



Community-Based Nonprofits Serving Ethnic Populations in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area

Alicia Lee and Carol J. De Vita

The dramatic rise in the number of foreign-born residents in the United States has increased attention to issues related to immigrants and immigration. Numerous studies document the number of immigrants in the United States, their countries of origin, and the impact of immigration on the labor force, schools, and social welfare systems. But little attention has been given to the community-based groups that serve immigrants and help them incorporate into American life.

This brief profiles community-based nonprofits in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area that are helping newcomers adjust to their new social and political environment and, in some cases, preserve their cultural identities. This brief focuses on nonprofit groups that serve Asian, Middle Eastern, and African populations; a companion brief focuses on Latino organizations.¹ Together the two studies look at the characteristics and growth of small, locally based groups that are expanding and transforming civil society in the D.C. region.

The Recent Rise in Immigration

Immigration is playing a significant role in shaping U.S. society. During the 1990s, the foreign-born population in the United States grew 57 percent; today, about one in eight residents (12.5 percent) is foreign born. The traditional immigrant gateway cities of New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago still attract large numbers of immigrants, but different metropolitan areas are now experiencing an influx of new arrivals. Atlanta, Dallas/Fort Worth, Las Vegas, and Washington, D.C., are

among the gateway centers for immigrants emerging since the 1990s (Singer 2004).

The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is a primary recipient of the new immigration flows, ranking fifth among the top immigrant-receiving communities.² Since 2000, the region has received 3.5 percent of all new immigrants into the United States.³ About 20 percent of residents in the D.C. metro area are foreign born, compared with 12.5 percent nationwide. Particularly for the District of Columbia, which lost population between 1990 and 2000, the arrival of new immigrants helped mitigate population losses.

About 75 percent of the foreign-born population in the D.C. region is either Latino (39 percent) or Asian (36 percent). More than 133,200 Salvadorans call the D.C. area home—or roughly one-third of all the Latino immigrants in the region. The next largest groups come from India (62,300), Korea (58,900), China (46,600),⁴ Mexico (43,600), and Vietnam (43,200). While African immigrants make up about 4 percent of the foreign-born in the United States, they make up almost four times that proportion (14 percent) in the D.C. area.

The majority of immigrants live in the suburbs of D.C., especially Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia. Both Montgomery and Fairfax counties report over 230,000 foreign-born residents—more than half of all immigrants in the region. In contrast, the District of Columbia has less than 10 percent of the metro area's immigrant population—about 73,600 immigrant residents. Other counties and cities in the region with high proportions of immigrants include Arlington County (52,700 immigrants) and

Alexandria City (32,600) in Virginia. In each of these jurisdictions, immigrants account for one-quarter of the population. In Prince George's County, Maryland, and Prince William and Loudoun counties, Virginia, the share of the foreign-born population hovers between 10 and 15 percent, but the numbers are growing. Prince George's County has more than 110,600 immigrants, while Prince William has about 32,300 and Loudoun County, 19,100.

Nonprofit Ethnic Organizations

Nonprofits that serve ethnic communities have a rich history in the United States. For centuries, immigrants have relied on mutual aid societies and similar associations for financial, spiritual, and emotional support. But ethnic organizations are fundamentally different from mainstream groups. Ethnic organizations incorporate the culture of the ethnic group into their programs, offering support and enrichment through education, awareness, and celebration of the ethnic culture. The staff and founders of ethnic nonprofits typically share the same ethnic identity as the population they serve. In contrast, mainstream organizations generally do not have a large proportion of clients from a single ethnic group, and the staff may not be of a particular ethnic background (Cordero-Guzman 2005; Holley 2003).

Immigrants are able to affirm their cultural identity in these ethnic organizations through cultural activities and programs. Religious institutions are important within this context. A study of Ethiopian immigrants in the D.C. area, for example, found that religious institutions not only provide spiritual and worship space but also offer their members social services, cultural preservation programs, and language classes (Chacko 2003).

The role of community-based nonprofits as support systems for immigrants is poorly understood. Very little is known about the number, size, or financial resources of these organizations or the programs they offer. To fill this gap, this study develops a profile of ethnic-serving nonprofits in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. We focus on ethnic organizations that are locally based and have omitted national and international nonprofits that may be headquartered in the D.C. region because they do not generally focus on

local needs. Because the D.C. area is a magnet for newcomers, the findings of this study may serve as a model for other cities and towns that want to understand the roles and functions of their own ethnic-serving nonprofits.

