New EWU study paints picture of Asians here

Asian-American population in Spokane County jumped 28 percent during 1990s

By Paul Read

The Asian-American population in Spokane County jumped 28 percent during the 1990s, well outpacing the 16 percent overall population growth here, a new study shows.

The analysis, an in-depth socioeconomic profile of Asian Americans in Spokane and Kootenai counties, was conducted by Eastern Washington University professor Pui-Yan Lam for the school’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis.

Spokane County had about 7,900 Asian Americans in 2000, the study says. Of those, the three largest groups were Japanese, Vietnamese, and Chinese, in that order. Vietnamese Americans were the fastest growing here, with their numbers doubling during the decade.

Kootenai County, meanwhile, still has a relatively small number of Asian Americans, totaling just 539 in the 2000 census, the study shows. That number, however, is twice as high as in the 1990 census. Filipinos, Japanese, and Chinese are the three largest Asian American groups in that county, the study says.

“There certainly is an opportunity there” for businesses, says Chris Marr, vice president of Foothills Automotive Group, of Spokane, and past chairman of the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce. “It’s a somewhat shadow population; they’re not as engaged in the community,” says Marr, who is of Asian descent, but “it’s a ripe target market.”

“It would be a good thing being able to increase the visibility of the cultural diversity in our community,” he adds.

The institute’s analysis also collected a host of other data on such things as age, migration, language, marital status, educational attainment, income and poverty, and occupations.

Following are some of the study’s more notable findings:

• Nearly two-thirds of Spokane County’s Asian Americans were born in another country, and about half of them entered the U.S. between 1990 and 2000. Asian Americans in Kootenai County were less likely to be foreign born or to have arrived here in the 1990s.

• About 35 percent of Asians in Spokane County speak English only, compared with about 55 percent in Kootenai County. Among those who speak a language other than English, 46 percent claim to speak English
“very well,” while 21 percent reported that they speak it “not well” or “not at all.”

• The median age in 2000 for Asian American residents in Spokane County was 29.5, six years younger than the general population here, while in Kootenai County the median was 36.2 years, nearly identical to the general population there.

• Asian Americans here were more likely than the general population to have finished college, according to the 2000 census, but also were less likely to have completed high school. Patrick Jones, the institute’s director, says the reason for that relationship isn’t clear, though it could be related to the relatively big recent increases in Hmong and Vietnamese immigrants here.

Writes Lam in her analysis, “The lower percentage of college graduates among Hmong and Vietnamese could be due to their recent arrival in the U.S. If they arrived as adults, they might not come with a higher education, as in the case of Indian or Korean immigrants. If they came as teenagers, they might have a difficult time learning English and adjusting to the educational system in the U.S.”

Chinese and Asian Indians in Spokane County appeared to be the most highly educated of the Asians, and more highly educated than the general population. Three other groups, the Chinese, the Japanese, and Filipinos, all had higher proportions of college graduates than the general population. Hmong and Vietnamese had the lowest college graduation rate.

• As a whole, the median incomes of Asian Americans here are lower than that of the general population. Comparatively, Asian American households in Washington state and the U.S. as a whole have higher incomes than their respective general populations.

Interestingly, Asian Indians have the highest median annual family incomes here, at $68,250, about 47 percent higher than the median income for Spokane County as a whole. Hmong rank last, with a median family income of $19,375, almost 50 percent below the general population.

“… Asian Americans tend to cluster at the ends of the economic hierarchy, forming an ‘hourglass’ shaped class structure,” writes Lam.

Says Marr, “It’s important to note that you can’t look at the Asian population here just as a single group because there is huge diversity within it.”

• The proportion of Asian-American families in poverty in Spokane County was 15.8 percent in 1999, almost double the rate for the general population here. In contrast, in Kootenai County, the difference in poverty rates between Asian-American families and the general population was negligible—both around 7 percent. Among Asian groups, Hmong consistently have the highest poverty rates, with almost 31 percent of families and 68 percent of individuals below the official poverty level.

Writes Lam, “Hmong, who came to this country recently as refugees with little formal education, economic resources, and prior exposure to Western culture, face tremendous difficulties as they try to rebuild their lives in Spokane.”

• About 59 percent of Asian Americans over the age of 15 in Spokane County were participating in the labor force, about 5 percentage points lower than the general population. The study says that could be explained by the higher percentage of Asian Americans who attend college—about 21 percent versus 7.6 percent for
Spokane County overall. A higher percentage of Asian Americans in Kootenai County (69 percent) were in the labor force.

• Compared with the general population, Asian Americans in Spokane County tend to be more concentrated in service and production jobs than in sales and office occupations, especially for Hmong and Vietnamese. By contrast, Asians in Kootenai County were much more concentrated in managerial and professional occupations than the overall population there.

• Spokane County is home to 430 Asian American-owned businesses. Of these, 163 have paid employees with a total payroll of $33 million.

“From a marketing standpoint, if you’re a business and aren’t catering to this population and the individual needs of their culture, that might be something you’ll want to look at,” says Jeff Selle, the Regional Chamber’s federal/regional issues manager.