2014

INVISIBLE NEWCOMERS

REFUGEES FROM BURMA/MYANMAR AND BHUTAN IN THE UNITED STATES

APIASF® Today's Minds, Tomorrow's Future®
Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund

INVISIBLE NEWCOMERS: REFUGEES FROM BURMA/ MYANMAR AND BHUTAN IN THE UNITED STATES

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The usage of the term "Burma" is consistent with reports released by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as they track refugees to the United States. We recognize the sensitivity that exists regarding the use of the term. We use Burmese Americans and Burmese refugees to encompass all refugees with origins in Burma/Myanmar with the understanding that there are numerous ethnic groups who prefer to be identified by their respective ethnic identity. We are also sensitive to the use of the country's current official name of The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Many in the international community use Myanmar because they believe that nations should be referred to by the name that they prefer. We are aware of the recent changes in U.S. relations with the country and that in its May 15, 2013 statement regarding Myanmar President Thein Sein's visit to the United States, the Obama Administration referred to the country as Myanmar, as a courtesy gesture of respect for a government that is pursuing a transformative reform agenda.

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contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 4

APIASF AND AAAS STATEMENTS 5

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 6

INTRODUCTION. 8

PLAN FOR THE STUDY. 9

HISTORICAL CONTEXT 10

FINDINGS. 15

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 35

CONCLUSION 36

REFERENCES 37

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Although this study focuses on a number of key areas, we would like to note that this is an exploratory project and not a comprehensive examination of the two communities. The interview responses are not intended to be generalizable. Instead, we seek to provide a preliminary snapshot of the two largest recent U.S. refugee groups. We hope that this report will serve as a catalyst for future research on these rapidly growing communities.

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As APIASF works to better serve the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, the organization maintains continual assessment on each scholarship application cycle. Through this assessment, APIASF was alerted to the growing number of applicants and scholarship recipients from the Burmese and Bhutanese communities.

Further investigation into the community, demonstrated the need for access to educational resources and additional research to learn about the experiences of students. APIASF hosted a session at the 2013 Higher Education Summit titled, *Enhancing the Adolescent Burmese Refugees' Access to Higher Education*, to help increase awareness on this underserved community. This session presented by Elaisa Vahnie, Executive Director of the Burmese American Community Institute, and Lana Alaine Knox, Assistant Director of Extended Studies at American University's School of Professional & Extended Studies, provided practitioners and education leaders with information to help improve student success.

The completion of this report is the next step to better inform policymakers, higher education leaders, and other resource providers with information about these two growing communities that are often overlooked especially at the national level. With better information about the needs and experiences of these underserved communities, we hope to be able to increase access to resources that will support the academic and long-term success of these students.

Neil Horikoshi, President & Executive Director
Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund

APIASF AND AAAS STATEMENTS

THE ASIAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP FUND (APIASF)

The Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) is the nation's largest non-profit provider of college scholarships for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). APIASF places an intentionally strong focus on students who live at or below the poverty level, are the first in their families to attend college, are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, and are committed to community service. Since its inception, APIASF has distributed more than $70 million in college scholarships to AAPI students across the country and in the Pacific Islands.

APIASF's holistic approach includes partnerships with a number of nonprofit, corporate, research, advocacy

organizations, and the nation's Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) to support opportunities for students to access, complete, and succeed after post-secondary education. Through its programs, APIASF is able to develop future leaders who excel in their careers, serve as role models in their communities, and contribute to a vibrant America.

ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) was founded in 1979 for the purpose of advancing the highest professional standards of excellence in teaching and research in the field of Asian American Studies; promoting better understanding and closer ties between and among various sub-components within Asian American Studies: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Hawaiian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander, and other groups. AAAS sponsors professional activities to facilitate increased communication and scholarly exchange among teachers, researchers, and students in the field of Asian American Studies. The organization advocates and represents the interests and welfare of Asian American Studies and Asian Americans. AAAS is also founded for the purpose of educating American society about the history and aspirations of Asian American ethnic minorities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report paints a historical and demographic portrait of the Burmese and Bhutanese experience in the United States and gives voice to one Southeast Asian refugee community and one South Asian refugee community who are largely invisible in the current national discourse on Asian American socioeconomic outcomes. National data show that Bhutanese and Burmese constitute a large proportion of refugees to the United States in recent years. Refugee experiences in this study are based on existing statistical data, interviews with 10 refugees working in different capacities, and a review of existing studies and reports[1]. Lastly, we would like to add an important note that in portions of the statistical data (specifically from the Current Population Survey), the Bhutanese population is placed into the "all others" category and cannot be disaggregated. Thus, interviews and other sources of information are used to help tell the Bhutanese narrative.

Background Highlights

- Data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement trace Burmese refugee arrival into the United States all the way back to 2000. It is not until 2005 that the Burmese refugee population arrives en masse into the U.S. to flee political, religious, and economic persecution.
- From 2002–2011, Burmese made up the largest refugee group resettling in the U.S. with 88,348, or 17 percent of the total 515,350 refugees. They were the second largest refugee group in 2009 and 2010 (23 percent of total refugees admitted), and the largest in 2011 (30 percent).
- Refugees from Bhutan[2] began arriving in the United States in 2008 to flee the Bhutanese government's discriminatory social and political rule.
- In 2010, Bhutanese refugees represented 17 percent of the total refugees resettling in the United States. In 2011, they increased to 26 percent of the total number of refugee arrivals.
- For both groups: Refugees from Burma (30 percent) and Bhutan (26 percent) dramatically increased to become the two largest refugee groups arriving in the United States in 2011. Prior to this, in 2005, the Burmese population made up 2.7 percent of the total 53,738 refugees arriving in the United States. At that point in time, no Bhutanese had yet entered under "refugee status."
- In 2011, refugees from Burma and Bhutan made up 56 percent of refugees resettled in the U.S.

Key Findings

Demographic Characteristics and Settlement Patterns

- The largest Burmese population in the U.S. is located in the South, followed by the West, Northeast and Midwest.
- The Burmese American population is a relatively young population (64 percent are under the age of 40); 78 percent are foreign born; and 50 percent are U.S. citizens.
- The educational portrait for the Burmese American population is a bimodal one—39 percent of the population

[1] See national and regional reports in the references section.

[2] It is important to note that Lhotshampas, who are Bhutanese of Nepali ancestry, are not always separated from those who are Nepali. Displaced ethnic Bhutanese also reside in the same refugee camps and camp officials do not consistently make such distinctions.

are high school dropouts (the highest of any AAPI group) and 31 percent possess a college degree or beyond.

- An alarming 30 percent of Burmese Americans live below the poverty line (as noted earlier, some demographic statistics for the Bhutanese population were not available).
- The U.S. region with the largest Bhutanese initial resettlement is the South, followed by the Northeast, Midwest and West.

Challenges

- There is a dire need for longer-term support and provision of sources for refugee communities.
- Refugee self-help organizations for the Burmese and Bhutanese community exist nation-wide. They play a crucial role in supporting the communities' adaptation in the U.S. and maintenance of ethnic culture by offering a variety of programs (i.e., language, driving instruction, and citizenship classes). However, as fairly new refugees consisting of mostly first and 1.5 generations, some groups are just beginning to learn how to navigate systems to access funding and support services. They currently lack social, cultural, and human capital to address some of these challenges and most rely on community volunteers.
- Many socioeconomic barriers exist in the refugee adaptation process. One of the key barriers is limited-English proficiency. The inability to communicate influences adaptation in many realms, including educational access, employment, access to resources, etc.
- Age of refugee arrival matters. Those who are older, with no prior formal education prior to their arrival, tend to experience the greatest difficulties in educational attainment. This is related to the point made regarding limited-English proficiency. Moreover, those who arrive as teens or young adults also have a more difficult time adjusting—a fact that is represented in the large high school dropout rates.
- Intergenerational conflict has emerged as a result of differences in adaptation experiences between children and youth, and elders.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

- Pre- and post-arrival orientation sessions appear to not adequately prepare refugees for what to expect once they are in the United States. Cultural orientations need to inform refugees not only about American cultural norms and behaviors, but also, the economic reality of U.S. society today.
- Knowing and speaking the English language appear to be the key variables in overcoming initial adaptation barriers. Intensive ESL language training must be readily available for adult refugees upon arrival, which would enhance the community's cultural capital.
- Education and an increase in resources appear to be crucial variables in overcoming long-term barriers. The length of time that adult refugees are eligible for English language education and the length of time that they are eligible for social support services should be extended.
- Special attention needs to be paid to the refugee population who arrive during their early/late teen years (1.5 generation); especially regarding their educational outcomes. As it stands, an alarming 39 percent of the Burmese population in the U.S. has dropped out of high school. Similar to adult refugees, this population also needs programs to help ease their transition (especially in acclimating to American cultural norms and expectations). Intensive educational and social support (i.e., via academic counselors with cultural sensitivity training, tailored tutoring after-school programs) should be provided to teenagers to help increase high school graduation rates.
- Self-help organizations play an instrumental role in refugees accessing resources to outreach and educate refugee communities in their own language. With resources, refugee organizations can assist in educating the larger community about their groups' history and culture. Additional capacity building support is needed for self-help organizations.
- Job training and job development are critical factors contributing to improved socioeconomic status. Organizations should strategically provide training to refugees that will lead to permanent positions and focus on areas with future job growth.
- Like the experiences of immigrant and refugee groups before them, intergenerational conflict exists among the Burmese and Bhutanese population. Resources are needed to aid parents and children to better understand one another.
- More research is needed on these two populations. This report is not a comprehensive report due to the limitation of the data sets. Research is needed to delve deeper into the Burmese and Bhutanese population, especially the 1.5 and second generations and issues such as mental health and physical health.

INTRODUCTION

Why are there refugees from Burma and Bhutan living in the United States? What are their social, educational, political, and economic patterns? How do they fit into the larger U.S. refugee resettlement narrative? In recent years, thousands of refugees from Burma and Bhutan have come to the United States. While constituting a significant proportion of global stateless people rebuilding their lives in the U.S., surprisingly little information is known about these two groups. In particular, most Americans lack knowledge about the historical events that pushed the refugees out of their countries of origin, their refugee camp experiences, and their subsequent post-resettlement lives in various locations throughout the country. We firmly believe that understanding a population is the critical first-step to facilitating better educational opportunities—and, subsequently, better life chances and outcomes—for future generations.

The central aims of this report are twofold: the first is to paint a historical and demographic portrait of the Burmese and Bhutanese refugee experience in the United States, and the second is to give voice to a Southeast Asian and a South Asian group that are invisible in the current national discourse (and reports) lauding Asian American achievements.[3] This glaring omission is alarming given the current dire state of some local Burmese and Bhutanese refugee communities.[4] Thus, in writing this report, our overarching goal is to paint a fuller, and more complex, portrait of the Asian American and refugee population living in the United States.[5]

This report is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief historical background of the Burmese and Bhutanese people, reasons for their forced-migration, and current demographic patterns and socioeconomic outcomes in the United States. The second portion draws from personal narratives to underscore the Burmese and Bhutanese communities' needs, and the adaptation challenges they face, as well as each respective community's hopes and dreams for future generations. The final section of the report concludes by providing policy implications and recommendations.

[3] Pew Social & Demographic Trends. 2012. *The Rise of Asian Americans*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

[4] Jeung, Russell, Joan Jeung, Mai Nhung Le, Grace Yoo, Amy Lam, Alisa Loveman, and Zar Ni Maung. 2013. *From Crisis to Community Development: Needs and Assets of Oakland's Refugees from Burma*, California: Burma Refugee Family Network, Cesar Chavez Institute and Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University; The Intergenerational Center, *Needs Assessment of Refugee Communities from Bhutan and Burma*. Washington DC: Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, May 2011.

[5] APIASF is interested in understanding refugees' educational and social attainments so that it can work with its partners to ensure that students have necessary support services to thrive.

PLAN FOR THE STUDY

Given the limited existing information about Burmese and Bhutanese refugees in the United States, we believe that it is important to obtain and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, this report is based on existing statistical data, interviews with former refugees working in different capacities, and a review of existing studies and reports. The statistical data represents weighted sample sizes that draw from a merged aggregate file of the *Current Population Survey* (CPS) and the *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series* (IPUMS), spanning from 2003–2011. The CPS data set (a joint effort of the U.S. Census Bureau & the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) is a national survey that collects demographic data and is supplemented by labor statistics. This particular data set is utilized here because it is the only national data set that allows for a detailed generational breakdown (1, 1.5, 2nd, etc.) by racial and ethnic categories in a large sample size. Moreover, to increase sample size, we have also included the IPUMS data set, which consists of 60 samples of the American population drawn from 15 federal censuses (from the American Community Surveys of 2000–2011). We use this data to draw a demographic overview of the population (e.g., native-born versus foreign-born, age, gender distribution, detailed generational distinctions, marital status, educational attainment, and employment status) in comparison with other Asian ethnic groups at a national-level. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the data set, we were only able to draw a demographic overview of the Burmese population living in the United States. In the CPS data, the Bhutanese population is placed into the "all others" category and cannot be disaggregated. Therefore, we had to rely heavily on interviews and other sources to tell the Bhutanese story.

