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Surveying Southeast Asian Welfare Participants:

Examples, Challenges, and Future Directions

Evelyn Blumenberg, Lily K. Song, and Paul M. Ong

Abstract

Numerous studies have examined the effects of welfare reform on the employment and caseload dynamics of welfare recipients in California. Yet, despite their overrepresentation among welfare recipients, Southeast Asians have received relatively little scholarly attention. This study explores one explanation for this finding—the challenges of collecting data on Southeast Asian welfare recipients and, in particular, the difficulties associated with surveying this population group. These difficulties include attracting adequate funding to recruit sizeable Southeast Asian samples, translating survey materials into Southeast Asian languages, and effectively administering surveys among a highly mobile population group with low English language proficiency. To strengthen research on this important but understudied population group, researchers must build political and financial support for such research, develop appropriate research designs informed by an understanding of the characteristics of Southeast Asian families, communities, and welfare recipients; rely on refugee support organizations to help overcome resistance to participating in survey research; and make the data available to interested scholars to maximize the impact of these data collection efforts.

Introduction

Southeast Asians currently comprise a disproportionate percentage of welfare recipients in California, particularly in counties such as Los Angeles and Orange that were ports of entry for Southeast Asian refugees during the late 1970s and 1980s. In California, numerous studies have examined the effects of welfare reform on the employment and caseload dynamics of recipients in the state. However, despite their overrepresentation among welfare recipi-

ents and the additional barriers they face in moving off public assistance and into the labor market, Southeast Asians have received relatively little scholarly attention.

Without detailed information and analysis, it is difficult to formulate sound policies and develop effective programs. Any analytical effort requires good data. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to examine the challenges of collecting data on Southeast Asian welfare recipients and, in particular, the difficulties associated with surveying this population group. We first briefly review the connection between Southeast Asians and welfare. We then examine existing survey-based welfare studies in California to assess the extent to which these studies include a Southeast Asian sample and report outcomes for Southeast Asian welfare recipients. Because of the limitations of administrative data, survey data are critical to studying the impact of welfare reform on Southeast Asians, particularly their workforce barriers and participation in welfare-to-work programs. Therefore, third, drawing from interviews with investigators and survey administrators as well as our own experiences, we explore the challenges of surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients.

Southeast Asian welfare recipients differ substantially from other welfare recipients, confounding attempts to apply the findings of general welfare studies to the behavior of this particular group. Consequently, understanding the welfare dynamics of Southeast Asians requires focused study only possible through survey research. Our interviews suggest that surveying Southeast Asians poses some significant challenges. We conclude, therefore, with recommendations to strengthen research on this important but understudied population group.

Southeast Asians and Welfare Reform

Following the Vietnam War (1959-1975) and the political turmoil in Cambodia and Laos, millions of Southeast Asian refugees relocated abroad, the majority settling in the United States. California became a popular destination for Southeast Asian refugees, home to four of the top ten U.S. metropolitan areas for refugee resettlement between 1983 and 2004 (Singer and Wilson, 2007). Within Southeast Asian immigration waves, earlier arrivals tended to reflect higher socioeconomic backgrounds, while the latter group, often referred to as “boat people,” arrived with less capital,

education, and professional skills. Consequently many Southeast Asian arrivals were poor and continue to experience high rates of poverty in the U.S. As Table 1 shows, the poverty rate is 13 percent; in contrast average poverty rates for Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese are high, 25, 28, 50, and 15 percent respectively.

To facilitate the integration of Southeast Asian refugees, in 1975, the federal government instituted the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, providing funds for resettlement as well as economic assistance through the welfare system for the 1.4 million Southeast Asian refugees who subsequently relocated to the United States. The Department of Health and Human Services, through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, was responsible for administering cash and medical assistance as well as social services to arriving refugees (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). The federal welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, disbursed refugee cash assistance.

