

**Beyond Resettlement: The Impact of Community on the Integration of Burmese Refugees
in Marion County, Indiana**

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of Burmese refugees in Neighborhood B, a Burmese ethnic enclave in Marion County, Indiana. It operationalizes integration with the adoption of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (2015) definition of the concept which posits that the ultimate goal of integration is for immigrants and refugees to achieve a similar status to that of the native-born population. The study disaggregates the *native-born population* into three major groups, namely White, Black, and Hispanic. Using Census Bureau data, the study examines five domains of integration found in the framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008), which are education, employment, housing, health, and rights and citizenship. The study employs seven socioeconomic indicators, namely educational attainment, employment status, household income, poverty status, tenure or housing occupation status, health coverage, and citizenship status, to examine these domains. The study finds that Burmese refugees in Neighborhood B have successfully integrated into their host society despite the limitations of the U.S. refugee admissions program. More specifically, the socioeconomic outcomes of Burmese refugees generally approximate that of White individuals, while tending to surpass that of Black individuals on average, and Hispanic individuals in some domains. The study suggests that the strength of the Burmese community in Neighborhood B, which fosters strong social networks, may be a possible explanation for this finding.

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, the United States has welcomed over two million refugees through its refugee admissions program (USRAP). Historically, it has admitted more refugees for permanent resettlement than any other country in the world. For refugees who are eligible for permanent resettlement, the U.S. provides a safe haven where they can start a new life, free from the fear of persecution, conflict, or violence.

Unlike other migrants, refugees arrive in the United States under vulnerable circumstances. They do not voluntarily choose to migrate but are forced to leave their home countries because of circumstances outside of their control (Singer and Wilson 2006; Bernstein and DuBois 2018). Prior to being admitted to a country of resettlement, they often spend long periods of displacement in refugee camps or under other vulnerable and traumatic conditions (Singer and Wilson 2006; McCabe 2010; Capps et al. 2015; Bernstein and DuBois 2018; Gowayed 2022). Furthermore, due to their unplanned departure, many refugees arrive in the country with limited material possessions, and separated from family members and other social networks (McCabe 2010; Bernstein and DuBois 2018; Gowayed 2022).

The United States provides “integration services” to support the transition of refugees into the country, however, previous research has shown that the U.S. refugee admissions program presents various challenges. More specifically, the program’s emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and nonreliance on governmental assistance, i.e. time limited benefits and support, often creates further barriers to refugees’ successful integration rather than facilitates it (Kerwin 2012; Fix et al. 2017; Saksena and McMorro 2019). Gowayed (2022) even argues that this emphasis on self-sufficiency integrates refugees into American poverty. Additionally, the USRAP lacks a system for tracking the long-term integration outcomes of refugees (Office of

Refugee Resettlement 2022). Instead, local agencies are only required to report on the employment status of refugees within 90 days of their arrival in order to measure their integration success, which discounts other essential aspects of integration, namely social, cultural, and civic (Bansak et al. 2018; Bernstein and DuBois 2018). While the USRAP provides a crucial opportunity for refugees to escape persecution, conflict, and violence, and resettle in the United States, one might ask, does the U.S. government provide sufficient support to help refugees not only start a new life but also achieve socioeconomic mobility?

The broader goal of this study is to take a step towards answering this question by examining the integration of refugees who have resettled in the United States. Following the assumptions that integration happens at the neighborhood level (Seethaler-Wari 2018) and is contextual (Saksena and McMorrow 2019), and that premigration personal characteristics (including national origins) as well as experiences influence integration outcomes (Capps et al. 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016; Fix et al. 2017; Evans and Fitzgerald 2017; Bansak et al. 2018), this study focuses on Burmese refugees who resettled in Marion County, Indiana. Examining this specific group is of particular significance because Burmese refugees constitute one of the largest refugee populations in the United States, with over 140,000 refugees resettled in the country since 2008 (Migration Policy Institute 2021; WRAPS 2022). Additionally, Indiana has played a critical role in providing a new home for thousands of Burmese refugees, with Marion County serving as the second largest Burmese ethnic enclave in the country. As this community continues to grow, there is a critical need to better understand the factors that contribute to their successful integration.

Using U.S. Census Bureau data, primarily 5-year tract-level estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS), this study investigates the extent to which Burmese refugees have

achieved successful integration in Marion County, Indiana. To operationalize successful integration, the study adopts the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (2015) definition of integration which emphasizes the ultimate goal of integration, which is for immigrants and refugees (within and across generations) to achieve a similar status to that of the native-born population. The U.S. native-born population, however, is heterogeneous, and there is high variation in socioeconomic outcomes across races/ethnicities. Therefore, in this study, the *native-born population* is disaggregated into three major groups: the majority and most historically advantaged population (White), the most historically underserved and marginalized population (Black), and the largest immigrant population (Hispanic).

It is worth noting that several studies have been conducted on the Burmese refugee community in Indiana, however, the majority of them have focused on narrow topics such as health issues, media portrayal, youth education, and political activism, rather than the broader integration of the community (Ritchey et al. 2009; White 2012; Williams 2012; McHenry et al. 2016; Tervo 2017; Ehmer and Kothari 2018; Kuo 2019; Kumar 2021; Lim 2022). Additionally, many studies have used Census Bureau data to examine refugee integration, but they have not focused on a single refugee community or one specific resettlement location (Trieu and Vang 2015; Capps et al. 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016; Fix et al. 2017; Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). Therefore, this study is an essential contribution to the existing literature.

It is important to mention that although the country's official name changed to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in 1989, this study uses the name Burma because pro-democracy supporters rejected the name imposed by the military junta, and the United States does not recognize it as it was not the result of a democratic process. Furthermore, referring to the country as Burma is an act of resistance for many refugees (Fike and Androff 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief history of the global refugee crisis

The global refugee crisis is a complex and ongoing phenomenon that has been shaped by a variety of historical, political, economic, and social factors. While there have always been people who have been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, and other forms of violence, the modern era of refugee movements can be traced back to the aftermath of World War II (UNHCR 2023). The first international legal framework for addressing the rights of refugees was established in 1951, with the adoption of the United Nations Refugee Convention. This Convention defined who is a refugee and established the legal obligations of states to protect refugees, including non-refoulement, the principle that no one should be returned to a country where they would face persecution (UNHCR 1951). The Convention also established the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to help protect and assist refugees. Over the following decades, the number of refugees increased due to ongoing conflicts and civil wars, including the wars in Indochina, the Balkans, and Africa (UNHCR 2023). In recent years, the number of refugees has risen dramatically due to conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Burma, and other countries. According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2020, there were 82.4 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, including 26.4 million refugees, 4.1 million asylum seekers, and 45.7 million internally displaced people (UNHCR 2020). It is worth noting that only 1% of the total global refugee population are ever deemed eligible for permanent resettlement into a host country (Gowayed 2022).