Identifying Ethnic-Serving Nonprofits

Because many ethnic-serving groups are small and unstructured, there are no lists of such organizations. To overcome this problem, we developed a three-step process to create a list. First, using data from the Urban Institute's National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), a national repository of 501(c)(3) organizations that file annual financial forms with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS), we identified all nonprofits in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.⁵

Next, we refined the list by searching for organizations that refer to an ethnic group or use common ethnic words or phrases in their names or program descriptions, specifically those associated with Asian, Middle Eastern, and African nations or cultures.

Finally, we reviewed each organization and removed groups that were primarily national or international in focus. The resulting list provides a broad cross-section of community-based, ethnic-specific nonprofits in the D.C. metro area. However, it misses many small and new organizations that do not file with the IRS, and many churches that are exempt from filing.⁶

The final sample used in this analysis contained 120 community-based nonprofits in the D.C. region. Of these, 62 focused on Asian populations, 27 on Middle Eastern populations, and 14 on African populations. In addition, 17 nonprofits that are primarily engaged in refugee resettlement were included in the study. These organizations are multiservice centers with ethnically diverse clientele and staff, and for purposes of this analysis are considered mainstream organizations.

Findings

As anticipated, ethnic-serving nonprofits tend to be relatively small. But the study also finds some sharp departures from common stereotypes.

Nonprofits Are Scattered through the D.C. Area, Especially in the Surrounding Suburbs

A common assumption is that immigrant populations settle in the urban core of large cities and use service providers located in the core. However, ethnic-specific nonprofits are found throughout the D.C. metro area, reflecting the broad dispersion of immigrant residential patterns in the D.C. area. Just over 70 percent of the community-based, ethnic-serving nonprofits in the study are found in Virginia (39 percent) and Maryland (32 percent). Less than one-third make the District their home (table 1).

The distribution of these nonprofits is even more distinct by ethnic group. The majority of nonprofits serving the Middle Eastern population, for example, are located in Virginia (56 percent), whereas nearly two-thirds of the African-serving nonprofits (64 percent) are in the District. In contrast, nonprofits serving the Asian population are more widely spread across the suburban regions—most are in Maryland (45 percent), followed by Virginia (39 percent). Only about one in six Asian-serving groups (16 percent) are in the District of Columbia.

On the other hand, the multiservice organizations that provide refugee resettlement assistance are primarily located in D.C. Nearly two-thirds of them (65 percent) are in the District, with an additional quarter (24 percent) in the surrounding Virginia suburbs. Only two refugee resettlement groups are located in Maryland.

Ethnic-Serving Nonprofits Are Fairly Young and Generally Reflect the Periodic Waves of Immigrants That Come to the Region

Over the past four decades, the D.C. metro area has experienced distinctive waves of

immigrants and refugees. In the 1970s, Southeast Asians came to the region in large numbers. During the 1980s and 1990s, migration from Ethiopia, Somalia, and other African nations was prominent. More recently, migration from Middle Eastern countries is evident. The age of nonprofit organizations serving these ethnic groups in part reflects these waves of migration. However, it may also reflect the short lifespan of some ethnic-serving nonprofits as their target population moves, becomes incorporated into the broader U.S. society, or as financial support for their programs becomes difficult to maintain.

Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of the ethnic-specific nonprofits in the study were incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations between 1990 and 2005. However, nonprofits serving the Asian and African communities report a somewhat longer presence in the community than those serving a Middle Eastern clientele. Nearly 45 percent of the Asian and African nonprofits were created in the 1970s and 1980s, compared with only 14 percent of Middle Eastern-focused groups. Four mainstream refugee-serving nonprofits in the region date back to the 1940s and 1950s, but most of these organizations were established after 1990.

Younger Ethnic-Serving Nonprofits Are Sprouting Up in the Suburbs, While Older, Established Ones Are More Likely to Be in the District

As the immigrant population moves to the suburbs, so too are the nonprofits that serve it. This shift can be seen in the proportion of new organizations in suburban locations. Among ethnic-specific nonprofits in D.C., only 14 percent have been incorpo-

TABLE 1. Distribution of Ethnic-Related Nonprofit Organizations in the D.C. Area by Ethnic Group

Jurisdiction	Asian		African		Middle Eastern		Refugee-Serving		All Ethnic-Related Nonprofits	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
District of Columbia	10	16	9	64	5	19	11	65	35	29
Maryland	28	45	1	7	7	26	2	12	38	32
Virginia	24	39	4	29	15	56	4	24	47	39
Total	62	100	14	100	27	100	17	100	120	100

Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005).