The qualitative data was obtained from interviews with members of the Burmese and Bhutanese communities. APIASF staff referred us to several former refugees who are respected community leaders. They provided us with contacts in different parts of the country. We also relied on our network of professionals who work with these two groups. Our goal was to speak with individuals working in a variety of capacities within organizations that serve refugees formally and informally. The people we chose to interview all have first-hand knowledge of their respective community. In addition to demographic background, interviewees were asked a series of questions regarding services refugees received and their perceptions about educational attainment, socioeconomic status, strategies for maintaining culture and traditions, observations about how children are faring, and identity issues.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The act of leaving one's homeland, culture, and loved ones and trying to live within a new, strange culture is bound to be an emotionally wrenching experience. To better understand the reasons why dramatic growth in the number of Burmese and Bhutanese who sought refuge in the U.S., it is important to provide a brief overview of the political transformations that initially displaced them.

Burma

The area that became known as Burma existed for centuries with seemingly unresolvable interethnic conflicts (Taylor 2009; Smith 1999). It is part of the complex history of the peoples of Southeast Asia. Because "all classical states of Southeast Asia conjured up a barbarian hinter-land just out of reach in the hills, forests, and swamps", kings located in the valleys attempted to rule over the diverse ethnic minority hills peoples who they often viewed as inferior (Scott 2009: 111). Similar to other parts of Southeast Asia, this area fell victim to European colonialism in the late 1800s. British colonization began in 1885 and the country was administered as a province of India up until 1937 (Barron et al 2007:6). The ethnically and religiously diverse peoples in the remote, mountainous regions were subsequently brought into the Burmese colony as a single geographic unit. Colonial incorporation of ethnic minorities included job opportunities, and education provided by Christian missionaries. Consequently, many converted to Christianity. The people of Burma/Myanmar consist of eight main ethnic groups that can be further divided into more than 130 distinctive subgroups. The largest is Burman or Bamar, which represents 68 percent of the country's 55 million people.[6] The other seven ethnic groups include Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Mon, Arakhan (Rakhine), Shan, and Karenni (Kayah) (Barron et al 2007:2). Burman, Mon, Arakhan (Rakhine) and Shan are primarily Theravada Buddhist. Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), and Karenni (Kayah) are primarily Christian.

Ethnic tensions intensified as Burma fought for independence from Great Britain. During World War II, the Burman anti-colonial movement sided with the Japanese while many ethnic minority groups sided with the British. Efforts were made by nationalist leader, Aung San, to promote cooperation and unity among Burma's many ethnic groups (Naw 2002). His assassination in 1947 would change the course of ethnic relations in Burma since his successor, U Nu, did not follow through with Panglong agreement, which formed the foundation for ethnic nationality participation in the Union of Burma. Following its independence in 1948, the country entered into an enduring civil war. Armed conflicts between ethnic groups and the central government would plague the country. From 1962 to 2011, it remained under military rule.

Every aspect (from political to social life) of Burma have, arguably, been shaped in part by the ethnic and political conflicts tracing back to both pre-colonial and colonial periods of the country's history. The origins of the current refugee situation is a result of this historical narrative coupled with events unfolding in the 1960s, where the military regime implemented counter-insurgency efforts against ethnic nationality armed forces, their families and local villagers (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center 2011). During the ensuing decades, the state would carry out violent actions against groups that threatened its rule. The confrontational atmosphere created between the army and groups demanding democracy, in addition to the threat or reality of political demonstrations at critical times, contributed to a politically repressive atmosphere (Taylor 2009). The series of protests led largely by students in 1988 demanded change in the military government's economic and political policies. The mass demonstration on August 8, 1988 (often referred to as the "8888" uprising) included monks, workers, intellectuals, civil servants, and members of different ethnic groups. The military regime's suppression of the protests through violent measures resulted in the death of thousands and the arrest of key organizers.

The military regime's gradual takeover of territories formerly controlled by ethnic minorities led to the displacement

[6] Population estimates vary. Fifty-five million is the 2013 estimate from the U.S. State Department for Burma's population.

of more than a million people to neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand. Some who crossed borders were allowed to live in refugee camps operated by a nongovernment organization (NGO) consortium and the refugees themselves. In general, refugee camps are supposed to be temporary shelter until a durable solution is found. The ideal situation is improved conditions in the country from which the refugees fled so that they can safely repatriate. If that is not possible and the first asylum country is open to integration, then refugees may be integrated into the local society. Resettlement in a third country is generally the last option; thus very few of the world's refugees are able to resettle internationally. This process is complex, and multiple factors contribute to why certain refugees are permitted to apply for international resettlement while others are not. After living in the refugee camps for two decades, many welcomed the opportunity to resettle in third countries. This situation occurred because Thailand, Bangladesh, and Malaysia refused to allow local integration as an option for refugees and safe repatriation to Burma was not possible. The United States and a small group of countries agreed to open resettlement to a select group of refugees from Burma. Since 2004, more than 80,000 refugees from Burma have settled in the U.S. Activists in the diaspora have continued to play an important role in influencing change inside the country (Williams 2012).

Bhutan

The early history of what is now Bhutan is also complex. Similar to Burma/Myanmar, Bhutan has a long history of ethnic and sectarian tensions. It is a small Buddhist nation located between India and China. The majority of refugees from Bhutan living in the U.S. are descendants of Nepalese migrants who settled in southern Bhutan in the late 1890s Referred to as Lhotshampas or "People from the South," their initial occupation was to clear the jungles in the southern part of the country. Over time, their population increased and they were able to experience prosperity. For example, some members worked in government posts and became educators. Unlike the Bhutanese Buddhist majority, the Nepali Bhutanese are mostly Hindu (Rizal 2004).

Nation building processes from 1958 to 1985 resulted in a number of measures that targeted the Hindu Lhotshampas. Although they were granted Bhutanese citizenship through the 1958 Citizenship Act, multiple government strategies were implemented that socially and politically discriminated against this group. The 1989 "One Nation, One People" policy adopted by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk was promoted as an attempt to integrate the diverse peoples. In addition to mandating that all people wear the national dress of the north, the policy also prohibited the teaching of Nepali language in school. Those who resisted were taunted as "anti-nationals," and many who could not provide tax receipts of 1958 as evidence of citizenship were deemed illegal residents. Increased government crackdown on prominent Lhotshampas and innocent villagers culminated in a series of events demanding for human rights and democracy in 1988–1989. Peaceful rallies in southern Bhutan from mid September through early October 1990 were met with arrest and torture (Cultural Orientation Resource Center 2007). Thousands were forced to flee to Nepal in 1991 and by 1992, more than 100,000 had become refugees. The UNHCR established camps in Eastern Nepal to house the refugees. Despite the many talks to resolve the situation, a durable solution could not be reached. From 1991/1992 to 2007, the Bhutanese refugees lived in limbo. Unable to repatriate, Bhutanese refugees were allowed to resettle in third countries in 2007.

U.S. Refugee Resettlement Process

The international resettlement of refugees is a complex process that involves the negotiation of identities and resources to facilitate their integration into host societies. As a global system that is supported by individual nation states, refugees in different host countries receive varied support services. According to the latest United Nations statistics, there are more than 15 million refugees in the world.[7] Most receive some help in the country into which they have fled until they can safely return to their home country. A small number that demonstrate the highest risk of harm upon return may be resettled in a third country. The UNHCR reports that less than one percent of refugees do resettle in a third country, and the U.S. admits more than all other resettlement countries combined. Incorporating the United Nations' definition, the U.S. Congress defined a refugee as:

> *Any person who is outside of any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality,*

[7] According to the UNHCR, more than 45 million people around the world were forcibly displaced by the end of 2012 and one-third are classified as refugees.

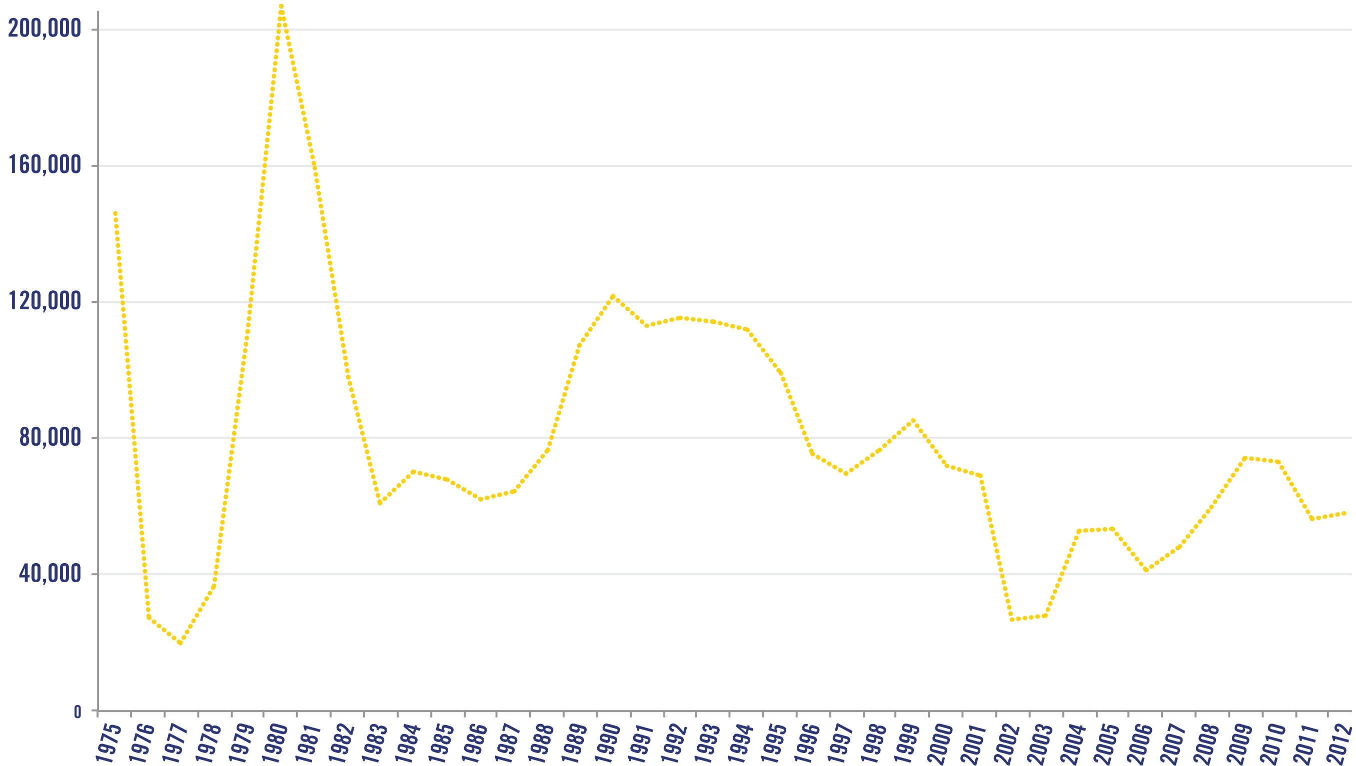
membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 101(a)42).[8]

While the process has changed significantly since the admission of more than 250,000 displaced Europeans in the wake of World War II, U.S. practices have historically been guided by special humanitarian concern for displaced persons. Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 to allow another 400,000 displaced Europeans to be admitted into the country. Additional laws were later enacted for the admission of refugees fleeing Communist countries, including Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Korea, China, and Cuba. These earlier refugees were generally assisted by private, ethnic and religious organizations, setting in motion the private/public partnership in refugee resettlement that has been sustained to the present.

[8] http://www.uscis.gov

Beginning in mid-1975, the U.S. resettled refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the same *ad hoc* nature. As the number of refugees resulting from the American war in Southeast Asia continued to increase through the late 1970s, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which set formal procedures for resettling refugees. Each year the President consults with Congress and refugee-related agencies and provides the designated nationalities and processing priorities for refugee resettlement for the upcoming year. An annual ceiling on the total number of refugees to be admitted to the U.S. is set. As Figure 1 illustrates, more than three million refugees have been resettled in the United States.

FIGURE 1 : REFUGEE ARRIVALS: FISCAL YEARS 1975 TO 2012



Note: Data series began following the Refugee Act of 1980. Excludes Amerasian immigrants except in fiscal years 1989 to 1991.

At the international level, the UNHCR is responsible for overseeing displaced people and in the U.S., three federal agencies manage the resettlement program: The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) at the Department of State; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) at the Department of Homeland Security; and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at the Department of Health and Human Services. PRM coordinates the overseas processing of refugees while USCIS facilitates the

admission of refugees to the U.S.[9] After one year, refugees are required to apply to adjust their status to permanent resident alien, and they may apply for citizenship after five years. ORR administers federal funding to states and local resettlement agencies to assist refugees. The agencies include: Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, United States Conference on Catholic Bishops, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, and World Relief.[10] Because the U.S. government has historically emphasized quick refugee integration into American society, it works with the resettlement agencies to promote economic self-sufficiency through employment. In addition to eight months of cash assistance, refugees have limited access to medical services, English language training, and employment support services.

