

**UCLA**

**AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community**

**Title**

The Risk of Timing Out: Welfare-to-Work Services to Asian Immigrants and Refugees

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/99n4n6mv>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 3(2)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

**Authors**

Chow, Julian Chun-Chung

Osterling, Kathy Lemon

Xu, Qingwen

**Publication Date**

2005

**DOI**

10.36650/nexus3.2\_85-104\_ChowEtAl

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# The Risk of Timing Out: Welfare-to-Work Services to Asian Immigrants and Refugees

Julian Chun-Chung Chow,  
Kathy Lemon Osterling, and Qingwen Xu

## Abstract

With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, welfare recipients are faced with new work requirements and sanctions, including a five-year time limit on receiving public assistance. Due to difficulties in adjustment to American society and lack of human capital for the labor market, Asian immigrants and refugees face obstacles transitioning from welfare to work. The majority of individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area who have reached the five-year time limit since January 2003 are of Asian descent. Without adequate welfare-to-work services, restrictions and time limits are leaving many Asian recipients without the proficiencies required for employment, as well as without the cash assistance needed for survival. Using a qualitative study approach by conducting three focus groups with Asian welfare recipients in the San Francisco Bay Area, findings of this study indicate that existing welfare-to-work programs do not meet the unique needs of this population. Their barriers for achieving self-sufficiency are not adequately addressed by welfare reform's "work first" approach. Instead, findings suggest that welfare-to-work program strategies for this population should incorporate culturally competent support services, human capital development, and strength-based approaches. As more Asian immigrant families lose cash assistance as a result of reaching the five-year time limit, the need to improve welfare-to-work programs and policies for this population has become increasingly urgent.

## Introduction

For many Asian immigrants, especially Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees, the process of acculturating to American

lifestyles and achieving economic self-sufficiency can be formidable tasks (Chu 1983; Ong and Blumberg 1994). There are over 3 million Southeast Asian immigrants in the U.S., representing 10 percent of all immigrants (U.S. Census 2000). Over 1.2 million of these Southeast Asians are refugees who fled to the U.S. in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2000). Experiences of dislocation, the trauma of war, and abrupt immersion in an unfamiliar culture can complicate the acculturation process and create challenges in achieving economic self-sufficiency. Indeed, research suggests that many Southeast Asian immigrants have difficulty achieving economic self-sufficiency with high rates of poverty, as well as low rates of labor force participation (Bach and Seguin 1985; Office of Refugee Resettlement 2000; U.S. Committee on Ways and Means 1992, as cited in Ong and Blumberg 1994). Not surprisingly, Southeast Asians also tend to have a high rate of public assistance use: approximately 23 percent of Vietnamese and 46 percent of Southeast Asian refugees from Laos and Cambodia receive some type of cash assistance (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2000).

The use of welfare and other government support programs among immigrants and refugees has been described as a potentially important tool to assist in acculturation and achievement of economic self-sufficiency (Hirschl et al. 1994). However, welfare as a transitional tool in the acculturation process is generally described as including only short-term assistance, and for many Southeast Asians, government assistance can last for years (Chung and Bemak 1996). The high rate of welfare use among Southeast Asians and their relatively lengthy stays on aid suggest that traditional welfare programs are not effectively meeting the needs of this population.

With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 (commonly referred to as "welfare reform"), California passed legislation on the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility for Kids (CalWORKs) in 1997. Under this new law, immigrants and refugees receiving assistance are faced with new restrictions that limit access to benefits, as well as new requirements and sanctions, including a five-year lifetime time limit of the receipt of benefits.<sup>1</sup> The immigrant restrictions contained in welfare reform and the five-year time limit on the receipt of welfare assistance have important

and potentially negative implications for Asian immigrants and refugees. Without adequate welfare-to-work services, restrictions and time limits may be leaving many Asian immigrants and refugees without the proficiencies required for employment, as well as without the cash assistance needed for survival. Rather than facilitating a successful transition into a new culture, the situation created by welfare reform may be frustrating and impeding the acculturation process for many immigrants and refugees.

Most existing studies of welfare reform among immigrants focus on the issue of eligibility and enrollment—little is known about the risk of reaching the five-year time limit and the adequacy of welfare-to-work programs serving Asian immigrants. The purpose of this study is to fill this knowledge gap in the literature. Using a qualitative study approach by conducting focus groups with Asian immigrant welfare-to-work recipients, this paper first explores the context of welfare reform and its potential impact on immigrants. Second, key barriers to employment and access and use of current welfare-to-work programs among Asian immigrants and refugees are presented. Third, focus group results on the experience of participating in traditional welfare-to-work programs from the Asian immigrant and refugee perspective are reported. Last, focus group findings are integrated with the research literature to describe innovative welfare-to-work program strategies to address barriers and to assist Asian immigrants and refugees in successfully moving from welfare to work. A better understanding of these issues can help inform policy, practice, and research and ultimately contribute to the economic self-sufficiency of Asian immigrant families and communities.

