

The Case of the  
Southeast Asian Refugees:  
Policy for a  
Community "At-Risk"

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The popular stereotype of Asian Americans is one of a self-sufficient community whose average income is higher than that of other racial groups in the United States. This image often obscures the fact that a significant number of Asian Americans live below the poverty level.

The majority of Asian Americans living below poverty are Southeast Asian refugees. The term "Southeast Asian refugee" refers to persons originally from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and is preferred over the term "Indochinese," which is found to be offensive by some Southeast Asian refugees. The term "refugee" used here serves to distinguish the Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese from other ethnic communities also from Southeast Asia such as Thai, Filipino or Malaysian. The distinction is important because while most other Southeast Asians and Asian Americans generally came to this country as immigrants, Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese arrived here as refugees.

Within the Southeast Asian refugee population, there are also minority populations such as the Hmong from Laos and the ethnic Chinese

\* For identification purposes only

from Vietnam. Each majority and minority population has a distinct history, language and culture. The purpose of referencing all of these groups as "Southeast Asian refugees" is appropriate only because they do share the common experience of being refugees; they arrived in the U.S. at roughly the same time, and they share some similarity in their "American experience."

This paper will profile this community, examine some data suggestive of this population's being economically and socially at risk, and make recommendations for both the Asian American community and the American community at large for actions to improve the conditions of this population.<sup>1</sup>

## **Profile of the Southeast Asian Refugee Communities**

### **WHY ARE THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS IN THE U.S.?**

Contrary to the experience of other Asian Americans who immigrated to the U.S. for a variety of economic reasons, Southeast Asians have been resettled in the U.S. as part of a worldwide rescue effort.

As the result of constant warfare and systematic persecution of individuals with differing political or religious beliefs, the communist governments that came to power in 1975 killed and imprisoned countless Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese. Millions had to flee to seek refuge elsewhere. A significant number who attempted to escape lost their lives crossing hostile borders and the South China Sea in unseaworthy boats. Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines offered temporary asylum. Few of these countries, however, have resettled any refugees permanently for fear of retribution from the governments of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, as well as for reasons of limited resources.

Many other countries of the world offered permanent asylum for Southeast Asians. The United States resettled the largest number among all nations, even though it ranks only fifth among all countries in terms of ratio of refugees resettled per total population.

### **WHEN DID THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS ARRIVE IN THE U.S.?**

In the U.S., the rescue of Southeast Asian refugees was initially thought to be a one-time crisis intervention following the communist

takeover in 1975. That this was thought to be a short-term process can be seen in classification of the Indochinese Resettlement Assistance Act of 1975 as a "sunset" law, scheduled for termination by 1977. The subsequent continuing flow of refugees prompted the passage of the historic Refugee Act of 1980, which, for the first time, defined who could be admitted to this country as a "refugee," and established the framework under which the federal refugee assistance program operates. Through the Refugee Act, the number of refugees to be admitted each year is determined by the worldwide refugee need and by the ability of the U.S. to absorb and provide for these individuals. Reauthorization of the Refugee Act occurred in 1984, 1986, 1989 and 1992.

Because so many of the refugees fleeing Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam lost their lives in their attempts to escape and because those who survived created tremendous political, social and economic pressures in the countries of first asylum, the Orderly Departure Program was established in 1979 to create a mechanism through which a limited number of Southeast Asians (primarily Vietnamese) could leave and be admitted to the U.S. through legal immigration channels.

In 1988, Congressman Robert J. Mrzarek of New York, a Vietnam veteran, introduced the Amerasian Homecoming Act to speed up the process to admit Amerasians and their families to the U.S. Amerasians are children of Vietnamese mothers and U.S. citizens. In many instances these children were abandoned by their fathers. By April 1992, a total of 62,351 Amerasians and their families were resettled in the U.S.

In 1989, the U.S. State Department negotiated and signed an agreement with the Vietnamese government allowing the release of political prisoners from "reeducation camps" to be resettled in the U.S. As of June 1992, an estimated 50,000 former Vietnamese political prisoners and their families were admitted to the U.S. under this program; among them are religious leaders, former government officials and military servicemen.