Similar to other refugee groups before them, Burmese and Bhutanese sought refuge in the U.S. for a better life. The Refugee Act of 1980, and the expanded definition of "refugee" to include persons fleeing from "fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion," is essentially what enabled Burmese and Bhutanese individuals to seek refuge in the United States. Although it maintains good relations with Bhutan, via its embassy in New Dehli, India, the U.S. has no diplomatic relations with Bhutan, and it supported the return of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal to Bhutan. Since repatriation was not an option, the acceptance of refugees from Bhutan to the U.S. was based primarily on humanitarian grounds.[11] Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Burma were first established in 1947. During the nearly six decades of military rule, the U.S. along with other European countries imposed numerous economic and political sanctions. Restrained relations heightened following the 1988 military coup and repression against pro-democracy activists and further intensified in 2007 due to the government's repressive action toward protestors. After the 1988 crackdown, the U.S. reduced its representation in Burma from ambassador to Chargé d'Affaires. When the U.S. began allowing Burmese refugees to settle in the U.S. in 2005, relations between the two countries reached an even lower point. While Burma still has a long way to go, recent economic and political reforms have contributed to improved U.S.-Burma relations. The 2010 election ended 60 years of military rule and the 2012 parliamentary by-elections resulted in the U.S. fully restoring diplomatic relations with Burma.[12]

Burmese and Bhutanese Refugees

The process from when an individual is officially designated as a refugee to when they arrive in the host country consists of a multitude of steps. Burmese and Bhutanese immigration to the U.S. has taken place very recently. While refugees from Burma began settling in the U.S. around 2005, the first Bhutanese refugees did not arrive until 2008. In 2010, Burmese refugees represented 23 percent of the total number of refugees admitted and 30 percent of the total in 2011. Bhutanese refugees were 17 percent of total in 2010 while in 2011 they increased to 26 percent of the total number of refugees admitted to the U.S. It is also notable that in 2011, refugees from Burma and Bhutan made up 56 percent of refugees resettled in the U.S. From 2002–2011, the Burmese were the largest refugee group resettling in the U.S. with 88,348, or 17 percent of the total 515,350 refugees. They made up the second-largest group in 2009 and 2010, and the largest group in 2011 (Russell and Batalova 2012). Refugees in camps have limited resettlement options since only 22 countries have humanitarian programs. Many chose to come to the U.S. because their cases were processed and accepted by American immigration officials.

Unlike most of the more than 1.3 million refugees from the Vietnam War, the Burmese and Bhutanese refugees' stay in camps lasted significantly longer. While refugee policies during the 1970s and 1980s intentionally dispersed Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese refugees throughout the U.S., today concentrated settlement is carried out. What they do share with refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam is that they come from countries with complex histories and that the process by which they settle and rebuild their lives from years of displacement is accompanied with much struggle. Many experienced trauma as they escaped their home country. They sought refuge in first-asylum countries hoping that the situation would be temporary until things improved and they could return home. Years of living in contained camps affected their mental and physical

[9] Prior to 2003, this was the role of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). USCIS Refugee Affairs Division with DHS now deals with most refugee functions previously handled by INS.

[10] http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/voluntary-agencies

[11] See Department of State., *US Relations with Bhutan*. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35839.htm

[12] See Department of State. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm.

health. Many individuals resettle in a host country with limited knowledge of what life will be like there. For many, the only preparations they receive are advice given during the "pre-arrival orientation." Once in the U.S., refugees may move elsewhere for a variety of reasons. Although the support services provided to refugees through the Office of Refugee Resettlement have clearly changed over time, a core component of the program is that refugees are expected to become self-sufficient within a fixed length of time. Currently, new arrivals are eligible for refugee cash assistance for eight months. A number of factors influence the extent to which refugees can successfully transition into the workforce. Since they receive travel loans from the International Office of Migration (IOM), which they must begin to repay after six months in the country, families who cannot find employment face even more difficulties.

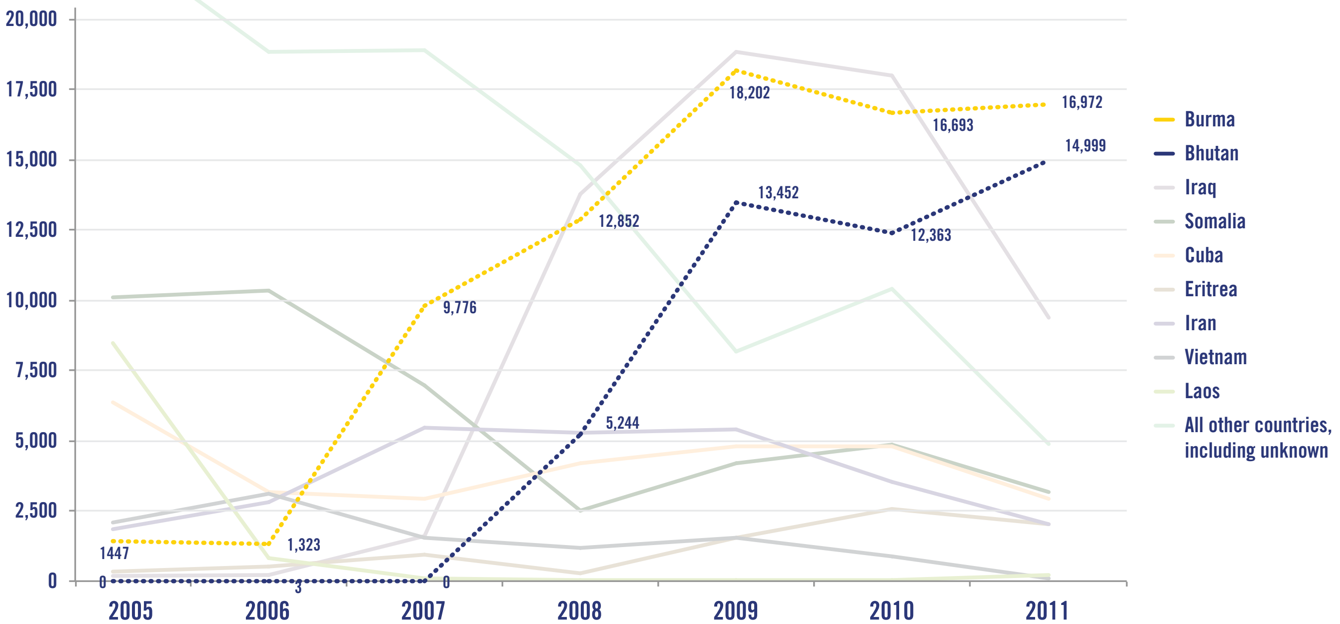
FINDINGS

Burmese and Bhutanese Migration to the United States

Refugee arrival by country: 2005-2011

The narrative of Burmese and Bhutanese refugee population in the United States is one defined by dramatic growth in recent years. Both groups' presence in the United States was virtually nonexistent prior to 2005. According to Figure 2 the United States received 1,447 Burmese and zero Bhutanese refugees in 2005. Six years later, in 2011, refugees from Burma (16,972) and Bhutan (14,999) dramatically increased to become the two largest refugee groups received by the United States. Federal agencies collaborate on annual refugee allocation and placement considerations; thus, the locations to which refugees initially settle depend largely on the capacity of communities and states to serve the diverse needs of the refugees. As seen with refugees and immigrants in the past, Burmese and Bhutanese refugees also practice secondary migration once they learn about support services and job opportunities in certain places and/or they want to be near other people from their ethnic group.

FIGURE 2. REFUGEE ARRIVAL BY COUNTRY: 2005–2011



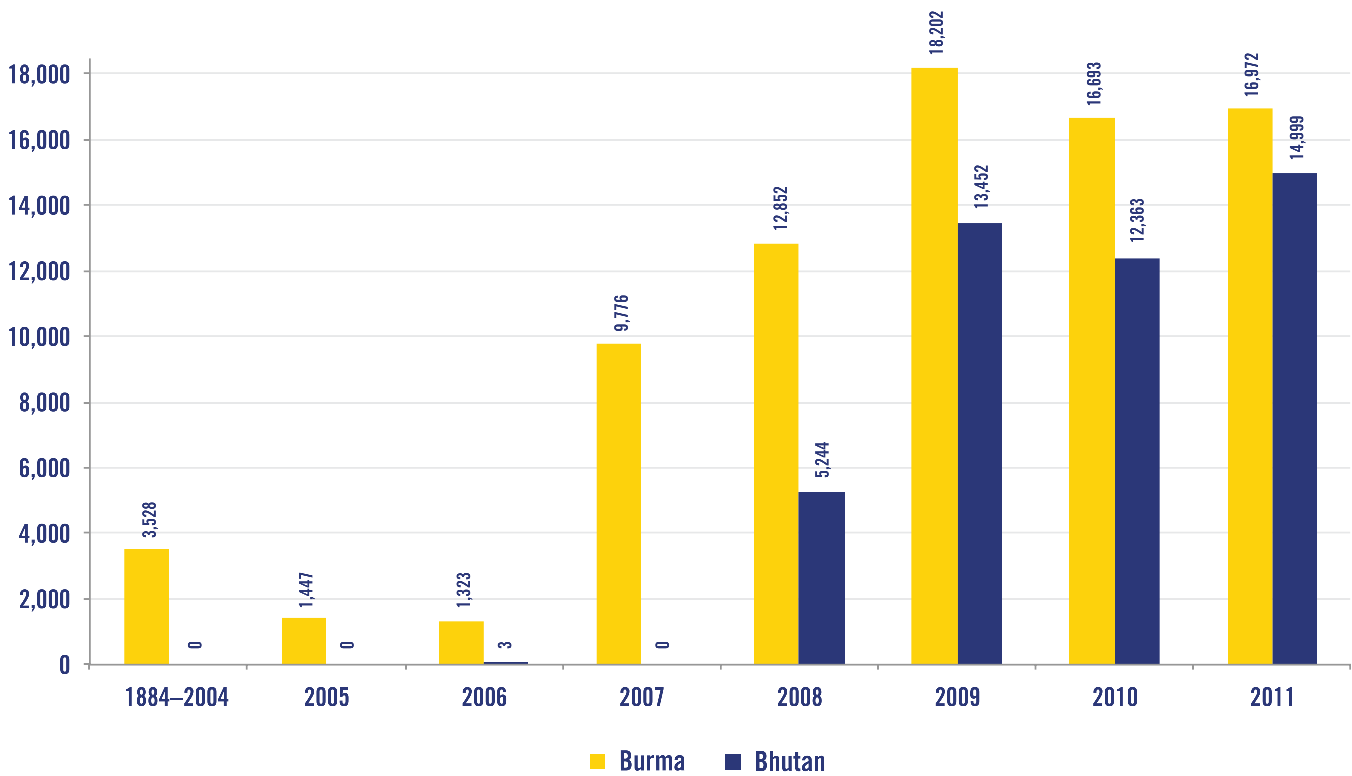
Refugee arrival from Burma and Bhutan to the US: 1984-2011

For Burmese refugees, this large increase began in 2007, when the Burmese refugee population coming into the United States increased by an astonishing 640 percent from the previous year (see Figure 3). In particular, the number of refugee arrivals increased from 1,323 in 2006 to 9,776 in 2007. The peak year of Burmese refugees entering the United States was in 2009, with 18,202 refugees. The major shift in the Burmese refugee population is illustrated by the 3,528 refugees who entered the U.S. between 1984–2004, compared to the 77,265 refugees who entered between 2005–2011. Thus, it is important to point out that with the influx of refugees from Burma after 2005, the Burmese population in the US has become an overwhelmingly refugee population. However, in addition to the refugee population,

there are other Burmese and Bhutanese individuals who have settled in the United States through other means.

In the case of Bhutanese refugees, a significant number of arrivals into the United States did not start until 2008, with 5,244 individuals. Prior to 2008, only three Bhutanese had entered the United States under the refugee status (specifically in 2006). However, since then, the Bhutanese refugee population entering the United States has been characterized by a steady and steep increase—from 5,244 in 2008 to 14,999 in 2011 (representing a 186 percent increase). The peak year of Bhutanese refugees entering the United States was in 2011, with 14,999 refugees. Similar to the Burmese population, the Bhutanese refugee population also experienced a major shift in number of entries to the United States—from zero Bhutanese refugees entering between 1984–2004 to 46,061 Bhutanese refugees entering between 2005–2011. The total Burmese population, including refugees and those who identify themselves as Burmese, was 106,168 in 2011. It is difficult to obtain an accurate total count of the smaller Bhutanese population since it consists of refugees and those who continue to identify themselves as Bhutanese.

FIGURE 3. REFUGEE ARRIVAL FROM BURMA AND BHUTAN: 1984-2011



Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement's Annual Reports to Congress (2009) and Office of Immigration Statistics (DHS), Annual Flow Report on Refugees and Asylees: 2011 (May 2012)

Demographic Overview

Where are Burmese Americans located?

