



Analysis of the Myanmar Diaspora in the United States

(1980-2025): Trends, Triggers, and Policy Impacts

***An Analytical Brief By The Myanmar Conflict Analysis
Research Institute (MCARI)***

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Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of the Myanmar diaspora in the United States, a rapidly growing community of **223,191 (MoE ±15,653)** individuals identifying as "Burmese alone" and **249,550 (MoE ±16,514)** as "Burmese alone or in any combination." **While data for both population segments are acknowledged, this report will primarily utilize the more inclusive "Burmese alone or in any combination" data for subsequent analysis to provide a broader understanding of the community.**

Primarily shaped by decades of conflict and political instability in Myanmar, this diaspora is unique in that it is overwhelmingly composed of former refugees and ethnic minorities, rather than economic or skills-based migrants.

Key findings indicate that the community faces significant socioeconomic challenges, including lower educational attainment (26.8%) and a higher poverty rate (16%) compared to the broader Asian American population.

Settlement is highly concentrated in states like **Indiana, Texas, and Minnesota**, driven by refugee resettlement programs and the formation of robust ethnic community networks.

This report utilizes data from U.S. government sources and community organizations to provide crucial insights for policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and academic researchers.

Background & Methodology

This analysis is based on a synthesis of quantitative data from multiple authoritative sources. The methodology involved data aggregation, trend analysis, and comparative analysis, with key findings visualized using Looker Studio to enhance clarity and accessibility.

Data Sources

- **Demographic and Socioeconomic Data:** Primarily derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 2017–2021 5-Year Estimates and the 2024 1-Year Estimates.

- **Immigration and Refugee Data:** Sourced from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, official publications from the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), and data compiled by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University.
- **Comparative Analysis Data:** Provided by the Pew Research Center and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), which offer broader context on Asian American populations.
- **Community-Level Data:** Crucial estimates and context on specific ethnic group populations and settlement patterns were furnished by community-based organizations, most notably the Burmese American Community Institute (BACI).

Terminology and Population Definitions

To ensure clarity in our data presentation, this report uses population terminology as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau:

- **Burmese Alone:** Refers to individuals who reported "Burmese" as their only race or ethnic origin.
- **Burmese in Combination:** Refers to individuals who reported "Burmese" in combination with one or more other races or ethnic origins (e.g., "Burmese and White" or "Burmese and Chinese").
- **Burmese "Alone or in Any Combination":** Represents the total number of individuals who identify as having Burmese ancestry, either alone or in combination with other groups. This figure provides the most comprehensive count of the diaspora and is the primary figure used for analysis throughout this report.

A Note on Margin of Error (MoE)

- Throughout this report, figures sourced from the American Community Survey (ACS) are accompanied by a Margin of Error (MoE). The ACS is a survey based on a sample of the population, not a complete count of every individual. The MoE is a statistical measure that indicates the level of uncertainty surrounding a survey estimate. It provides a range within which the true population value likely falls. For example, a population estimate of 249,550

with a **MoE of ±16,514** means that the actual number is between **233,036** and **266,064**.

