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[Special Issue on SEA Demographics] Response - Sociology: A Portrait of Adaptation

Carl L. Bankston III
Tulane University, Carl.Bankston@tulane.edu

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Special Issue on Southeast Asian American Demographics

Response—Sociology: A Portrait of Adaptation

Carl L. Bankston III

Tulane University

Dr. Pfeifer has provided a useful summary of the 2005 ACS data. His statistics are consistent with earlier descriptions of Southeast Asian populations using Census data, such as the description that Danielle Hidalgo and I recently published, relying mainly on full Census and the Public Use Micro Data Series (PUMS) from 1980 through 2000 (Bankston & Hidalgo 2007a), and the description of the Vietnamese American population published by Rubén Rumbaut (2007). The use of Census data does raise the question of undercounting, a problem that Pfeifer himself acknowledges elsewhere, when he remarks that “it should be noted that it is widely believed that substantial undercounts occurred in the census enumerations of each of these predominantly immigrant and refugee populations” (Pfeifer, 2001). Based on interviews with Hmong community leaders, I have identified census undercounting as apparently a serious problem for this group, in particular (Bankston, 1995, 2000). Drastic undercounting, especially of children, may be the reason that the ACS and 2000 Census data for the Hmong show a very small increase in population, in both rate and numbers, from 2000 to 2005, while the Hmong tend to have very large families (see Table 12), which should reflect high fertility and a consequent high rate of population growth.

The definition of group membership may also create some ambiguities. The “... alone or in any combination” definition includes individuals of mixed ethnicity. In the 2000 Census, for example, there was a difference of over 100,000 people between “Vietnamese alone or in any combination” and “Vietnamese alone,” or over 8% of the entire population. Among those under 18 years of age, 13% of the “Vietnamese alone or in any combination” category were “any combination,” rather than “Vietnamese alone.” Thus, the definition that Pfeifer uses includes some fairly large numbers and proportions of people whose own ethnicity may be complicated, whose parents and other family are not members of the groups under consideration, and who may be quite distinct from other group members, especially in characteristics related to cultural and socioeconomic assimilation. The offspring of Southeast Asian partners or spouses of non-Asian American military personnel formerly stationed in Southeast Asia make up one particularly distinctive sub-group whose demographic characteristics may be quite different from other Southeast Asians and whose ethnic self-identification may be complicated (Hidalgo & Bankston, forthcoming). The fact that younger and, therefore native-born, people are more likely to be mixed race can introduce some systematic, if small, bias into many of the descriptive measures.



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Keeping these concerns in mind, this descriptive summary is significant for social scientists concerned with Southeast Asian origin populations in the United States. Several showed substantial recorded population increases from 2000 to 2005: The Vietnamese population showed an increase of 24%, the Cambodian an increase of 17%, the Lao 6%, and the Hmong population an increase of 1.4%. As Pfeifer notes, this last increase may not include the 15,000 Hmong who came from 2004 to 2006 and, as I note above, even excluding those new arrivals, real Hmong population growth may have been much greater. This would indicate that these statistics give us a very conservative measure of the rapid increase of Southeast Asians in the United States.

One of the implications of this growth is that several Southeast Asian groups will make up a much larger proportion of the American population in the foreseeable future. To put the above growth in context, the American population as a whole grew by 2.5% between 2000 and 2005, a lower rate of growth than any of the Southeast Asian groups except the Hmong (and even the Hmong may have grown by more if the 2004 through 2006 arrivals were left out). The rate of growth of the Vietnamese American population was especially great, and the Vietnamese were already one of the largest Asian American groups by 2000. In terms of sheer numbers, Southeast Asians are an important segment of the people of the United States and the segment is growing steadily.

Another observation that should be made about this population growth is that it is happening after the era of large-scale Southeast Asian refugee movements that established all of these groups in North America from 1975 until the early 1990s. The 2004 to 2006 entry of Hmong mentioned by Pfeifer was something of an anomaly. As reflected in Pfeifer's section on time of arrival, the flow of refugees originating from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos peaked in the 1980s and for the most part ended by the early 1990s (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007a, 2007b; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). While there was some non-refugee migration after this period, most of the growth occurred by births inside of the United States. This is reflected in Pfeifer's Table 18. Although the majority of all groups except the Hmong were foreign born, they all had substantial native born populations and the fact that nearly 36% of the Vietnamese American population was American born is impressive when one considers that the entire group has been established through migration over the past thirty years.

As the native born portion of these groups grows, it is probable that family sizes will become more similar to those of the general population, shown in Table 12 and that growth in population through native fertility will slow down. However, there are reasons to believe that immigration, especially from Vietnam, will grow. Already, immigrant admissions from mainland Southeast Asia have increased while refugee admissions have dropped (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007a, 2007b). A large population of any national group in the United States increases opportunities for migration from the ancestral homeland because family reunification is the primary preference category in American immigration policy. Accordingly, Pfeifer aptly observes that much Vietnamese migration after the 1990s was probably the result of family reunification migration. In general, one can expect both a slowing of population growth through native birth, and an increase in population growth through migration, unless there is a change in American immigration law. Both of these trends mark what may be called the "normalization" of the Southeast Asian groups that originated as refugees. The native-born groups are becoming more similar, in basic demographic characteristics, to members of other American ethnic groups, and the new immigrants are becoming more like other new immigrants to the United States in their means of arrival.

The socioeconomic and educational progress of these groups marks their rapid adaptation to American society. Adaptation, though, is not the same thing as assimilation. In fact, the progress of some groups actually distinguishes them from much of American society. Vietnamese American youth, in particular, have long been noted for their school performance (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Whether their differences from the Laotians and Cambodians in this respect can be entirely attributed to the relatively higher level of availability of education in Vietnam, as Pfeifer suggests, is open to question. Min Zhou and I (1998) found that even Vietnamese children from extremely limited educational backgrounds are often comparatively high achievers. We have located the sources of academic achievement in the frequently close ethnic community networks that surround Vietnamese American children. It may be reasonable to suggest, then, that at least part of the difference among these groups may lie in structures of their ethnic networks. It may also be the case, as my co-authors and I have argued about Cambodians, that the tragic experiences of their homeland have placed increased stress on them, slowing upward mobility (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2007b; Zhou, Bankston, & Kim, 2001).

If the educational progress of the Southeast Asian groups is a product of ethnic social relations, then this distinctiveness may diminish as young people take on characteristics of the other young people who surround them in this country. Already, in revisiting the Vietnamese community that we studied in the 1990s, Min Zhou and I have found that the high achieving Vietnamese adolescent, while still part of the scene, is becoming somewhat less common (Zhou & Bankston, 2006).

The general economic progress noted by Pfeifer is impressive. When we see that the Vietnamese and Lao have higher median household and family incomes than the American population as a whole, though, it is important to remember that all of these groups were disproportionately located in California, where both wages and the cost of living tend to be higher than many other parts of the country. In addition, as Pfeifer points out, there is substantial variability within these groups as well as among them. As Table 22 shows, all groups had higher poverty rates than the American population in general, with the Hmong especially disadvantaged, since about one third live below the poverty level.

Overall, Mark Pfeifer has done an excellent job of summarizing and describing for us the most important Census statistics on the adaptation of Southeast Asians to life in the United States. This is a picture that shows remarkable achievements over a short period of history, as well as remaining challenges.

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About the Author



Carl L. Bankston III is Chair of the Department of Sociology and Director of the Asian Studies Program at Tulane University. His research interests focus on Asian migration and sociology of education. He has published over one hundred articles and book chapters and fifteen books, including *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (1998), co-authored with Min Zhou.



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