### The Context of Welfare Reform for Immigrants

Welfare reform legislation brought about widespread changes to the welfare system in the United States—both for immigrants and for native populations. The PRWORA ended the entitlement program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF mandated new requirements for the receipt of benefits and restricted eligibility for assistance (Weil and Finegold 2002). Specifically, TANF requires that participants become involved in work activities within two years of enrollment; it places a five-year lifetime time limit on the receipt of welfare; and it also restricts ac-

cess to benefits for immigrants. TANF allows flexibility to states to add additional requirements or time limits and uses a “work first” model of welfare services in which quick labor force attachment is encouraged through job search assistance services. The degrees to which other supportive services, including education and training, are provided depend largely on the locality (Holcomb and Martinson 2002).

The immigrant provisions contained within the welfare reform legislation created distinctions between immigrants who could qualify for assistance and those who could not. Naturalized immigrants maintain full benefits; however, legal immigrants arriving after passage of welfare reform are not eligible for assistance until they become naturalized or become eligible for naturalization, a process that takes at least five years after arrival in the U.S. As with AFDC, undocumented immigrants are ineligible. TANF legislation also granted flexibility to states in creating their own welfare assistance programs for legal immigrants who are not yet naturalized—however, TANF dollars cannot be used for these programs. Additionally, the immigrant provisions stipulated that refugees are exempt from the restrictions on other legal immigrants and can thus qualify for assistance. However, after 5 to 7 years in the U.S. refugees lose their refugee status and are considered immigrants and thus become subject to the restrictions on assistance affecting all immigrants (Fix and Passel 2002).

Overall, public assistance caseloads declined after welfare reform; however, the decline has been steeper for immigrant populations than for the native born population. Borjas (2002) used data from the U.S. Census’ Current Population Surveys to analyze national trends in welfare reciprocity between 1994 and 1998 and reported that the use of AFDC among immigrants decreased from 7.1 percent in 1994 to 3.9 percent in 1998. Using more recent data from the U.S. Census’ Current Population Survey, Brady et al. (2002) analyzed welfare use trends among immigrants in California between 1994 and 2000. Analyses revealed that the use of AFDC/CalWORKs and receipt of food stamps among immigrants declined from 10.8 percent in 1993 to 5.0 percent in 1999 compared to a decline from 5.5 percent to 3.1 percent respectively among native households. Moreover, after controlling for demographic and economic factors, immigrants still experienced steeper declines in welfare use than natives.

Yet, even though welfare use among immigrants has declined overall, research also suggests that immigrants spend lengthier amounts of time on welfare than U.S. natives, largely because of the multiple barriers to employment that they face, including low education level, insufficient job skills, limited English proficiency, and poor psychological well-being (Brady et al. 2002; Chung and Bemak 1996; Tumlin and Zimmermann 2003). Chung and Bemak (1996) used data from the California Southeast Asian Mental Health Needs Assessment Study of 2,482 Southeast Asian refugees in nine counties in California to examine welfare status and psychological distress. Even after being in the United States for five to six years, 46 percent of Vietnamese refugees, 39 percent of Cambodians, 46 percent of Laotians, and 46 percent of Hmong refugees were still receiving welfare. Moreover, in California, 20 percent of welfare-to-work clients who have received assistance for three or more years are Asian<sup>2</sup>, even though Asians make up only 11 percent of the total welfare-to-work caseload (California Department of Social Services [CDSS] 2001). Lengthy stays on welfare make the potential impact of the five-year time limit on immigrants particularly important.

### The Risk of Timing Out: Key Barriers to Employment and Access and Use of Current Welfare-to-Work Programs

In California, the first group of CalWORKs recipients reached the 60-month time limit in January of 2003. A review of the caseload statistics from social services agencies in three Bay Area counties (Alameda, San Francisco, and Santa Clara) reveals that the majority of these timed-out individuals were Asian Americans.<sup>3</sup> In Alameda, 47 percent of the 2,660 timed-out individuals, as of June 2003, were Asians, while they made up 17 percent of the overall enrollment (Alameda County Social Services Agency 2004). During the same period, of the 346 timed-out families in San Francisco, 60 percent were either Chinese or Vietnamese, while they made up 15 percent of the total caseload (City and County of San Francisco Department of Human Services 2004). The number in Santa Clara is even more astonishing: 83 percent of the total timed-out clients (n=1,927) from January 2003 to June 2004 were Asians, compared to their share of 24 percent of the CalWORKs population (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency 2004).