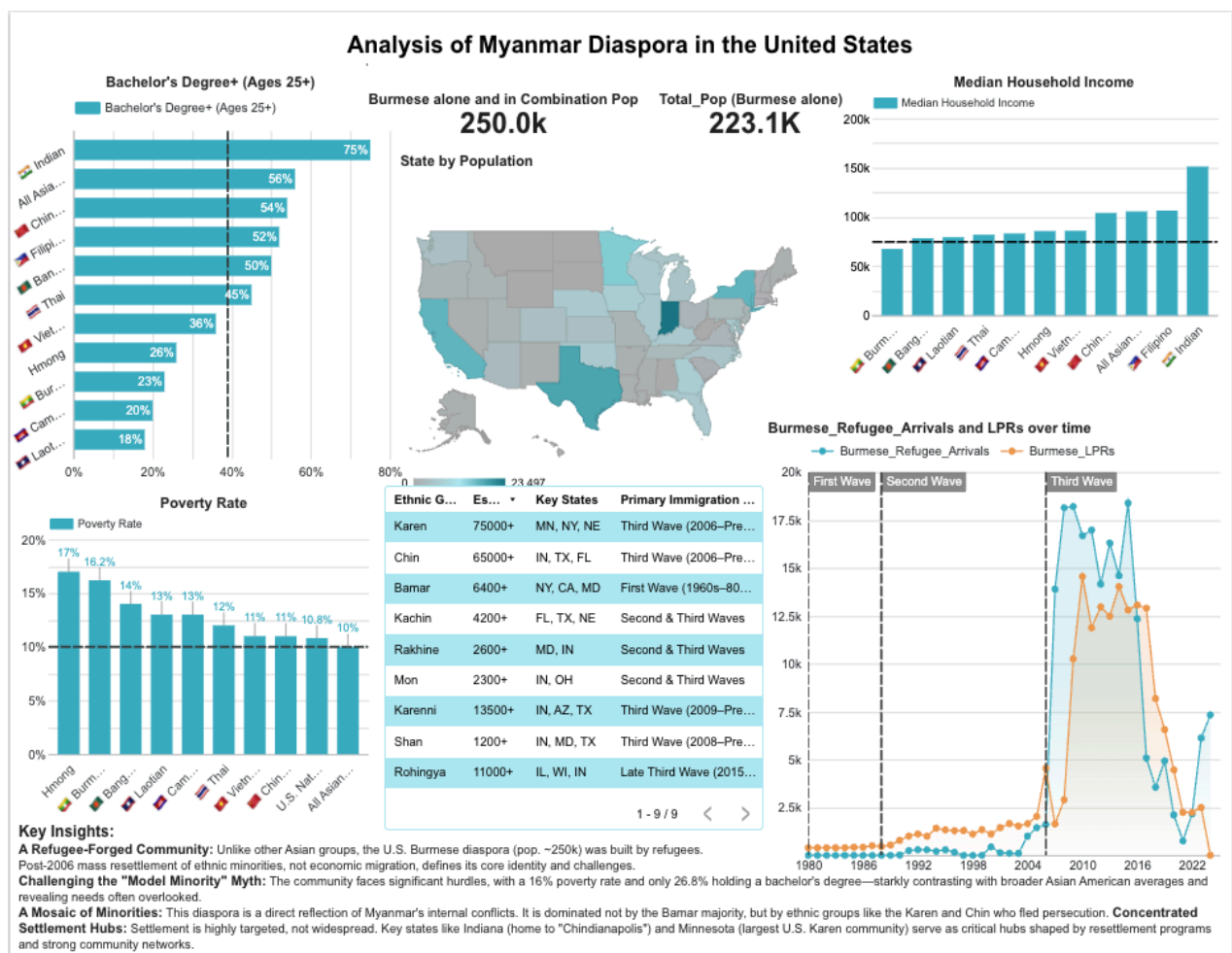
Key Findings

1. **A Refugee-Driven Population:** The U.S. Burmese diaspora numbers **250,000**. Its demographic profile has been fundamentally shaped by U.S. refugee policy, particularly the mass resettlement of ethnic minorities from camps in Thailand beginning in 2006.
 2. **Significant Socioeconomic Disparities:** The community's poverty rate is considerably higher than both the Asian American and the U.S. national average.
 3. **Educational Hurdles:** At just 26.8%, the rate of bachelor's degree attainment for those aged 25 and older is less than half the Asian American and the U.S. national average.
 4. **Three Distinct Immigration Waves:** Burmese immigration occurred in three phases: a post-1962 (**First Wave**), a post-1988 (**Second Wave**), and a post-2006 (**Third Wave**), which accounts for the vast majority of the current population.
 5. **A Diaspora of Minorities:** Reflecting Myanmar's internal conflicts, the community is predominantly composed of ethnic minorities, most notably the Karen and Chin rather than the Bamar majority.
 6. **Concentrated Geographic Settlement:** The diaspora is heavily concentrated with the top five states—**Indiana, Texas, California, New York, and Minnesota**—hosting a significant portion of the total population, and settlement patterns are often linked to specific ethnic groups.
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Analysis: Myanmar Diaspora in the U.S

1. Total Population & Core Demographics

The Burmese diaspora in the United States is a significant and growing community, numbering nearly 250,000 individuals. While smaller than long-established Asian American communities, its rapid growth over the past two decades makes it a critical demographic to understand.



This population is not evenly spread across the U.S. but is instead highly concentrated in specific states, as illustrated by the map. **Indiana** stands out as the state with the largest Burmese population at **23,497**. The other top settlement states are **Texas (18,459)**, **California (16,748)**, **New York (16,695)**, and **Minnesota (14,370)**. This geographic concentration is a direct result of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, where resettlement agencies place refugees in cities with affordable housing and entry-level job opportunities (e.g., in manufacturing and

agricultural sectors), and the presence of established community networks that provide support for new arrivals.

Conversely, states like Wyoming (0), North Dakota (32), and Alabama (32) show negligible or no Burmese population, illustrating a distinct pattern of concentrated settlement.