Data from the U.S. State Department indicate that by September 1991, Southeast Asians constituted the largest group of refugees worldwide admitted to the U.S. since 1975. Roughly 29 percent of the Southeast Asians arrived in the U.S. during 1980 and 1981. From 1975 to 1979, approximately 90 percent of all refugee arrivals were Vietnamese; a small number of Laotians arrived in 1976. The majority of Laotians and Cambodians arrived after 1980. Because Cambodians were considered "displaced persons" rather than "refugees" by Thailand, the country of

first asylum, the number of Cambodians admitted to the U.S. was reduced substantially by the late 1980s. Only those qualified as immigrants and "humanitarian parolees" arrived after 1987.

The conditions and temporal variations of arrival are important in understanding the development of communities relative to the length of residence in the U.S. While the first wave of Southeast Asians generally was composed of individuals considered to be the "elite" in their countries of origin, those arriving in subsequent years represent a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The "late arrivals" also tend to have been exposed to more trauma in their home countries because of persecution and imprisonment. Their escape attempts were more dangerous, and their stays in refugee camps were longer because of the difficulty in obtaining permanent asylum.

TABLE 1: National Origins of Refugees  
by Year of Arrival (Fiscal years 1975-1987)

	Total No. SE Asians	Percentage of Resettled		
	Resettled	Cambodians	Laotians	Vietnamese
1975	135,000	3.5	0.6	95.0
1976	15,000	7.6	70.3	22.1
1977	7,000	11.5	15.4	73.1
1978	20,574	6.4	39.2	54.4
1979	76,521	7.4	37.4	55.1
1980	163,799	9.6	33.3	57.1
1981	131,139	20.5	14.6	65.0
1982	73,522	27.8	13.0	59.1
1983	39,408	33.8	7.4	58.8
1984	51,960	38.2	13.8	47.9
1985	59,970	38.5	10.6	50.9
1986	45,450	22.2	28.4	49.3
1987	40,112	4.8	38.9	56.3

Source: David Haines (1989); data collected by Linda Gordon (1987) and Office of Refugee Resettlement (1987).

## WHERE AND HOW MANY CAMBODIANS, LAOTIANS, AND VIETNAMESE ARE IN THE U.S. TODAY?

According to the 1990 census, the total number of Americans who trace their ancestry to the countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam is 1,1001,054. This figure includes the number of arrivals as refugees, immigrants, and children born in the U.S. It is estimated that a significant number of individuals from these three countries may choose to identify themselves as ethnic Chinese, therefore contributing to the undercount of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. The Southeast Asian refugee population thus accounts for 13 percent of the total Asian American population, and ranks third only after Chinese Americans (1,645,472) and Filipinos (1,406,770). Individually, the 1990 census identifies 614,547 Vietnamese, 147,411 Cambodians, and 239,096 Laotians—including 90,082 Hmong.

It is important to note that the distribution of each ethnic community differs somewhat. While California has roughly 45 percent of all Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese, the secondary areas of concentration of each of these communities reflect that there are unique patterns of re-

TABLE 2: The Ten States with 76 Percent  
of the Southeast Asians in the U.S.

State	Total Number
California	453,363
Texas	85,029
Washington	36,724
Minnesota	36,459
Massachusetts	33,732
Virginia	27,178
Pennsylvania	23,788
Wisconsin	23,010
New York	22,619
Florida	20,379

Source: Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census Report*

settlement. The differences may be due to variations in community support systems and in opportunities for community development in different parts of the U.S. To this end, the East Coast seems to be the destination of preference for Cambodians since five of the top ten states with the largest concentration of Cambodians are Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York and Rhode Island. The Laotians, on the other hand, choose the Midwest, with Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan comprising the largest contiguous states with a significant concentration of Laotians. For the Vietnamese the Gulf states (Texas, Louisiana and Florida) are their second favorite locations.<sup>2</sup>

#### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS

As mentioned in the introduction, to refer to Southeast Asian refugees as a group would be similar to describing Asian Americans as one homogeneous ethnic/racial block. Even the refugee experience is widely different among Southeast Asian groups. Vietnamese generally left their home country by boat, while Cambodians and Laotians walked across the border to Thailand. The survival rate of those who attempted escapes was determined by homeland conditions, escape routes, the receptivity of the countries of first asylum, and the safety afforded to the refugees during their stay in refugee camps.

The characteristics of Southeast Asians in the U.S. consequently reflect those of the survivors. Among Cambodians, for example, 12.2 percent were found to be widowed. Data collected during the early years of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the U.S. provide some general images of these communities. A large percentage of Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese, and Lao was from urban areas. The Hmong, on the other hand, came primarily from rural areas, as did about 50 percent of the Cambodians.