A brief history of the Burmese refugee crisis

The Burmese refugee crisis is a complex issue that stems from a long history of political conflict, ethnic persecution, and human rights violations. It has its roots in the 1960s when military rule was established in Burma. The military-dominated government has been accused of widespread human rights violations, including ethnic cleansing and persecution of minority groups such as the Rohingya, resulting in the displacement of millions of people (Cox and Pawar 2006; Malseed 2009; Brough et al. 2013; Fike and Androff 2016). Burma was once a multiethnic society promoting exchange (Brough et al. 2013), but colonization by the British in 1885 created and exacerbated ethnic divisions (Charney 2009; Holliday 2010). Nationalist leader Aung San sought to promote cooperation between Burma's ethnic groups but was assassinated in 1947 while attempting to develop a federal government system sharing power between political units made up of different ethnic groups (Charney 2009; Fike and Androff 2016). Burma gained independence in 1948, but the lack of leadership and power gap led to a prolonged violent conflict between ethnic groups, intensified by a military coup in 1962 (Charney 2009; Malseed 2009; Holliday 2010). The military junta ruled the country as a dictatorship and brutally suppressed popular protests for democratic reform (Fike and Androff 2016).

The most significant influx of Burmese refugees occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the military cracked down on pro-democracy activists, leading up to 250,000 refugees fleeing to Thailand where they were housed in overcrowded camps along the border (Maizland 2022). Despite efforts to resettle them in other countries, many remained in the camps, living in harsh conditions with limited access to healthcare and education (Amnesty International 2021). In 2012, sectarian violence broke out in Rakhine state, where the Rohingya minority resides, leading to the displacement of thousands of people (UNHCR 2021). This sparked a new

wave of refugee arrivals in neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand (UNHCR 2021). For decades, Burma has suffered from repressive military rule, widespread poverty, and neglect, and discrimination against minority ethnic groups (Pedersen 2008; Maizland 2022). The ongoing civil war has resulted in the current Burmese refugee crisis, which remains a significant humanitarian concern. As of 2021, the UNHCR has recorded over 1 million displaced people within and from Burma, with almost 400,000 internally displaced and 800,000 stateless individuals (UNHCR 2021).

Burmese refugees in the United States

Refugees from Burma began resettling in the United States in large numbers around 2008 (WRAPS 2022). Since then, the country resettled more than 140,000 Burmese refugees, with significant populations found in Minnesota, California, Indiana, Texas, and New York (Pew Research Center 2019; Migration Policy Institute 2021). Between the fiscal year 2010 and 2020, refugees from Burma made up 21% of the total refugee population admitted into the country (Migration Policy Institute 2021).

Burmese refugees in the United States are a diverse population, reflecting the diversity of Burma itself. The largest ethnic group of Burmese refugees in the U.S. are Karen, accounting for approximately 45% of all Burmese refugees (Migration Policy Institute 2021). The Karen are an ethnic minority group that has faced persecution and violence in Burma, and many have fled to neighboring countries such as Thailand and Malaysia before resettling in the United States (Cultural Orientation Resource Center 2023). The Karenni are another significant ethnic group among Burmese refugees in the U.S., accounting for approximately 10% of all Burmese refugees (Migration Policy Institute 2021). The Karenni are an ethnic minority group that has also faced

persecution and violence in Burma, particularly due to their struggle for autonomy (Cultural Orientation Resource Center 2023). The Chin are another significant ethnic group among Burmese refugees in the U.S., accounting for approximately 9% of all Burmese refugees (Migration Policy Institute 2021). The Chin are an ethnic minority group that has faced persecution and discrimination in Burma due to their religious beliefs and cultural practices. In addition to these major ethnic groups, there are also significant numbers of refugees from other ethnic groups such as the Rohingya, Mon, and Shan.

When it comes to religion, approximately 90% of Burmese refugees in the U.S. are Buddhist (Migration Policy Institute 2021). This reflects the fact that Buddhism is the dominant religion in Burma, with over 85% of the population identifying as Buddhist. The same report by the Migration Policy Institute found that roughly 7% of Burmese refugees in the U.S. are Christian, with many belonging to the Karen Baptist Church. There are also smaller numbers of Muslim refugees, particularly from the Rohingya community in Burma, who have largely faced persecution and violence due to their religion.

Overall, the Burmese refugee population in the United States is a vulnerable group that requires more assistance with integration compared to other refugee groups (Agbényiga et al. 2012). Kuoch et al. (2018) found that Burmese refugees who spent more time in refugee camps had a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They also found that refugees who experienced traumatic events in their home country were more likely to have mental health issues regardless of their length of stay in a refugee camp. Similarly, Mehta et al. (2019) found that Burmese refugees who had spent time in refugee camps were more likely to experience social isolation and limited social networks in the United States.

Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of Burmese refugees in the United States presents a challenge for resettlement agencies, who must ensure that refugees have access to appropriate resources and services. Some Burmese ethnic groups may find it easier to adapt while others face significant challenges in the integration process (Barron et al. 2007; Fike and Androff 2016). Additionally, many Burmese refugees tend to associate primarily with members of their own ethnic group rather than the larger Burmese population in the U.S. due to cultural and linguistic differences and the history of intergroup ethnic conflict (Fike and Androff 2016). This can lead to social isolation and a lack of connection with the broader American society.

As they try to adjust to their new environment in the U.S., Burmese refugees may also face difficulties pertaining to language barriers/communication; access to resources and services, including education, healthcare, and employment; navigating the complex legal and bureaucratic systems; cultural differences and unfamiliar norms; worries about family back home; and discrimination in their host society (Hickey 2007; Tonsing and Vungkhanching 2020). Service providers may also struggle to meet the unique needs of Burmese refugees due to the ongoing ethnic conflict in Burma which has led to a deep mistrust of the government and authority in general (Fike and Androff 2016). As a result, Burmese refugees may be hesitant to seek out services or interact with authority figures, further exacerbating their isolation and vulnerability.

The U.S refugee admissions program

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States began to establish a formal system for admitting refugees. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 provided for the admission of refugees from Europe, including those who had been displaced by the war. The Refugee Relief Act of 1953 expanded the scope of the U.S. refugee program to include refugees from around the world.

In 1980, the U.S. government passed the Refugee Act, which created a permanent and standardized system for admitting refugees. The act defined a refugee as someone who had fled persecution or the fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The act also established a process for determining whether an individual met this definition and for resettling refugees in the United States.

Refugees are subject to a lengthy and rigorous screening process prior to determining their eligibility to resettle in the U.S. The UNHCR refers resettlement cases to the US Department of State, which collaborates with non-governmental organizations and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to collect information and keep refugees informed about the progress of their cases. Refugees undergo screening and interviews by officers from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), with various national security agencies involved in background checks and medical examinations. If successful, refugees receive cultural orientation before travelling to the United States. The U.S. resettlement program is a collaboration between federal agencies and nine national resettlement agencies, which determine the local placement of refugees and offer support through local affiliates.