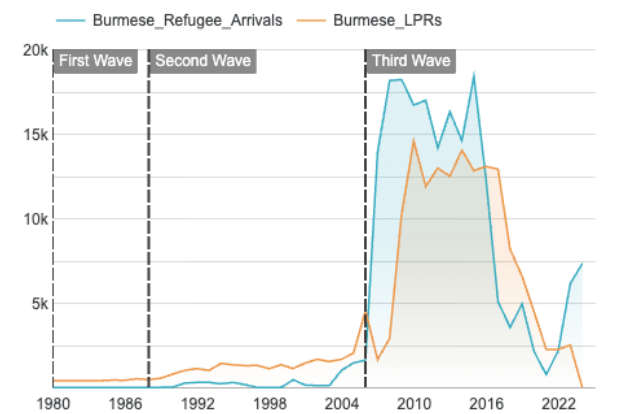
2. Analysis of Immigration Trends (Refugee Arrivals & LPRs)

The chart narrating Burmese Refugee Arrivals and LPRs Over Time powerfully illustrates the two distinct eras that have shaped the diaspora, directly explaining its current demographic and ethnic composition.

- **The Pre-2006 Era:** Prior to 2006, the data shows a long period of low-level immigration. Arrivals were dominated by Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), represented by the orange line, while refugee arrivals (the blue line) were almost negligible. This period corresponds to the **First and Second Waves** of migration, which consisted of a smaller number of professionals, students, and political activists who arrived through non-refugee channels.
- **The Post-2006 Third Wave:** The year 2006 marks a dramatic turning point. A U.S. policy change enabling the mass resettlement of ethnic minorities from camps in Thailand triggered an unprecedented surge in refugee arrivals.

The blue line, peaking at **18,202** refugees in 2009 alone. This period of intense resettlement, known as the **Third Wave**, continued for nearly a decade and fundamentally built the foundation of the community as we know it today.

Burmese_Refugee_Arrivals and Burmese_LPRs over time



3. Ethnic Group Demographics

A defining feature of the U.S. Burmese diaspora is its ethnic composition. It is a community dominated by ethnic minorities who have fled persecution and civil war.

- **Bamar:** The ethnic majority in Myanmar, they predominantly arrived during the First Wave (1960s–80s) as professionals and scholars, and the Second Wave (1988–2000) as political dissidents. Major settlements include New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and the Maryland/DC Suburbs, which historically served as a center for political activism.
- **Chin:** Primarily arriving during the Third Wave (post-2006), these predominantly Christian individuals fled religious and ethnic persecution. Indianapolis, Indiana, notably its south side (Perry Township/Southport), is referred to as "Chindianapolis," home to the largest Chin population outside of Myanmar (over 22,000). Other significant settlements are in Dallas and Lewisville, Texas.
- **Karen (Kayin):** Also largely Third Wave (post-2006) arrivals, many spent years in Thai refugee camps. Saint Paul, Minnesota, hosts the largest and most established Karen community in the U.S. (over 20,000), while communities also thrive in Utica and Buffalo, New York, and Omaha, Nebraska.
- **Karenni (Kayah):** Primarily Third Wave (post-2009) arrivals, with significant communities in Fort Wayne and Indianapolis, Indiana, and growing populations in Phoenix, Arizona, and Houston/Dallas, Texas, often due to secondary migration for jobs.
- **Rohingya:** Predominantly Late Third Wave (post-2015), this stateless Muslim minority, declared victims of genocide by the U.S., has established communities in Chicago (IL), Milwaukee (WI - largest concentration), and Fort Wayne (IN).
- **Kachin:** Arriving during the Second & Third Waves, these predominantly Christian individuals have settlements in Jacksonville, Florida, and the Dallas/Fort Worth area, Texas. Maryland (DC Metro Area) historically served as a base for Kachin political activism, reflecting a migration driven by political dissent in addition to refuge.

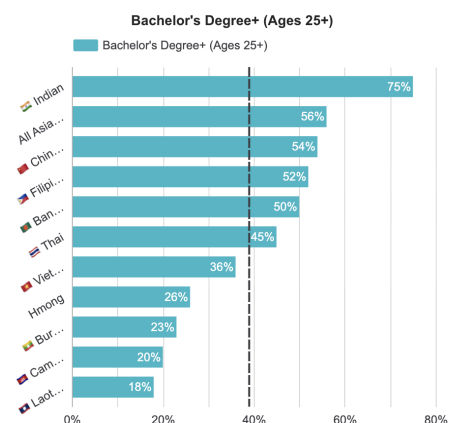
- **Mon:** Primarily Second & Third Waves, with established communities in Fort Wayne, Indiana (which has a dedicated Mon Buddhist temple), and Akron, Ohio.
- **Rakhine (Arakanese):** Arriving during the Second & Third Waves, Baltimore, Maryland, historically served as a significant hub for Rakhine political exiles and activists. This suggests a migration pattern distinct from mass refugee resettlement, driven by political reasons leading to the formation of intellectual and activist communities. Smaller populations are also integrated into broader Burmese networks in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne, Indiana.
- **Shan:** Primarily Third Wave (post-2008), with an estimated population of over 1,200. Settlements are found in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne (IN), the DC Metro Area (MD), and Dallas (TX).
- **Estimated Ethnic Populations:** The Chin (65,000+ individuals) and Karen (75,000+ individuals) are estimated to be the largest single ethnic subgroups within the U.S. Myanmar diaspora, together constituting over half of the total "Burmese alone" population.