Asian immigrants are disproportionately more likely and at

higher risk than other ethnic racial groups of losing their benefits due to the five-year lifetime limit. For Asian immigrants, who face unique barriers to access and use of social services, traditional welfare-to-work programs—with their heavy emphasis on a “work first” approach—may not be appropriate. The barriers that many Asian immigrants face in transitioning off of welfare must be addressed if this group is to avoid reaching the five-year time limit. An important aspect of barriers for immigrants is related to the low human capital for the American labor market.<sup>4</sup>

For many Asian immigrants and refugees there may be a mismatch between the human capital needed for economic self-sufficiency in their country of origin and the type of human capital needed for employment in the U.S. Human capital factors such as prior labor force attachment, English language proficiency, and a high school education all serve to increase the likelihood of employment within the American labor market. Asian immigrants and refugees may need to build these types of human capital in order to obtain employment in the American labor market.

Prior labor force attachment in the U.S. labor market can be an important human capital factor that increases employability; but for many Asian immigrants and refugees simply gaining experience in the U.S. labor market may be difficult. For instance, many refugees from Cambodia and Laos were small-scale farmers or fishers in their country of origin. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (Hein 1995) explored previous and current occupational status among a national sample of 608 refugees from Indochina and found that 39 percent were farmers or fishers in their homeland. Once in the U.S., labor force attachment is relatively low among Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees; the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2000) reports that 77 percent of Vietnamese refugees have worked at any point since their arrival in the U.S., and only 49 percent of refugees from other Southeast Asian countries have worked in the U.S.—the lowest rate of any refugee group. Similarly Ying et al. (1997) used data from the California Southeast Asian Mental Health Needs Assessment Study (n=2,234) and reported that only 50 percent of the Vietnamese refugees in the sample were employed; 14.3 percent of the Hmong; 18.9 percent of the Cambodian; 35.9 percent of the Chinese-Vietnamese; and 38.5 percent of the Laotian refugees were employed.

English language proficiency is often a prerequisite to many

jobs in the United States. Language barriers are extremely important in determining employment outcomes for non-English immigrants. For instance, Strand (1984) used interview data from a random sample of 800 Southeast Asian refugee heads of household in San Diego County to identify factors that predicted employment. A variety of multiple regression model analyses indicated that the most consistent predictor of employment within the sample was enrollment in English as a second language courses. Moreover, Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) interviewed a stratified random sample of 739 Southeast Asian refugees in San Diego, California and found that lack of proficiency in English was significantly related to welfare use.

Yet, despite the importance of English language proficiency, evidence suggests that many refugees—and in particular Southeast Asian refugees on welfare—are not proficient in English. For instance, only 14 percent of refugee households whose only source of income is public assistance have at least one fluent English speaker in the house, compared to approximately 50 percent of refugee households whose income is from earnings (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2000). Moreover, Ong and Blumenberg (1994) utilized U.S. Census data from California and found that 76 percent of Southeast Asians receiving AFDC were limited in English proficiency.

In addition to English language proficiency, educational level is also related to human capital in the American labor market. Research suggests that many Asian immigrants and refugees experience relatively low levels of formal education. For instance, Ong and Blumenberg (1994) analyzed census data from California and found that 34 percent of Southeast Asian AFDC recipients had no formal education, and 40 percent had less than a high school education. Moreover, Ying et al. (1997) reported relatively low levels of education in the sample of 2,234 Southeast Asian refugees from the California Southeast Asian Mental Health Needs Assessment. In the total sample, 46 percent had no formal education or elementary education; only 13 percent were high school graduates. Additionally, differences were found by country of origin; Hmong refugees tended to have the least formal education; 58 percent of Hmong refugees in the sample had no formal education, and only 77 percent had graduated from high school; 23 percent of Cambodian refugees had no formal education, and 77 percent had graduated from high school; 11 percent of Laotians had no formal education



and 13 percent were high school graduates. Whereas, only 0.5 percent of the Vietnamese sample had no formal education, and 21 percent were high school graduates.

A lack of human capital for the U.S. labor market creates challenges for Asian immigrants and refugees in their access and use of traditional welfare-to-work programs. A heavy emphasis on a “work first” approach is not suitable for this population. Without prior labor force attachment, English language proficiency, or a high school education or equivalent the chances of being able to “work first” (e.g. finding and maintaining employment) are greatly reduced; add to this the experience of being a refugee and challenges in employment can be further complicated. In order to develop strategies to effectively serve the Asian immigrant populations, their perception of welfare time limits and experience of participating in welfare-to-work programs must be better understood.