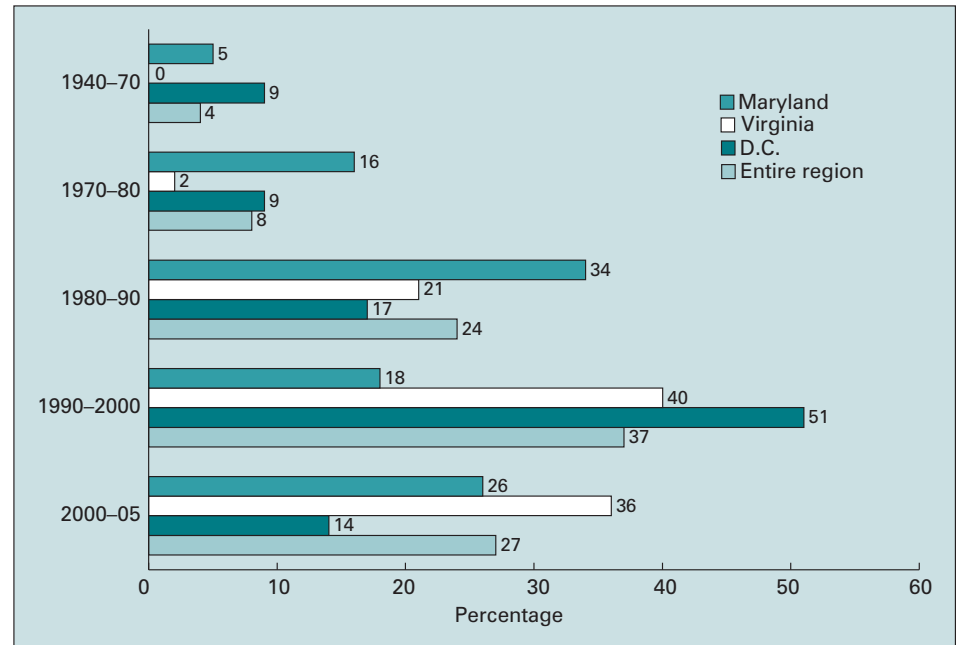
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

rated since 2000, but more than twice that proportion (36 percent) have been formed in Virginia (figure 1). In Maryland, about a quarter (26 percent) of ethnic-serving nonprofits have been formed this decade. In contrast, the District is more likely to house older and more established groups. Almost 10 percent of the ethnic-serving nonprofits in D.C. were incorporated before the 1970s, compared with none in Virginia and 5 percent in Maryland. The location of newly incorporated nonprofits is another indicator that, at least in the D.C. metro area, immigrants are not clustered in the central city but spread throughout the surrounding suburbs.

Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Region Typically Operate on Small Budgets with Few Assets

Based on their financial pictures, ethnic-specific organizations are relatively small. At least half of them reported revenues of less than \$121,900 in 2005 (table 2). Although the average for all these nonprofits is much higher (\$862,400), it reflects a few organizations with multi-million-dollar budgets. Likewise, the net assets of ethnic-serving nonprofits tend to be small. Median net assets

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Area by Founding Decade and Location



Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005).

are less than \$50,000, so ethnic-serving nonprofits have few reserves to draw on in times of need.

Table 2 also shows that these financial measures are highly concentrated in refugee-serving nonprofits. As indicated earlier, these groups tend to be mainstream organizations,

not focused on a specific ethnic group. Average revenues for refugee-serving organizations are around \$4 million, but the median is much smaller—about \$842,000. These data suggest that refugee-serving organizations are roughly eight times larger than nonprofits serving specific

TABLE 2. Financial Measures of Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Area

Characteristic	Number	Total Revenue (\$)		Total Expenditures (\$)		Net Assets (\$)	
		Average	Median	Average	Median	Average	Median
Ethnic group							
Asian	62	284,300	96,200	245,100	81,300	227,000	51,700
African	14	978,600	163,100	821,900	168,200	601,000	31,500
Middle Eastern	27	213,600	84,100	214,300	84,400	372,200	63,400
Refugee-serving	17	3,905,000	841,800	3,587,800	843,200	4,062,600	391,300
Location							
District of Columbia	35	1,637,600	272,300	1,531,200	272,400	1,015,800	68,700
Maryland	38	449,000	78,700	371,500	73,000	1,061,500	45,700
Virginia	47	619,300	101,300	545,900	87,400	337,700	38,100
All ethnic-specific nonprofits	120	862,400	121,900	779,000	91,300	764,700	45,700

Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005).

Note: Dollars have been rounded to the nearest 100.

immigrant populations. African organizations have the highest median revenues (\$163,100), while Asian and Middle Eastern groups report median revenues of smaller sizes—\$96,200 and \$84,100, respectively.