Upon arrival in the United States, refugees face a complex resettlement process that involves multiple steps and stakeholders (Fix et al. 2017). While the goal of the U.S. refugee resettlement program (USRAP) is oriented towards integration, the specific goal of the refugee resettlement process is to encourage refugees to be self-sufficient and enter the labor market as quickly as possible (Chambers 2017; Saksena and McMorrow 2019; Portes and Rumbaut 2019; Gowayed 2022). To achieve this goal, refugees are provided with transitional assistance services including housing arrangements, employment support, English language training, enrollment of children in schools, and application for public assistance programs (Fix et al. 2017). However,

refugees with no pre-existing ethnic community or family ties in the country may face additional challenges as they are assigned to a local resettlement location based on various factors, including the availability of jobs and affordable housing, the receptivity of the local community, and the capacity of local resettlement agencies (Bansak et al. 2018; Singer and Wilson 2006).

Refugees are eligible for certain privileges, including the ability to apply for legal permanent residence one year after their arrival, a pathway towards citizenship, an employment authorization, and medical benefits (Singer and Wilson 2006; Ninh 2013; Gowed 2022). They are also entitled to federal cash assistance, known as Welcome Money, for their initial needs and rent for the first 90 days, and an additional amount, called Flex Money, to be spent on any refugee in need (Gowed 2022). However, refugees are typically eligible for cash assistance and medical benefits for no longer than eight months after their arrival, and local resettlement agencies provide transitional assistance services for the refugees' first four to eight months in the country (Singer and Wilson 2006).

The limitations of the U.S. refugee admissions program

While previous literature has recognized the importance of successful integration for both refugees and receiving communities, it has also identified several limitations and challenges that affect the U.S. refugee resettlement program's ability to effectively address the needs of refugees and facilitate successful integration.

Economic self-sufficiency is a crucial goal of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, but research shows that early emphasis on self-sufficiency can create additional barriers for refugees. Saksena and McMorow (2019) argue that this emphasis can negatively impact refugees' ability to acquire English language skills and limit their access to well-paid jobs, healthcare, affordable

housing, and transportation. Brick et al. (2010) also argue that the emphasis on early economic independence risks limiting opportunities for refugees to become accustomed to their new surroundings, find jobs appropriate to their skill sets, and access social services that could improve their long-term outcomes. Gowayed (2022) finds that pushing refugees to enter the labor market quickly can lead to low-skilled and low-income employment, creating additional stress in an already difficult situation. Furthermore, it overlooks a more robust understanding of integration which includes psycho-social, linguistic, and cultural integration (Ott 2011).

The U.S. refugee resettlement program also discounts refugees' premigration credentials and experiences, denying their human capital and making it difficult for them to find better employment (Gowayed 2022). Lara-García (2020) describes the U.S. refugee resettlement program as treating refugees as "blank states." Furthermore, while acknowledging differences between refugees and other migrants, the program often overlooks differences among refugee groups. Bansak et al. (2018), however, found that personal characteristics and the geographical context of resettlement have a significant influence on refugee integration. Examining variation in socioeconomic outcomes of five refugee groups of different nationalities across four states, Fix et al. (2017) found that national origins, rather than the location of resettlement, are highly correlated with refugees' employment, unemployment, and income. Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) also found variations in the socioeconomic outcomes of refugees who resettled in the United States before and after age 13, highlighting the importance of considering refugees' unique experiences and circumstances. Similarly, various studies found that integration outcomes are not only affected by time spent in the U.S. but also by the country of origin, professional and educational background, and gender (Capps et al. 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016; Fix et al. 2017).

Inadequate information sharing is another limitation of the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Brown and Scribner (2014) highlight the failure of participating resettlement agencies to share information adequately, especially regarding the medical and mental health status of refugees. The emotional and psychological trauma that many refugees experience can have long-lasting impacts on their well-being and their ability to integrate. However, in many cases, due to the lack of information sharing, illnesses have gone untreated, and treatment has been delayed (Brown and Scribner 2014). Furthermore, the State Department does not provide resettlement agencies with UNHCR's referral for resettlement, which provides an in-depth analysis of a refugee's life and experiences, due to confidentiality concerns. This lack of information sharing can make it challenging for resettlement agencies to make placement decisions for vulnerable populations that require special forms of support (Brown and Scribner 2014).

Defining refugee integration

The concept of refugee integration is complex and context-specific, making it difficult to achieve a universal definition (Ager and Strang 2008). Saksena and McMorro (2019) assert that refugee integration remains "individualized, contested, and contextual." Alba and Richard (1997) view integration as the process during which newcomers or minorities are incorporated into the social structure of the host society. Gillin and Gillin (1948) argue that integration is about organization rather than homogeneity. Bosswick and Heckmann (2006) emphasize that the inclusion of individuals in a system, the creation of relationships among individuals, their attitudes toward society, and the conscious motivated interaction and cooperation of individuals and groups are essential aspects of integration.

Laurentsyevea and Venturini (2017) view integration from two angles: for immigrants, developing a sense of belonging to the host society, and for the native population, accepting immigrants. This mutual recognition enhances individual well-being, social cohesion, and has significant economic implications. Similarly, Castles (1993) defines integration as a process of mutual accommodation between immigrants and the majority population. It implies that immigrant groups will cease to be distinctive in culture and behavior over time, with adaptation viewed as a two-way process where minority and majority groups learn from each other and embrace each other's culture. Petsod et al. (2006) also define immigrant integration as a dynamic, two-way process where both newcomers and the receiving society collaborate to build cohesive communities that are secure and vibrant. Newcomers actively adjust to their new homes by learning the language, culture, and customs of the native population, while the pre-established community actively incorporates them into the economic, social, and civic life of the region. This exchange transforms both the new arrivals and the native population (Gonzales 2016).

The Migration Policy Institute (2022) defines integration as the process of economic mobility and social inclusion for newcomers and their children, encompassing the institutions and mechanisms that promote development and growth within society. These include early childhood care, elementary, postsecondary, and adult education systems, workforce development, health care, and the provision of government services to communities with linguistic diversity, among others. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's (2015) definition of refugee integration, as adopted in this study, emphasizes the ultimate goal of integration, which is for immigrants and refugees (within and across generations) to achieve a similar status to that of the native-born population.

