

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES: *Emphasis on Poverty, Gender, Language Ability, and Immigration Status<sup>1</sup>*

With a population of more than 2 million people, South Asians comprise the fastest growing Asian American group in the United States between 1990 and 2000. It is essential for service providers, policymakers, and others working with the community to understand the tremendous cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity among South Asians. This document presents an overview of South Asians in the United States based on national demographic data and analysis<sup>2</sup>, with an emphasis on a few key demographic factors – language ability, poverty, gender, and immigration status.<sup>3</sup>

### Who are South Asians?

The largest South Asian groups in America are the Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepali communities.<sup>4</sup>

<i>South Asians in the United States by Group</i>			
Group	<i>Race Alone</i>		<i>Race Alone or in Combination</i>
	Size	Percentage of South Asian Population	Size
Indian	1,678,765	89%	1,899,599
Pakistani	153,533	8%	204,309
Bangladeshi	41,280	2%	57,412
Sri Lankan	20,145	1%	24,587
Nepali	7,858	< 1%	9,399
Total	1,901,581	100%	

*Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4.*

In addition to the above communities, significant populations of South Asians trace their origins to other areas, including various African nations, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands. As reflected in the table below, in 2000, the three top places of birth for South Asians from the diaspora were Guyana, the United Kingdom, and Trinidad and Tobago.

<i>Top Places of Birth and Residence in the U.S. for Immigrants from the South Asian Diaspora</i>					
Place of Birth	South Asian Total	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Guyana	39,562	27,771	1,278	8,240	2,273
England/UK	17,780	3,083	1,666	7,848	5,183
Trinidad & Tobago	16,912	9,119	395	6,491	907
Kenya	12,554	4,242	1,184	4,185	2,943
Canada	11,734	2,711	2,517	5,083	2,423
Fiji	9,271	110	129	163	8,869

*Source: U.S. Census 2000, Public Use Microdata Sample. Figures based on race alone.*

<sup>1</sup> SAALT would like to thank the AT&T Foundation for its support of SAALT's census data compilation and analysis project. SAALT also acknowledges Howard Shih of the Asian American Federation of New York (AAFNY) for his invaluable contributions. We are also indebted to Saurav Sarkar, Priya Murthy, Parag Khandhar, K'ai Smith, Imrana Khera, Bhairavi Desai, Subash Khateel, Paul Ravi Waldron, and Deepa Iyer for their input and assistance at various stages of this project. Permission to reproduce materials from this report is granted with attribution to: South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT), 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This report draws primarily from data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau during the 2000 Census. Census 2000 was the first time in which a respondent could select more than one group to describe his or her race. When possible, we have included both "Race Alone" responses, as well as "Race Alone or in Combination with any other Group" (i.e. "Bangladeshi" and "Indian"). Because the latter figure is a tally of responses, there may be an overlap of individuals who responded with more than one South Asian group. Therefore, "Race Alone or in Combination" results should not be totaled across groups (i.e. "Total South Asians Alone or in Combination"). As with all data releases, this information should be used to provide a baseline for understanding the community, and should be coupled with data from community-based research to provide the most comprehensive understanding of the South Asian community.

<sup>3</sup> For additional demographic information about South Asians, please refer to *Making Data Count: South Asian Americans in the 2000 Census with Focus on Illinois*, published by the South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (available at [www.saapri.org](http://www.saapri.org)); and the National Asian Pacific American Community Development Data Center's *South Asian Demographic Analysis* (available at [www.southasianforum.org](http://www.southasianforum.org)).

<sup>4</sup> In Census 2000, the Census Bureau released detailed disaggregated data for the four largest South Asian groups, as well as the population total for Nepalis.

## Growth of the South Asian American Community

South Asians have become one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the United States, particularly since 1990. As the below table indicates, each of the four largest South Asian groups more than doubled in size between 1990 and 2000. In fact, the Bangladeshi community grew nearly 400% during that time period.