Selective data points out that Vietnamese tend to be the best educated and more proficient in the English language. More Vietnamese are professionals and technicians. They also have smaller households and the lowest fertility rate. On the opposite side are the Hmong, who have high illiteracy rates, large households, very high fertility rates, and the highest percentages of individuals with farming and fishing skills.

The Cambodians and Laotians have more diversified populations, e.g., coming from both urban and rural areas, and one third being illiter-

ate in their native languages. Their household sizes are fairly large and the fertility rates, while lower than those of the Hmong, are still significantly higher than the U.S. average of 1.8.

In reviewing the data profiling each major ethnic community below, it is critical to understand that these data were collected from a specific site in the U.S. for the populations arriving prior to 1983. Perhaps nearly 50 percent of Southeast Asians came after 1983 or were born in the U.S. Therefore, this selective data provides a glimpse of these populations which may need modification to reflect current national profiles. For example, a significant number of political prisoners arrived after 1989, which should alter the percentage of individuals from Vietnam whose previous occupation was related to the military services.

Data collected by the Office of Refugee Resettlement by September 1991 indicates that about 55 percent of Southeast Asians are males while 45 percent are females. The median age of those arriving as refugees was 28. Approximately 2 percent were pre-schoolers (this count does not include children born in the U.S.), while 21 percent were between the ages of 6-17, and an additional 19 percent were young adults between the ages 18-24. Those 65 or older constituted 3.5 percent. Altogether 60 percent were considered in the prime working age of 18-44.

Close to one third of the Southeast Asians are of school age, indicating the tremendous impact this population has on the education system in their communities of residence. The population within the age group 18-24 may also impact the vocational training or higher education systems. The majority, however, are of working age and should contribute to the general labor force in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

## **Analysis of the At-Risk Nature of the Southeast Asian Refugee Population**

### **SOCIOECONOMIC INDICATORS**

It is rather evident from the data above that Southeast Asian refugees face barriers preventing them from achieving successful adaptation to American society. Extremely high rates of illiteracy in their own native language, in the case of the Hmong, or low levels of formal education in the homeland signify that Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong must overcome greater educational gaps to achieve minimum levels of English language

**TABLE 3: General Characteristics by Ethnicity**

	Chinese	Hmong	Cambodian	Lao	Vietnamese
<b>California, 1977</b>					
Mean education (yrs.)	5.9		8.0	3.6	9.7
Some English: speaking	48.0 %		49.0 %	49.0 %	74.0 %
English: reading	47.0 %		49.0 %	50.0 %	74.0 %
<b>Five sites, 1982 (1978-82 arrivals only)</b>					
Education: at least some college	3.6 %			5.1 %	13.8 %
No formal education	6.5 %			21.0 %	1.6 %
Households with at least one person with "some" English at arrival	47.0 %			46.0 %	68.0 %
<b>San Diego, 1983</b>					
% illiterate in native language	17.6 %	70.8 %	34.2 %	26.6 %	1.0 %
Years of education	6.7	1.6	5.0	4.9	9.8
% urban	95.4 %	8.3 %	46.3 %	79.1 %	94.0 %
Months in Refugee Camps	10.3	34.3	25.5	23.0	7.8
Household size	5.8	8.7	8.3	6.3	5.5
Close family member lost	0.5	1.0	1.7		0.6
% widowed	2.3 %	3.5 %	12.2 %		1.0 %
Total fertility rate	4.7	11.9	7.4	6.6	3.4
<b>Previous occupation:</b>					
% white collar	12.2 %	5.0 %	7.1 %		33.1 %
% sales	38.8 %	2.0 %	14.2 %		18.8 %
% blue collar	27.6 %	2.0 %	8.0 %		10.5 %
% military	6.1 %	31.3 %	15.9 %		25.6 %



Notes: Figures are generally limited to adults except for such variables as household size and number of children. The five-site survey did not include Hmong and Khmer and these columns are thus blank; for the California survey, there was no separate category for Hmong. For the five-site survey, Chinese means only Sino-Vietnamese; for the California survey, this is true for the figures on education, but not those on language (for which Chinese from Vietnam and Cambodia were combined). For the San Diego data, Cambodians includes ethnic Chinese from Cambodia as well; for the California data, "Lao" includes all Laotians.