Measuring refugee integration

As seen in the previous section, measuring refugee integration is a challenging process. The lack of agreement on what integration means makes it difficult to develop standardized indicators to measure it (Ager and Strang 2008). Some studies use employment rates, while others use educational attainment or language proficiency, among others. This inconsistency can make comparisons across studies and regions difficult. Measuring refugee integration also takes time, and the length of the process varies depending on the country, region, and individual circumstances (Colic-Peisker 2015; Koser 2017). Therefore, short-term measurements might not capture the full extent of integration, while long-term measurements might be too costly or difficult to carry out. Additionally, availability and quality of data on refugees are limited, especially data pertaining to refugees' social, cultural, and civic outcomes (Bernstein and DuBois 2018). Furthermore, the level of refugee integration depends on contextual factors such as the availability of resources, policies and support services, the social and cultural attitudes of the host community, and the refugees' personal characteristics, among others (Ager and Strang 2008; Bhabha and Schmidt 2017). Therefore, the measurement of integration may vary depending on the refugee group and the place of resettlement. Seethaler-Wari (2018) argues that integration happens at the neighborhood level and there is no one solution that fits all refugees or all cities. Similarly, Bernstein and DuBois (2018) emphasize that there is not one but multiple "refugee experiences."

Various studies, however, have attempted to measure refugee integration including four major studies that utilized data from the Census Bureau, primarily the decennial census and the annual American Community Survey (ACS). These studies focus on three main areas of integration: economic, linguistic, and civic. They examine how refugee integration outcomes

compare to those of the native-born population and non-refugee immigrant populations, as well as differences across national origin groups and arrival cohorts within the refugee population (Bernstein and DuBois 2018).

Capps et al. (2015) conducted a study comparing the employment and welfare outcomes of refugees who arrived in 1980 and 2011. The study found that, overall, employment rates were higher among male refugees than among native-born men, but that female refugees had similar employment rates to native-born women. The study also found that refugees were more likely than non-refugee immigrants and the native-born population to receive food stamps, cash assistance, and public health insurance. However, the receipt of these benefits declined with more time spent in the U.S.. The study also found that many recent refugees faced challenges with literacy, and over half of those with lower literacy and education attainment had family incomes below twice the federal poverty level. On average, refugees had higher educational attainment than non-refugee immigrants, but lower than the native-born population.

Kallick and Mathema (2016) conducted a study examining the labor force participation, wages, career advancement, entrepreneurship, homeownership, and English proficiency of four refugee groups: Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian, who arrived in the U.S. between 1982 and 2014. The study found that all four refugee groups experienced an increase in labor force participation, with longer-term residents (more than 10 years) having higher rates than newer arrivals (10 years or less). Newly arrived refugee women were found to be less likely than native-born women to participate in the labor force, but rates for longer-term residents increased to nearly meet or exceed that of native-born women, except for the Hmong. The study also found that median wages increased with more time spent in the U.S., but noted the need to account for racial and gender differences within the native-born workforce. The researchers observed that

refugees in their studied groups were able to advance in their careers over time, with many moving from blue-collar to white-collar jobs after 10 years in the country. Additionally, immigrants were found to be more likely to be business owners than the native-born population. Homeownership rates varied by national origin group, with higher rates observed for Burmese and Bosnians who had been in the country for 10 years or more, but lower rates for the other two groups analyzed. The study also noted that English proficiency improved with more time spent in the US, and that longer-term residents in their four refugee groups (21 years or more) were more likely to acquire American citizenship compared to all immigrants.

Fix, Hooper, and Zong (2017) conducted a study of Burmese, Cuban, Iraqi, Russian, and Vietnamese refugees who arrived between 1980 and 2013. They found that underemployment was a significant issue for several of the analyzed groups. Approximately half of Iraqi, Cuban, and Burmese refugees were found to be underemployed, meaning that they held a bachelor's degree but were either unemployed or employed in a low-skilled job. In comparison, only 18% of the native-born population faced underemployment. The study also noted that wage outcomes were closely related to educational attainment.

Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) conducted a study of refugees who arrived in the US between 1990 and 2014, with separate analyses for arriving adults and youths. The study found that refugees participate in the labor force at rates equivalent to the native-born population within 4 years of their arrival in the U.S. While refugees' median wages increase with more time spent in the U.S., they remain lower than the wages of native-born individuals, even for refugees who have spent 20 years or more in the country. The study also observed a decline in benefits use with longer stays in the U.S., with food stamp receipt dropping from 70% in the first year to 20% after 12 years. Using a tax projection program, the researchers calculated the net cost over a

20-year period following initial resettlement and discovered that refugees arriving as adults (aged 18 to 45) ultimately contribute more than they cost during this period. They also found that after 8 years in the U.S., refugees are contributing more in taxes than they receive in government benefits. The study highlighted that refugees who arrive as young children have better educational outcomes than those who arrive at older ages.

Overall, these studies show that refugees generally face challenges with employment, education, and accessing government benefits, but they successfully integrate into American society over time. Their labor force participation rates increase to meet or exceed those of native-born individuals, income levels rise, reliance on public benefits decrease, and English language skills improve. Furthermore, many refugees acquire American citizenship and even become homeowners and business owners, making significant contributions to their communities.

Refugee integration framework

Ager and Strang (2008) have developed a conceptual integration framework that proposes a structured approach to understanding and measuring refugee integration for individuals and communities. While the framework does not seek to impose a uniform approach or a comprehensive measure of the concept of integration, it identifies the key factors that contribute to successful integration.

The framework is structured around ten domains that are crucial to the integration of refugees. The domains are grouped into four levels of integration, namely markers and means, social connections, facilitators, and foundation. The first level, markers and means, encompasses four domains: employment, housing, education, and health (Ager and Strang 2008). Together,

these domains serve as markers of integration and the means by which refugees can attain successful integration outcomes. The second level, social connections, consists of three domains: social bridges, social bonds, and social links. These domains underscore the significance of relationships in understanding the integration process. Social bridges refer to connections with individuals outside the refugee community, social bonds refer to ties within the community, and social links refer to connections with institutions. The third level, facilitators, includes two domains: language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability. These domains represent the key facilitating factors for successful integration. Language and cultural knowledge enable refugees to communicate and navigate the host society, while safety and stability provide the necessary conditions for integration to occur. The fourth and final level, foundation, comprises one domain: rights and citizenship. This domain focuses upon the enablement of rights for those granted refugee status.

For each domain, Ager and Strang (2008) have identified around 10 indicators to assess attainment.

CURRENT STUDY

The goal of this study is to investigate the extent to which Burmese refugees have achieved successful integration into American society. To operationalize successful integration, the study adopts the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's (2015) definition of integration which, rather than focusing on the process of integration, emphasizes its ultimate goal which is for immigrants and refugees (within and across generations) to achieve a similar status to that of the native-born population. The U.S. native-born population, however, is heterogeneous, and there is high variation in socioeconomic outcomes across races/ethnicities.

Therefore, in this study, the *native-born population* is disaggregated into three major groups: the majority and most historically advantaged population (White), the most historically underserved and marginalized population (Black), and the largest immigrant population (Hispanic).