When disaggregated from other Asian groups, the largest Burmese population[13] is located in the South, followed by the West, Northeast and Midwest. According to Table 1, the residential patterns of Burmese Americans are unique because a significant proportion resides in the South. This is not the case for all other major Asian ethnic groups (with the exception of Asian Indians)—the majority of whom are located in the West. Overall, the largest Burmese populations reside in the Southern and Western United States (approximately one-third of the population has settled in each region). Since these are sample statistics, they are really not distinguishable. Also refer to Table 2b for specific locations of Burmese refugee resettlement.

[13] An important note: There is a large possibility that US census data on the Burmese population represents an undercount of the actual population itself. Potentially missing in the population count are individuals who are either (1) re-migrants (Burmese immigrants who entered the US via a country other than Burma), or (2) Chinese Burmese or Indian Burmese who, through the process of re-ethnicization, identify themselves on the census form as Chinese or Asian Indian, respectively.

Where is the Bhutanese population's Region of Initial Settlement?

According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement,[14] the U.S. region with the largest Bhutanese initial resettlement (from 2008–2012) is the South. Many refugees chose to settle in the South because of job opportunities. As the number of refugees increased, a support system was established by resettlement agencies.[15] According to Figure 5, since 2008, a little fewer than 20,000 Bhutanese refugees have made their initial resettlement in the South. The second largest area of resettlement is the Northeast, followed by the Midwest and the West. According to Table 2a, within each U.S. region, the states with the largest Bhutanese initial resettlement population are: Texas (South), Pennsylvania (Northeast), Ohio (Midwest), and Arizona (West). This settlement pattern differs from the concentration of Asian Americans in the East and West coasts.

[14] http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data

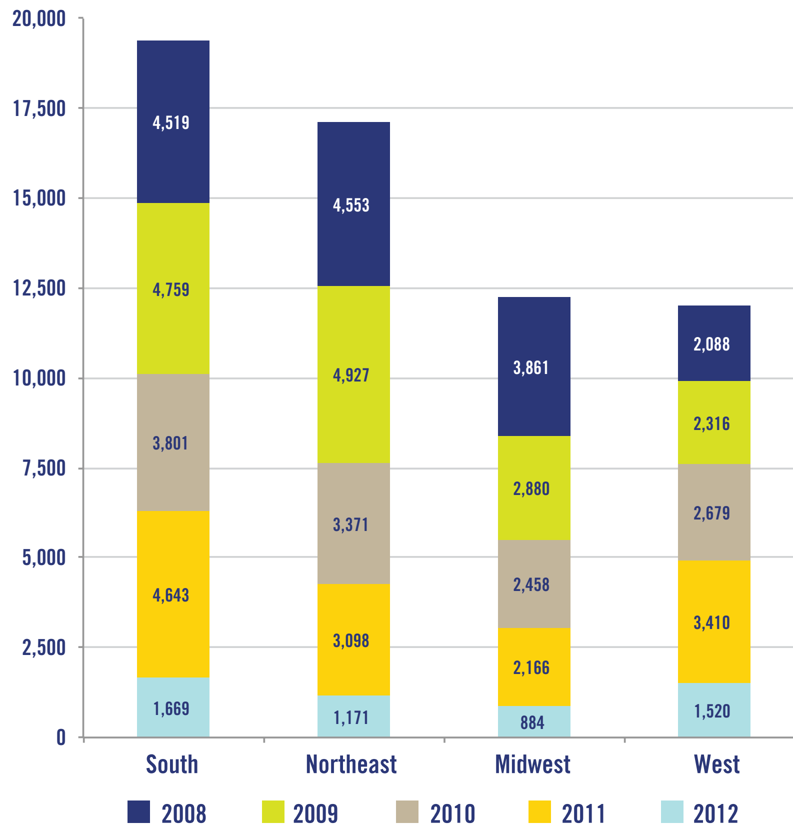
[15] Interview with refugee program director, Pabitra Rizal, in Atlanta, GA.

TABLE 1. ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES BY REGION, 2003-2011

	West	%	Midwest	%	Northeast	%	South	%	Total
Burmese	35,788	34	13,821	13	19,263	18	37,296	35	106,168
Filipino	1,746,075	61	286,377	10	283,206	10	541,530	19	2,857,188
Chinese	1,226,233	42	290,651	10	907,204	31	499,058	17	2,923,146
Asian Indian	668,544	27	422,431	17	748,248	31	611,797	25	2,451,020
Vietnamese	874,615	51	161,804	9	197,596	11	486,987	28	1,721,002
Korean	571,926	38	208,281	14	332,059	22	401,487	27	1,513,753
Japanese	405,686	55	71,867	10	78,925	11	187,787	25	744,265
Laotian, Cambodian, Hmong	398,499	49	142,955	18	118,080	15	146,408	18	805,942
Other Asians	558,427	27	256,570	12	503,044	24	735,294	36	2,053,335
All others (Non-Asians)	65,498,624	23	64,263,294	22	51,613,888	18	109,664,200	38	291,040,006
Total	71,948,629	24	66,104,230	22	54,782,250	18	113,274,548	37	306,109,657

Source: Numbers represent weighted sample sizes from merged CPS-IPUMS, 2003–2011.

FIGURE 5. BHUTAN REFUGEE ARRIVAL BY U.S. REGION OF INITIAL RESETTLEMENT AND YEAR



Source: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data

TABLE 2A. BHUTAN REFUGEE ARRIVAL BY U.S. REGION OF INITIAL RESETTLEMENT AND YEAR*

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
South	1,669	4,643	3,801	4,759	4,519	19,391
Northeast	1,171	3,098	3,371	4,927	4,553	17,120
Midwest	884	2,166	2,458	2,880	3,861	12,249
West	1,520	3,410	2,679	2,316	2,088	12,013
SOUTH						
Texas	429	1,620	1,244	1,244	1,276	5,813
Georgia	549	992	713	1,012	900	4,166
North Carolina	138	404	483	569	639	2,233
Virginia	120	514	431	701	457	2,223
Maryland	171	192	269	482	464	1,578
Kentucky	90	383	312	344	404	1,533
Tennessee	63	329	210	278	251	1,131
Florida	109	205	125	93	101	633
South Carolina	0	4	1	13	27	45
Louisiana	0	0	13	20	0	33
Arkansas	0	0	0	3	0	3
Delaware	0	0	0	0	0	0
District of Columbia	0	0	0	0	0	0
West Virginia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi	0	0	0	0	0	0
Alabama	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oklahoma	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional Total	1,240	3,023	2,557	3,515	3,243	19,391
NORTHEAST						
Pennsylvania	228	780	1,187	2,228	2,166	6,589
New York	397	1,103	1,003	1,259	1,204	4,966
Massachusetts	112	389	398	503	505	1,907
New Hampshire	272	452	380	432	241	1,777
Vermont	131	157	189	299	296	1,072
New Jersey	31	183	64	50	21	349
Connecticut	0	5	77	91	62	235
Rhode Island	0	29	73	65	58	225
Maine	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional Total	1,171	3,098	3,371	4,927	4,553	17,120
MIDWEST						
Ohio	263	500	631	766	1,306	3,466
Illinois	145	399	472	503	425	1,944
Michigan	94	337	295	278	317	1,321
North Dakota	119	202	216	273	428	1,238
Missouri	79	164	178	186	271	878
South Dakota	37	104	117	176	359	793
Minnesota	61	101	200	146	190	698
Nebraska	0	54	90	197	269	610
Iowa	35	210	71	84	89	489
Kansas	51	85	107	124	111	478
Wisconsin	0	10	60	122	56	248
Indiana	0	0	21	25	40	86
Regional Total	884	2,166	2,458	2,880	3,861	12,249
WEST						
Arizona	291	919	544	484	390	2,628
Colorado	246	586	565	585	536	2,518
Washington	299	592	505	442	424	2,262
California	255	432	217	212	107	1,223
Idaho	173	310	332	199	159	1,173
Utah	140	286	251	183	255	1,115
Oregon	79	130	127	139	138	613
Nevada	22	85	65	19	52	243
Alaska	0	50	46	21	6	123
New Mexico	15	20	27	32	21	115
Hawaii	0	0	0	0	0	0
Montana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wyoming	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional Total	1,229	2,491	2,135	1,832	1,698	12,013
Grand Total	**5,244**	**13,317**	**12,309**	**14,882**	**15,021**	**60,773**

Source: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data

**Please note that these numbers do not include other Bhutanese who arrived before 2008 or came through other means.*

TABLE 2B. BURMESE REFUGEE ARRIVAL BY U.S. REGION OF INITIAL RESETTLEMENT AND YEAR

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
South	5,315	7,152	6,178	6,617	5,579	30,841
Northeast	2,242	3,184	2,904	2,247	1,685	12,262
Midwest	3,742	4,780	4,625	5,246	4,618	23,011
West	2,339	3,159	2,958	2,791	2,138	13,385
SOUTH						
Texas	1,457	3,086	2,250	2,416	2,142	11,351
Georgia	574	875	946	913	634	3,942
North Carolina	837	885	789	916	785	4,212
Virginia	200	280	127	107	91	805
Maryland	308	253	220	334	353	1,468
Kentucky	266	584	561	496	333	2,240
Tennessee	185	356	393	369	343	1,646
Florida	470	553	616	588	432	2,659
South Carolina	837	52	68	101	76	1,134
Louisiana	29	108	101	121	102	461
Arkansas	3	1	6	0	6	16
Delaware	0	0	0	16	0	16
District of Columbia	0	2	0	0	0	2
West Virginia	3	5	3	8	10	29
Mississippi	0	4	4	0	3	11
Alabama	4	1	0	3	12	20
Oklahoma	142	107	94	229	257	829
Regional Total	5,315	7,152	6,178	6,617	5,579	30,841
NORTHEAST						
Pennsylvania	414	456	507	334	255	1,966
New York	1,321	1,695	1,607	1,343	1,074	7,040
Massachusetts	183	358	286	252	140	1,219
New Hampshire	0	17	2	9	20	48
Vermont	42	41	54	34	42	213
New Jersey	189	508	261	66	40	1,064
Connecticut	93	75	136	142	60	506
Rhode Island	0	11	49	59	53	172
Maine	0	23	2	8	1	34
Regional Total	2,242	3,184	2,904	2,247	1,685	12,262
MIDWEST						
Ohio	211	277	247	299	209	1,243
Illinois	639	596	501	568	563	2,867
Michigan	399	591	551	639	539	2,719
North Dakota	3	25	8	0	3	39
Missouri	236	344	337	279	245	1,441
South Dakota	0	110	102	191	180	583
Minnesota	367	370	802	1,058	688	3,285
Nebraska	277	525	528	427	393	2,150
Iowa	153	289	143	177	240	1,002
Kansas	106	168	119	162	180	735
Wisconsin	201	338	367	435	387	1,728
Indiana	1,150	1,147	920	1,011	991	5,219
Regional Total	3,742	4,780	4,625	5,246	4,618	23,011
WEST						
Arizona	542	900	654	423	307	2,826
Colorado	259	410	411	500	364	1,944
Washington	460	655	823	592	481	3,011
California	519	450	387	462	409	2,227
Idaho	180	233	217	226	189	1,045
Utah	199	360	225	239	125	1,148
Oregon	138	102	204	250	124	818
Nevada	34	49	7	26	59	175
Alaska	0	0	0	26	26	52
New Mexico	0	0	29	47	53	129
Hawaii	8	0	1	0	1	10
Montana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wyoming	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional Total	2,339	3,159	2,958	2,791	2,138	13,385
Grand Total	**13,638**	**18,275**	**16,665**	**16,901**	**14,020**	**79,499**

Source: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data

What are the socioeconomic characteristics of Burmese Americans?

According to Table 3, there are a number of demographic characteristics that stand out for the Burmese American population. The first is that the gender distribution is slightly skewed, with 55 percent of the Burmese population being male. When compared to other Asian ethnic groups, this is a highest percentage relative to own group size.

The second distinction for the Burmese is that they are a relatively young population. In particular, approximately 64 percent of the Burmese population is under the age of 40. This age distinction mirrors that of their Southeast Asian counterparts. That is, the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong are also a relatively young with more than 60 percent of their population at 39 years old or younger. This finding is further confirmed by the mean age by generation. Specifically, the mean age of the Burmese first-generation is 44 years old, which is the second youngest behind Asian Indians (who have a mean age of 42 years old). Furthermore, the Burmese 1.5-generation and second-generation is the youngest amongst all Asian ethnic groups at 22 years old and 10 years old, respectively.

Thirdly, given their recent immigration/refugee narrative, it is no surprise that the majority of the Burmese population is foreign-born (78 percent)—the highest percentage relative to other Asian groups. However, interestingly, approximately half of the Burmese populations are U.S. citizens. This finding indicates that a significant number of Burmese have gone through the naturalization process and have acquired U.S. citizenship.