Given their historical circumstance, Southeast Asians have disproportionately high rates of welfare usage. A survey by the California Department of Social Services found that Asians, a category that includes Vietnamese, Laotian, Chinese, Cambodian, Asian Indian, Korean and Japanese, comprise almost 15 percent (97,572) of total welfare recipients in California (California Department of Social Services, 2005) but only 11 percent of the California population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Southeast Asians represent approximately 90 percent of the total Asian CalWORKs caseload (CDSS, 2005) while accounting for less than 3 percent of the California population.¹ Asians are particularly overrepresented among two-parent welfare households, accounting for 34 percent (43,911) of this welfare household type. Moreover, over 18 percent of CalWORKs household heads whose primary language is non-English speak Vietnamese, Cambodian, a Chinese language, Hmong, or Laotian as their primary language. After Spanish, Vietnamese is the most widely spoken non-English primary language among CalWORKs heads of household.

Initially, the federal government funded refugee cash and medical assistance without time limitations on the receipt of aid and reimbursed states for the full costs of their AFDC, Medicaid, and Supplementary Security Income (SSI) programs. However, over time federal lawmakers increasingly limited immigrant aid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002), culminat-

Table 1. Characteristics of Southeast Asians, California (2005)

	Total	Cambodian	Laotian	Hmong	Vietnamese
Total Population	35,278,768	92,220	67,704	65,814	581,545
Social Characteristics					
% foreign born	27.2%	56%	58.7%	45.9%	66.7%
Language other than English	42.3%	86.5%	89.2%	96%	87.6%
< H.S. diploma	19.9%	47.9%	37.3%	53%	25.8%
Income					
With cash assistance	3.4%	18.1%	12.6%	31.3%	5.3%
Per capita income	\$26,800	\$11,469	\$13,106	\$7,947	\$20,717
Below federal poverty line	13.3%	24.8%	28.3%	49.6%	14.9%
Employment Status					
With earnings	82.5%	80.6%	79.4%	79.2%	88.6%
Unemployment rate	7.2%	13.6%	9.8%	11.2%	7.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2005). American Community Survey, S0201: Selected Population Profile in the U.S., data for California.

ing in the passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996. PRWORA replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) under a new paradigm of “welfare-to-work.” The new welfare legislation put an end to welfare as an entitlement, imposed strict work-related requirements and a five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt, and gave states substantial new authority to shape their TANF programs.

The new federal law also made it more difficult for immigrants to qualify for public aid. Under PRWORA, “qualified” immigrants—those with documentation—are eligible for a range of public benefits; however, eligibility varies depending on citizenship status, date of arrival, and state of residence. Naturalized citizens have full access to all federal means-tested programs including TANF and refugees and asylum-seekers are eligible for benefits for seven years after their date of entry. Among immigrants who are not naturalized citizens, the federal government granted states the right to determine whether to extend TANF to immigrants who entered prior to welfare reform—in other words, before August 22, 1996 (Fix and Passel, 2002), and to recent immigrants who have lawfully resided in the country for over five years.

In response to federal legislation, California adopted the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids Program (CalWORKs) in 1998. Consistent with federal mandates, CalWORKs promotes economic self-sufficiency among low-income families by means of sustained employment. With respect to immigrants, California extended TANF benefits to non-citizens who legally arrived in the U.S. prior to welfare reform as well as to those who arrived post-welfare reform after five years of U.S. residency (Singer, 2004). Further, California is one of twenty-three states with a state-funded TANF program for legal immigrants ineligible for federal assistance during their first five years in the U.S. (Singer, 2004).

Despite California’s efforts to maintain a safety net for immigrants, studies show that immigrants in California are disproportionately affected by the complicated array of new welfare rules and regulations. Non-citizens experience a greater decline in welfare approval and use rates compared to citizens (Borjas, 2002; Tumlin and Zimmerman, 2003; Zimmerman and Fix, 1998). Immigrants also exit welfare at slower rates than native-born fami-

lies (Tumlin and Zimmerman, 2003; Zimmerman and Fix, 1998). Additionally, immigrants with limited English language skills are the least likely to leave welfare and, conversely, the most likely to have reached the five-year time limit on the receipt of benefits yet remain financially eligible (California Budget Project, 2002). A study by the California Budget Project (2002) estimated that in four California counties (Alameda, Orange, San Francisco, and Santa Clara) more than half of all adults who timed out in January 2003 spoke an Asian language.²

Southeast Asians are particularly sensitive to changes in welfare rules and regulations given their high welfare usage rates and their susceptibility to the negative impacts of welfare reform. Yet few studies have examined the welfare dynamics of Southeast Asians. Numerous welfare studies include data on major racial/ethnic groups, describing their welfare use and dynamics.³ While existing data (administrative and census) are important to developing a better understanding of welfare dynamics in California, they tend not to include detailed racial/ethnic categories nor have sample sizes large enough to examine Southeast Asians. Southeast Asians are often grouped together with other Asian immigrants from various countries of origin, despite the wide diversity of those falling within the Asian category and the preponderance of Southeast Asians among Asian welfare recipients.