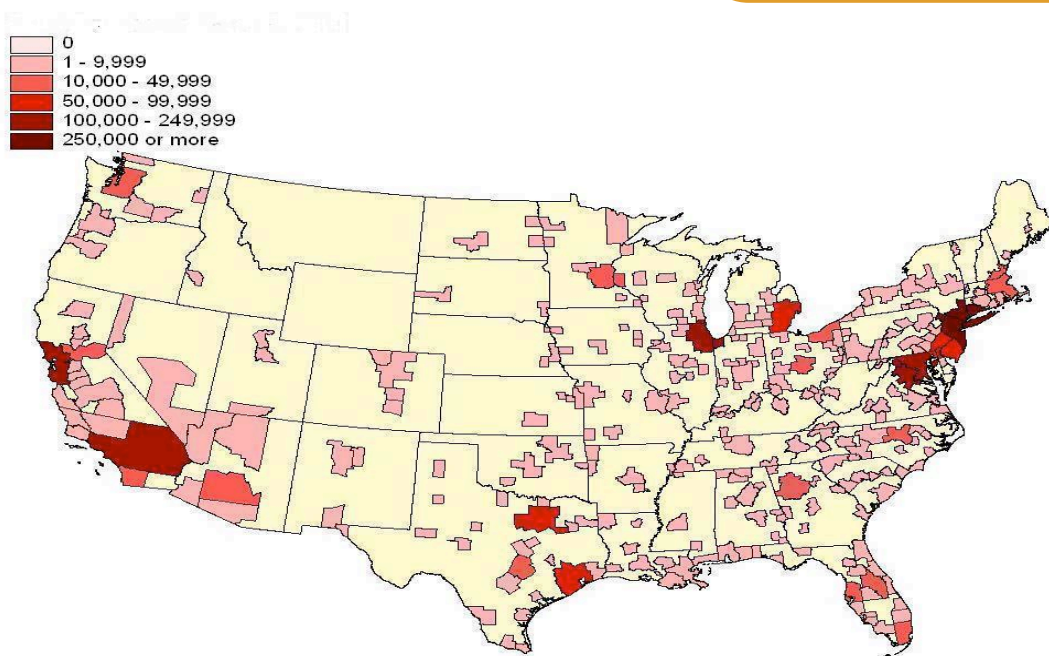
<b>Growth Rate of South Asians in the United States Since 1990</b>						
<b>Group</b>	<b>Race Alone</b>			<b>Race Alone or in Combination</b>		
	<b>Population in 1990</b>	<b>Population in 2000</b>	<b>Percentage increase from 1990 to 2000</b>	<b>Population in 1990<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>Population in 2000</b>	<b>Percentage increase from 1990 to 2000</b>
Indian	815,447	1,678,765	106%	815,447	1,899,599	133%
Pakistani	81,371	153,533	89%	81,371	204,309	151%
Bangladeshi	11,838	41,280	249%	11,838	57,412	385%
Sri Lankan	10,970	20,145	84%	10,970	24,587	124%
<b>Total</b>	<b>919,626</b>	<b>1,893,723</b>	<b>106%</b>			

Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4.

South Asians live primarily in metropolitan areas on the East and West coasts. For example, in New York City, the Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities are among the six largest Asian American groups.<sup>6</sup> South Asians were also the fastest growing Asian group in California in 2000.<sup>7</sup>

However, there are sizable emerging populations in various parts of the United States, including Houston, Atlanta, and Seattle. The map below illustrates South Asian communities across the country by population density.

### Population of South Asians in 2000



**METROPOLITAN AREAS WITH LARGEST SOUTH ASIAN POPULATIONS**

- New York/New Jersey
- San Francisco Bay Area
- Chicago
- Los Angeles
- Washington, D.C Metro Area

<sup>5</sup> In 1990, respondents were only permitted to report one race. However, for comparison purposes with Census 2000 data, this report compares responses of a particular group in 1990 with responses of that group in 2000, whether "Alone", or "Alone or in Combination with one or more groups."