TABLE 3. ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES: SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHICS

	Burmese	Filipino	Chinese	Asian Indian	Vietnamese	Korean	Japanese	Laotian, Cambodian, Hmong	Other Asian	All Others (Non-Asian)
Gender										
Male	55%	44%	47%	52%	49%	46%	43%	50%	51%	49%
Female	45%	56%	53%	48%	51%	54%	57%	50%	49%	51%
Age										
Under 18	26%	23%	21%	25%	26%	23%	18%	32%	29%	25%
18-39	38%	33%	33%	45%	36%	36%	31%	36%	40%	30%
40-64	28%	34%	35%	25%	31%	32%	30%	27%	27%	33%
65 and older	8%	10%	11%	5%	7%	8%	21%	6%	5%	13%
Marital Status										
Married	47%	47%	51%	55%	45%	46%	48%	39%	44%	41%
Separated, divorced, widowed	7%	10%	8%	4%	8%	9%	15%	10%	6%	15%
Single	47%	43%	41%	41%	47%	45%	37%	52%	50%	44%
Children										
Number of own children	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.7	0.5
Nativity										
U.S.-born	22%	37%	30%	28%	33%	28%	47%	45%	32%	89%
Foreign-born	78%	63%	70%	72%	67%	72%	53%	55%	68%	11%
Citizen	50%	78%	70%	57%	80%	67%	77%	81%	66%	94%
Generation										
1.0	59%	43%	51%	57%	42%	45%	30%	31%	44%	7%
1.5	19%	20%	20%	15%	25%	27%	23%	23%	24%	4%
2.0	18%	23%	24%	25%	28%	18%	19%	38%	22%	6%
2.5	5%	14%	6%	3%	5%	10%	29%	8%	10%	83%
Mean Age by Generation										
1.0	44	52	50	42	50	50	51	53	45	48
1.5	22	29	28	23	31	27	33	33	24	30
2.0	10	21	20	13	13	17	56	15	13	28
2.5	22	22	26	20	18	20	30	12	20	37

Source: Numbers represent weighted sample sizes from merged CPS-IPUMS, 2003-2011.

Finally, in terms of marital and family patterns, the Burmese population is evenly split among those who are married (47 percent) and single (47 percent). They are also tied with the Laotian, Cambodian and the Hmong for the most children (0.9) in both categories.

TABLE 4. ASIAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES BY ETHNICITY: ECONOMIC DEMOGRAPHICS

	Burmese	Filipino	Chinese	Asian Indian	Vietnamese	Korean	Japanese	Laotian, Cambodian, Hmong	Other Asian	All Others (Non-Asian)
Education										
High school dropout	39%	12%	18%	9%	26%	13%	9%	38%	19%	20%
High school graduate	13%	17%	18%	10%	27%	21%	23%	30%	21%	30%
Some college	16%	29%	16%	11%	22%	21%	28%	20%	21%	26%
College graduate	23%	36%	25%	34%	19%	32%	26%	10%	26%	16%
Advanced degree	8%	7%	23%	36%	6%	14%	13%	2%	14%	8%
Employment										
Unemployed	8%	6%	4%	5%	6%	5%	4%	10%	7%	7%
Below the poverty line	30%	6%	12%	7%	14%	13%	9%	16%	18%	13%
In labor force	67%	71%	64%	69%	67%	62%	55%	66%	66%	66%
Self-employed workers	6%	5%	10%	11%	11%	23%	13%	5%	12%	10%
White-collar	15%	25%	29%	34%	16%	25%	26%	9%	21%	20%
Blue-collar	24%	11%	6%	5%	18%	9%	7%	28%	12%	15%
Own home	50%	71%	67%	63%	70%	60%	69%	65%	56%	70%
Total personal income (mean)	$25,901	$33,077	$37,005	$46,308	$27,135	$31,883	$35,793	$21,414	$30,091	$31,787
Total family income (mean)	$64,913	$85,660	$88,027	$106,352	$70,851	$79,365	$80,274	$58,217	$72,487	$67,557
Number of family members	4.6	3.8	3.2	3.5	3.9	3.1	2.8	4.8	3.9	3.2
Live in central city	36%	43%	52%	36%	43%	37%	38%	41%	43%	26%

Source: Numbers represent weighted sample sizes from merged CPS-IPUMS, 2003-2011.

TABLE 5. BURMESE AMERICANS, ALL OTHER ASIAN AMERICAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER, AND NON-AAPI POPULATION: AN ECONOMIC DEMOGRAPHICS COMPARISON

	Burmese Americans	All Other AAPI	All Non-AAPI
Education			
High school dropout	39%	16%	20%
High school graduate	13%	19%	30%
Some college	16%	20%	26%
College graduate	23%	28%	16%
Advanced degree	8%	17%	8%
Employment			
Unemployed	8%	5%	7%
Below the poverty line	30%	11%	13%
In labor force	67%	66%	66%
Self-employed workers	6%	11%	10%
White-collar	15%	25%	20%
Blue-collar	24%	10%	15%
Own home	50%	66%	70%
Total personal income (mean)	$25,901	$34,606	$31,787
Total family income (mean)	$64,913	$84,113	$67,557
Number of family members	4.6	3.6	3.2
Live in central city	36%	43%	26%

Source: Numbers represent weighted sample sizes from merged CPS-IPUMS, 2003-2011.

What are the educational and employment patterns among Burmese Americans?

According to Table 4, the educational portrait for the Burmese population is a bimodal one. On the one hand, Burmese have the highest high school dropout rate among all major Asian ethnic groups. Thirty-nine percent of the Burmese populations are high school dropouts. This is different from the non-Southeast Asian population, who all possess much lower high school dropout rates (see Table 4). The groups with the second highest dropout rate are the Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong at 38 percent, followed by Vietnamese with 26 percent. In comparison, the U.S. (non-Asian) high school dropout rate is at a relatively lower 20 percent (see Table 5). The side-by-side comparison of Burmese high school graduates (13 percent) versus the U.S. (non-Asian) population high school graduates (30 percent) paints a dire picture of current Burmese preparatory educational attainment. That is, Burmese youth are lagging behind educationally in comparison to their peers. This finding confirms previous reports on the relatively low educational attainment of Southeast Asian groups.[16] However, on the other hand, unlike the aggregated Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong group, the Burmese population is also relatively educated. Specifically, 23 percent of the Burmese population has a bachelor's degree and 8 percent possess advanced degrees. In other words, nearly one-third (31 percent) of the Burmese American population is college educated or beyond.

Unfortunately, the overall economic picture of Burmese living in the United States is a relatively dire one. Thirty percent of Burmese Americans are living below the poverty line (See Table 4). In comparison, 13 percent of U.S. non-Asian population is living below the poverty line (see Table 5). The group's mean total personal income is at $25,901, second lowest after the aggregated Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong group. While the mean total family income appears to be relatively high at $64,913, this number is offset by the large mean of 4.6 family members living within a household. Moreover, the Burmese rate of home ownership is the lowest among all groups at 50 percent. In terms of specific employment patterns, Table 4 shows that merely 15 percent of Burmese engage in white-collar work while a larger 24 percent are employed in the blue-collar sector.

[16] Asian American for Advancing Justice. *Community of Constrasts: Asian Americans in the United States 2011*. (p. 33) http://www.advancingjustice.org/pdf/Community_of_Contrast.pdf

In summary, the Burmese American population appears to be falling in line with other refugee groups, specifically the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong. According to the data, Burmese Americans are faring worse than their peers along most indicators of socioeconomic measurements (e.g. education and income). In this sense, the data suggest that the nation is failing to meet the needs of the Burmese and Bhutanese population. It is important to acknowledge that, as refugees, the circumstances in which the Burmese and Bhutanese fled their home-of-origin, and the way that the host countries receives them, differ from other immigrants (e.g., access to government assistance such as employment resources and monetary stipends). This distinction is potentially impactful on adaptation outcomes, which will be covered in the sections to follow.[17]

Interview Results

Ten individuals shared their perspectives for this report—five women and five men. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face; five by telephone and two individuals submitted written responses to the interview questions. Seven were former refugees from Burma and three from Bhutan. Interviewees consisted of individuals who had obtained formal education either in the home country or in the refugee camp. Several had attended college in the home country. Their positions include program manager, case manager, board member, commissioner, interpreter, bilingual assistant, and volunteer. They reside in the following locations: Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, Washington, D.C., and Wisconsin.

Services

There were three themes that emerged from speaking with the community members; they include: (1) the role and availability of long-term support, (2) the role of refugee self-help organizations, and 3) the limitations and barriers in accessing services. Organizations that provide services to refugees tend to be mainstream social service agencies that are contracted by state agencies, such as Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services. But, other community agencies offer services to refugees, such as the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia, Asian Services in Action, Inc. in Akron, Ohio, and Refugee Transitions in

[17] Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 1996. *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

San Francisco, California. Although they are eligible for cash assistance for eight months from when they arrived in the U.S., it should be noted that refugees receive case management services from resettlement agencies for only 90 days. Once this 90-day timeframe has expired, refugees who have not found employment have the ability to access other social programs. In general, interviewees view the services provided by refugee resettlement agencies as instrumental to their initial survival. Although refugees are newcomers, their basic needs reflect what other Americans require. Prakash Biswa, a case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI, puts it best when describing Bhutanese refugees:

> *We do all we can to help them start their life in America. We prepare before they arrive by locating housing. When they arrive, we pick them up from the airport. There are volunteers to help with cultural training. We also help them get their social security number, and if they have children under 18, we do assist with their W-2[18] family case. We provide cultural orientation so refugees understand American cultural norms. Initially, we take them to find jobs, to shop, and to their different appointments. Eventually refugees will end up depending on each other for help."*

Long-term Support for Refugee Communities

Historically, refugee resettlement decisions are made at the federal level, but once refugees arrive in the country, state and local communities bear the brunt of providing on-going support services. Organizations that support refugees rely on a combination of public and private funding sources and volunteers from the local community to navigate the multiple institutions from which they seek assistance. Annic Thay, Karen language interpreter for St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee, WI, appreciates the support that the church provides her community. She stated:

> *St. Michael's Parish assists refugee families with many things, like English classes, homework support for children, all kinds of donations for families, and helping families to access services that are available to them. Most of the people who help the refugees are volunteers from the church and community members and college students who want to help students with their homework.*

While she indicated that the generosity had been crucial, she was quick to explain that there was only so much the church could do, and that the refugee community needed more resources than are available. As an interpreter, Annic Thay feels limited in her ability to assist the entire community because her time and resources are limited. Thus, she thinks that long-term caseworker support would benefit many refugees. The most significant problem she sees is the severe disconnect after eight months of cash assistance runs out. At that point, refugees who have not found employment confront limited sources of financial support.

Nang Kham, bilingual program assistant at the International Learning Center (ILC)/Neighborhood House in Milwaukee, WI, said that if refugees need additional language training, they can participate in English classes coordinated by organizations funded by Adult Basic Education (ABE) grants, foundations, and private donations. She also stated, "ILC helps refugees and immigrants with ESL classes for adults with low literacy. We provide adult basic education like citizenship, GED and pre-GED, math, and computer skills. We also have parenting support that includes home visits." She has observed that it often requires refugees more than eight months to learn enough English to seek employment, especially if they do not have formal education. Serving as a bridge between the refugees and those who teach them, Nang Kham believes that ILC's language instructors and volunteers are patient and they go above and beyond to ensure that refugees' needs are addressed so that they can learn when they come to class.

Role of Refugee Self-Help Organizations

The challenges that refugees face in seeking services are evident. What resettlement agencies and mainstream organizations offer is certainly very important to new arrivals, but interviewees pointed out that the willingness of people in their own communities to help others with their many needs makes a difference in the long run. Since there is a time limit for refugees to receive financial and other supportive services, they have to organize formally and informally to support themselves. A simple Internet search showed that Burmese and Bhutanese refugees across the country are creating formal and informal organizations to support one another. Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH, (BCAA), and Kewaw Keh Mu, Louisville, KY, Karen Community communication team leader, explained why each of their groups established self-help organizations, respectively:

> *Even though it was informally launched in 2009, BCAA was registered in the state of Ohio in 2010 as a tax-exempt organization. We organize cultural programs, picnics, soccer tournaments, driving instruction classes, citizenship classes, and classes in our native [Nepali] language. As we do not have grants yet, we request the members of the community to pay a small fee to cover the expenses for these activities. The*

[18] W-2 is Wisconsin Works, the state of Wisconsin's safety net program for parents with minor children whose income is 115% below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

organization also assists families when there is a death in the family by collecting contributions from the members of the Bhutanese community.

We saw the need for support and so that is why we formed the teams to provide services to our community. We know that it is a lot to ask people to help each other when they do not have much, but it is important because people did not understand what they need to do to access resources. So, if someone needs an interpreter, the people who can speak English will just go help that person. If they need to make a doctor's appointment, someone helps them. That is the only way we can survive.

