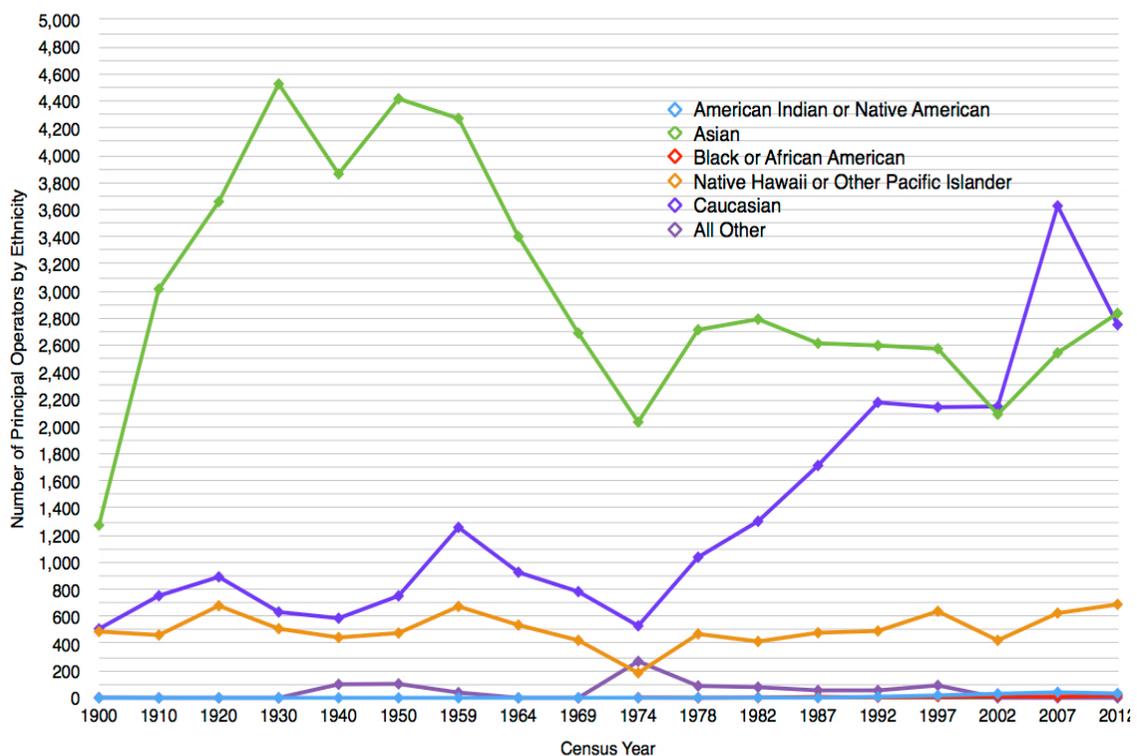


Fig 2. Race of principal farm operators in Hawai'i, 1900–2012.

The proportion of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander farmers also dropped to 6% in 1974. However, the measure reversed itself to 8% in 2007, and then inched higher to 9% of the state total in 2012. The proportion of Caucasian farmers declined from 20% in 1959 to 18% in 1974 but thereafter reversed the general demographic downtrend to peak at 48% of total principal farm operators in 2007. The same measure dropped to 38% in 2012. Figure 3 shows the various trends in ethnicity of principal operators of Hawai'i farms between 1900 and 2012.

The number and proportion of female principal farm operators increased steadily between 1978 and 2012. 1978 was the first year gender was collected. There were 172% more female principal farmers in 2012; this count increased from 579 in 1978 to 1,576 in 2012. For all farm operations in Hawai'i, the proportion of operators who are women increased from 13.4% in 1978 to 22.5% in 2012. This number of female principal operators reached a high of 1,806, or 24% of all Hawai'i farm operations, in 2007 (Figure 4).

Summary

An analysis of USDA Census of Agriculture data from 1900 to 2012 indicates that several changes have taken place in the demographic characteristics of Hawai'i farmers. In summary, these include the following:

- There are more farmers in Hawai'i now. The count increased from 2,273 principal operators in 1900 to 7,013

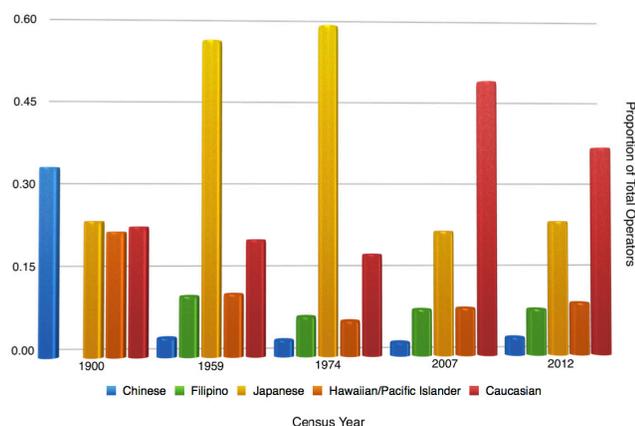


Fig 3. Ethnicity of principal farm operators in Hawai'i, select years.

in 2012 – an increase of 209% over the 112-year period. In comparison, the overall population increased at a more rapid pace, growing 803% (154,001 to 1,390,090) during the same time period.

- Despite the increase in actual count of farmers in Hawai'i over this time period, the overall ratio of farmers to the general population declined from 1.5% in 1900 to 0.5% in 2012.
- While the demographic of principal farmers in Hawai'i is a general uptrend over time, it is better portrayed as cyclical, with three distinct peaks in 1930, 1964, and 2007.
- Hawai'i farmers, by race, were predominantly Asians (45%) and Caucasians (43%) in 2012.
- The leading farming groups in Hawai'i, by ethnicity, were Caucasians (36%), Japanese (23%), Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (9%), and Filipino (8%) in 2012.
- There are a growing number of women farmers in Hawai'i. The count increased from 579 female principal farm operators in 1978 to 1,576 in 2012 – an increase of 172% over the 34-year period.

References

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Various years. Agricultural Census of the U.S. Washington, D.C.

Acknowledgements

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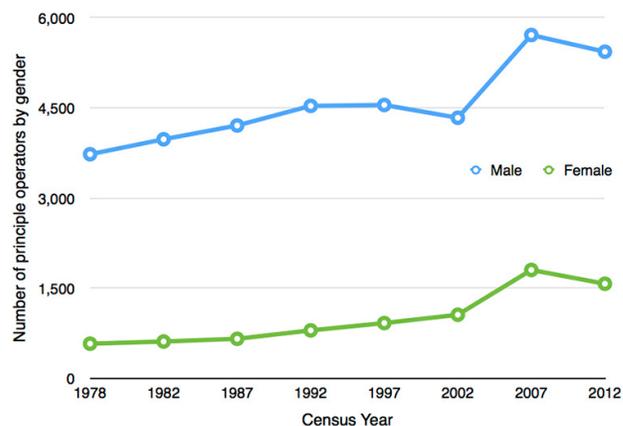


Fig 4. Gender of principal farm operators in Hawai'i, 1978–2012.