## Method

For this study, we used a qualitative research method by conducting focus groups of Asian American welfare recipients in three San Francisco Bay Area counties in California. Using focus groups for data collection is appropriate because we can listen to the participants, in their own words, in regard to their experiences concerning the loss of benefits due to the five-year lifetime limit, and their perception of receiving welfare-to-work programs. Because Asian Americans constitute a diverse population, we made special efforts to assure the participants reflected the demographic and ethnic characteristics of the Asian American welfare-to-work recipients in the area. Enrollment data from CalWORKs indicated that the three most frequently spoken languages by the head of the household among the Asian American welfare-to-work participants are Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese (California Department of Social Services 2001). For this reason, we decided to hold three focus group sessions, each made up of participants with the same ethnic and language background, in three different Bay Area counties: Cambodian in Alameda county, Vietnamese in Santa Clara county, and Chinese in San Francisco county. We chose these three counties because they have the largest number of Asian American welfare-to-work participants in northern California.

A purposive sample of three local social services agencies, one in each county, that are known to serve Asian immigrant pop-

ulations were initially contacted by the researchers and invited to hold the focus group session. All agencies agreed to participate after the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the agency executive or administrative staff. Flyers and sign-up sheets were translated and posted in the agencies to recruit current or former public assistance recipients for their voluntary participation. Free childcare was provided on site during the focus group session. Agency staff reviewed the participant rights form and consent was obtained from participants, who were informed that an incentive of a gift certificate would be provided for participation. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of California, Berkeley for the Cambodian and Vietnamese focus groups and by San Francisco State University for the Chinese group.

A focus group discussion guide was developed to ask participants of their experiences on facing benefit loss and their perception of receiving welfare-to-work programs. A total of three focus group sessions were held, one at each agency, between March and April of 2004. The sessions lasted about ninety minutes in duration. Because the majority of Asian immigrant welfare recipients are limited English speakers, we decided to hold the focus group sessions in their native language. With the exception of the Chinese group in San Francisco, which was facilitated by one of the researchers who is fluent in the dialect of Cantonese, the Alameda and Santa Clara focus groups were facilitated by one of the researchers in English and translated by an interpreter into Cambodian and Vietnamese, respectively. All sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the facilitator. The corresponding facilitator coded and analyzed the data initially by identifying the topics and the underlying themes that emerged from the discussion. Next, one other researcher of the study team independently read and coded the data from the original transcripts, without seeing the initial analysis from the focus group facilitator. The two sets of analyses were then compared. Discrepancies between the initial and the second reader's results were discussed and verified until an agreement was reached.

One limitation of the study is the small sample size in each group and the possible sample selection bias of the participants through the recruitment process at existing community-based social services agencies. In addition, because the focus of the study is

on Asian immigrants and refugees, who, arguably, are most vulnerable to reach the five-year time-limit, findings might not be generalizable to the entire population of welfare recipients or other immigrant welfare recipients from non-Asian countries. Because of the small sample size in each focus group session, the resulting analyses were highly consistent across the groups; as a result, findings of the study are presented as an aggregate and no attempt was made to compare differences across the three ethnic groups.

There were a total of 28 people who participated in the three focus group sessions. The number of participants in each session was: 8 Cambodians in Alameda, 9 Vietnamese in Santa Clara, and 11 Chinese in San Francisco. Eighty-two percent of the participants were female. As a group, they tended to be older: ages ranged from 31 to 65 with an average of 45 years. The majority of participants were married (61 percent), of those who were not married, 14 percent had never been married, 14 percent were widowed, and 11 percent divorced. The average household size including the participant was 3.4 persons. Eighty-two percent of the participants had one or more children under 18 years of age living with them; the number of children ranged from 1 to 5 with an average of 1.6 persons. On average, they had been living in the United States for 12 years with a range from 2 to 24 years. While all participants had received a variety of public assistance programs including Supplemental Security Income, food stamps, or Medi-Cal (California version of Medicaid), 46 percent were current CalWORKs recipients.

## Findings

Focus group participants described and articulated their perception of the time limit policy and their experiences of participation in welfare-to-work programs during the interview. Several themes emerged as follows:

It was important to know to what extent the recipients were aware of the five-year lifetime limit policy. The focus group participants appeared to have little knowledge about such policy. Across all groups, many shared a similar feeling when one participant said: "I didn't know exactly why I was cut." Most participants did not know exactly why or for what purposes there is a time limit; many stated that the requirement does not make any sense. When asked how they first heard of the five-year time limit, there were a variety of sources: some participants responded that their wel-

fare worker informed them, others found out from the radio or newspaper, and others from friends. While the majority of participants had difficulties in English, many participants received letters only in English, which they took to local social service agencies for translation. Some participants also responded that they were confused as to what benefits were terminated or re-instated. One participant said: “[I was off of cash assistance for 2 months] I don’t know why they gave it back to me.” In addition, others described confusion about exemption policies as well as the extent of benefit loss: “I don’t know how much [money] they will cut, is it only mine, or also the kids’? How about food stamps and Medi-Cal?”