Sources: David Haines (1989); San Diego data derived from Rumbaut (1985) and Rumbaut and Weeks (1986); the 1982 five-site survey is from Caplan, Whitmore, and Bui (1985); the data for California are from Aames et al. (1977).<sup>3</sup>

and vocational skills than other refugees. Without these they cannot compete for jobs with salaries to support their large households. Lack of English language fluency has direct impact on a Southeast Asian refugee's ability to enroll in vocational training programs, or to pursue higher education. High fertility rates further exacerbate the difficult economic conditions and limit prospects for making economic improvement in the United States.

The study conducted by Ruben G. Rumbaut in San Diego found that household sizes of Southeast Asian families were significantly larger than the average U.S. household size of 2.7. The Hmong have the largest household size with an average of 8.8 persons; Cambodians average 8.7 persons; and Vietnamese households average 5.5 individuals. In contrasting nuclear family size against household size, the researchers found that the nuclear family is smaller for refugees than the U.S. population, averaging from 3.4 for Hmong to 4.0 for Cambodians. The larger household size versus nuclear family can be interpreted to mean: (a) the refugees continue to maintain the traditional extended family structure of multiple generations under one roof; and/or (b) there is an economic necessity to combine many families or single individuals within a household to pool income, especially in areas such as California where housing costs are prohibitively high.

Further analysis of household data shows that significant percentages of the Cambodian households (26.6 percent) are headed by women.

For Hmong families, approximately 16.7 percent were headed by women, as were 8.6 percent of Vietnamese families.<sup>5</sup>

Many refugee families coming from rural areas (e.g., the Hmong) would have the additional adjustment problem of leaping economically and socially from a primarily primitive agrarian culture to a post-industrialized society where economic forces and social interactions all move at a rapid pace. Those formerly rural residents who are resettled in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia have the extra burden of adapting to life in poor neighborhoods, where crime can be rampant and competition for such resources as affordable housing can create tensions among the needy populations already concentrated in the same geographic area.

Southeast Asians with professional credentials may no longer be employed in the same professions here since it is not unusual that their credentials are not accepted in the U.S. The large percentage of military personnel may also mean that there are significant numbers of Southeast Asians with skills for which there is no longer a market. There are exceptions, such as the case of former pilots who could combine their previous training and experience with English language training to secure commercial work. However, very few can successfully make this type of transition easily. The majority must learn new skills or upgrade their training to be more marketable in the new economic environment.

#### ECONOMIC INDICATORS

*Dependence on Public Assistance.*<sup>6</sup> Because the overwhelming majority of refugees from Southeast Asia arrived in the United States with little or no possessions, limited English skills and few transferable skills, Congress authorized, through the Refugee Act of 1980, an assistance program to help families and individuals overcome barriers to successful integration in the U.S.

Food, clothing, shelter, and transportation during the first 30 days following arrival in the U.S., cash grants and medical assistance up to the first 36 months in the U.S., and English language training and vocational training, job placement, counseling, and mental health services were made available through a variety of agencies and organizations.

Refugees from Southeast Asia, as with other refugee populations, are generally discouraged from applying for public assistance; in fact, most

were instructed to find work as quickly as possible. The multitude of problems experienced by this population, however, indicated a need for a transition period for moving from dependency to self-sufficiency. The most recently available data on the welfare dependency rate measures only the period during which the federal government reimbursed states for cash grants and medical assistance expenses incurred at the state level. Data from the report to Congress for the 1991 fiscal year estimated the welfare-dependency rate of Southeast Asians in the first 12 months of their resettlement in the U.S. to be about 45 percent for Vietnamese, 44 percent for Laotians (including Hmong), and close to 100 percent for Cambodians.

These estimates fluctuate from one year to another, reflecting the special populations arriving each year. For example, the high rate of dependency for Vietnamese during the fiscal year 1991 may be due to the high proportion of Amerasians admitted in that year. Additionally, these estimates must be understood from the limitation that reports on welfare dependency are not consistent from state to state. One state may choose

TABLE 4: States with the Highest Dependency Rates,  
All Refugee Populations (FY 1988, 1989)

State	Dependency Rates (%) at the End of 24 Months
California	78.9
Hawaii	76.8
Minnesota	69.1
Wisconsin	69.1
Ohio	62.9
Montana	61.3
Delaware	57.9
Washington	55.1
Oregon	50.1
Massachusetts	45.2

Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (1991).

to include a particular federal assistance program, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), while others may not. The dependency rate reported here also does not measure accurately the variable of arrival date. Consequently, if a large percentage of refugees arrived in the last two quarters of the fiscal year, the dependency rate reported actually reflects a six-month welfare utilization rate, rather than a whole year.