<sup>6</sup> *A Community of Contrasts*. Asian American Justice Center/Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

## Poverty Among South Asians

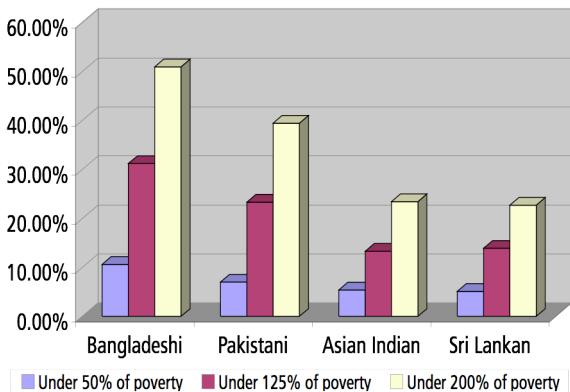
Contrary to popular perception, a significant percentage of South Asians live at or below the poverty line. The following table and graph demonstrate the poverty rates in the South Asian community.<sup>8</sup>

- Almost one-third of South Asians living between 50% and 125% of the poverty line are children.
- Nearly two-thirds of Bangladeshi seniors are below 200% of the poverty line.
- Although only 13% of Indians are at 125% of the poverty level, this constitutes more than 200,000 individuals.

<i>Ratio of Income to Poverty Level<sup>9</sup> within the South Asian Community</i>			
Group	Less Than 50% of Poverty Level	Less Than 125% of Poverty Level	Less than 200% of Poverty Level
Bangladeshi	9.4%	29.5%	49.4%
Pakistani	6.8%	22.1%	37.8%
Asian Indian	5.2%	12.5%	21.9%
Sri Lankan	5.1%	13.2%	21.1%

Source: U.S. Census, Summary Files 1 through 4. Figures based on race alone.

Rates of Poverty by Group



South Asians who struggle to meet the cost of living in the United States face numerous challenges every day, ranging from the lack of health care coverage to difficulties in obtaining affordable housing or college educations.

With respect to employment, many South Asians have careers in the technology and medical fields. Many South Asians are also employed in lower-wage jobs as cashiers, taxi drivers, and restaurant workers, as the table below demonstrates.

*Most Prevalent Occupations for South Asians by Ethnic Group*

South Asian	Bangladeshi	Indian	Pakistani	Sri Lankan
1. Computer Specialists	1. <b>Cashiers</b>	1. Computer Specialists	1. <b>Cashiers</b>	1. Computer Specialists
2. Physicians & Surgeons	2. Other Sales	2. Managers	2. Other Sales	2. Physicians & Surgeons
3. Managers	3. <b>Vehicle Operators</b>	3. Physicians & Surgeons	3. Computer Specialists	3. Managers
4. Engineers	4. <b>Retail Sales</b>	4. Engineers	4. Physicians & Surgeons	4. Postsecondary Teachers
5. Other Sales	5. Computer Specialists	5. Other Sales	5. <b>Retail Sales</b>	5. Primary School Teachers
6. <b>Cashiers</b>	6. Engineers	6. <b>Cashiers</b>	6. <b>Vehicle Operators</b>	6. Office Support Teachers
7. Office Support	7. <b>Food prep and servers</b>	7. Office Support	7. Managers	7. Other Sales
8. <b>Retail Sales</b>	8. <b>Waiters and waitresses</b>	8. <b>Production Occupations</b>	8. Engineers	8. Engineers
9. <b>Production Occupations</b>	9. <b>Production Occupations</b>	9. <b>Retail Sales</b>	9. <b>Office Support Occupations</b>	9. <b>Cashiers</b>
10. Postsecondary teachers	10. Postsecondary teachers	10. Postsecondary Teachers	10. <b>Production Occupations</b>	10. <b>Retail Sales</b>

Source: Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4.