Southeast Asian welfare recipients differ substantially from other welfare recipients in their historical eligibility stemming from refugee status as well as their characteristics. Compared to other welfare recipient groups Southeast Asians are more likely to live in two-parent households. Among refugee recipients in California, 67 percent live in two-parent households compared to only 25 percent among all recipients (California Department of Social Services, 2005). Southeast Asian recipients are also more likely to be linguistically isolated than other recipient groups. Data from the 2005 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census show that approximately 52 percent of Southeast Asians are linguistically isolated (speak English less than "very well") compared to 41 percent of Mexicans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Finally, Southeast Asian welfare recipients are more likely to have persistent mental and physical health problems resulting from their migration experience (Abe et al., 1994; Kinzie et al., 1990) that impede their ability to work. Such differences underscore the importance of

understanding the welfare dynamics of Southeast Asians. Given the dearth of existing information, survey data based on sizeable samples are essential to studying this population group.

Methodology

To conduct this study, we first examined the extent to which Southeast Asians have been included in existing California welfare studies. We focus on research conducted since the implementation of welfare reform in California and draw our sample of studies primarily from the Welfare Policy Research Project (WPRP) of the University of California Office of the President. Established in conjunction with the adoption of CalWORKs in 1997, the WPRP is legislatively mandated with a set of responsibilities that includes maintenance of a searchable welfare research database for the State of California. The WPRP database accounts for a total of 650 studies on the subject of welfare. Of these, 152 focus on the CalWORKs program of which ninety-four were completed in 1999 or later. Exactly half (forty-seven) of these studies are based on survey data, both original and secondary, and eleven include Southeast Asians among their sample. The seemingly low counts across the board may be attributed to the fact that the WPRP database does not exhaustively account for existing research on welfare. We determined the number of studies that include Southeast Asians among their survey sample based on a keyword search that relied on terms like "Southeast Asian," "Vietnamese," "Cambodian," and references to other Southeast Asian ethnicities. Surveys that sampled Southeast Asians but failed to include specific references within the descriptive text provided to the WPRP database were not identified through the keyword search.

In addition to the WPRP database, we also searched academic journals and online portals of major research and policy organizations for studies on welfare recipients post CalWORKs. In sorting our findings, we divided the studies into those that rely on original survey data, those that analyze existing data (including secondary survey data), and those that use qualitative methods such as focus groups and ethnography. We then separated the studies that rely on original survey data based on inclusion/exclusion of a Southeast Asian sample. Survey-based studies that include a Southeast Asian sample were further sorted according to whether they oversampled Southeast Asians or had a proportionate num-

ber. We found a total number of twelve studies completed post-CalWORKs that rely on original survey data and include Southeast Asians among their sample. (See Figure 1 for a summary of these studies.) We analyzed the studies based on topic, place, ethnic composition, and sample size of the Southeast Asian sample. We also analyzed with survey methodology, design, and response rate to examine the status of survey-based research on Southeast Asian CalWORKs participants.

To develop a more detailed understanding of the challenges that researchers face in surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients, we draw on our own experiences surveying Southeast Asians as well as interviews with survey administrators to examine: the types of challenges faced in surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients, the approaches used to overcome these challenges, and lessons learned.

Analysis of Existing Studies

Despite the numerous post-welfare reform studies in California, only twelve include survey data of Southeast Asian welfare recipients. The twelve studies, listed in Table 2, vary by sample (size and composition), methodology, topic, and geography. They begin to create an overall picture; the majority describing CalWORKs recipients as they receive aid, encounter health care, housing, child-care, transportation, and education issues, and reach their time limits, before assessing policies and posing recommendations. However, most studies that include Southeast Asians among larger survey samples present findings and their implications in a general manner with little discussion of the differences or unique trends that characterize certain populations. Those that specifically target issues pertaining to Southeast Asians, on the other hand, provide more detailed analysis.