The self-help organizations work well in communities with large numbers of refugees. For example, Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc. in Atlanta, GA, noted that a positive outcome related to resettlement among the Bhutanese in that city is that they mostly live within an hour from each other. This concentration allows people to rely on one another.

Barriers in Accessing Services

Similar to recent reports documenting the needs assessments of these two refugee communities[19], this report also finds that a language barrier (or, the lack of English language proficiency) constitutes a key factor in terms of hindering access to services. This challenge is exacerbated by the language and cultural diversity of the refugees, in particular those from Burma. The theme of limited-English knowledge serving as a barrier was pervasive throughout all the responses. The following are sample representative quotes conveying the importance of language in refugee adaptation:

Refugee agencies do their best to help us, but language barriers make it hard for these agencies to fully support our people. (Kawaw Keh Mu, communication team leader with Louisville, KY, Karen Community).

In locations where there are strong community leaders, people have access to more resources. In most places, people do not even know what services are available, even those who are community leaders. When they do not know, they cannot help the community. Some do not even speak English. (Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of Karen American Foundation in Washington, DC).

We help families to navigate all kinds of public resources. We also help them with English classes, domestic violence prevention, housing, banking, homeownership, etc. More than 90 percent of our work is interpretation for clients. (Pabitral Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA).

Interviewees believe that having bilingual staff and/or access to interpreters enables refugees to obtain support services for their myriad needs. For example, Sie Sie, who has served as an on-call interpreter for the International Institute of Wisconsin for about one year, explained how she helps refugees who speak Karen and Burmese languages:

I go wherever the different clients need me, and I help agencies translate so that clients get the services they need. Hospitals and schools are common. I also help agencies call transportation for clients to doctors' appointments. When I am able to help the clients, it is good. But I have heard from many refugees that sometimes when the nurses do not ask an interpreter like me to help, they end up waiting a very long time for transportation to and from home. This means that the language barrier is a challenge for refugees.

Nang Kham, bilingual program assistant at the International Learning Center (ILC)/Neighborhood House in Milwaukee, WI, reiterated the importance of bilingual individuals in facilitating refugees' access to services. She pointed out that the larger community is only beginning to better understand the Karen people. She shared the following situation:

I think the general public still is confused about Karen refugees. For example, in the last couple of years I've seen hospitals and clinics make this mistake numerous times. A client would need an interpreter for a doctor's appointment. The person would request an interpreter only to find out that at the appointment, the interpreter does not speak their language. This is because instead of sending a Karen interpreter, they have sent a Korean interpreter. I think it is getting a little better because these mistakes have helped to educate some health professionals so they are understanding the difference.

In addition to the limited-English knowledge obstacle, other barriers include the lack of adequate preparation for life in the United States. For instance, limited knowledge about U.S. rules, cultures and norms can, in turn, have dire consequences. Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of the Karen American Community Foundation in Washington, D.C., addresses the consequences for this lack of knowledge by recalling an incident involving cultural adaptation among refugee families:

The one-hour orientation they received before leaving the camp is merely "airplane training." Refugees talk about how they only learned how to sit down and put on their seatbelts. When they arrive, the three-day orientation is mostly for socializing and not adequate to prepare them for what they will encounter in the larger community. For example, there was a big problem in Elizabeth, NJ, in 2008 where minor children were

[19] The Temple University/Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) report, *Needs Assessment of Refugee Communities from Bhutan and Burma*, included refugees in Philadelphia and Atlanta. May 2011. Refugees in Oakland are the focus of the San Francisco State University/Burma Refugee Family Network study, *From Crisis to Community Development: Needs and Assets of Oakland's Refugees from Burma*.

left home alone. In their home country and in the refugee camp, parents can leave their minor children in the house. Since they did not know and left their children home, neighbors got involved, and the children were taken away. We had to go and help them to get their children back.

Through verbal communications with Myra Dahgaypaw, it was clear that she feels frustration over the inadequate pre-departure and post-arrival orientations (or what she calls "airplane training").

Furthermore, one of the most prevalent themes emerging from the community is that of coping with the overall lack of support and isolation found in a new country. As John Tinpe, commissioner with the District of Columbia Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, articulated, "The needs of the people are the same: affordable healthcare, housing, food, and employment; the need to communicate and socialize. What makes the Burmese different and unique is they come from [a] less known culture and find themselves isolated in communities." Furthermore, feeling a sense of isolation, compounded by a lack of network and support, can lead to mental health issues, in particular if they suffer from long-term untreated problems as a result of living in refugee camps. Sie Sie, on-call interpreter for International Institute of Wisconsin, has observed this time and again in her interaction with the refugee community; She shares:

Many refugees are upset about themselves. They are sad and angry about the problems they face. This makes some of them not want to go to class and learn. When they no longer have support from the resettlement agencies, they seem lost. They really need someone to remain in contact with them so that there will be somebody to help them think through different issues. Some people do not have anyone to turn to.

Education

As mentioned earlier, the education background of refugees from Burma and Bhutan varies. One of the recurring themes from the responses regarding educational attainment is that refugees who arrived with some formal education tend to have a relatively easier adjustment process. This is clearly conveyed by two community members in the statements below regarding education:

If they have some education in refugee camps in Nepal, then they usually go to ESL classes and learn easily. Some people have passed tests and they get scholarships to go to community college (Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan , WI).

For parents with education background, they are doing better too. It is not too hard for them to just get some English training, then, they get jobs to support their families. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).

Education Barriers

Interviewees identified numerous challenges regarding adult refugees' educational attainment. From the responses, it appears that those who are older with no prior formal education tend to experience the greatest difficulties. In order for refugees to learn different topics, they must first gain basic English language skills. This can be an insurmountable task if they are illiterate. Representative comments regarding difficulties with educational attainment for adults include:

...[Our] challenge is that some people in our community are not literate in their own language. This makes it hard for them to learn a foreign language...Before they get a job, they attend English classes, but when they get jobs, they do not have time anymore so their language skills may not improve. (Kawaw Keh Mu, communication team leader with Louisville, KY, Karen Community).

One main issue is that many adult refugees come from rural backgrounds, and they do not have formal education in Burma. Even if they lived in the refugee camp for a long time, they do not know how to read and write. When they come to the U.S., it is hard for them to learn enough English within eight months. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).

Very few students do well. We do have some people who speak English, but we learned British/Indian English. When we get here, we have to learn to listen to American English, and that can be challenging for many in our community...There is a group of people who actually do not want to learn English so it is hard to motivate them. (Pabitral Rizal).

There are generational differences. Bhutanese refugees do have old people who had spent their lives in Bhutan with no English language skills. If they read, it would likely be Nepali. If they have no formal education, they communicate only in their own language. (Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI).

Thus, for part of the refugee population, pre-migration language knowledge plays a crucial role in educational attainment in the United States—with the lack of literacy serving as a major education barrier.

Lack of Academic Support to Children

Limited education among refugee parents can have a negative effect on their children's adaptation. For instance, Zeynep Isik-Ercan's study of Burmese refugees in Indiana found that parents' own limited education experiences contributed to their inability to advocate for their children and access academic opportunities (2012). Interviewees in this study also identified parents' inability to provide academic help

to their children as a key issue. Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of the Karen American Community Foundation in Washington, D.C., explained it best in the following quote:

> *Parents of young children find it difficult to discipline and help their children. "I can't help them with their homework" is the most common response I hear from parents. I often tell them that they can still help by opening their children's school bag and asking them to talk about one thing they learned in school that day. If the children can tell them something, then parents should know that they are learning.*

The issue is not only prevalent among young children. Several interviewees expressed much frustration with challenges that teenagers face. Annic Thay, Karen language interpreter for St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee, WI, remarked, "In the refugee camp, school is available, but not everyone chooses to go to school, including young people, so that is why there are some young people who do not have education. Some do not even know the alphabet." The dilemma that refugee teenagers face is best illustrated by Patrick Thein's, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI, observation below:

> *Again, the education system is hard for young people who come to this country when they are a little older, like teenagers. For example, someone who is 18 can still enroll in high school here, but with the limited education experience, it is hard for them to do well and pass all the requirements to graduate from high school. After their eight months of assistance has passed, they usually drop out and find jobs to support themselves. When they have to choose between survival and getting a degree, they will go to work so they can survive.*

Patrick Thein's statement highlights the importance of age of refugee arrival.[20] Coming to the U.S. as a teenager or young adult facing limited educational opportunities can, more likely than not, translate to limited future education and employment options.

Challenges with Higher Education

Refugees understand the value of formal education, and, indeed, many dream of attending colleges and universities. But, they do face significant challenges. Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA, explained, "There are so many barriers for us. It is difficult for our teenagers to meet graduation standards." Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of Karen American Community Foundation in Washington, D.C., added, "The biggest problem for young people, especially teenagers, is that the education they received in the camp is so different from here in the U.S. For example, a 16-year-old who has a 4th grade level education is placed in high school. This person does not understand and is not able to do the high school work. I think 20–30 percent of refugees from Burma is in this population." Lack of adequate preparation, understanding about the higher education system, and access to resources, such as scholarships, are identified as factors preventing refugees from pursuing higher education. Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH, believe that the challenges are even deeper:

> *[Young Bhutanese] are not convinced yet [that] getting higher education will offer them better opportunities as there are hardly any educated people currently employed at high status with high paying jobs. They do not have any role models to look up to for inspiration and motivation. At this point, I do not see how we can mold this kind of defeated mentality into a right direction. This, I think, is a major problem when it comes to educating children.*

Due to language and educational barriers, young refugees often struggle to do well on standardized exams for college entrance. This means that those interested in pursuing higher education have been limited primarily to community and technical colleges. Annic Thay, interpreter for St. Michael's Parish-Good Samaritan House in Milwaukee, WI, shared her personal experience and observations, "I see many people just give up because it is too hard to go to school. Then I see others who no matter how hard, they try to get an education. I go to technical school because I was able to get my GED and pass the entrance exams. It is hard, but I want to get a college degree."

[20] Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2004. "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States." *International Migration Review* 38(3):1160–205.

A Case Study

During the 2013 Higher Education Summit, APIASF hosted a session developed by Elaisa Vahnie, Executive Director of Burmese American Community Institute, and Lana Alaine Knox, Assistant Director of Extended Studies at American University's School of Professional and Extended Studies, on "Designing and Promoting Burmese Refugee & Migrant Population Access to Higher Education." The session explored best practices to help increase higher education access and success for one of the nation's most underserved communities and provided a national platform to raise awareness among practitioners, policymakers, campus administrators, researchers, and community leaders of the experiences of refugee students. Representatives from the Burmese American Community Institute (BACI) discussed the development and implementation of its Upward College Program.

Located in America's Heartland (Indianapolis, IN), BACI's primary goals are to advocate for "education for all" and to build "a strong community." These visions are directly achieved through various programming that includes advocacy work, employment assistance, educational outreach programs, and numerous other special programs to assist/support the community. According to BACI, the barriers to higher education for the Burmese refugee community are: financial, English proficiency, family obligations, and lack of knowledge and skills with application process. To address these pressing needs, the organization has established a number of educational programs. The "Upward College Program" is an example of one such program, with explicit goals to: 1) increase performance in school, 2) prepare students for college, 3) increase high school graduation, 4) increase college enrollment, and 5) increase scholarship opportunities. These goals are achieved through an array of services, including: tutoring, providing life skills, leadership training, tips on college, college preparatory class, one-on-one assistance, offering extracurricular opportunities, and implementing an "expedition learning project." This particular program has achieved success in its objectives. Specifically, for the academic year of 2011–2012, thirty students were enrolled in the program. From these thirty participants, 100 percent are currently enrolled in college, and 50 percent have received scholarships to attend.

Reflecting on the success of the Burmese American Community Institute (BACI) Upward College Program, session participants engaged in dialogue to generate recommendations to better support students. To ensure success, future initiatives aimed at supporting Burmese students should include the following: building self-efficiency among students and programs, developing social skills, creating partnerships, advocating with schools, encouraging students to mentor each other, engaging the different Burmese ethnicities to work collaboratively, and obtaining multi-year grants. The inclusion of this session at the APIASF Higher Education Summit was an important first-step to increase visibility about the needs of this rapidly growing student population.

Socioeconomic Status

Interviewees generally agreed that refugees in their community are highly motivated in seeking employment to be economically self-sufficient. However, in addition to the lack of education background serving as an important employment barrier to overcome, interviewees also saw numerous other factors influencing refugees' ability to find suitable employment.