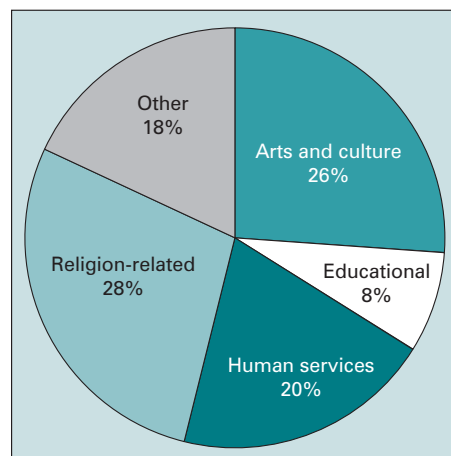
Because most of the mainstream, refugee-serving nonprofits are in the District, the financial picture of the D.C.-based nonprofits in this study is substantially better than that of Maryland and Virginia nonprofits. While median revenues for D.C.-based, ethnic-serving nonprofits are \$272,300, the medians for suburban-based nonprofits are considerably lower—about \$101,300 in Virginia and \$78,700 in Maryland.

Similarly, nonprofits in the District have higher median net assets than their counterparts in the surrounding suburbs—\$68,700 in D.C., compared with \$45,700 in Maryland and \$38,100 in Virginia. It is unclear from these data, however, the reasons for these differences.

Ethnic-Serving Nonprofits Can Be Found in Various Venues

A common stereotype is that assistance to newcomers is offered primarily by social service agencies. However, the most common type of ethnic-serving organizations in the study is religion-related (figure 2). Twenty-eight percent of these nonprofits are faith-based organizations, including churches.⁷ The second most common type are arts and culture

FIGURE 2. Distribution of Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Area by Primary Activity



Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005).

nonprofits (26 percent). Human service providers rank third (20 percent), followed distantly by educational nonprofits (8 percent). This finding supports previous work by Jose Moya (2005), who reported that the majority of ethnic organizations focus on cultural awareness and social programs rather than human services, advocacy, or community development.

However, the pattern of ethnic-serving nonprofits varies substantially by specific ethnic group (table 3). Nonprofits serving the Middle Eastern community are primarily religious groups (63 percent). Most of these 17 organizations are mosques or

Islamic education centers. The majority of the African organizations (57 percent) are in arts and culture venues, offering various cultural programs—such as dance performances and art lessons—and classes on the history of specific ethnic groups. Nonprofits serving the Asian community are found in the most diverse venues. Nearly 30 percent of them are arts and culture nonprofits, providing cultural classes and language schools for children, and another 24 percent are religion-related, including Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist churches and temples.

One reason for the greater variety of Asian nonprofits may be the size of the Asian population and how long it has been in the region. Although immigrants from many Asian countries have lived in the D.C. area for decades, the arrival of large numbers of Southeast Asians in the 1970s profoundly transformed the cultural landscape of the region. This may have spurred the development of Asian-serving nonprofits and, over time, the diversity of the sector. The more recent arrival of large numbers of Middle Eastern and African immigrants suggests that these groups have not had as much time to establish a large number or diverse types of nonprofit entities.

Interestingly, very few community-based ethnic organizations focus primarily on civil rights and advocacy. The nonprofits that focus on advocacy

TABLE 3. Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Area by Primary Type of Activity

Primary activity	Asian		African		Middle Eastern		Refugee-Serving	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Arts and culture	18	29	8	57	5	19	0	
Educational	6	10	0		1	4	3	18
Human services	11	18	4	29	1	4	8	47
Civil rights/advocacy	2	3	0		1	4	1	6
Religion-related	15	24	1	7	17	63	1	6
Other	10	16	1	7	2	7	4	24
Total	62	100	14	100	27	100	17	100

Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005).

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

are mostly national organizations, including broad coalitions and associations that work on national, not local, issues. Small organizations engaged in grassroots advocacy often do not meet the minimum revenue requirement (\$25,000) to file with the IRS and therefore are not captured in this study. Also, some ethnic-serving organizations engaged in advocacy and civil rights, particularly African organizations, are likely to have an international focus. These groups typically seek congressional assistance on behalf of their native countries or work to improve the conditions in their native lands. Less frequently do they advocate on behalf of their countrymen living in the United States.

Nonprofits That Assist Immigrant Groups Offer More Than Social Services

Within these venues, a wide variety of programs and services is offered (table 4). Consistent across all three ethnic-specific nonprofits, the most common activity is cultural awareness and preservation. For Middle Eastern organizations, cultural activities are particularly strong. About three in five services (61 percent) are geared toward cultural programs—nearly twice the proportion reported by Asian- or African-serving nonprofits (29 and 36 percent, respectively). Middle Eastern organizations also direct their resources toward the provision of religious services, such as worship services and religious training.