Among the twelve studies, the Southeast Asian samples include ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians, with Vietnamese recipients the most frequently surveyed. Almost half of the surveys include Vietnamese as their only Southeast Asian population group (Ha, 2002; Hirshberg et al., 2005; Brown, 2004; Seid et al., 2006; Ng et al., 1999 & 2004; Moreno et al., 2004). The studies with the three largest Southeast Asian samples totaling 662 (Ha, 2002), 609 (Hirshberg et al., 2005), and 274 (Brown, 2004 and Seid et al., 2006), include samples comprised exclusively of Viet-

Table 2. CalWORKs-Related Studies that Include Surveys and a Southeast Asian Sample

Study	Subject	Place	Sample & Size	Methodology
Ha (2002)	Self-sufficiency of Vietnamese refugees	Orange & Los Angeles Counties	662 survey responses from Vietnamese respondents (not exclusive to welfare recipients)	Random sample; mail survey; 70.2% response rate; translated 15-question survey (English & Vietnamese)
Hirshberg, Huang, & Fuller (2005)	Impact of new welfare-to-work & capacity building initiatives on supply & demand in the child-care system	Kern, Orange, Santa Clara Counties	1,974 former & present CalWORKs recipients parents moving from welfare to work, 609 of whom are Vietnamese	Random sample; telephone survey; English survey translated into Spanish & Vietnamese
Brown (2004); Seid et al., (2006)	Effectiveness of Healthy Families in improving health-related quality of life	Statewide	274 Vietnamese language responses out of 6,881 total	Random sample; mail survey; 51% overall response rate in first year; 56% Viet. response rate in first year; longitudinal survey; Eng. survey translated into Span., Viet., Korean, & Chinese
London & Mauldon (2006)	Description of CalWORKs families reaching time limit	Alameda, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, & Tulare Counties	Total 1,797 CalWORKs recipients; 200 Asians; 159 speak Southeast Asian language; 123 Vietnamese-speaking	Random, stratified sample to ensure diverse sample; telephone survey; longitudinal (only 1 of 2 completed so far); translated survey administered in Eng., Span., & Viet. lang. with simultaneous translation service & abbrev. survey instrument when requested other lang.
Blumenberg (forthcoming)	Transportation needs of CalWORKs participants	Los Angeles & Fresno Counties	127 Southeast Asian welfare recipients (LA: 21 Viet., 2 other; Fresno: 99 Hmong, 3 Laotian, 2 Cambodian)	Random sample; telephone survey; translated survey administered in SE Asian languages
Norris et al. (2002a, 2002b)	Barriers to departure from welfare & document welfare recipient outcomes	San Joaquin County	56 Vietnamese ethnics & 56 Cambodian ethnics	Random sample; face-to-face interviews with survey instrument; longitudinal survey; translated survey administered in Eng., Span., Cambodian, & Vietnamese languages
Ng (1999); Ng (2004)	Health, hunger, housing, childcare, trans., ed., experiences under CalWORKs	Santa Clara County	150 Mexican-American & Vietnamese-American women (75 Viet. Am. rec'd welfare benefits in last 7 months)	Identified participants through mailing & contacts with local institutions; face-to-face interview with survey instrument; trained bilingual interviewers
Speigman et al. (1999, 2003); Dasinger et al. (2001, 2002); Driscoll et al. (2000); Green et al. (2000)	Barriers to departure from welfare & document welfare recipient outcomes	Alameda County	47 Vietnamese-speaking; 46 ethnic Vietnamese, 6 Laotian, 1 Hmong	Random sample; face-to-face interview with survey instrument; longitudinal survey; translated survey administered in English, Spanish, & Vietnamese languages
Moreno et al. (2000a, 2000b, 2000c)	Trans. needs assessment of CalWORKs participants	Los Angeles County	23 Southeast Asians (21 Vietnamese)	Random sample; telephone survey; translated survey administered in Vietnamese
CDSS (various dates)	Social & economic characteristics of families receiving CalWORKs	39 California counties	Over 5,000 cases per year, some of which are SE Asian	Random sample
Moreno et al. (2004a, 2004b)	How CalWORKs families fare after reaching time limits	Los Angeles County	1,753 timed-out participants out & 1,753 participants not timed out, some are Vietnamese	Random sample; in-person & phone with survey instrument; longitudinal study; translated surveys administered in Span., Viet., & Armenian in addition to English
Stagner, Kortenkamp, & Reardon-&erson (2002)	Work, income, & dependency outcomes of long-term recipients	Alameda & Los Angeles Counties	Survey sample of 546 welfare recipients who have long histories of attachment to welfare in the 1990s some of whom are Southeast Asian	Survey

