



THE HIDDEN PLIGHT OF ASIAN AMERICANS IN POVERTY

Includes an In-Depth Look at the Growing Number of
At-Risk Children in Montgomery County, MD



A SPECIAL REPORT BY AALEAD

A CROSS THE UNITED STATES more than 12 million children are growing up in poverty. They are of all races and all ethnicities. Many live in distressed communities where whole neighborhoods – or regions – suffer from hardship. But others live in small pockets of poverty, overlooked and underserved. Our concern as a nation must be for all children in need, whatever their backgrounds. This report focuses on a misunderstood, even invisible population of disadvantaged youth – Asian American children living in poverty in one of the wealthiest communities in the U.S.

Asian Americans are one of the fastest

economic and educational spectrum.⁵

Looking at aggregate figures, one might easily assume that virtually all Asian Americans are living the American Dream. Census data puts Asian Americans as a group at the top of the income scale, with the highest education levels of any racial group.⁶ Asian Americans are more likely to graduate from college and doctoral programs, and to come from two-parent homes than any other population in our country today.

But a closer look at these figures tells another story. While as a group Asian Americans fare well, a substantial

Invisible Americans

growing racial groups in the U.S. A little over three decades ago, Asian Americans were a tiny fraction of the population – under one percent, comprised of mostly U.S.-born Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans.¹ Today, that percentage has increased more than five fold, largely due to immigration.² By 2050, experts predict that Asian Americans will make up eight percent of the population, or 33 million people.³

Asian Americans are also the most diverse racial group by language, culture, and religion. Two out of three Asian Americans today are immigrants, representing one out of every four foreign-born persons living in the U.S.⁴ Covering more than 34 ethnicities and speaking more than 300 languages and dialects, Asian Americans span the

subgroup falls far below the poverty line. Per capita income for Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans is about half that of whites, and below that of African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians. The homeownership rate for Asian Americans lags that for white Americans by 20 percentage points.⁷ Asian American households are more overcrowded than the general U.S. population by 10 percent.⁸ One in eight Asian Americans lives in poverty. This figure includes one in every six Vietnamese Americans, and more than one in every four Cambodian Americans. High school graduate rates range from 88 percent for Japanese Americans to 31 percent for Hmong.⁹ One in five Asian immigrants has less than a high school diploma.¹⁰ Asian Americans as a group are more than four times as likely as

Caucasians to have no formal schooling; that figure includes one in four Laotian women and one in two Hmong women in America.¹¹

Significant disparities also exist within individual ethnic groups. For example, while Chinese Americans, the largest Asian ethnic group in the United States, are among the more affluent Asian American subgroups,¹² this ethnic group also includes a large low-income population, with 14 percent of Chinese Americans living below poverty. Ethnic Chinese who are foreign born are twice as likely as native born Chinese Americans to be poor.¹³ Despite their longer history in the United States, only 15 percent of the Chinese American population reports speaking English at home, and half are unable to speak English “very well.”¹⁴

Part of the explanation for this disparity comes from the ways in which these

families came to the U.S. Restrictive immigration laws in place into the 1960s prevented large numbers of Asians from immigrating – most of these immigrants were single men who were not allowed to bring their families to the U.S. The American descendants of these early immigrants have fared

Per capita income for Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian Americans is about half that of whites.

relatively well. When immigration laws were changed in 1965 in part as a strategy to respond to a shortage of engineering and medical personnel, a large influx of Asian immigrants began, including many employer-sponsored skilled workers.¹⁵ These immigrants have also been relatively economically and educationally successful as a group.



THE LAST DECADES, however, have brought other populations of Asian immigrants to the United States under far less favorable circumstances. In the 1970s, refugees from Southeast Asia came to the United States in waves, beginning with the Vietnamese resistance force. A second wave of “boat people” fleeing Vietnam came at the end of the 1970s, with still more coming in the 1980s after spending time in refugee camps in other countries. Yet another group of refugees were Amerasians – children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women – who were admitted to the U.S. in large numbers in the late 1980s.¹⁶

These populations came to the U.S. in

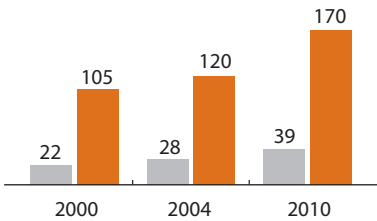
many cases with limited educations, without knowing English, and after living for years in prison, war zones, or refugee camps. Amerasians carried the added burden of the effects of discrimination in their country of origin, where they were considered outcasts and ineligible for education and jobs. These refugees and their children have too often struggled to gain a footing in America.