As a point of comparison, during the same fiscal year 1991, welfare utilization rate for immigrants from the former Soviet Union is 50 percent, for Afghans 45 percent, for Ethiopians 30 percent, and for Iranians 34 percent. Dependency rates also differ from one geographic region to another. Among the total of 183,717 refugees arriving in the U.S. between fiscal years 1988 and 1989, 43 percent were Southeast Asian.

Some states with high welfare-dependency rates are states with large concentrations of Southeast Asians. High levels of welfare dependency indicate that large numbers of Southeast Asians are living below the poverty level.

*Income/Occupational Status.*<sup>7</sup> The annual survey conducted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement measured the economic progress of Southeast Asian refugees for the first five years after resettlement. Ac-

TABLE 5: Previous and Current Occupational Status (%)  
Occupation In Country of Origin In U.S.

Occupation	In Country of Origin	In U.S.
Professional/Managerial	9.4	1.4
Sales/Clerical	26.2	16.2
<b>Total, White Collar</b>	<b>35.6</b>	<b>17.6</b>
Skilled	13.8	24.4
Semi-Skilled	3.5	35.4
Laborers	0.0	4.3
<b>Total, Blue Collar</b>	<b>17.3</b>	<b>64.0</b>
Service Workers	7.7	17.7
Farming, Fishing	39.4	0.6

Source: Refugee Resettlement Program (1992).

According to this survey for fiscal year 1991, 37 percent of the 1986 arrivals were participating in the labor force by 1991 as compared with 66 percent for the U.S. population. The first year arrivals' labor participation rate is 23 percent.

For those able to find work, the employment retention rates improve each succeeding year, in spite of the fact that the majority of Southeast Asians had to make major occupational changes upon resettlement. For those surveyed in the five-year study, 36 percent had white collar jobs in their countries of origin, but only 18 percent had white collar jobs in the U.S., largely in sales or clerical positions. The majority, 64 percent, held blue collar jobs. For the 39.4 percent who were once farmers and fishermen, only 0.6 percent work in such occupations now.

For those in the labor force, the average wage earned during the first five years is estimated at \$209.20 per week, or \$5.23 per hour. The relatively low wages for the first five years and the fairly large family sizes may explain why Southeast Asians continue to have to rely on public assistance. For those households with employed individuals, it takes more than two income earners to be economically independent. Households with more than six members and close to two individuals employed would still need some public assistance. Ability to speak English appears to be a major determinant regarding job acquisition and retention. The larger the number of individuals in a family who can speak English fluently, the higher the family employment rate.

#### HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH INDICATORS

What separates a refugee from an immigrant is the impetus and the conditions for leaving their country of origin. For refugees, a decision to leave is normally based on survival, yet escape from the homeland is equally life-threatening. For those fortunate enough to survive the escape, they must often face complete lack of control over their lives during their stay in the refugee camps. The experience of loss, whether of loved ones, ancestral homes, or country, remains with them for the rest of their lives. The impact of such experiences may not be felt or exhibited until years later when the immediate needs for shelter, clothing, and food are met.

Most studies on mental health and psychological adaptation document the deep depression experienced by refugees. For Cambodians in

TABLE 6: English Speakers and Job Acquisition

	Household Receiving Assistance	Household with Jobs & Assistance	Household with Jobs Only
Average household size	5.1	6.0	4.4
Number of wage earners	0	1.7	2.1
% with at least one fluent	7.5	21.7	29.3
% with children under 16	45.6	25.1	18.0

Source: Refugee Resettlement Program (1992).

particular, post-traumatic stress syndrome is a common experience for many adults and children who survived the "Killing Fields." The Sudden Death Syndrome, experienced primarily by Hmong, is a phenomenon where physically healthy young men die in their sleep. These experiences serve as indicators that many refugees must confront both the stress of adaptation to their new lives in the U.S. as well as the painful memories of their losses and trauma.

Studies have shown that the mental health of individual refugees is predicated upon the conditions which preceded their arrival in the U.S. and the conditions in the communities of resettlement. Ruben Rumbaut's study, "Mental Health and the Refugee Experience," conducted in 1985, found that 65.8 percent of Cambodians had lost at least one family member, 83.3 percent were separated from their family, and 76.3 percent could not communicate with families left behind. For Vietnamese, on the other hand, 42 percent reported having a family member jailed by the government in power, 30 percent were assaulted during their escape, and 39.5 percent had lost family members.<sup>8</sup>

Over 73 percent of all Southeast Asians surveyed in this study experienced fear of being killed during their escape attempts, and more than half were without food while escaping.