namese, whereas the next three in size order are a mix of Southeast Asians totaling 159 (London and Mauldon, 2006), 127 (Blumenberg, forthcoming), and 112 respectively (Norris et al., 2002). The remaining surveys include a relatively small sample of Southeast Asians, samples of less than 100. Two studies are quite large with total sample sizes in the thousands; however, while the authors indicate the inclusion of Southeast Asians in the sample, they do not indicate their numbers (CDSS, various dates; Moreno et al., 2004). In most studies, Southeast Asians are surveyed in tandem with other racial and ethnic groups so that the scholars can draw comparisons across groups. Only one study exclusively sampled Vietnamese (Ha, 2002), while the remaining eleven studies sampled more widely, including a Southeast Asian sample along with that of other racial and ethnic groups including non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans, Latinos, Koreans, and Chinese.

As with the broader literature on welfare reform, the topics covered in these studies are wide-ranging. Some studies examine CalWORKs recipients, detailing the social and economic characteristics of families receiving aid (CDSS), attributes of those reaching their time limits (London and Mauldon, 2006), barriers to departure from welfare (Norris et al., 2002; Speigman et al., 1999 & 2003; Dasinger et al., 2001 & 2002; Driscoll et al., 2000; Green et al., 2000), how families fare after reaching the five-year time limit (Moreno et al., 2004), and economic outcomes of long-term welfare recipients with regard to work, income, and public dependency (Stagner et al., 2002). Other studies are more focused in nature, depicting transportation needs of CalWORKs recipients (Blumenberg, forthcoming; Moreno et al., 2000), the impacts of the Healthy Families Program (Brown, 2004; Seid et al., 2006), and how new welfare-to-work initiatives impact supply and demand in childcare system (Hirshberg et al., 2005; Ng et al., 1999 & 2004). One study applies a more indirect approach, examining factors related to the economic self-sufficiency of Vietnamese refugees (Ha, 2002). While all the above studies include Southeast Asian samples, only the last one explores the issue of welfare as it pertains exclusively to Southeast Asians.

Since collecting survey data is expensive, most of the studies have relatively small sample sizes and, therefore, draw their data from particular geographic areas of the state. In welfare studies, counties typically are the basic unit of geographic analysis. While the federal and state governments set the general policy param-

eters, CalWORKs is a county-administered program. Only two of the studies have California as the unit of analysis (Brown, 2004; CDSS, various dates; Seid et al., 2006); in contrast, the remaining studies include select counties.

Studies tend to occur in geographic areas that have the highest percentage of Southeast Asian welfare recipients. Of the twenty counties in which surveys of Southeast Asian welfare recipients were conducted, ten were administered in Southern California (Los Angeles, Orange, and Riverside counties), five in California's Central Valley (Fresno, Kern, Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Tulare counties), and five in Northern California (Alameda and Santa Clara counties). Southeast Asian welfare recipients were surveyed most frequently in three counties—Los Angeles (Ha, 2002; London and Mauldon, 2006; Blumenberg, forthcoming; Moreno et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Moreno et al., 2004a, 2004b; Stagner, Lortenkamp, and Reardon-Anderson, 2002); Alameda (London and Mauldon, 2006; Speiglmán et al., 1999, 2003; Dasinger et al., 2001, 2002; Driscoll et al., 2000; Green et al., 2000; Stagner, Kortenkamp, and Reardon-Anderson, 2002); and Orange (Ha, 2002; Hirshberg, Huang, and Fuller, 2005; London and Mauldon, 2006).