Self-Motivation

Immigration is a highly selective process.[21] Related to this, ample literature exists that demonstrates immigrants' self-motivation (along with supportive structural circumstances) contributing to their upward mobility in U.S. society. While arriving under different circumstances, refugees are no exceptions. Interviewees identified high-levels of self-motivation to improve their life conditions as an important contributing factor to their employment status. Sample representative comments include the following:

> *Given that Bhutanese have only been in America since 2007-2008, it seems that overall many are doing all right. They get jobs mostly from referral of another Bhutanese in different companies. Some even own their own homes now, and they are able to pay back the travel loan that was provided to them when they came to the U.S. (Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI).*

> *I see a variety of people in the refugee community. Some who got a little education in the refugee camp who are young really like it here in America. They can get a job and it is better than sitting in the refugee camp not knowing what the future will be like. These people don't care what kind of job they get. They will work at any job as long as it pays them money. (Sie Sie, on-call interpreter with International Institute of Wisconsin).*

> *Depending on their level of motivation, many are able to find work within 90 days. Most people want to work as soon as possible. They do not want to just receive government help. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).*

Barriers to Employment

The challenge for many refugees from Burma and Bhutan is that many arrived during the 2008 recession and despite their motivation to work, few jobs were available. Lack of formal education and English language skills are major barriers to employment. Even if people have received some education in the refugee camps, country of origin, and/or elsewhere and they have work experience, certification issues prevent some from working in their respective professions. If they are able to find work, it is likely that the positions will not be aligned with their previous professional experiences. Older individuals with some health challenges are not able to work in meat packing plants or other factories that require physical labor. As interviewees expressed below, there exists a range of barriers to employment for refugees:

> *Some people cannot even fill out job applications so they cannot apply for jobs. They feel disempowered. Some of them have health issues, but they have no one to help them complete paperwork. It is a big challenge for our community. (Kewaw Keh Mu, communication team leader with Louisville, KY, Karen Community).*

> *A lot of elders are very sad and frustrated. They often talk about going back to the refugee camp. They are frustrated because they do not have money to pay back their travel loan, rent, and utilities. They cannot get jobs so they are angry at the situation. (Sie Sie, on-call interpreter with International Institute of Wisconsin).*

> *…English skills, this is a barrier for many because they can only get positions that do not require a lot of speaking in English. I see so many clients being rejected by prospective employers not because they do not think they can do the job but because of training and safety issues. Employers do not want to hire them because they are afraid that the refugees might get hurt and/or hurt others because they do not understand safety regulations. (Nang Kham, bilingual program assistant at the International Learning Center (ILC)/Neighborhood House in Milwaukee, WI).*

> *Some have college degrees but are employed in professions not relating to their education. In order to be employed, in their training or education, they have to be recertified. More success is seen in the medical profession where medical students in Burma are educated in English and Burmese. After intense studies in the U.S., for a couple of years, they are able to sit for the board exams and successfully continue in their career. In other fields, the variances are too great. (John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).*

Moreover, the need to overcome cultural norms and gender roles is something that refugees also have to deal with. Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH, explained that in Bhutanese tradition "…it is usually men who provide food, and women [who] take care of children and home. This arrangement does not work anymore as men alone cannot bring in enough money to meet the expenses to manage home." He believed that men and women from his community understand that they must change and work

[21] Portes, Alejandro. 1995. "Economic Sociology and the Sociology of Immigration: A Conceptual Overview." in *The Economic Sociology of Immigration: Essays on Networks, Ethnicity, and Entrepreneurship*, edited by Alejandro Portes. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

together. He further stated, "They are gradually adapting to these practice[s]. As a result, they feel, life in the U.S. will continue to improve, and they acknowledge that life is already much better in the U.S."

Furthermore, living within an ethnic community can potentially serve as a double-edged sword. For example, while Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA, believed that the concentration of Bhutanese in Atlanta is a positive situation, however, she pointed out that living within the community was simultaneously having a negative impact on their ability to find work. The reason for this, according to Pabitra Rizal, is because, "…Community members do not want to move away from other Bhutanese. There are jobs that are far away. They still prefer to travel back and forth. For example, jobs in chicken farms may be hours away, so they would carpool to get to the job instead of moving closer to those jobs."

Types of jobs

For those who are able to obtain employment, interviewees revealed that most are working in low-paying jobs (see also, Table 4). Some have only one member working to support large families so the income earned is barely enough to pay monthly bills. Despite this situation, they felt that those refugees with jobs are thankful to be employed. The most common ways for refugees to get jobs are through their case managers and from referrals by other refugees working in the various factories and companies. Jeung and colleagues[22] found that most Burmese refugees in Oakland worked in service sector occupations such as bakeries and pizza restaurants. The types of jobs and places of employment that interviewees in this study mentioned include meatpacking, chicken farms, apple picking, hotel housekeeping, home health care assistants, and pizza factory. Since these tend to be jobs that offer little or no benefits, refugees in these situations find it difficult to improve their socioeconomic status.[23]

Culture

Refugees bring diverse cultural practices to their communities in the United States. The years of displacement that refugees from Burma and Bhutan experienced prior to their arrival in the U.S. have clearly affected their sense of place and belonging. Elders yearn for the homeland, but many young people who were born in refugee camps have no personal ties to their parents' country of birth. Despite this complex situation, refugee parents and community leaders work hard to ensure that their culture and its traditions are maintained in the host country.

Burmese Cultural Retention

Given the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of refugees from Burma, interviewees indicated that they tend to gather with others who practice a similar religion. Parents and adult community members play an important role in preserving culture and in ensuring that young people understand their roots. New Year celebrations and informal gatherings in home settings are other ways that they maintain traditions. Several interviewees explained community-building efforts at the local level:

> *In large cities, there are religious centers such as Buddhist monasteries and Baptist churches where members of the community come to pray once a week. This allows them to regularly see each other and catch up on the latest news in their own language. There are also festivities almost every season, which allow members of the community to celebrate and socially interact… Culture is maintained at home with food. Members of the community prefer their home cooking and food to others'. Dinners are an important time for families to get together and talk about the day. Most members prefer the traditional way of eating with fingers; so [they] prefer not to dine out. Most dishes require frying and stews. There is very little need for baking so the oven is seldom used. Other ways of keeping the culture include clothing. Most members prefer the comfortable sarong and slippers to constraining pants and shoes. Most houses require removing of the shoes in the house. The reason: every house has a corner for praying; hence out of respect one must remove shoes in the house. (John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).*

> *We celebrate the Karen New Year at a Baptist church in Milwaukee, WI. People dance, and we wear our traditional clothes. People cook and bring food to the celebrations for everyone to share. Community leaders and elders make speeches about our culture and young people just come to have fun. (Annic Thay, Karen language interpreter for St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee, WI).*

[22] Jeung, Russell, Joan Jeung, Mai Nhung Le, Grace Yoo, Amy Lam, Alisa Loveman, and Zar Ni Maung. 2013. *From Crisis to Community Development: Needs and Assets of Oakland's Refugees from Burma*, California: Burma Refugee Family Network, Cesar Chavez Institute and Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University

[23] We acknowledge the intense pressure that case workers face in seeking employment for refugees, which often means channeling them into temporary positions.

The most common way we maintain our culture is spending time with family. We take turns visiting each other's house. We eat together and share foods. For the New Year celebration, community leaders will collect donations from all of us so that they can buy enough food for everyone. It is free to everyone who attends. (Sie Sie, on-call interpreter with International Institute of Wisconsin).

We have New Year celebrations where we gather and help encourage our young people to not forget who they are and their culture. Those who go to church, work together to have cultural events. Our community includes people who are Buddhist, Christian, and animists. But when we have wrist -tying ceremonies, it is for everyone because it is tradition and not religion. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).

Parents and community leaders clearly work hard to hold on to traditions, but interviewees expressed concerns with their efforts to maintain culture. Some are related to resources, while others relate to the challenges with the younger generation. Representative quotes include:

My biggest concern is that our younger generation is losing our culture. Many are born in refugee camps, so they think they are from Thailand and not Burma. In large communities, some have set a day of the week to teach our language to young people. They use their own homes to make sure that this important part of their culture is not forgotten. (Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of Karen American Foundation in Washington, D.C.).

We do have many challenges. There are no resources for us to have events and cultural programs. Even when we volunteer and contribute to hosting events, transportation is an issue for many families. Also, because many parents now work so that they can support their families, it is hard to bring everyone together at the same time. Our young people are losing our language as they try to learn English in school. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).

Unless they live in major cities or communities, members of the community are culturally isolated. (John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).

Bhutanese Cultural Retention

Refugees from Bhutan also promote the importance of gatherings as a way to hold on to culture and religion. Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA, made clear that the Hindu Bhutanese in Atlanta worship at temples, while those who converted to Christianity while in the refugee camps attend church with other Christians. Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI, explained that their identities as people of Nepali origin in Bhutan mean that they celebrate traditions from both cultures. He shares:

Our people celebrate two cultures: Bhutanese and Nepali. The most common way for us is having picnics. This is important for us to be able to eat and play together with friends and relatives, but most importantly, it is a time for elders to promote our culture and teach the young people. We also have smaller cultural get-togethers where we take turns sharing food with others. For example, I cook food, and I call others to come to my house to eat one day. Another day, someone else will cook and invite us to eat with them. It helps us to socialize and maintain our traditions. (Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI).

According to Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH, Bhutanese refugees appreciate the fact that they have religious freedom. However, as he succinctly stated, "…there is a limitation to what extent they can actually conduct activities like in their country. There are no temples of worship or a common center for public gathering." While parents are glad that their school age children are learning English quickly, he pointed out that parents are equally concerned about children forgetting their own language. He also discussed the need for people in his community to be flexible with cultural practices. His statement below describes changes to Bhutanese traditions that he has witnessed thus far.

As more and more people begin to have employment, they find it harder and harder to maintain some of their practices. Festivals, auspicious events, rituals during birth, marriage, or death are being redefined in order to fit into the new circumstances. Events are scheduled so that they fall on public holidays or during the weekends. Following the exact instruction according to the lunar calendar is becoming impossible or obsolete. In short, we could say, there is constant struggle between sustaining life [versus] maintaining their culture.

Children of Immigrants/1.5/ Second Generation

Status of refugee children

It is well documented that learning a second language is easier at an earlier age. Although interviewees pointed out that refugee parents often were not able to provide academic support to their children, they generally agreed that young children are adapting better than teenagers, especially in school settings. According to Annic Thay, Karen language interpreter for St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee, WI, many young children are making academic progress even if their parents cannot help them with homework. Some teenagers

are motivated to achieve in school and are making progress. However, interviewees did identify those in the late teens as the group who experienced the most difficulties in school. Some challenges are related to their lack of adequate education in refugee camps and others are due to external forces. They explained the issues as follows:

> *Family support is hard because children are burdened to help their illiterate parents...Some parents have to work and are away from home so there is no supervision of children. Some children are beginning to lose their language and some are doing things that are not healthy for them. (Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA).*

The older ones struggle because they have to do a lot to catch up. The education they received in the refugee camp is not enough. Also, the way of learning is different. There they have to just memorize, but here they have to learn to go analyze and offer their ideas. When they do not have good language skills—that makes it even harder. I think the after school programs do help these children. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).

> *[The] 1.5 generation is the most difficult one to comprehend fully. Especially, the ones who were born and raised in the refugee camps in Nepal seem to find it more difficult to accustom to the new culture and values, and at the same time they have not fully grasped the essence of their own cultural and religious values. (Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH).*

> *[There] are situations where teenagers are thrown into gangs like [the] public school system where they are forced to defend themselves by avoiding school or becoming equally bad. (John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).*

> *I think there are many issues. For high school youth, parents do not really know what they are doing. Some do not listen to their parents anymore. They play games and they do not tell their parents that they have homework. These young people are not learning English, so they can't even help their parents with translation. (Sie Sie, on call interpreter at International Institute of Wisconsin).*

Challenges ahead

Internal and external forces impact the ways in which interviewees regard challenges ahead for children of refugees. Interviewees generally think that children's educational gain via improved English language acquisition may be at the expense of losing their native language, and thus, culture. As Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI, indicated, "The biggest challenge I see is that many parents force their children to speak English so that they can do well in school. The children are not learning their native language so some are already losing their language skills. They mix it with English words." Expressing a narrative that is common among immigrant parents and the older generation,[24] Pabitral Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA, shares, "I am afraid that our children will assimilate fast and lose our language and culture." The fears of linguistic assimilation are not unfounded as existing research have found the rapid loss of culture (especially ancestral language knowledge) among children of immigrants.[25]

Rapid assimilation (especially cultural loss via acculturation) fears are justified since many immigrants and refugees have gone in this direction in the past. For John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, there is a critical need to bring the refugee children up to par with other American students in the next few years. While distinguishing between the old and new country's educational system, Tinpe also calls for the refugee youth generation to "avoid pitfalls" by focusing on goals and making sound decisions:

> *Back in the old country, education is passed down, the students are taught to memorize, listen and never question the teacher. In the new education system students are expected to think for themselves, compose their own essays, never to plagiarize, to question everything for themselves. The [young] generation will have to learn to focus on their goals and achieve them. To define what is important. To overcome social and racial barriers. To avoid pitfalls of giving into social pressure. To avoid distractions of material things.*

Hopes and Dreams for Children

Even amidst the difficulties interviewees highlighted, the majority harbor optimism in the communities' future educational and socioeconomic outcomes. Interviewees identified the length of time spent in the U.S. to be one of the key factors in achieving future success. Nang Kham's statement reflects this perspective; she states, "I do think that as [parents] live longer in this country, they will learn and become more knowledgeable so that they can help their children. They work hard and if they do not understand their schoolwork, they seek help from others." Likewise, Kewaw Keh Mu, communication team leader with Louisville,

[24] Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[25] Rumbaut, Rubén G., Douglas S. Massey, and Frank D. Bean. 2006. "Linguistic Life Expectancies: Immigrant Language Retention in Southern California." *Population and Development Review* 32(3):447–60.

