

Skilled immigration masks APA poverty, report shows

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The influx of highly skilled, highly educated workers on H1-B visas from Asian countries in the last decade has skewed poverty statistics, according to a new report by the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (National CAPACD).

In 2011 alone, “there were over 90,000 H1-B visas issued to people coming from Asia.”

These highly skilled, high-income immigrants have increased the pool of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and caused the APA poverty rate to stay stable even though the actual number of APAs living in poverty has grown dramatically.

Between 2000 and 2011 the official APA poverty rate only increased by .3 percent.

Yet during the same period, according to the report, the actual number of APAs living in poverty increased by 50 percent, which means there are roughly half a million more APAs living in poverty today than there were ten years ago.

“[APA] poor are one of the fastest growing poverty populations in the wake of the Recession,” states the report.

So who are the APA poor?

The National CAPACD report uses US Census data and defines the APA poor as families and individuals living below the federal poverty threshold. Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnic groups with the highest concentrations of poverty are Hmong, Bangladeshi, Tongan, and Cambodian. However, numerically, the APA poor is predominantly Chinese, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese. In terms of poverty growth rates, the ethnic mix of poor APAs did not change significantly between 2000 and 2010.

The U.S. Census Bureau set the poverty threshold for 2012 at \$11,945 per year for an individual under 65, and \$23,681 for a family of four.

One surprising finding of the report is that poverty growth was higher among native-born APAs than immigrants — a rare trend for ethnic populations. This supports the theory that the influx of high-income Asian immigrants has masked increasing poverty within APA communities.

However, the author of the report, Josh Ishimatsu, is quick to clarify that APA immigration is not homogenous. Despite the increase of wealthy Asian immigrants, other APA immigrants continue to make up a large portion of that population’s poor. In fact, housing and health care service providers working with APA communities say that the vast majority of their clients continue to be immigrants.

Ishimatsu attributes the growing poverty numbers primarily to geographic location and concentration. APAs are “disproportionately concentrated in metro areas with the highest housing costs,” and “50 percent of all poor APAs live in the 20 most expensive real estate markets in the country.” Ishimatsu notes that in urban areas of high cost states such as California, it is not unusual for people to spend over 50 percent of their income on housing.

"Housing issues are a critical issue facing those Asian American communities living in poverty with so many of them in very high cost areas," confirms Vivian Yi Huang, a director at Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), an advocacy group based in the Bay Area.

In Oakland in particular, Huang says housing prices have risen so dramatically that many Asian Americans have been pushed out of their homes and in some cases, forced to leave the city entirely.

Other drivers of APA poverty include low English proficiency, high rates of self-employment, and employment and housing discrimination, Ishimatsu says.

What is more, he adds, the report does not fully capture the economic woes of APAs because the U.S. definition of poverty is not adjusted for location. Since so many APAs live in high cost areas hit hard by the housing bubble, many more APAs are "functionally poor" than would be assumed, simply by looking at the statistics.

Ishimatsu hopes the report pushes policy makers and community organizers to recognize the magnitude of APA poverty. "The big narrative is that poverty for Asian Americans is relatively stable," he says. However, "APAs were hurt much more than people think." (*end*)