Spatial scales also correspond with survey methodology; in-person interviews (using survey instruments) only occur at the individual county level, an unsurprising finding given the logistical demands of administering surveys face-to-face, which grow with larger geographical magnitudes. Some studies examine counties in pairs, Los Angeles serving as the constant, in conjunction with Alameda (Stagner et al., 2002), Fresno (Blumenberg, forthcoming), or Orange (Ha, 2002). One study looks at the trio of Kern, Orange, and Santa Clara counties (Hirshberg et al., 2005), whereas another observes six counties—Alameda, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, and Tulare (London and Mauldon, 2006). These last two surveys, along with a study based in Los Angeles and Fresno, were administered by telephone. The CalWORKs Characteristics Survey administered by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS, various dates) that accounts for thirty-nine California counties fails to specify its method of survey, while the two surveys related to welfare reform and health issues that occur at the statewide level were completed via mail.

Among the ten studies that specify a survey method four rely on a telephone survey (Hirshberg et al., 2005; London and Maul-

don, 2006; Blumenberg, forthcoming; Moreno et al., 2000), three on in-person survey (Norris et al., 2002; Ng, 1999 & 2004; Speiglmán et al., 1999, 2003; Dasinger et al., 2001 & 2002; Driscoll et al., 2000; Green et al., 2000), and two on a mail survey (Ha, 2002; Brown, 2004; Seid et al., 2006); one study combines both a phone and in-person survey (Moreno et al., 2004). Mail surveys simply require written translation, while telephone and in-person surveys additionally call for trained bilingual interviewers or verbal translation services. Surveys are more likely to be translated into Vietnamese than any other Southeast Asian language. All of the surveys draw from random samples, some selected from administrative case records stratified to ensure respondent diversity and others randomly selected from respondents replies to mass mailings. Only two of the twelve studies provide information on Southeast Asian survey response rates in comparison to the overall surveyed population; one, based on a telephone survey, indicates a lower response rate among Vietnamese (London and Mauldon, 2006), whereas a study based on a mail survey finds a relatively high response rate among Vietnamese (Brown, 2004; Seid et al., 2006).⁴

In sum, there are twelve welfare-related studies completed in California post-reform that rely on original survey data and have Southeast Asian samples. They cover a myriad of topics from the broad to the specific. The studies examine data for the entire state as well as data for individual geographic areas, with counties acting as basic units of analysis given their pivotal role within CalWORKs administrative processes. Survey methodology tends to fit the study's spatial scale, with in-person interviews only occurring at the individual county level and mailed surveys used for larger statewide studies. The studies have generally small sample sizes and in most cases survey Southeast Asians in conjunction with other race/ethnic groups. Surveys were administered by telephone and mail as well as in person, all drawing from random samples. Data on Southeast Asian survey response rates are inconclusive. Among the different Southeast Asian ethnic groups, Vietnamese are most frequently surveyed, with survey instruments translated into Vietnamese more often than any other Southeast Asian language.

Challenges to Surveying Southeast Asian Welfare Recipients

In 1990 the Bureau of the Census examined barriers to the participation of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S. Census

through a detailed ethnographic study of lowland Lao refugees in St. Louis (Rynearson and Gosebrink, 1990). The investigators identified three major factors that contribute to the undercounting of Southeast Asian refugees—cultural dissonance, linguistic proficiency, and structural discord. In terms of cultural differences, the study finds that Southeast Asian households oftentimes include relationships, such as fictive kin, that do not match census definitions. Further, culturally prescribed gender roles and roles associated with life cycle stage also negatively influence the survey response rates of Southeast Asians, since women and seniors are less likely than younger men to engage in any type of official activities. Although a waning problem with time in the U.S., limited English language proficiency remains a barrier to survey participation, particularly among women and the elderly. Finally, the study finds that “structural discord” largely related to settlement patterns also negatively affects survey response rates. Refugees oftentimes reside in ethnic neighborhoods, where they largely interact with members of their own ethnic communities and, therefore, do not develop the skills to deal with people and agencies outside of their isolated communities. They also find that recent immigrants experience high levels of residential mobility, making them difficult to locate.