KY, Karen Community, observed that while very few have graduated from high school because of their limited-English ability, still, he is very optimistic that more will complete high school in the next few years. In highlighting the persevering nature of the younger generation, Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI, adds, "Young adults are doing what they can to survive. There are very few [who] go to four-year college because they do not have the education background. Many have been able to go to technical schools so they are at least getting skills for work."

When asked about their hopes and dreams for future generations, interviewees highlighted their desire to see educated individuals who will become leaders in their respective communities. They convey wishes of the young generation becoming self-sufficient, finding financial stability, successfully integrating into American society, and becoming productive, contributing members of U.S. society. By the same token, they also have hopes that the youth generation will still retain their ancestral culture. Below are several quotes that reflected these dreams:

> *I want them to have good education and get better jobs. I also want them to keep our culture and work hard to be successful in this country. They will become our leaders in the future. (Kewaw Keh Mu, communication team leader with Louisville, KY, Karen Community).*

> *I want to see people in the Karen community become educated so that we will have professionals who speak our language like the other refugees who have been here longer. I also want to see them start businesses so that our community can become better. (Sie Sie, on call interpreter at International Institute of Wisconsin).*

> *As a whole, I hope that they will become a strong community that keeps our language and culture. I want them to become self-sufficient. (Pabitra Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., Atlanta, GA).*

> *[My hopes are that we] will have many people in our community capable of getting out and educating our community. We will achieve in our day-to-day lives, but our community will be forward looking with long-term strategies to thrive in U.S. We will have more educated people who have the capacity to help themselves. Our younger generation will be strong and our community will be empowered. (Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of Karen American Foundation in Washington, D.C.).*

> *They will definitely have different experiences in this country, but I think that their migration experiences will remain an important part of their lives. I hope that kids will listen and respect their parents and that elders will guide them in a good way. I hope that they will do well in school and make our community proud of them. (Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI).*

> *I foresee an economically well-off, politically conscious, educationally enlightened, and well-rounded community of future generations of Bhutanese Americans living in harmony and peace with the rest of the American population. (Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH).*

Identity

The issue of identity and self-identification is a complex situation because there is also much diversity found within refugee communities from Burma and Bhutan. When asked about the general overall trend of how the community is identifying itself today, the vast majority said that they and others in their ethnic group, tend to identify themselves according to their respective ethnic group. In the case of those from Burma, it is evident that opinions vary. Some people refer to their ethnic group and those who are from ethnic minority groups tend to not refer to themselves as Burmese. According to John Tinpe, "[the] community identifies itself as Burmese or from Burma. [As] there are many [ethnic groups] within Burma, each [identifies] as their own: Shan, Kachin, Karen, Kaya, Arakan, etc." Other representative statements by those from Burma include:

> *It is a bit complicated because many of us will say our tribe or ethnic group first. For me, my father is Karen and my mother is Shan, so I usually identify with both. Although many people like me speak Burmese language if we went to school in Burma, we still do not say that we are Burmese. (Nang Kham, bilingual program assistant at the International Learning Center (ILC)/Neighborhood House in Milwaukee, WI).*

> *I think Karen people generally say that they are from Burma but that they are not Burmese. Instead, they are Karen. That is the only way for them to talk about their identity. (Sie Sie, on-call interpreter at International Institute of Wisconsin).*

While Pabitral Rizal, refugee department program manager at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc., in Atlanta, GA, and Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI, stated that they and others in their community see themselves as Nepali before Bhutanese, Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH, articulated the shifting identities of refugees from Bhutan. He explained:

> *The elderly population prefers to identify themselves with their ethnic group such as Nepali because of the historical and cultural ties that they have with the people of Nepal. On the other hand, [the] majority of the so-called 1.5 generation would like to identify themselves as Nepali because of the fact that they lived in Nepal all their life before*

arriving to the U.S. Then there is another group, [a] mostly educated and politically conscious lot, who prefer to identify themselves simply as Bhutanese, and as Bhutanese American once they become the U.S. citizens through naturalization.

Views on the Term Asian American

Interviewees provided an array of responses to their thoughts on the "Asian American" identity. The majority expressed not truly belonging into this category for a variety of reasons—reasons that range from birthplace citizenship to language ability to length of stay in the United States. For example, Nang Kham, bilingual program assistant at the International Learning Center (ILC)/Neighborhood House in Milwaukee, WI, shares a rationale that is based on citizenship and language knowledge:

> *I do not know anyone in my [Burmese] community who would introduce himself or herself as Asian American. Maybe it's because we see Asian American[s] as people who are born in America. When we speak, we still have accent[s] so we cannot say we are American.*

Likewise was the opinion of Prakash Biswa, case manager at Catholic Charities in Sheboygan, WI, who highlighted the role of length of stay in the United States on the applicability of the Asian American identity for the Bhutanese population:

> *Many people know about Asian Americans because they are settled in many parts of the country. For example, I know Bhutanese people have settled in Georgia, Buffalo, Texas, Oregon, Seattle and New Orleans. But, they do not consider themselves Asian Americans since they just arrived in this country.*

On the other hand, while many in both ethnic communities do not assert and embrace the Asian American identity, they do recognize its political purpose. This important political acknowledgment is clearly noted below by Bishnu Subba and John Tinpe, respectively:

> *I feel the term Asian American is an appropriate one when we are dealing with broader issues pertaining to or affecting the entire Asian population living in the U.S. Depending upon the topic of discussion at hand Bhutanese refugees may see themselves as being a member of the Asian American [community], but this term is not commonly used in this community. Asian American could be used as a common platform for all the Asians now legally resettled in the U.S. for national dialogue (Bishnu Subba, president of the Bhutanese Community of Akron, OH).*

> *Once naturalized the question of voting and political empowerment becomes an issue. By census the Asian community is defined as a bloc. Likewise, the Asian community also begin[s] to identify themselves as the Asian American voting bloc. Globally the Asian population is the largest in the world. But in the U.S., according to the census, the Asian community consist[s] of the smallest percentage of the national population. Hence, the Asian community [tries] to stick together as a strength in numbers. Otherwise their political power becomes marginal. In the national dialogue the Burmese community depends on the Asian community to advocate on their behalf. (John Tinpe, commissioner with D.C. Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).*

Furthermore, there are moments when choosing to identify as "Asian" is a decision that is based on availability and convenience. According to Annic Thay, Karen language interpreter for St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee, WI, while the community might not see themselves as Asian, sometimes they are left with no other choice. She shares, "Well, on the forms when you go to school or fill out job applications, you can only check Asian so I think we all check that category. It is not how we see ourselves, but that is the only option so we check that."

Finally, because identities—racial or ethnic—are fluid, people do have the ability to change how they identify over time. This is no less the case for the Burmese and Bhutanese communities living in the United States. In looking toward the future, a number of respondents noted that the communities might embrace (and assert) the Asian American identity in the next five to 10 years. A number of respondents expressed this viewpoint:

> *I see myself as Karen first. I think maybe sometime in the future we will see ourselves as Asian Americans, but not in the next five years. I think the problem is also that we do not understand the term. We need to understand it then maybe we'll feel that we are a part of it. (Myra Dahgaypaw, board member of Karen American Foundation in Washington, D.C.).*

> *I do not really know. I think it is too early to say because most Karen refugees do not know much about this term. Maybe five years from now they will understand it more but for now, it is hard to say. Personally, I think it depends. When I'm in the larger community, sometimes I am seen as just another Asian person. But, in my community, I am Karen. (Patrick Thein, case manager at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, WI).*

> *I do not think we are "American" yet. We do not know the language well yet and we are still learning American cultural norms. Maybe five to 10 years from now we will be more comfortable with the term. (Sie Sie, on-call interpreter at International Institute of Wisconsin).*

> *After a number of years of living in the U.S., especially after naturalization, members of the community [will] begin to identify themselves as Asian American. (John Tinpe, commissioner with DC Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs).*

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The statistical data and perspectives from interviewees are telling of the conditions under which refugees from Burma and Bhutan live in U.S. society. From this research finding and previous reports on the Bhutanese and Burmese communities,[26] we identify the following policy implications and offer recommendations for different stakeholders to enhance the refugee integration process.

A. Pre- and post-arrival orientation sessions appear to not adequately prepare refugees for what to expect once they are in the United States. Cultural orientations need to inform refugees not only about American cultural norms and behaviors, but also, the economic reality of U.S. society today.

B. Knowing the English language appears to be the key variable in overcoming initial adaptation barriers. Intensive ESL language training must be readily available for adult refugees upon arrival.

C. Education and increase in resources appears to be crucial variables in overcoming long-term barriers. The length of time that adult refugees are eligible for English language education and the length of time that they are eligible for social support services should be extended.

D. Special attention needs to be paid to the refugee population who arrive during their early/late teen years (1.5 generation), especially regarding their educational outcomes. As it stands, an alarming 39 percent of the Burmese population in the U.S. has dropped out of high school. Similar to adult refugees, this population also needs programs to help ease their transition (especially on acclimating to American cultural norms and expectations). Intensive educational and social support (i.e., via academic counselors with cultural sensitivity training, tailored tutoring after-school programs) should be provided to teenagers to help enable them to graduate from high school.

E. Self-help organizations play an instrumental role in refugees accessing resources to outreach and educate refugee communities in their own language. With resources, refugee organizations can assist in educating the larger community about their groups' history and culture. Provide capacity building support to self-help organizations.

F. Job training and job development are critical factors contributing to improved socioeconomic status. Strategically provide training to refugees that will lead to permanent positions and focus on areas with future job growth.

G. Like the experiences of immigrant and refugee groups before them, intergenerational conflict exists among the Burmese and Bhutanese populations. Resources are needed to aid parents and children to better understand one another.

H. More research is needed on these two populations. As mentioned earlier, this report is not a comprehensive report due to the limitation of the data sets. Research is needed to delve deeper into the Burmese and Bhutanese populations, especially the 1.5 and second generations and issues such as mental health and physical health.

[26] Jeung, Russell, Joan Jeung, Mai Nhung Le, Grace Yoo, Amy Lam, Alisa Loveman, and Zar Ni Maung. 2013. *From Crisis to Community Development: Needs and Assets of Oakland's Refugees from Burma*, California: Burma Refugee Family Network, Cesar Chavez Institute and Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University; The Intergenerational Center, Needs Assessment of Refugee Communities from Bhutan and Burma. Washington DC: Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, May 2011.

CONCLUSION

In the preface of a recent Pew Research Center publication entitled, *The Rise of Asian Americans,*[27] the report explicitly stated that, "This report sets out to draw a comprehensive portrait of Asian Americans." In reality, the report merely drew a comprehensive portrait of the "six largest Asian American country of origin subgroups."[28] The groups included the Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese Americans. The report goes on to summarize that, "Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States." While valuable in supplying the general U.S. population with a wealth of information on the six largest groups of Asian Americans, it is critical to highlight the limited focus of the report, and how its conclusion does not apply to other subgroups of Asian Americans. For example, the distinction of "highest-income" and "best educated" unequivocally cannot be applied to all Asian subgroups captured under the Asian American racial identity. This is especially true for those who arrive as refugees. Thus, making such a broad sweeping statement without clarification (or an investigation of other smaller Asian subgroups) does a disservice to the entire Asian American population. Such generalization merely sustains the insidious model minority myth, while concurrently working to mask the serious problems that exist within Asian America.

As with many immigrant and refugee groups, members of the Burmese and Bhutanese communities in the United States face powerful challenges that must be dealt with simultaneously—finding a livelihood and way of life for their family, building strong community institutions, and maintaining contact with family members and relatives in the refugee camps or scattered around the world. Data from this report show that the Burmese and Bhutanese newcomers are falling behind their peers along all socioeconomic measurements. Data are lacking to fully define the Bhutanese demography.

A significant amount of work and resources are still needed to assist these two new refugee communities—this is especially true in the educational realm. As we have mentioned from the onset of this report, we firmly believe that understanding a population is the critical first-step to facilitating better educational opportunities, and subsequently, leading to the reduction of poverty and to better life chances and outcomes for current and future generations. It is imperative that we provide the necessary support for new generations of Americans, especially those seeking to become first-generation college students.

It is our hope that this report has provided a critical first-step in that direction. Although the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all refugees, we believe that some of the broader findings highlight some key lessons learned. We see this study as an important beginning for stakeholders involved with Burmese and Bhutanese refugees to work toward a greater understanding of their experiences. Our role has been to share their words with those who want to support a successful transition to life in the United States. We implore future researchers to delve deeper into the Burmese and Bhutanese refugee community.

[27] Pew Social & Demographic Trends. 2012. *The Rise of Asian Americans.* Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

[28] From the Preface of *The Rise of Asian Americans.*

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