The trauma experienced by the refugees were often exacerbated by life in the refugee camps. At their best, these camps provided a transient respite with a subsistence level of food and some social or educational programs. At their worst, such as the border camps in Thailand or the

holding centers in Hong Kong, the refugee camps were detention centers keeping refugees inside barbed wire compounds with minimal provisions of security, food, and shelter. These facilities became breeding grounds for hopelessness, anger, depression, and social problems. The longer the refugees stayed in these camps, the more difficult their adjustment tended to be upon arrival in the U.S.

Among the multiple barriers preventing Southeast Asians from seeking jobs, health problems were cited by 56.8 percent of those age 44 and older as the major barrier, according to the FY92 Refugee Resettlement Report to Congress.

The Center for Disease Control of the Public Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services, is charged with providing health screening to detect problems considered a possible threat to U.S. public health. The Center has identified for states working with Southeast Asian refugees that priority areas for health screening and follow-up care include tuberculosis, hepatitis B, anemia, malnutrition, and hearing, vision, and dental problems. These areas of concern indicate that poor health care, or the absence of health care systems in home countries and refugee camps, have generated unique problems for refugees requiring special attention.

## SOCIAL PROBLEMS

In February 1989, *The Los Angeles Times* commissioned an extensive survey on the Vietnamese community in Orange County where an estimated 100,000 Vietnamese reside. Findings from this survey show that 41 percent of Vietnamese considered gangs and crime as the most serious problem facing the community in Orange County.<sup>9</sup>

The Vietnamese concerns, however, are widely shared. Reports from community leaders indicate that there are widespread juvenile delinquency problems among all Southeast Asian communities. Children as young as 12 or 13 are reported to be engaging in gang-like activities. This problem has received more attention in recent years but there is still no adequate research to understand the cause and magnitude of the problem. Suffice it to say that juvenile delinquency and criminal activities are common to most communities on the lower end of the economic social strata. For refugee youth, the inability to catch up with their peers in schools and their sense of alienation from their families due to cultural

gaps no doubt contribute significantly to this rebellion against institutions and law and order.

Other social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse also surfaced as major concerns in Southeast Asian communities. To a large degree, these problems again have not been adequately studied to determine their impact on family and community life. It may be plausible to speculate that the trauma experienced by refugees plays a role in drug and alcohol abuse.

*The Los Angeles Times* survey also reported that the Vietnamese consider "assimilation" as their second most serious concern, even greater than their concern for jobs. This may reflect the fact that the community sees itself as still being very isolated due to little opportunity for interaction with the larger community and because of limited English proficiency.

Special populations such as Amerasians and former political prisoners have greater needs than other refugee populations because of the hardships experienced prior to their arrival in this country. While there are limited assistance programs, the magnitude of their needs deserves more attention and creative solutions.

Among the Hmong population, the tradition of early marriage for young women in their early teens has presented a cultural, social and economic dilemma for the community and for the new generation of Hmong in particular. These early marriages prevent teenagers from finishing their education, and with early pregnancy, the prospect for continuing their education or improving their economic conditions becomes even more difficult. Challenging this tradition, on the other hand, would mean questioning cultural values and practices of the Hmong people, who have already experienced great losses. Such clashes involving cultural values and practices also manifest themselves in the increasing rates of domestic violence and divorce among all the Southeast Asian populations. Family breakdowns can also result from role changes, or from difficulties confronting couples who have been separated for a number of years—especially in the case of former political prisoners.



## Prospects for the Southeast Asian Refugee Community

The data presented above suggest some of the challenges confronting Southeast Asian refugees in their quest to become full participants and productive citizens in their adopted land.