For those who participated in welfare-to-work programs, many described having problems with such services. Because most of the participants were limited English speakers, they reported that training programs did not take their language skills or their emotional status into consideration. The following comments reflected many participants’ perceptions: “I went to the training and attended all classes because they asked me to, I have no idea what is going on, I do not know what they are talking about in English and the teacher did not seem to care as long as I showed up in class.” Consequently, it was difficult for the participants to know the value of the program, other than simply seeing it as another hurdle within the welfare requirements. While most participants were willing to play “by the rules,” they shared their frustration that the welfare-to-work training they received was not useful. In addition, some stressed that the training did not seem to reflect the needs of the current job market. Many participants agreed when one recipient said: “Going to training school is good, it buys out some time, but we still need a job. Why do they train us to do something that is no job out there? What kind of training are they?”

With regard to employment, participants uniformly expressed their desire and willingness to work in order to earn a living so that they could be economically self-sufficient. However, they strongly raised the concern that there are no jobs available, especially for limited English speakers, leaving them with no other choice but to stay on welfare. The longer period of time they remained on assistance, the greater the risk of reaching the five-year time limit. While many participants recognized that language is a major problem, they also pointed out that they could not find jobs even after they received and completed various required welfare-to-work train-

ing programs. The sentiment of the quote below from a participant appeared to be commonly shared among participants across all focus group sessions: "I finished all the training they [welfare department] asked me to. I completed a janitorial training and now have the certificate. But what good is it if there are no jobs? They did not help me find a job." Participants provided their insights into why this was the case. When asked what the reasons were, many discussed the poor economy, lack of job opportunities, and the increasing competition for lower skill jobs. They made statements around this issue: "The bad economy makes employers to cut staff, if a company had 5 workers, after one left, they won't hire another one to replace him," and "For every job opening around here, there are dozen many more people who are willing to work for less."

Several participants reported that after having difficulties while attending the welfare-to-work training programs, they were often referred to support services offered at different community-based organizations. Many pointed out that the welfare department typically did not offer such services or provide adequate referrals; instead, they identified common initial referral sources into support services as including friends, schools, doctors, and other agencies. Almost uniformly, participants emphasized the benefit of receiving support services and felt these services were particularly helpful.

With regard to the type of services they liked, many participants mentioned participating in training services such as English as a Second Language (ESL), as well as activities such as sewing classes and arts and crafts where they could learn some specific skills. Because most participants experienced extreme hardships making ends meet, they found support services of concrete assistance with job referrals, citizenship applications, and tangible assistance with food, housing, transportation, and utility bills as helpful. Participants also described preventive health services such as exercise and Tai Chi, as well as participation in support groups, counseling, and services for their children, as useful in easing their stress. While a number of participants were refugees, they described emotional support and relief of mental health symptoms as particularly helpful to them. One participant said: "They [the community-based support service] helped me with depression. They motivated me to go to school and to learn. To come here, I see other people and we talk . . ."

Participants provided a number of specific programmatic ideas regarding how welfare-to-work services could be improved. Many reported that services could be more helpful if ESL training was extended for a longer period of time; more concrete assistance was provided; more time for participants to be trained was allowed; assistance for children that extended to age 21 (rather than 18); higher allowance for childcare; and, most importantly, housing vouchers. Many felt that the 24-month time limit to be engaged in work activities is too short to actually be trained for a job, especially for someone with low English language proficiency. One participant explained: "I want to extend the 24 months because of limited English proficiency . . . it needs to be extended so that I can actually get trained. I need more time to learn computer application because my English level is so low."

#### Innovative Program Strategies and Approaches

Findings of this study clearly indicate that existing welfare-to-work programs do not adequately meet the unique needs of the Asian immigrant and refugee recipients. The lack of human capital and the mismatch between the types of services offered by welfare-to-work programs and their needs significantly increase the likelihood that this population reaches the five-year time limit on the receipt of welfare. It is disturbing to find that early statistics on the timed-out populations in California have already demonstrated that this has become a reality. If welfare-to-work programs are to be successful, innovative programs that address the key barriers facing Asian immigrants are needed in order to minimize the risk of timing out for this group. Based on focus group findings and information from the literature, we describe three program approaches that may address the key barriers facing this group: comprehensive and culturally competent support services, human capital development, and strength-based approaches.