In addition, widely held stereotypes about Asian Americans as a “model minority” have further disadvantaged these families, as people make assumptions that an Asian American who is a weak student is simply not trying. At the same time, strong

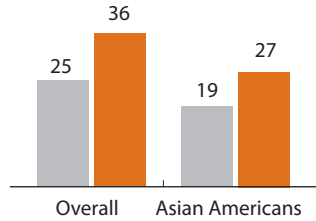
Asian Americans in Montgomery County



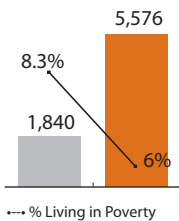
Population Trends (thousands)



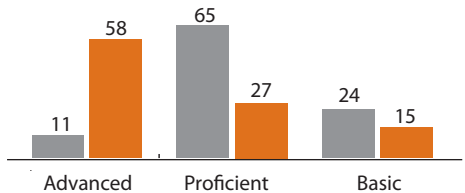
Income Levels (thousands \$)

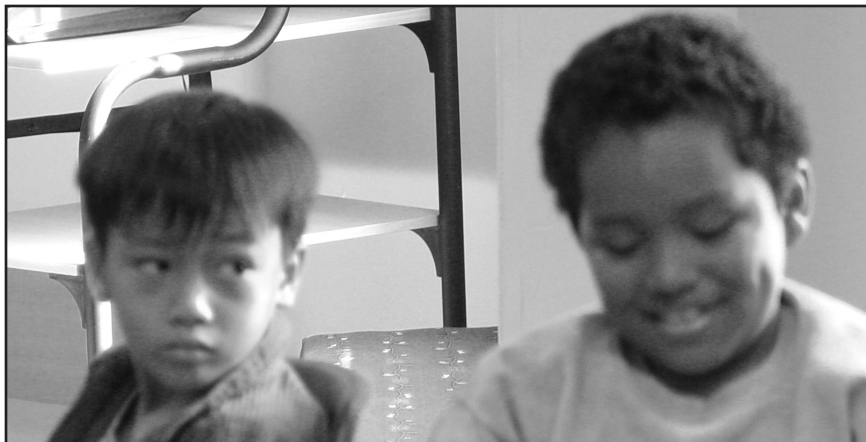


Poverty Rates



3rd Grade Reading Scores





achievers may feel conflicted that their success reinforces a stereotype or believe that they are held to an even higher, unattainable standard. Some experts see a connection between this pervasive stereotype and the high rate of mental health problems and suicides among Asian American girls and young women.¹⁷

While their need is great, low-income Asian American families are too often left to fend for themselves. Language and cultural differences limit their ability to navigate the complexities of the public education and social service systems. Forty percent of Asian Americans are limited English proficient,¹⁸ and three out of four Asian American school-age children are foreign born or have parents who are recent immigrants.¹⁹ Because children typically learn English more easily than parents, families rely on even young children to serve as translators, an inadequate solution that in some cases undermines parental authority and causes the children to miss days of school when their parents need their help. Violent crime, gang participation, and drug abuse involve increasing

numbers of Asian American youth in some communities.²⁰

Lack of knowledge of the needs of vulnerable Asian American families – even of their existence – has contributed to a lack of attention from policymakers,

More than one third of the immigrants in Washington, DC, metropolitan area, are from Asia.

philanthropists, educators, and other service providers. In a few parts of the country with highly concentrated populations of Asian American families, a social service infrastructure exists to meet their needs. While often under funded and thereby limited in their scope, these organizations offer support for vulnerable Asian American families. However, most schools serving low-income Asian Americans

students are unaware of challenges facing these families and rarely have ties to community groups knowledgeable about the needs of these families. (For example, a government study found that while 73 percent of Asian American students were language minorities, only 27 percent were recognized as such by their teachers).²¹ In many cases, such organizations do not exist, or operate with no paid staff. Although Asian Americans comprise 4 percent of the population, only 0.3 percent of philanthropic dollars go to organizations working in these communities.²² As a result, large numbers of these families remain unconnected to

organizations that can help them.

Washington-Baltimore area

While the vast majority of Asian Americans lives on the west coast, Maryland and Virginia have a higher than average Asian American population.²³ The Washington-Baltimore area experienced significant growth in its overall population from 1990 to 2000, adding nearly 1 million people, or a population gain of 13 percent. Asians and other minorities accounted for two-thirds of the Washington region's recent population growth, according to 2000 figures.

A large percentage of the region's

Behind the Numbers

TUAN is a 34-year-old Vietnamese refugee, married to a white Amerasian woman, and has three children. He works as a hotel janitor, and has no steady income or benefits. Both he and his wife earn extra income by cleaning offices on a "cash-basis." The entire family lives in a one-bedroom apartment. Tuan is completely absent in his children's lives – he does not know his children's ages, schools, or grades, and provides no guidance or discipline. His wife has a first grade education, cannot read or write in her native language, and suffers from low self-confidence. Last fall, Tuan bought and returned three cars within a five-month period, plunging his family several thousand dollars in debt. Although his dream is to buy a home, he is unable to plan long-term for the benefit of his family.