This study utilizes publicly available data from the American Community Survey to investigate five domains of integration based on the framework proposed by Ager and Strang (2008). These domains include education, employment, housing, health, and rights and citizenship. The study employs seven socioeconomic indicators, namely educational attainment, employment status, household income, poverty status, tenure or housing occupation status, health coverage, and citizenship status, to examine these domains. The goal is to compare the mean socioeconomic outcomes of Asian individuals (who are used as a proxy for Burmese refugees) to those of White, Black, and Hispanic individuals in Neighborhood B, which is a Burmese ethnic enclave located in Marion County, Indiana. To conduct the comparative analysis, a series of independent-sample t-tests are utilized.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a national survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on an ongoing basis. It collects detailed demographic, socioeconomic, and housing data from 3.5 million randomly selected housing units per year, with no unit selected more than once every five years. The survey is conducted using four modes: internet, mail, phone interviews, and in-person interviews. To protect respondents' privacy, individual responses are aggregated into estimates at various geographic summary levels, including states, counties, cities, congressional districts, metropolitan statistical areas, tracts, and block groups. The ACS provides 1-year estimates for geographic areas with at least 65,000 people, and 5-year estimates

for smaller geographic areas, such as census tracts and block groups. The multiyear estimates increase the statistical reliability of data for small population areas.

This study utilized data from the American Community Survey's 5-year estimates at the tract-level, which were released in 2021. The sample for this study consisted of 23 tracts located in Marion County, Indiana that had a significant Burmese population. These 23 tracts are geographically connected and were examined as a single large neighborhood area, referred to as Neighborhood B in this study. Although the ACS does not provide publicly available information specifically broken down for the Burmese population, various tables in the ACS have "universes" or base reference totals against which all other characteristics are compared. In Neighborhood B, the Asian population is predominantly of Burmese origin as shown in Table 1 and the area is recognized as a Burmese ethnic enclave. According to the 2021 American Community Survey, the Burmese population in Marion County, Indiana was estimated to be over 9,000, with the majority residing in Neighborhood B. This concentration of the Burmese population has resulted in the emergence of various Burmese-owned businesses, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and other services, making the area a cultural and social hub for the Burmese community. Additionally, the Burmese language is widely spoken in Neighborhood B, and there are various cultural events and celebrations throughout the year that are unique to the Burmese community. Thus, the study used the "total Asian population" universe as a proxy for the Burmese refugee population. It's worth noting that several other tracts in Marion County, Indiana had a significant proportion of Burmese population (>50% of the total Asian population), but were excluded from the sample because they were not located within or near Neighborhood B.

A comparative analysis was conducted to examine the mean socioeconomic outcomes of Asian individuals in comparison to White, Black, and Hispanic individuals, respectively. The

study employed a series of independent-sample t-tests, with each racial/ethnic group serving as an independent variable and the socioeconomic outcomes serving as dependent variables. Seven socioeconomic outcomes were selected as dependent variables: educational attainment, employment status, household income, poverty status, tenure, health coverage, and citizenship status. The methods for testing each variable are described below.

For the first dependent variable, educational attainment, a categorical variable with four categories (*less than high school degree, high school degree, some college, and bachelor's degree or more*) was used. To test the mean differences between the Asian population and each of the other groups across the four categories, twelve independent t-tests were conducted, treating each category as a unique dependent variable. For each category, the dependent variable was defined as the percentage of individuals aged 16 years or older with less than high school degree, with high school degree, with some college, or with bachelor's degree or more. Specifically, the first three t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with each of the other groups in the *less than high school degree* category, the second three t-tests were conducted in the *high school degree* category, the third three t-tests were conducted in the *some college* category, and the last three t-tests were conducted in the *bachelor's degree or more* category.

The second dependent variable tested was employment status, which was operationalized as the percentage of individuals aged 16 years or older unemployed in each group. Three independent t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with each of the other three groups. The third dependent variable tested was household income, which was operationalized as the percentage of households with income below the median household income in Marion County, Indiana. Three independent t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with

each of the other three groups. The fourth dependent variable tested was poverty status, which was operationalized as the percentage of individuals with income in the past 12 months below poverty level. Three independent t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with each of the other three groups. The fifth dependent variable tested was housing tenure, which was operationalized as the percentage of owner-occupied housing units in Neighborhood B. Three independent t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with each of the other three groups. The sixth dependent variable tested was health coverage, which was operationalized as the percentage of individuals with health insurance coverage. Three independent t-tests were conducted to compare the Asian population with each of the other three groups. The last dependent variable tested was citizenship status, which was operationalized as the percentage of individuals without American citizenship. One independent t-test was conducted to compare the Asian population with the Hispanic population.

The significance level for all t-tests was set at $p < .05$.

Table 1: Total Asian Population and Percent Burmese By Tract in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Tract #	Total population	Total foreign-born Asian population	Total foreign-born Burmese population	% Burmese foreign-born from Asian population
3801.01	7,314	371	171	46.09%
3801.02	3,763	1,293	983	76.02%
3803.02	2,492	47	9	19.15%
3805.02	3,968	29	7	24.14%
3806	5,983	81	46	56.79%
3807	6,817	1,135	844	74.36%

Table 1, continued: Total Asian Population and Percent Burmese By Tract in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Tract #	Total population	Total foreign-born Asian population	Total foreign-born Burmese population	% Burmese foreign-born from Asian population
3808	2,963	68	64	94.12%
3809.01	5,309	1,073	898	83.69%
3809.02	5,979	401	184	45.88%
3810.02	3,507	19	8	42.10%
3810.03	3,311	751	660	87.88%
3810.04	3,298	845	636	75.27%
3811.01	5,753	423	248	58.63%
3811.02	7,199	1,200	473	39.42%
3812.03	3,247	1,008	760	75.40%
3812.04	2,937	395	45	11.39%
3812.05	6,985	1,225	937	76.49%
3812.06	4,494	973	774	79.55%
3812.07	4,272	992	891	89.82%
3901.03	3,151	71	40	56.34%
3901.04	6,934	250	175	70%
3904.05	4,223	827	135	16.32%
3904.08	5,206	78	47	60.26%
Total	109,105	13,555	9,035	66.65%

RESULTS

Descriptive results

The descriptive statistics for each socioeconomic outcome by race/ethnicity are presented in Table 2. In regard to educational attainment, the table shows that a large proportion of Asian people in Neighborhood B, 37%, have less than a high school degree, whereas 10% of White people, 14% of Black people, and 38% of Hispanic people fall into this category. Twenty-eight percent of Asian people have a high school degree, which is higher than the percentages for Hispanic people (21%), but lower than those for White (33%) and Black (32%) populations. In terms of higher education, only 7% of Asian people have some college degree, whereas 31% of White people, 18% of Black people, and 18% of Hispanic people fall into this category. Twenty-three percent of Asian people hold a bachelor's degree or more, which is higher than the percentages for Black (16%) and Hispanic (13%) populations, but slightly lower than the percentage for White people (26%).

