

# For refugees from Burma, hope of better life in US turns into extreme poverty, isolation

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Refugees who have fled Burma to live in Oakland, Calif., are at risk of becoming a permanent, poverty-stricken underclass warns a new report released today by researchers at San Francisco State University and the Burma Refugee Family Network (BRFN). The report found that almost 60 percent of Oakland's refugees from Burma are living in extreme poverty.

Since 2007, thousands of [refugees](#) from war-torn Burma have been resettled by the U.S. federal government and an estimated 400 individuals have been resettled in Oakland.

Burma, also known as Myanmar, has been under military rule since 1962. Ethnic minorities make up 40 percent of the country's population and many refugees are from the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, have been the targets of brutal military attacks and persecution by Burma's Army.

"These recent refugees from Burma are facing dire circumstances," said Russell Jeung, associate professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University. "The recession and government cuts in adult English classes mean that even though they want to work, these refugees have no opportunity to learn English or workplace skills in order to adapt to life in the U.S."

Jeung and his students, together with BRFN and other community-based organizations, surveyed 194 refugees from Burma to assess the

community's needs. The researchers found that in addition to high [poverty rates](#), these refugees face barriers to accessing employment, health care and government benefits caused by their lack of English. These barriers have been exacerbated by recent cuts in the provision of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and a lack of appropriate interpretation services.

"Refugees from Burma are brought here to escape years of persecution and hardship, and are hoping for a better life in the U.S., but instead they are being neglected and caught in a web of poverty," said Zar Ni Maung of BRFN. "Here, we should have more human rights and opportunities, but we still struggle and must work together to overcome these challenges."

The report found that among Oakland's refugee population from Burma:

- 63 percent are unemployed. Those that are employed have sporadic, low-wage jobs.
- 57 percent live below the federal threshold for extreme poverty, earning less than \$1,000 per month for an average household size of five. Most of the remainder live below the federal poverty line.
- 38 percent speak no English at all. Another 28 percent speak English poorly.
- 74 percent report that lack of English is their biggest barrier to accessing health care.
- 47 percent report that English classes are the most-needed service in their community.

The outlook is particularly difficult for refugees from Burma's Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, which make up the majority of the refugees from Burma that have resettled in Oakland. These ethnic groups

originate from some of the poorest and least developed states in Burma. They fled their home states in eastern Burma to escape military attacks and human rights abuses. Now resettled in Oakland, refugees of Karenni origin are struggling to adapt to life in the United States: 81 percent are unemployed, 90 percent are living in extreme poverty and 90 percent have no high school education.

"These [ethnic groups](#) are faring the worst," Jeung said. "They are the least educated, the least empowered and many of them only speak their own ethnic language, which means they can't understand Burmese translators and are locked out of accessing the services they need."

The report's recommendations include an extension of the federal Refugee Cash Assistance Program, which currently only provides support to refugees for eight months after their arrival in the U.S. It also calls for direct support for refugee community organizations helping their own communities and the funding and training of interpreters in ethnic languages and increased provision of adult ESL classes, particularly classes appropriate for learners with low levels of formal schooling.

"Our findings suggest that resettlement programs in Oakland are not yet successful," Maung said. "We would like to see federal and local refugee government agencies and nonprofits working together with and supporting grassroots community organizations in order to help members of our community achieve self-sufficiency."

Provided by San Francisco State University

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