Consistent with previous research, the experiences of the participants in this study suggest that welfare-to-work programs for Asian immigrants and refugees should consider the mental health needs of this population through comprehensive and culturally competent support services, including case management and mental health services. For instance, in the Office of Refugee Resettlement's (1984) evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project (FASP), a comprehensive program designed to increase the

likelihood of economic self-sufficiency among Southeast Asians, the program component involving intensive case management was noted as an effective program design element. Although this program was not specifically a welfare-to-work program, results provide insight into welfare-to-work strategies that may be effective with this population. Participants in the program were assessed for their service needs and those requiring more intensive services were assisted with service coordination and linkages to resources. Although analysis of the independent effects of intensive case management on employment outcomes was not provided, overall program evaluation results indicated strong employment outcomes.

Many focus group participants reported that culturally competent mental health services would be useful in welfare-to-work programming. The high incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression among many Southeast Asian refugees suggests that mental health services are needed for this population and research suggests that these services should be provided in a culturally competent manner. For many Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees, mental health treatment was not common in their country of origin, and so it may not be evident to them how mental health treatment can help them (Ying 2001). In order to engage participants in supportive mental health services, practitioners and programs must establish some form of credibility with the client or within the larger community (Chow 1999; Ying 2001). Research also suggests that culturally competent supportive services provided to Asian immigrants and refugees should be focused on the whole family, rather than on one individual (Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center 1983). Traditional welfare-to-work programs tend to focus on individual level factors, yet many Asians may frame issues or problems within the larger context of their family. As such, culturally competent supportive services within welfare-to-work programs should be family-focused, rather than individually focused (Chow et al. 2001; Kelley 1992).

It is apparent from the focus group interviews that a fundamental problem many Asian immigrants and refugees face is the lack of human capital needed to be competitive in the job market. In addition to supportive case management and mental health services, welfare-to-work strategies for Asian immigrants and refu-

gees should focus on innovative ways to develop human capital characteristics such as labor force experience, English language proficiency, and education. For instance, in Chow et al.'s (2001) description of a TANF support program for Southeast Asians in Oakland, California, the program features included day socialization and job readiness. Within this program component, the welfare recipients (and their spouses when appropriate) participate in activities designed to increase employment skills, including English language classes or formal educational training through a community college. Participants are first given an assessment to determine their abilities and interests and an individual case plan is created. Through the use of a self-help, peer-support, and role-modeling framework participants perform tasks related to the functioning of the program itself.

Another innovative strategy to increase human capital among Southeast Asians are wage subsidy programs that provide subsidies to employers hiring refugees. In 1998 the Office of Refugee Resettlement began implementing a wage subsidy program entitled, the Community Service Employment (CSE) program. The CSE program was created in response to the potentially negative effects of the five-year time limit on refugees; the program uses a wage subsidy to create incentives for employers to hire refugees, and also delivers on-the-job training as well as supportive services. The target population for the CSE program includes low-income refugees age 21 or older with limited English proficiency, limited education, and who have been in the U.S. a number of years without work force attachment. The program is designed to assist these refugees to obtain and retain employment, while also promoting job advancement.

In Else et al.'s (2003) evaluation of the CSE program's effectiveness after five years of implementation, results indicated the program possessed a number of strong employment and earnings outcomes. Eleven program sites were included in the evaluation and participant-level data were collected from eight program sites—five in California, one in Massachusetts, one in Michigan, and one in Missouri. Of the 2,088 refugees for which data were collected, employment and earnings outcomes for the program participants were promising. Eighty-five percent of the participants were placed in full-time positions; 21 percent of these positions were unsubsidized. Moreover, participation in the program was associated with



a decrease in poverty and an increase in annual household income. Public assistance use also decreased among program participants. TANF participation decreased from 45 percent to 15 percent and receipt of food stamps decreased from 52 percent to 17 percent. Although this program is not specifically a welfare-to-work program, the results suggest that comprehensive programs that provide access to labor force attachment through creative job development strategies and wage subsidies to employers may represent an effective program strategy with Asian refugees and immigrants.

Discussions of low-income Asian immigrant economic self-sufficiency tend to focus on the deficits of this population and their difficulties in transitioning into the U.S. labor market. Yet, welfare-to-work strategies for Asian immigrants and refugees should also focus on the existing strengths and resources of this population. For instance, Fass (1986) describes three innovative modes of economic self-reliance among Hmong refugees in which the natural resources and skills of the Hmong are used. These projects include sewing projects, farming projects, and small businesses.