When it comes to employment status, 67% of Asian people are employed which is higher than the employment rate of White (62%) and Black (65%), but lower than that of Hispanic (68%) populations. In terms of household income, a majority of households from all racial and ethnic groups have an income below the median household income in Marion County, Indiana. Specifically, 52% of Asian households have an income below the median, along with 54% of White, 57% of Black, and 57% of Hispanic households. In regard to poverty status, 20% of Asian people have an income below the poverty level which is higher than the rates of White (13%) and Hispanic (13%) populations but lower than that of Black people (29%). When it comes to tenure, 54% of Asian housing units are owner-occupied which is slightly lower than the rate of White people (58%) but higher than that of Black (14%) and Hispanic (36%) populations.

In terms of health insurance coverage, 89% of Asian people are covered by health insurance which is higher than the rates of White (86%), Black (78%), and Hispanic (82%) populations. In regard to citizenship status, 45% of Asian people have obtained American citizenship, compared to 74% of Hispanic people.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
% of Asian with less than high school	36.96%	.2774865	0	.8596974	23
% of Asian with high school	28.13%	.2094027	0	.64	23
% of Asian with some college	6.77%	.1031758	0	.3783784	23
% of Asian with bachelor's degree or more	23.13%	.20623	0	.7029703	23
% of White with less than high school	9.94%	.0797714	.0107099	.360157	23
% of White with high school	32.98%	.0783821	.1785045	.4761209	23
% of White with some college	31.03%	.0834834	.1020608	.4921891	23
% of White with bachelor's degree or more	26.05%	.1313804	.0677134	.5069222	23
% of Black with less than high school	14.36%	.2566936	0	1	23
% of Black with high school	31.75%	.3370382	0	1	23

Table 2, continued: Descriptive Statistics of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
% of Black with some college	17.70%	.2131752	0	.6666667	23
% of Black with bachelor's degree or more	16.18%	.2699963	0	.9411765	23
% of Hispanic with less than high school	37.53%	.3252247	0	.9333333	23
% of Hispanic with high school	20.97%	.2961711	0	.9123712	23
% of Hispanic with some college	18.19%	.2165036	0	.85	23
% of Hispanic with bachelor's degree or more	13.31%	.178634	0	.5729167	23
% of Asian employed	66.92%	.1395383	.3898305	1	23
% of White employed	62.10%	.0960215	.305	.7718019	23
% of Black employed	64.55%	.3333508	0	1	23
% of Hispanic employed	67.73%	.2721771	0	1	23
% of Asian household income below median	52.12%	.3056712	0	1	23
% of White household income below median	53.87%	.1539612	.3032399	.8050931	23
% of Black household income below median	57.10%	.4255658	0	1	23

Table 2, continued: Descriptive Statistics of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
% of Hispanic household income below median	56.76%	.3834527	0	1	23
% of Asian income below poverty	20.36%	.2828079	0	1	23
% of White income below poverty	13.21%	.0956618	.0111821	.361349	23
% of Black income below poverty	29.02%	.3369339	0	1	23
% of Hispanic income below poverty	13.69%	.2097848	0	.8195488	23
% of Asian owner-occupied housing units	54.20%	.3930307	0	1	23
% of White owner-occupied housing units	57.74%	.2510327	.1204701	.980121	23
% of Black owner-occupied housing units	14.02%	.2496845	0	1	23
% of Hispanic owner-occupied housing units	36.87%	.4020618	0	1	23
% of Asian with health coverage	89.02%	.1402066	.529661	1	23
% of White with health coverage	85.72%	.2952985	0	1	23
% of Black with health coverage	78.59%	.3620997	0	1	23

Table 2, continued: Descriptive Statistics of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
% of Hispanic with health coverage	81.93%	.2550815	0	1	23
% of Asian with American citizenship	45.03%	.2114413	0	.822884	23
% of Hispanic with American citizenship	74.13%	.3105726	0	1	23

T-test results

The independent-sample t-tests for each socioeconomic outcome by race/ethnicity are presented in Table 3. The results show that there are significant differences in the proportion of individuals without a high school degree between Asian (.3696281) and White (.0994044), as well as between Asian and Black (.1436061) populations, with the rate of individuals without a high school degree being higher among Asians compared to Whites and Blacks. However, no significant difference is found between Asian and Hispanic (.3752934) populations. Moreover, there is a significant difference in the proportion of individuals with some college degree between Asian (.0677036) and White (.3103063), Asian and Black (.1770408), and Asian and Hispanic (.1818607) populations. This reveals that the rate of individuals with some college degree is lower among Asians compared to Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. However, there is no significant difference between Asians and any of the other racial/ethnic groups in terms of the proportion of individuals with a high school degree or a bachelor's degree or higher. The study also found no significant difference between Asians and any of the other racial/ethnic groups in terms of employment status, household income, poverty status, and health coverage. However,

there is a significant difference in the proportion of owner-occupied housing units between Asian (.3930307) and Black (.1401865) populations, with the rate of Asian owner-occupied units being higher than Black owner-occupied units. There is no significant difference between Asian and White as well as Hispanic populations in this regard. Finally, the study found a significant difference in the proportion of individuals with American citizenship between Asian (.4503133) and Hispanic (.7412614) populations, with the rate of Asian people with American citizenship being lower than that of Hispanic people.

Table 3: Independent-Sample T-tests of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	t	Degrees of freedom	Significance
% with less than high school				
Asian	.3696281			
White	.0994044	3.8250	22	**
Black	.1436061	2.6476	22	*
Hispanic	.3752934	-0.0493	22	NS
% with high school				
Asian	.2813519			
White	.3298045	-0.8937	22	NS
Black	.3175141	-0.4209	22	NS
Hispanic	.2097489	0.8384	22	NS
% with some college				
Asian	.0677036			
White	.310363	-8.0908	22	***
Black	.1770409	-2.1280	22	**
Hispanic	.1818607	-2.3084	22	**
% with bachelor's or higher				
Asian	.2313165			
White	.2604848	-0.5316	22	NS
Black	.161839	0.9658	22	NS
Hispanic	.133097	1.7916	22	NS

Table 3, continued: Independent-Sample T-tests of Socioeconomic Outcomes by Racial/Ethnic Group in Neighborhood B, 5-year American Community Survey estimates 2021