Ethnic Group Name	Estimate...	Key States	Primary Immigration Wave
Karen	75000+	MN, NY, NE	Third Wave (2006–Present)
Chin	65000+	IN, TX, FL	Third Wave (2006–Present)
Bamar	6400+	NY, CA, MD	First Wave (1960s–80s) & Sec...
Kachin	4200+	FL, TX, NE	Second & Third Waves
Rakhine	2600+	MD, IN	Second & Third Waves
Mon	2300+	IN, OH	Second & Third Waves
Karenni	13500+	IN, AZ, TX	Third Wave (2009–Present)
Shan	1200+	IN, MD, TX	Third Wave (2008–Present)
Rohingya	11000+	IL, WI, IN	Late Third Wave (2015–Present)

4. Comparative Analysis: The Socioeconomic Landscape

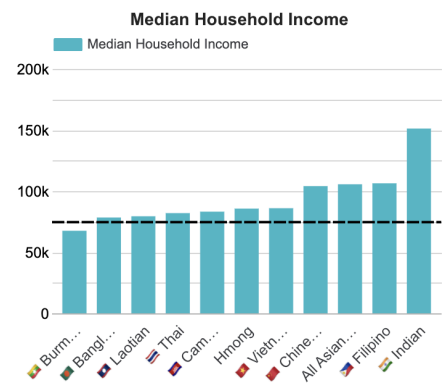
To fully understand the socioeconomic standing of the Burmese diaspora, a comparative analysis is essential. The data reveals stark disparities when placed alongside other Asian American communities, effectively challenging and highlighting the unique circumstances of refugee-origin groups.

Educational attainment is a primary challenge. Only **26.8%** of Burmese Americans aged 25 and older hold



a bachelor's degree or higher. This rate is dramatically lower than the Asian American average (56%) and also falls below the U.S. national average (38%). This disparity is a direct consequence of the refugee experience, including interrupted schooling and immediate economic pressures upon arrival.

Economically, compared to skills-based immigrant groups like Filipino Americans median household income **\$106,400** and Indian American median household income 151,200), the Burmese American median household income is **\$67,600**. This figure is even lower than the U.S. national average income of \$74,580. Correspondingly, the community's **poverty rate of 16%** is significantly higher than both the Asian American average (10%) and the U.S. national average (11.5%).



Disparities Obscured by the 'Asian American' Label

The practice of aggregating data under the single term "Asian Americans" masks the profound economic inequality within the group. An overall Asian American median income of **\$105,600** and a **10%** poverty rate creates a misleadingly prosperous picture.

This aggregate figure completely obscures the reality for community like Burmese and Hmong Americans, whose poverty rates (**16%** and **17%** respectively) are more comparable to, or even exceed, those of African and Hispanic Americans.

This renders the acute challenges faced by vulnerable subgroups invisible, thereby hindering the development of targeted support programs.

In reality, Asian Americans are the most economically unequal racial group in the U.S. The chasm between the highest earners (e.g., Indian Americans) and the lowest earners (e.g., Burmese Americans) is wider than in any other demographic group, making disaggregated data not just a preference, but a necessity for equitable policy-making.

5. Conclusion

The Myanmar diaspora in the United States presents a complex and multifaceted profile, characterized by diverse demographic features, evolving immigration waves, significant socioeconomic challenges, and distinct ethnic settlement patterns. This community highlights the economic inequalities within the broader Asian American population, often facing lower educational attainment and income levels, coupled with higher poverty rates, compared to many other Asian groups. The overwhelming presence of ethnic minorities, largely arriving through mass refugee resettlement programs, has played a pivotal role in shaping their socioeconomic outcomes and geographic distribution. Such detailed disaggregated analysis is crucial for policymakers, academics, and community organizations to develop more effective and targeted support initiatives for this diverse and evolving population.