Although cultural activities are also prominent in African- and Asian-serving nonprofits, there is a greater array of services and programs in these grassroots groups. African organizations are most likely to emphasize cultural programs (36 percent) and resettlement assistance (13 percent), while Asian organizations largely provide three types of services: cultural awareness and preservation (29 percent), language training (18 percent), and children's program (14 percent), most commonly in the form of a culture-language school.

In sharp contrast, mainstream organizations, such as the refugee

TABLE 4. *Services and Programs Provided by Ethnic-Specific Nonprofits in the D.C. Area*

Service/program type	Percent of Services That Are:			
	Asian	African	Middle Eastern	Refugee-serving
Cultural programs	29	36	61	0
Children's programs	14	7	4	10
Language training	18	7	4	18
Family services	6	7	4	12
Resettlement services	4	13	4	10
Religious programs	5	3	11	0
Legal assistance	5	7	4	18
Translation services	4	7	4	8
Other	15	13	4	24
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: The Urban Institute National Center for Charitable Statistics Core File (Public Charities, circa 2005), supplemented with the National Program Classifications.

resettlement centers in this study, are more traditional social service providers. They offer no cultural programs but tend to emphasize language training (18 percent) and legal assistance (18 percent). Family services (12 percent), children's programs (10 percent), and resettlement services (10 percent) are also quite common. The multiple services of these organizations are reflected in the proportion of activities (24 percent) that cannot be classified under any of the more specific topics.

Implications

Ethnic-serving nonprofits in the D.C. metropolitan area, although generally operating with relatively limited financial resources, are important factors in helping the foreign-born and ethnic communities create their own space within civil society and ease the newcomers' adjustment to U.S. society. As these findings illustrate, the complexity and diversity of these organizations defies simple stereotypes about how community-based groups operate and the services and activities they provide.

Ethnic-serving nonprofits in the D.C. metro region vary by spatial distribution, financial status, year incorporated, and services provided.

African, Asian, and Middle Eastern organizations differ as much from one another as they do from mainstream organizations. African organizations, for example, have greater revenues and net assets than their Asian and Middle Eastern counterparts and are more concentrated in the District of Columbia. Asian nonprofits provide the most diverse activities, offering many cultural and language programs and targeting both families and children. Several of these Asian-serving nonprofits have been operating since the 1960s and '70s, and almost half are located in the Maryland suburbs. On the other hand, Middle Eastern nonprofits tend to be young, concentrated in Virginia, and housed in religious centers such as mosques or Islamic centers. They primarily provide cultural programs and, to a lesser degree, religious scholarship and training.

The emphasis on cultural awareness and cultural preservation rather than social services is what distinguishes many of these nonprofits from mainstream social service providers. Ethnic-serving nonprofits typically provide people with a space to come together, enjoy social and recreational activities, and, sometimes, worship. These nonprofits provide a place that immigrants can call their

own and receive support, feel solidarity with one another, and strengthen their cultural ties. Further research will explore the civic and political activities of these groups and how they interact with other organizations and with government.

Notes

1. For information on Latino-serving nonprofits, see Guillermo Cantor and Carol J. De Vita, "Civil Society Structures Serving Latinos in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area," Charting Civil Society brief 18 (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2008).
2. The top four metro areas are New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami. See Singer and colleagues (2001).
3. From the 2006 American Community Survey, accessed March 10, 2008, at <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
4. This figure excludes immigrants from Taiwan, which total approximately 12,800.
5. The study used the Census Bureau definition of the Washington, D.C., primary metropolitan statistical area, which includes the District of Columbia, 5 counties in Maryland (Calvert, Charles, Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince George's), and 15 jurisdictions in Virginia (Arlington, Clarke, Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun, Prince William, Spotsylvania, Stafford, and Warren counties, along with Alexandria City, Fairfax City, Falls Church City, Fredericksburg City, Manassas

City, and Manassas Park City). Jefferson County, West Virginia, was omitted because of a lack of nonprofits specifically serving ethnic groups and the small size of the immigrant population.

6. Nonprofits with annual revenues below \$25,000 are not required to file Forms 990 with the IRS. Likewise, churches are exempt from filing with the IRS, although many churches that run social ministries voluntarily report these programs to the IRS and are part of the NCCS database.
7. This proportion may underestimate the proportion of churches involved in ethnic-serving activities because churches are underreported in the NCCS database.

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