Variable	Mean	t	Degrees of freedom	Significance
% of employed				
Asian	.6691891			
White	.6210074	1.6670	22	NS
Black	.6454651	0.3148	22	NS
Hispanic	.6773127	-0.1279	22	NS
% of household income below median				
Asian	.5211762			
White	.5387398	-0.2587	22	NS
Black	.5709703	-0.4572	22	NS
Hispanic	.5676331	-0.4838	22	NS
% of income below poverty				
Asian	.2036133			
White	.1320873	1.0492	22	NS
Black	.2901862	-0.8748	22	NS
Hispanic	.1368668	1.2589	22	NS
% of owner-occupied housing units				
Asian	.5420303			
White	.5774214	-0.4218	22	NS
Black	.1401865	4.2521	22	***
Hispanic	.3686938	1.5417	22	NS
% with insurance coverage				
Asian	.8902573			
White	.8572536	0.4357	22	NS
Black	.7859508	1.1439	22	NS
Hispanic	.8193099	1.0537	22	NS
% with American citizenship				
Asian	.4503133			
Hispanic	.7412614	-3.9366	22	***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the extent to which Burmese refugees have achieved successful integration into American society. More specifically, it sought to answer the following question: what are the socioeconomic outcomes of Burmese refugees in Neighborhood B, and how do these outcomes compare to those of other racial/ethnic groups? The study results indicate that the socioeconomic status of Burmese refugees generally approximates that of White individuals, while tending to surpass that of Black individuals on average, and Hispanic individuals in some domains. These results suggest that Burmese refugees living in Neighborhood B have successfully integrated into their host society, as defined by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2015), which describes integration as the extent to which immigrants and refugees achieve a similar socioeconomic status as the native-born population. These results are consistent with previous research which found that refugees' socioeconomic outcomes tend to improve over time, and they successfully integrate into American society (Capps et al. 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016; Fix et al. 2017; Evans and Fitzgerald 2017).

Nonetheless, it remains uncertain whether this integration can be attributed to the U.S. refugee admissions program (USRAP) alone. As previously discussed, the USRAP presents several limitations that hinder refugees' integration. A study that examined the social, economic, political, and educational adaptation patterns of Burmese and Bhutanese Americans found that the overall socioeconomic outcomes of Burmese individuals in the United States tend to be low when compared to the native-born population and other Asian American and Pacific Islander groups (Trieu and Vang 2015). They face significant language and educational barriers that reduce their socioeconomic mobility. To the best of my knowledge, the policies, services, and

resources provided by local resettlement agencies are standardized across regions. Therefore, there is no indication that Burmese refugees in Indiana would receive better benefits than those in other states. Furthermore, one major limitation of my study is that it does not account for the time of arrival of the refugees. As a result, it is also uncertain whether the positive integration outcomes observed among Burmese individuals are due to their length of stay in the United States as discussed in previous research (Capps et al. 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016; Fix et al. 2017; Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). With that being said, a possible factor that could explain the positive socioeconomic outcomes of Burmese refugees in Marion County, Indiana is the strength of the Burmese community in Neighborhood B.

A portrait of Neighborhood B

Neighborhood B is located in the southern part of the Indianapolis metropolitan area with 19 out of its 23 census tracts situated within Perry township, as shown in Figure 1. Throughout its history, Perry township has undergone significant socioeconomic and demographic changes, evolving from a rural farming community to a predominantly residential area with commercial and industrial development. The post-World War II era saw a surge in population growth which led to a boom in residential construction, with new subdivisions and housing developments being built. The 1990s saw a significant demographic changes due to the Burmese refugees settling in the area.

The Chin ethnic group, a Christian minority who has been persecuted due to their religious beliefs in Burma, make up 75% of the Burmese refugees placed in Indianapolis with a majority residing in Perry township (Indy Encyclopedia 2023). This area has become a popular destination for this community due to its affordable cost of living, accessible housing prices,

availability of employment opportunities, and abundance of Christian churches (Choi 2016; Indy Encyclopedia 2023). In fact, Perry township has become so attractive to Burmese refugees that many from other parts of the country choose to migrate there. The area has earned the nickname “Chindianapolis” to reflect the community’s dominant presence (Aye and Chadwick 2018; Salaz and Raymer 2020; Indy Encyclopedia 2023).

One major characteristic of Neighborhood B is the dense concentration of Burmese-owned businesses, including restaurants, grocery stores, and markets that cater specifically to the Burmese community, offering traditional foods and ingredients that may not be readily available in mainstream American stores. One such business, Chin Brothers Market, was established by Than Hre, a Burmese Chin refugee who settled in Perry township in 2002. Hre opened the market in 2007 after recognizing the need for traditional food options for the Burmese Chin community (Indy Encyclopedia 2023). The market's success prompted Hre to expand and open Chin Brothers Restaurant and Bakery shortly after (Aye and Chadwick 2018).

In addition to food establishments, Neighborhood B has seen the emergence of many other Burmese-owned businesses, including accounting offices, real estate agencies, and barber shops. These businesses are tailored to meet the needs of the Burmese community, with their signage written in Burmese (Salaz and Raymer 2020). Moreover, Neighborhood B has a range of community-based organizations, such as the Indiana Chin Center, which offers English language classes and employment support; and Hope For Tomorrow, which offers U.S. Citizenship Classes, assistance with U.S. citizenship applications, after-school programs, as well as English conversational classes. These organizations have proven invaluable to many Burmese refugees who have settled in the area and speak limited English (Indy Encyclopedia 2023).

Another key characteristic of the area is the prevalence of the Burmese culture. Neighborhood B is home to several cultural institutions and community centers that serve as gathering places for the Burmese community, where they can socialize, participate in community events, and celebrate their culture. The local residents have also demonstrated their welcoming attitude towards the Burmese community. In 2016, for instance, a neighbor put up a sign in front of a vacant house in Neighborhood B that read “No More Chin,” a reference to the Burmese Chin community (Wagner 2016). However, the community’s response was overwhelmingly supportive of the Burmese community. Neighbors protested against the sign and reached out to the Fair Housing Center of Central Indiana to voice their discontent (Wagner 2016). In 2021, a number of churches in Neighborhood B organized solidarity services after the 2021 military coup in Burma to express their support for the Burmese people (Hoefer 2021).

Furthermore, local authorities have invested resources and taken initiatives to understand and overcome cultural barriers that might keep the Burmese community isolated from the larger American community. For instance, the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD) has expanded its *Immigrant Outreach Unit* to the southside where Neighborhood B is located (Daudelin 2017). The unit regularly reaches out to the Burmese community to offer assistance and organize crash courses on the Indiana police, customized for people who have limited English proficiency and for immigrants and refugees who may not be familiar with the role of American law enforcement (Lewis and Disis 2016; Daudelin 2017). In addition, in 2018, the Southport Police Department in Neighborhood B hired its first Burmese officer with the hopes to bridge the gap between the local community and the rapidly growing Burmese population in the area (Choi 2018).

Overall, Neighborhood B has evolved to become a Burmese Chin ethnic enclave with a strong sense of community and social cohesion. The area has played a crucial role in facilitating the development of strong social networks among the Burmese community as well as the local residents.

It is worth noting that Neighborhood B is located close to major transportation routes, including Interstate 65 and route 31, which provide easy access to downtown Indianapolis and other parts of the state. This means that the Burmese community can take advantage of resources and opportunities beyond Neighborhood B.