<sup>8</sup> According to definitions adopted in 1999 by the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty thresholds are defined by the size of the family unit and range from \$8,501 (one person family unit) to \$34,417 (nine people or more family unit). More information about poverty thresholds is available at [www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-19.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-19.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> The poverty ratio not only takes into account the person's income (including the income of the person's entire household), but also the structure of the person's household, as built into the poverty threshold tables. More information about the ratio of income to poverty level is available at [www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/definitions.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/definitions.html).

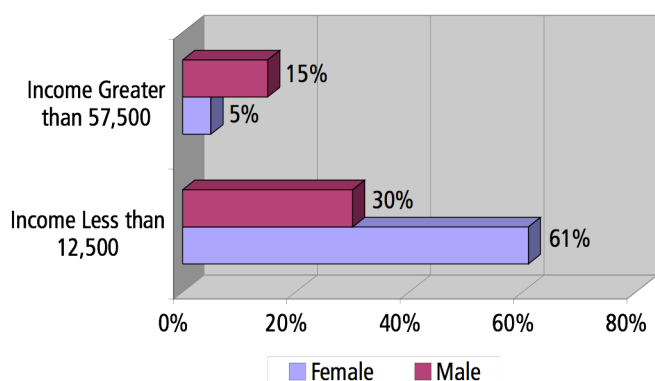
## Gender and South Asians

Women comprise 46% of the South Asian population in the United States. Disparities among men and women of South Asian descent are evident along several different variables, including population size; education; presence in the workforce; annual income; and limited English proficiency.

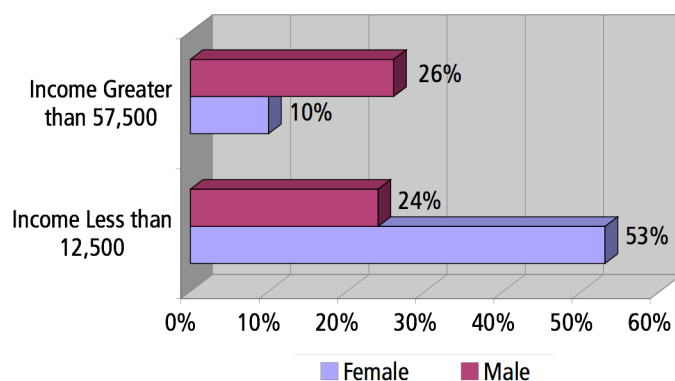
For example:

- Among most South Asian groups, the percentage of men earning more the \$57,00 annually is more than double the women at that income level. In contrast, the percentage of women earning less than \$12,500 annually is more than double the percentage of men in the same income level.
- South Asian women are not equally represented in the labor force. For example, among Indians, 80% of men work, compared to 54% of women; and for Pakistanis, 76% of men work, compared to 34% of women.
- South Asian women make up 59% of those without a high school diploma, but only 35% of adults with graduate degrees.
- South Asian women over 25 years old are more likely to be limited-English proficient than South Asian men.
- As illustrated in the graph below titled *Male Dominated Households by Race Alone*, male-led households vastly outnumber female-led households. Between 82% and 93% of households are male-led, depending upon the group.