Hmong sewing projects involve marketing the traditional crafts and ethnic art forms of the Hmong. Fass (1986) reports that in 1983, 28 projects with 1,800 Hmong participants were in existence. These projects generated annual sales of \$700,000. However, outcomes for individual participants were reported as mixed; although some Hmong participating in the sewing projects earned as much as \$3,000 a year, the annual average earnings for the project participants was only \$240. Fass notes that certain obstacles prevented many of the sewing projects from making a significant profit. Specifically, many of the Hmong involved in sewing projects did not have experience in marketing techniques, some were unwilling to stop producing traditional crafts, and under financing represented a significant obstacle.

Fass (1986) describes farming as another existing skill possessed by many Hmong that has been used as a means of potentially achieving economic self-sufficiency. In 1983, 230 Hmong families were participating in farming projects. Yet, Fass reported that certain barriers have hindered earnings outcomes for many of the Hmong farming projects. Some of these barriers include lack of knowledge of commercial farming practices, lack of networks with neighboring farmers, weak marketing channels, and insufficient financial resources. Additionally, many of the Hmong working on

the farming projects that Fass describes were AFDC recipients and as such, there were limited to only 100 hours of remuneration for work per quarter.

Additionally, Fass (1986) discusses small businesses as an innovative mechanism for self-reliance among Hmong in the United States. In 1983, 39 small businesses were being operated by Hmong, most of these grocery stores. Most businesses started as food buying cooperatives that began with pooled resources from savings and extended family. Again, as with the sewing and farming projects, earnings were mixed. Although sales averaged \$5,400 for cooperative grocery stores, not all businesses were able to turn a profit. Barriers related to lack of knowledge regarding how to establish and operate a business in the U.S. slowed the progress of many of the Hmong small businesses.

Although the outcomes for innovative modes of economic self-sufficiency among the Hmong have been mixed, the potential of using the natural resources and skills of Southeast Asian refugees in welfare-to-work strategies is promising. For instance, in Chow et al.'s (2001) description of a TANF support program for Southeast Asians, participants were exposed to activities related to small business operation. Specifically, using participants' natural talents in traditional Cambodian arts and crafts, partnerships were formed with non-profit cultural arts and media groups and products such as greeting cards were advertised and sold on the Internet. In this manner, the existing skills of welfare participants were utilized while simultaneously exposing participants to real-life economic development activities related to small business operation. As such, services were able to use the existing resources of Southeast Asians, while also assisting participants to learn important business skills to help them in maximizing earnings from their talents.

## Conclusion

Welfare reform legislation produced profound policy changes that have widespread implications for Asian immigrants and refugees. Because Asian immigrants and refugees have disproportionately high rates of poverty and public assistance use and are likely to stay on welfare for relatively lengthy periods of time, many are at an increased risk of reaching welfare reform's five-year time limit. This study has helped to shed light on Asian immigrants' ex-

periences facing the loss of welfare benefits and their perceptions of receiving welfare-to-work services. Such information has important implications for the improvement of welfare-to-work programs and policies. Focus group findings highlighted the many barriers this population faces and that these barriers do not appear to be adequately addressed by welfare reform's "work first" approach. Instead, focus group findings and information from the literature suggest that welfare-to-work program strategies for this population should incorporate culturally competent support services, human capital development, and strength-based approaches. As more and more Asian immigrant families lose cash assistance as a result of reaching the five-year time limit, the need to improve welfare-to-work programs and policies for this population has become increasingly urgent. Acculturating to the U.S. and achieving economic self-sufficiency are indeed formidable tasks; yet, adequate welfare programs and policies that address the unique circumstances of refugees and immigrants have the potential to facilitate a successful transition to the U.S.

## References

- Alameda County Social Services Agency. 2004. *Quarterly Report, June 2004*. <<http://www.alamedasocialservices.org>> as of October 29, 2004.
- Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center. 1983. "Bridging Cultures: Southeast Asian Refugees in America." *Organizational Report*.
- Bach, Robert and Rita Carroll Seguin. 1985. *Labor Force Participation of Southeast Asian Refugees in the United States*. Binghamton, NY: State University of New York.
- Borjas, George. 2002. *The Impact of Welfare Reform on Immigrant Welfare Use*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigrant Studies.
- Brady, Henry E., Michael S. Clune, Laurel Elms, Anita K. Mathur, Kamran Nayeri, Jon Stiles, and Jeffrey W. Weinstein. 2002. *California's Immigrant Households and Public-Assistance Participation in the 1990's*. Berkeley, CA: California Policy Research Center, University of California.
- California Department of Social Services. 2001. "CalWORKS Characteristics Survey." <<http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research>> as of October 3, 2003.
- Chu, Judy. 1983. "The Trauma of Transition: Southeast Asian Refugees in America." Pp. 15-31 in *Bridging Cultures: Southeast Asian Refugees in America*, ed. Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center. Los Angeles, CA: Asian American Community Mental Health Training Center.
- Chung, Rita Chi-Ying and Fred Bemak. 1996. "The Effects of Welfare Sta-