ANH-THU is a 35-year-old black Amerasian woman. Within two days of arriving in the United States, her husband abandoned her and her infant child, telling her that he did not love her and was only using her to immigrate to the United States. A few months later, she began a relationship with a black Amerasian man, and has been living with him for the past decade. Anh-Thu, who only has a 5th grade education, works 6 days a week, 12 hours a day sorting mail at the United States Postal Service. She now has four children, of which two have repeated a grade and face continued school failure. Although Anh-Thu loves her children, she does not know how to discipline or guide them, and allows them to do whatever they want. Their building owner is now demanding that the family leave, saying that 6 people in a one-bedroom apartment is too crowded.



population increase has been in immigrants, making the area the seventh-largest immigrant gateway in the United States.²⁴ In some jurisdictions, such as Montgomery County, the growth in the immigrant population has far exceeded increases in the native-born population.²⁵ Silver Spring, with nearly 27,000 immigrants, had the largest number of immigrant residents in the region, with more than 35 percent of its population foreign born.²⁶ One in five immigrant households in the area lack adults who are proficient in English.²⁷ The growing presence of these families has created demand for English classes, document translations and other services.²⁸

More than one third of the immigrants in Washington, DC, metropolitan area, are from Asia. Growth in the Asian American population has been driven

primarily by increases in the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Asian Indian populations.²⁹ This growth has been concentrated in areas surrounding Washington, DC, with Montgomery County, Maryland, receiving the largest percentage increase in its Asian American population.³⁰

The Asian American population in Montgomery County totaled 120,000 in 2004, and at current growth rates is expected to rise to more than 170,000 by the year 2010. Demographically, this population is diverse, with significant numbers of wealthy and well-educated Asian Americans as well as low-income Asian American families who too often face the challenges of inadequate housing, lack of physical and mental health services, and no access to culturally competent and linguistically appropriate nonprofit and

government services, and limited access to English language classes and job training. Disproportionate numbers of their children are struggling in school, and subject to many of the risk factors faced by other disadvantaged youth – exposure to substance abuse, violence, and gang activity.

As a group, Asian Americans in Montgomery County lag behind the



general county population in per capita income. In certain parts of the county, particularly the Wheaton-Glenmont-Silver Spring area, the differential between the county-wide averages and the Asian American population is quite dramatic. The Asian American per capita income here, at \$19,995 in 2000, was just over half the county-wide average income figure.

Nearly 5,500 Asian Americans in Montgomery County live in poverty. Their poverty rate of 6% is about the same as that of the overall county population. But this overall figure masks large pockets of poor families that are

concentrated in the Silver Spring and Wheaton-Glenmont areas, where about a third of the poor Asian American population of Montgomery County lives.

In 2002, of the approximately 140,000 students enrolled in Montgomery County public schools, around 20 thousand, or 14 percent were Asian American.³¹ The enrollment of Asian American students can be expected to grow to somewhere between 25,000 & 27,000 by the year 2010.

Overall, almost 23% of the public school students in the County are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, or FARMS.³² These figures go up to as high as 45% for Asian Americans in the Silver Spring and Wheaton-Glenmont area. For example, of the 43 elementary schools in the Silver Spring and Wheaton-Glenmont area,

25 have more than one-third of their Asian American students eligible for free or reduced price lunches; 12 of these schools have more than half of their Asian American students eligible.³³

The performance of Asian American students in Montgomery County reflects the wide diversity of this subpopulation in the area, as in the nation. For example, while countywide there is a disproportionately large number of Asian American students performing at the Advanced level in both sixth grade reading and math, there is also a disproportionately large number of Asian American students performing

below the proficient level in areas of higher concentration of poor and low-income students. For example, larger percentages (about 24%) of Asian American 3rd Graders in the Silver Spring and Wheaton-Glenmont areas are performing at the Basic levels on the Maryland School Assessment data.³⁴

Policy Implications

Despite the fact that low-income Asian American youth are a growing presence in Montgomery County, service providers have not been able to respond to their unique needs. Language- and culturally appropriate services – from after-school and mentoring programs to health care and social services – are limited or altogether unavailable. For example, a survey of local providers conducted by the Monitor Group identified that there are very few organizations that have linguistically and culturally appropriate services available to low income Asian American youth and families in Montgomery County.

The Asian-American population is expected to grow significantly over the next half decade, largely through new immigration and births to immigrants already living in the County.³⁵ If the needs of these families mirror those of low-income Asian American immigrants here and elsewhere, the demand for services will increase substantially. As policymakers, philanthropists, and others plan for the future of Montgomery County, these families and their special needs must be taken into consideration or they will be left even further behind.

Disproportionate numbers of their children are struggling in school, and subject to many of the risk factors faced by other disadvantaged youth.

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