Economic survival depends not only on their ability to acquire new skills and achieve a level of English competency, but also on their capacity to overcome social and cultural barriers preventing them from realizing their full potential. For the first generation of refugees, these problems may seem insurmountable. There are also, however, indications that for some in this first generation, the prospect can be rather promising.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement has been able to examine the income gains of Southeast Asians after the first five years by collecting data from the Internal Revenue Service for those individuals arriving between the years of 1975 and 1979. This was possible because a block of Social Security numbers was given to these Southeast Asians at that time. These data reveal that after ten years, the average income of those arriving in 1975 is \$17,092. At this level, the 1975 arrivals had achieved an income equal to the average U.S. resident. Again, it is important to note that refugees arriving in this country in 1975 were primarily the Vietnamese "elite" who generally had some English proficiency, a high level of education, and an urban background. Their experience therefore cannot be seen as representative for the larger percentage of refugees arriving in later years.<sup>10</sup>

The report from the Bureau of the Census shows that between 1982 to 1987, the number of businesses owned by individuals identifying themselves as Vietnamese increased 414 percent, from 4,989 businesses in 1982 to 25,671 businesses in 1987 with the reported receipts of \$532,200,000 in 1982 to \$1,361,000,000 in 1987. This increase is more remarkable when compared to the 87 percent increase for all Asian American populations, and 14 percent for all U.S. firms during the same period.<sup>11</sup> It appears that the Vietnamese have contributed, through self-employment, to expanding the economy by meeting the needs created by the new population. Through such expansion, they created jobs for themselves and for the local labor force. These entrepreneurial activities promoted new commercial areas, showing that the Vietnamese commu-

nity can serve as a viable economic force. In some cases, Vietnamese refugees revitalized inner city neighborhoods in Chicago, Illinois, and Arlington, Virginia. In other locations, entire new ethnic commercial centers, such as Westminster for the Vietnamese and Long Beach for the Cambodians, created new cultural centers in areas where Asians were once invisible.

Annual reports on scholastic performance of the Southeast Asian refugee children point to a long list of valedictorians and academic contest winners. Glowing as these reports are, they should not mask the high drop-out rate among other Southeast Asian youth who arrived in the U.S. after having their education disrupted. These young people have not been able to catch up with their peers because of lost time as well as their limited English proficiency.

The portrait of the Southeast Asians, thus, is a community of extremes. The success of some seems extraordinary in view of the obstacles they must overcome. The failure of others who have not achieved economic self-sufficiency or overcome the social, cultural and language barriers exasperates both the individuals who have survived the worst horrors, as well as their community leaders, who struggle to establish a place for their people in this highly competitive and pluralistic society.

The success of some young Southeast Asian professionals and the alienation and despair of other young Southeast Asian gang members demonstrates the wide range of prospects for Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in the U.S. The implications of this profile of extremes point to the need to view these communities as not homogeneous, but rather as consisting of multiple subgroups defined by ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, different experiences before and after arrival, and different potentials for development.

### **Policy Implications**

Public and private institutions concerned with alleviating poverty must not overlook the Southeast Asian communities, whose problems may be hidden through lumping together with other Asian Americans who have achieved a relative degree of economic success. This misperception may deny opportunities for Southeast Asians to work on their own problems and to improve the conditions of less fortunate community members.

The lack of knowledge about conditions in Southeast Asian communities is presently not limited to public and private institutions working on poverty issues. Asian American and Southeast Asian communities and leaders also need to be more informed. While the annual report to Congress prepared by the Office of Refugee Resettlement yields important data on the background and economic progress of Southeast Asians, further studies are necessary to understand the reasons for the shortcomings and to explore strategies and programs which could help those communities gain economic and social self-sufficiency. A new generation of young Southeast Asian social scientists should be employed to conduct research studies to provide cultural and linguistic insight into these issues.

Of utmost importance is the need to begin working more closely and directly with families living in poverty to help find better prospects for their economic survival. Programs are needed for the adult populations, as well as for the next generations, to avoid development of a cycle of poverty. Social problems associated with poverty are severe enough to warrant immediate actions by policy-makers. The youth delinquency problem and gang-like activities must be dealt with through prevention programs.

To this end, the leadership of Southeast Asian communities needs to be equipped with appropriate skills and knowledge of the economic and social problems confronting members of their communities. The success of community leaders in solving these problems is crucial to the success of the community as a whole. The investment of resources in refugee community organizations is a crucial means in a long-term strategy for responding to the needs of the less fortunate.

Additionally, because of their economic conditions, Southeast Asians generally live among other ethnic and minority populations who face many of the same social and economic barriers. For this reason, inter-ethnic and interracial relations skills must be developed by and for community leaders to build a climate of tolerance and acceptance. Otherwise, there will be interethnic tensions due to the perceptions of others that the refugees are receiving preferential treatment or are competing with others for limited resources. Southeast Asians could become useful bridge builders between communities of different economic and social backgrounds, because of their unique experience in which many who were once "the haves" are now "the have-nots."