- tus on Psychological Distress among Southeast Asian Refugees." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 184(6): 346-353.
- Chow, Julian. 1999. "Multiservice Centers in Chinese American Immigrant Communities: Practice Principles and Challenges." *Social Work* 44(1): 70-81.
- Chow, Julian, Nancy Bester, and Alan Shinn. 2001. "AsianWORKS: A TANF Program for Southeast Asian Americans in Oakland, California." *Journal of Community Practice* 9(3): 111-124.
- City and County of San Francisco, Department of Human Services. 2004. *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2002-2003*. <<http://www.sfgov.org>> as of October 29, 2004.
- Else, John F., Dennis Affholter, Gerald Brown, Lisa Budzilowicz, and Maria Hein. 2003. *Working in America: A Wage-Subsidy Strategy for Employing Refugees Without Prior Workforce Attachment*. Washington, D.C.: ISED Solutions.
- Fass, Simon. 1986. "Innovations in the Struggle for Self-reliance: The Hmong Experience in the United States." *International Migration Review* 10(2): 351-380.
- Fix, Michael and Jeffery Passel. 2002. "Assessing Welfare Reform's Immigrant Provisions." Pp. 179-202 in *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*, eds. A. Weil and K. Finegold. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Hein, Jeremy. 1995. *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States*. New York: Twayne.
- Hirschl, Thomas, Douglas Gurak, and Huong Haoi Tran. 1995. "Patterns and Determinants of Welfare Use among Southeast Asian Refugees." Unpublished manuscript.
- Holcomb, Pamela and Karen Martinson. 2002. "Putting Policy into Practice: Five Years of Welfare Reform." Pp. 1-16 in *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*, eds. A. Weil and K. Finegold. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Kelley, Patricia. 1992. "The Application of Family Systems Theory to Mental Health Services for Southeast Asian Refugees." *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* 2(1): 1-13.
- Office of Refugee Resettlement. 2000. *Report to Congress*. <<http://www.scf.dhhs.gov/programs/orr/policy/00arc8.htm>> as of October 16, 2003
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Refugee Resettlement.
- Ong, Paul and Evelyn Blumenberg. 1994. "Welfare and Work among Southeast Asians." Pp. 113-137 in *The State of Asian Pacific America: Economic Diversity, Issues and Policies*, ed. Paul Ong. Los Angeles: LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute, UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.
- Rumbaut, Ruben G. and John R. Weeks. 1986. "Fertility and Adaptation: Indochinese Refugees in the United States." *International Migration Review* 20(2): 428-466.
- Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. 2004. *Promise Your Family a Better Future: CalWORKs Annual Report, September 2004*. <<http://www.sccgov.org>> as of October 29, 2004.

- Strand, Paul J. 1984. "Employment Predictors among Indochinese Refugees." *International Migration Review* 18(1): 50-64.
- Tumlin, Karen, C. and Wendy Zimmermann. 2003. *Immigrants and TANF: A look at Immigrant Welfare Recipients in Three Cities*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census. 2000. "Table PCT19: Place of Birth for the Foreign Born Population, Census 2000 Summary File 3." <[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTGeoSearchByListServlet?ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF3\\_U&\\_lang=en&\\_ts=89919607515](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTGeoSearchByListServlet?ds_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U&_lang=en&_ts=89919607515)> as of February 8, 2004.
- Weil, Alan and Kenneth Finegold. 2002. "Introduction." Pp. xi-xxxi in *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*, eds. A. Weil and K. Finegold. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Ying, Yu-Wen, Phillip D. Akutsu, Xiulan Zhang, and Larke, N. Huang. 1997. "Psychological Dysfunction in Southeast Asian Refugees as Mediated by Sense of Coherence." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 25(6): 839-859.
- Ying, Yu-Wen. 2001 "Psychotherapy with traumatized Southeast Asian refugees." *Clinical Social Work Journal* 29(1): 65-78.

## Notes

1. The five-year time limit applies to all welfare recipients, not just immigrants.
2. Southeast Asians are not differentiated within the Asian racial category.
3. To our knowledge, there is no statewide data available on the total number of timed-out clients broken down by ethnic racial groups in California.
4. Barriers related to the American labor market or welfare-to-work programs may also affect employment outcomes among Asian welfare recipients; however, we will focus only on individual-level

---

JULIAN CHUN-CHUNG CHOW is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Welfare, at the University of California, Berkeley.

KATHY LEMON OSTERLING, MSW, is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Social Welfare, at the University of California, Berkeley.

QINGWEN XU, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Social Work, Boston College.