The factors raised in the above study are highly relevant to surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients who comprise a relatively small population group, are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous, and often change residential locations frequently and lack regular phone service (London and Mauldon, 2006). Many of these themes were echoed in our own experiences and that of survey administrators; our comments can be organized around issues of funding, instrument translation, and survey administration.

With respect to funding, researchers often encounter difficulty in gaining financial support for projects that include surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients. Many funders are unwilling to support studies of small population groups, especially those “without much political clout.” In the funding world, whereas African American and Latino communities have representative program officers within foundations and public agencies that advocate for their inclusion, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) program officers, as newcomers to the field, generally hesitate to actively pursue such a role.

Survey administrators also face challenges in developing Southeast Asian surveying capacity that stem from the lack of funding for research integrating Southeast Asians. Oftentimes researchers do not have the funds to hire Southeast Asian bilingual staff on a permanent basis given the insufficient number of contracts requiring Southeast Asian language capacity. Instead, administrators rely on outside consultation for Southeast Asian language translations and conduct surveys with temporary hires, which in turn escalates charges to clients and further discourages sampling of Southeast Asians in an environment where financial disincentives for their inclusion already exist.

Getting accurate translations of survey instruments can pose problems. Depending on the geographic area, it can be difficult to locate individuals with the expertise to provide professional translations of English surveys into a particular Southeast Asian language. Sometimes researchers rely on translation services provided by staff of community-based organizations; however, they might not have a way of independently verifying the translation given the scarcity of translators. In contrast, there are numerous individuals with Spanish translation expertise, allowing researchers the ability to confirm—with relative ease—Spanish translations of survey materials. Moreover, since Spanish is the dominant second language in California, survey research staff frequently has in-house expertise with the language. Bilingual Spanish interviewers and supervisors can offer feedback on translations upon receipt and send back materials to translators for revision. On the other hand, the absence of Southeast Asian bilingual staff can result in a failure to replicate the situation with Southeast Asian language surveys and can potentially compromise translation quality.

Researchers have faced a number of difficulties in administering surveys to Southeast Asian welfare recipients, some of which relate to circumstances and characteristics endemic to the targeted population. Historical experiences shared by various Southeast Asian communities have resulted in their not being very open or cooperative about sharing personal information. Surveys of welfare recipients tend to take place in low-income neighborhoods, which pose public safety issues for survey administrators. In the case of face-to-face interviews, gated housing complexes further complicate the task of accessing potential survey participants.

Challenges in administering surveys to Southeast Asian welfare recipients also derive from surveyor side conditions. Recruitment of survey administrators often takes place within a university setting and results in a large representation of 1.5 and second generation student interviewers with limited language capacity. It can be difficult to manage a team of interviewers comprised of beginners with little relevant experience. Conversely, if survey administrators hire interviewers with good Southeast Asian language skills, they many have limited English language proficiency, creating in-house communication barriers. Staff fluency in a Southeast Asian language does not necessarily imply good interviewing skills. If supervisors cannot speak the language in which the survey is being administered, they cannot thoroughly observe interviewers and maintain a certain quality of interviews. There is a relative lack of built capacity with respect to surveying Southeast Asians, in contrast to the sophistication of operation, procedures, and protocols long developed for Spanish language surveys.

In addition to the challenges of surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients, experience has resulted in a number of lessons learned including strategies to overcome some of the above obstacles or challenges. Recommended strategies can be organized around issues of funding, project design, and survey design. To maximize funding eligibility and access, researchers can break projects into smaller components, each of which can independently secure funds. For instance, one grant can cover translations of survey instruments, while another can cover oversampling of Southeast Asian welfare recipients. Also, researchers can pursue larger grants based on experiences associated with a "small grant that was just barely enough to polish, edit, and print [a] report."

In designing projects, researchers must oversample small demographic groups in order to produce analyses and yield conclusions that are statistically meaningful. Further, to ensure the quality of the data and results, survey administrators should hire at least one project manager with the language capacity to oversee staff interviews. This might prove difficult considering that some project manager positions require at least one year of prior work experience in a research laboratory following an interviewer, combined with the dearth of studies that include Southeast Asian samples. Finally, researchers ought to pay for professional translations in order to as-

sure the validity of studies. All three of these recommendations rest on acquiring the funding necessary to the administration of a professional survey that will yield reliable results.