## Specific Action/Policy Recommendations

### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

- Congress and the administration should provide adequate funding to at least maintain the level of assistance provided to new arrivals. Loss of funding allocated through the Office of Refugee Resettlement would result in decreasing levels of services and create undue pressure at the state and local levels, where resources are limited.
- The coordination of services among federal, state, and local government and with the private sector, including Southeast Asian self-help organizations, is critical to the successful integration of Southeast Asians in the U.S. Policies and funding decisions affecting these various sectors must be made with the intent to maintain and build on the crucial role of each type of institution, rather than giving particular institutions more control in the initial resettlement effort.
- Private foundations and corporations should provide more resources to programs addressing the multiple needs of this at-risk population.
- Programs addressing family needs must be developed to prevent further breakdown and the escalation of existing problems. Gang prevention, family counseling, and early pregnancy prevention are urgent needs calling for immediate attention.

### EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- Employment and training programs must take into consideration the unique language and skill transfer needs of the Southeast Asians. Professionals and skilled workers should be provided opportunities for retraining or upgrading their skills. Those without transferable skills should be placed

in programs promoting employment and training simultaneously.

- Additional English classes should be provided for the adult population. Long waiting periods for enrollment in language classes in major urban areas prolong the integration process both economically and socially.
- Funding to support K-12 education institutions serving this at-risk population must be restored in order for public schools to continue providing necessary remedial and early intervention programs critical to the needs of Southeast Asian youth.

## HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Public education and preventative programs, such as health screening to address communicable diseases and good health care habits, must be expanded. The use of community organizations and culturally and linguistically appropriate methods are crucial to eradicate existing health problems and teach better health care practices.
- Special efforts to recruit and train Southeast Asians to work in the fields of public health and mental health are very much needed to ensure that bicultural and bilingual professionals and para-professionals are available to work with communities and to provide direct services to individuals in need of counseling and intervention.
- Funding for mental health services is also crucial to meet the needs of those experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome and adaptation crises. Community resources for addressing the needs, such as cultural events and the role of religious leaders, must be recognized and supported.

## Notes

1. The two major sources of information for this paper are the *Fiscal Year 1991 Report of the Office of Refugee Resettlement to Congress, Refugee Resettlement Program, Report to Congress*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, DHHS, Washington, D.C., January 31, 1992; and the book edited by David Haines, *Refugees as Immigrant: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989).
2. U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).
3. See David Haines, ed., *Refugees as Immigrants*. The San Diego data derive from Ruben Rumbaut, "Mental Health and the Refugee Experience: A Comparative Study of Southeast Asian Refugees," in *Southeast Asian Mental Health: Treatment, Prevention, Services, Training and Research*, edited by Tom C. Owan (Rockville, Maryland: National Institute of Mental Health, 1985), 441; and Ruben Rumbaut and John F. Weeks, "Fertility and Adaptation: Indochinese Refugees in the U.S.," *International Migration Review* (1986), 445. The 1982 five site survey is from Nathan Caplan, John K. Whitmore, and Quang Bui, *Southeast Asian Refugee Self-Sufficiency Study: Final Report* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, 1985), 46, 48, 57, and 70. The data for California are from Jacqueline Aames et al., *Indochinese Refugee Self-Sufficiency in California: A Survey and Analysis of the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Lao and the Agencies That Serve Them. Report Submitted to the California State Department of Health, State of California* (Sacramento, 1977), 16, 106, and 107.
4. *Fiscal Year 1991 Report*, Office of Refugee Resettlement.
5. Ruben Rumbaut, "Southeast Asian Refugees in San Diego County: A Statistical Profile." Report prepared for IHARP (Indochinese Health and Adaptation Research Project), Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego, 1984.
6. Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Fiscal Year 1991 Report*.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ruben Rumbaut, "Mental Health and the Refugee Experience."
9. Steve Emmons and David Reyes, "Gangs, Crimes Feared Most by Vietnamese," *Los Angeles Times* (February 5, 1989).
10. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Refugee Resettlement Program, Report to Congress*, DHHS, Washington, D.C., January 31, 1992; January 31, 1991; and January 31, 1990.
11. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Economics and Statistics Administrations, "Business Firms Owned by Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians and Alaska Natives Increased 87 Percent Over Five Years, Census Shows," Washington, D.C., August 2, 1991.