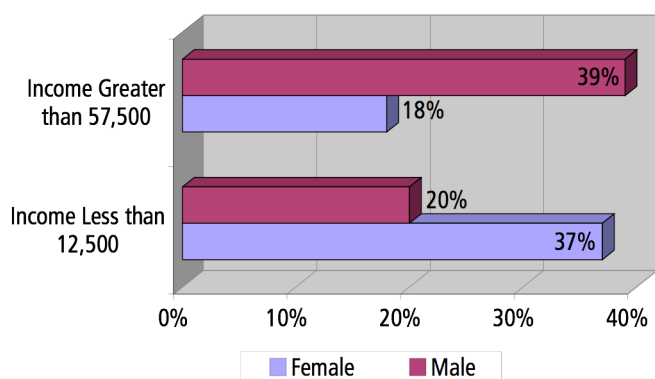
**Bangladeshis in the US**



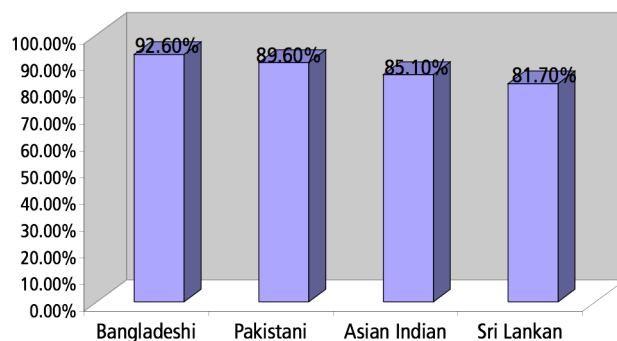
**Pakistanis in the US**



**Asian Indians in the US**



**Male Dominated Households by Race Alone**



## English Language Ability and South Asians

Significant segments of the South Asian population living in the United States are limited English proficient (LEP) and/or reside in linguistically isolated households (LIH). Thus, many lack the English language ability to access necessary services and benefits.

In fact, as the chart to the right shows, half of Bangladeshis have limited English proficiency while almost one third of Pakistanis and nearly one quarter of Indians are LEP.

<i>LEP and LIH Rates of South Asians by Group</i>				
Group	Race Alone		Race Alone or in Combination	
	LEP Rate	LIH Rate	LEP Rate	LIH Rate
Bangladeshi	50%	32%	52%	34%
Indian	23%	11%	23%	11%
Pakistani	32%	15%	32%	17%
Sri Lankan	19%	10%	18%	11%

Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4.

Additionally, as the following chart demonstrates, there is a correlation between poverty and LEP and LIH rates. Generally, as the rates of limited English proficiency and linguistic isolation increase, the opportunity for higher incomes decreases. Nearly two-fifths of individuals who earn between 50% to 125% of the Federal poverty level have limited English proficiency, and almost one-fifth of the households in this income bracket are linguistically isolated.

<i>LEP and LIH Rates of South Asians by Poverty Level</i>		
Poverty Rate	LEP Rate	LIH Rate
Less than 50%	32%	11%
From 50% to 124.9%	39%	19%
From 125% to 199.9%	37%	16%
From 200% to 299.9%	32%	14%
300% or over	18%	7%

Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4. Figures based on race alone.

### TERMINOLOGY

**Limited English Proficient (LEP):** Individuals who have a limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English less than "very well."

**Linguistically Isolated Household (LIH):** Households in which no member aged 14 or over speaks English at least "very well."

## Immigration Status and South Asians

The majority of South Asians who live in the United States are foreign-born, possessing a range of immigration statuses from undocumented immigrants to student and worker visa holders and their dependents, legal permanent residents, and naturalized citizens.

As the chart below shows, a significant majority of each South Asian group was born outside the United States. Further, only about one third of Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans are naturalized and only one-fourth of Bangladeshis have become U.S. citizens. However, the percentage of both naturalized and native-born citizens within the South Asian community is on the rise.

<i>Foreign-born and Native-born Populations among South Asian Americans</i>								
Group	Race Alone				Race Alone or in Combination			
	Native-born	Foreign-born	Naturalized Citizens	Non-citizens	Native-born	Foreign-born	Naturalized Citizens	Non-citizens
Bangladeshi	17%	83%	25%	58%	17%	83%	26%	57%
Indian	24%	76%	30%	46%	27%	73%	29%	44%
Pakistani	24%	77%	31%	46%	26%	74%	30%	44%
Sri Lankan	17%	83%	31%	52%	21%	79%	30%	49%
Total	25%	75%	30%	45%				

Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4.