Finally, with respect to the design of the survey instrument, researchers must “ask the right questions,” adapting survey questions to the target population rather than simply translating them from English. Survey instruments must include relevant questions—such as year of arrival, English language ability or civic engagement. Some of these questions might not be relevant or as relevant to non-immigrants, but are fundamental to understanding welfare and employment dynamics among Southeast Asians.

Surveying Southeast Asian Welfare Recipients: Future Directions

The experiences of Southeast Asian welfare recipients can reveal the shortcomings of welfare reform and, in doing so, illuminate ways to improve the welfare system. However such valuable accounts can fruitlessly dissipate given the complexities of capturing this type of information. The dynamics of social capital and issues of underreporting among certain populations like Southeast Asians may skew findings and depict situations that differ from reality. Multifamily household structures with built in emergency support systems may disguise individual economic hardship, while underreporting of administrative barriers and material hardship by Southeast Asian welfare recipients may similarly paint an overly optimistic picture.

Southeast Asian CalWORKs participants also embody the diversity of California’s welfare recipient population. Besides adding to the ethnic and linguistic variety of CalWORKs participants, Southeast Asians also enhance variation with respect to participant understanding of time-limit policies, immigrant status, education level, employment patterns (overrepresentation in the ethnic and informal economy), and household structure (greater likelihood of being two-parent families). While Southeast Asians welfare recipients may be categorized with their Latino counterparts by virtue of immigrant status, they exhibit marked differences in many of the abovementioned categories. The distinction of Southeast Asians from other CalWORKs participants highlights the need for administrators to recognize and cater to the wide-ranging needs of their clients in order to achieve maximum efficacy.

Surveys of welfare recipients are valuable in capturing details and nuances that are typically lost in studies relying on public or administrative data. However, very few investigators have undertaken the task of surveying Southeast Asian welfare recipients, perhaps, in part, because of the difficulty of attracting funds to do so and, related, because of the challenges associated with surveying this population group. The following recommendations would help to better incorporate Southeast Asians into studies of welfare reform.

First, the political and financial support for research related to Southeast Asian welfare recipients must be developed. Adequate funding would motivate investigators to include Southeast Asian welfare recipients in their studies; enable researchers to include Southeast Asian samples large enough to determine the statistical significance of their findings; and provide the necessary resources to support all aspects of the survey research process (translation of materials, recruitment of quality bilingual staff, etc.). Second, researchers must understand the characteristics of Southeast Asian families, communities, and welfare recipients to develop appropriate research designs. Knowledge of Southeast Asian ethnic groups is necessary to facilitate adequate response rates and to develop survey instruments that reflect the welfare dynamics of this unique target population. Third, ethnic associations and other refugee support organizations can be enlisted to help overcome some of the resistance that Southeast Asian welfare recipients might have to participating in survey research. Finally, investigators should make their data sets available to other interested scholars to maximize the impact of their data collection efforts.

Combined, these strategies will help address the under-representation of Southeast Asians in welfare studies. If successful, these studies will contribute to a better understanding of the welfare dynamics of Southeast Asians and to the development of policies and programs to engender economic self-sufficiency among this disadvantaged population group.

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Notes

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1. The California Department of Social Services does not report the detailed racial and ethnic group of CalWORKS participants. However, the agency reports the primary language of the head of household. These language data show that Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian speakers comprise 90 percent of heads of households who speak a major Asian language.
2. The study estimated that 53 percent of timed-out adults in Alameda would speak an Asian language as their primary language. In Orange, San Francisco, and Santa Clara counties the figures are 66 percent, 70 percent, and 93 percent respectively.
3. See, for example, Klerman et al., (2002) and Verma and Hendra (2003) for studies in California.
4. In London and Mauldon (2006), the authors found an overall response rate of 60.9 percent; in contrast the response rate among Vietnamese was only 53.8 percent. In Brown (2004), the response rates for Vietnamese-speaking respondents was 56 percent in the baseline year, 85 percent in Year One, and 82 percent in Year Two; among English-speaking respondents the rates were 44 percent, 83 percent, 69 percent respectively.

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