The impact of community on Burmese refugee integration

This study found that the rate of Burmese refugees who have earned a college degree or higher is similar to those of White, Black, and Hispanic individuals in Neighborhood B. Additionally, Burmese individuals have similar rates of employment, median household income, poverty status, and health coverage as White, Black, and Hispanic individuals in the same area. When it comes to homeownership, Burmese households have a similar rate of homeownership as White and Hispanic households. These similarities could be attributed to the strong sense of community in Neighborhood B, which fosters strong social networks, as described in the previous section.

Social networks can play a crucial role in the integration of refugees into their new communities. Strong social networks can provide refugees with access to information, resources, and social support that can help them navigate the challenges of resettlement, navigate the local culture, and adapt to their new environment (Poros 2011). With strong social networks, refugees may have access to information about job opportunities, housing options, health care, and

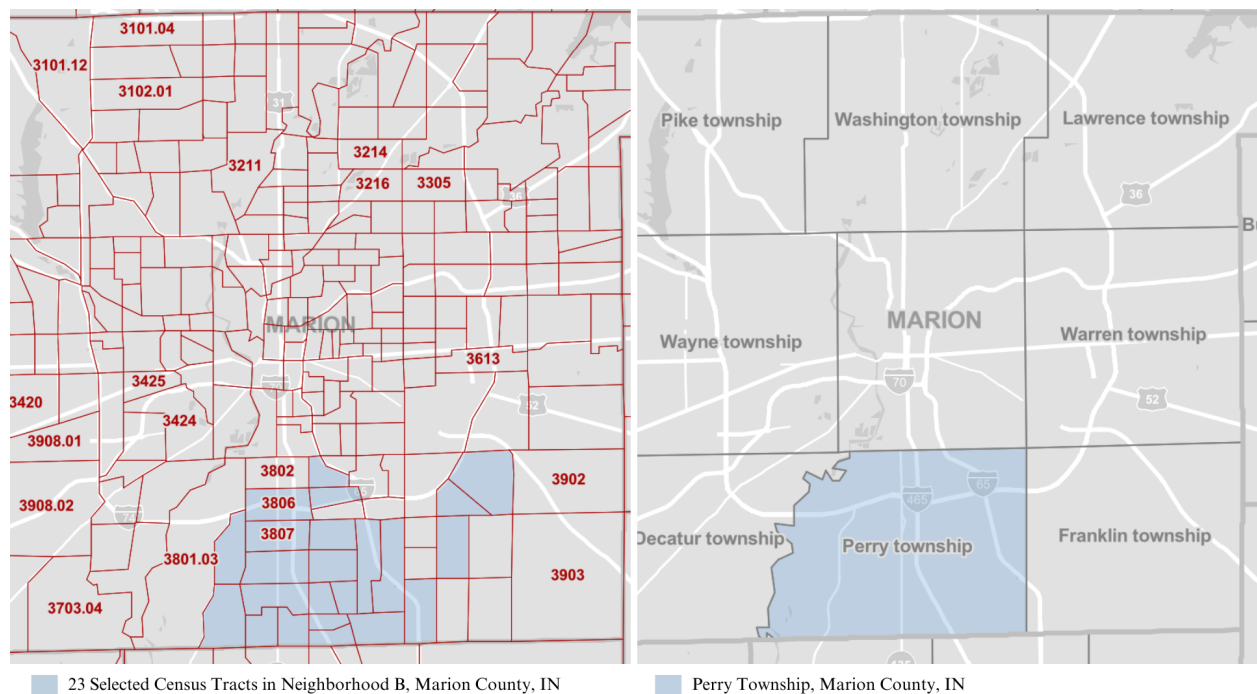
community services that can help them establish themselves in their host society (Poros 2011). They may also receive emotional support and practical assistance from their network members.

Furthermore, the presence of various Burmese organizations that primarily serve Burmese individuals in Neighborhood B allow them to access goods and services within their community (Poros 2011). Thus, Burmese refugees can gain employment, seek professional services such as accounting, and fulfill their basic needs without having to learn and navigate American culture or attain English language proficiency. Additionally, the presence of the Burmese American Community Institute (BACI) in Neighborhood B, a non-profit organization founded in 2011 that advocates for the Burmese community both locally and nationally, provides strong institutional support to Burmese individuals in the area.

It is worth noting that the study found significant disparities in two socioeconomic indicators. First, Burmese individuals have a significantly lower rate of not completing high school when compared to White and Black individuals. A possible explanation for this disparity is that many adult refugees come from rural backgrounds in Burma and have had limited access to formal education (Trieu and Vang 2015). Furthermore, education is often disrupted for refugees waiting for permanent resettlement in refugee camps. Second, a significantly lower percentage of Burmese individuals have attained American citizenship when compared to Hispanic individuals. This could be due to the limited English proficiency of Burmese refugees, which makes it difficult for them to take the naturalization exam. Although social networks play an important role in helping refugees adjust to life in a new country and navigate the different legal and bureaucratic processes involved in resettlement, ultimately, passing the citizenship exam is an individual process.

It is also important to note that the rate of homeownership for Black households is significantly lower than that of Burmese households. This disparity can be attributed to historical and ongoing systemic racism and discrimination against Black individuals. Furthermore, refugees receive financial and social assistance from the U.S. government upon their arrival, a benefit that Black people have historically been denied.

Figure 1: Maps of Marion County, Indiana, U.S. Census Bureau 2021



LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study generates valuable insights regarding the integration of Burmese refugees into Neighborhood B, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, due to the lack of data on Burmese individuals in the Census Bureau, the Asian population was used as a proxy for the Burmese community. This may have influenced the data as the Asian population in

Neighborhood B includes non-refugee populations with typically higher socioeconomic status, such as Malaysians and Indians. Secondly, the data did not capture the period of arrival of the Burmese refugees. It is well-known that first and second-generation immigrants and refugees often have different outcomes, and this study did not account for that. Thirdly, the American Community Survey (ACS) did not include other socioeconomic indicators that could have been used to examine other domains of integration proposed in Ager and Strang's (2008) framework. Lastly, while this study builds on an established integration framework, the definition and experience of successful integration are better understood from the perspective of refugees themselves.

Future research could address these limitations and deepen our understanding of the concept of refugee integration and its implications for policy and practice. For example, collecting primary data can ensure that all relevant indicators of integration are examined, and personal characteristics of refugees are captured in the analyses. Furthermore, future studies could explore social ties and community connection in Neighborhood B as well as study the community as an ethnic enclave to further understand if and how neighborhood dynamics might offer benefits and support to the residents.

Despite these limitations, this study represents an essential contribution to the existing literature on refugee integration. Firstly, it highlights the importance of examining the experience of integration in specific contexts. Secondly, it highlights the importance of social network building as a key factor in facilitating integration. Lastly, it paints a positive picture of Burmese refugees who found refuge in the United States. This study shows that, despite the challenges refugees face before and beyond resettlement, their journey can lead to favorable outcomes for both them and the host society with the appropriate support.

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