

*Culture, Community,
and Commitment:
The Nikkei Community Assessment,
1999-2002*

Executive Summary

A project designed and implemented by
the Japanese American Service Committee
Funded by the Retirement Research Foundation
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Japanese American Service Committee

**Summer
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Nikkei Community Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than fifty-five years, starting in the post-World War II resettlement era, the Japanese American Service Committee (JASC) has strived to serve the needs of the Nikkei community in the greater Chicago area.* During the past five years, in response to the changing nature of the community, the JASC has been undergoing a process of reassessment of its organization and purpose. In order to direct agency efforts more effectively, the JASC identified that it needed specific information about the community and its current and future needs, concerns, resources, and expectations. This type of information has not been collected from the Nikkei community in nearly twenty-five years.

In the spring of 1999, the JASC received a two-year grant from the Retirement Research Foundation for the Chicago-area Nikkei Community Assessment (NCA). This project was designed to define the extent of demographic and socioeconomic changes in the community and how these changes impact it and the JASC's services and programs. The Retirement Research Foundation awarded the JASC this grant as part of their first Organizational Capacity Building Initiative, a program designed to improve the management and governance of nonprofit organizations serving the elderly in Lake, Cook, and DuPage counties. As the only Japanese American social service agency in the Midwest, the JASC was in a unique position to undertake this project with invaluable input and support from other Nikkei organizations, institutions, groups, and individuals.

In order to understand the Nikkei community from an individual to a broad perspective, data were collected through focus groups and surveys, and from the US Census results. While we definitely wanted to understand the needs and resources of the current senior population (those over 60), we also wanted to understand the future needs and resources of the Nikkei community. We felt that these future needs might best be expressed by those under 60—a group typically geographically dispersed and less involved than seniors in Nikkei organizations. We actively reached out to include this group and 50% of respondents are younger than age 60. We also wanted to include those whose primary language is Japanese. In total, approximately 3,900 copies of the NCA in English or Japanese were distributed via direct mail or in person at community gatherings. One thousand one completed surveys were returned, and the responses analyzed.

* The term "Nikkei" refers to people of Japanese ancestry, both American-born and resident Japanese nationals.

Changing Demographics

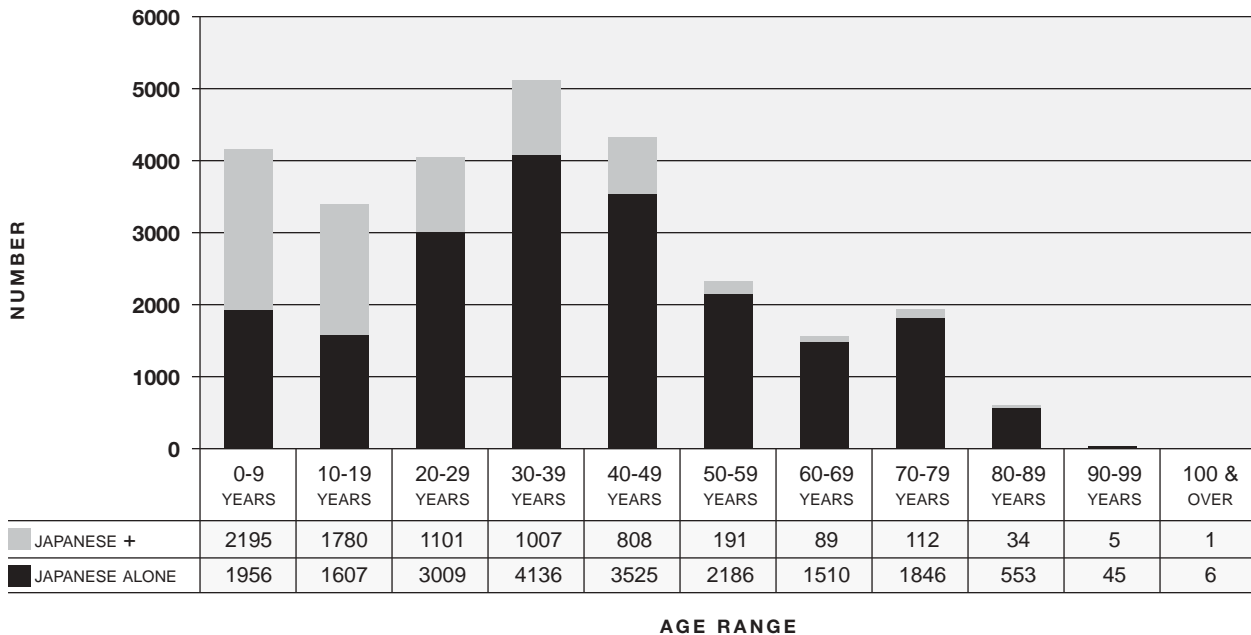
• **Multiracial and multicultural** individuals may represent a new cohort within the Nikkei community. A change in the US Census form in 2000 allowed each respondent to “Mark one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.” Thus, for the first time, the Nikkei community was able to have a more complete understanding of its evolving multi-ethnic and multiracial component. Specifically, the number of persons who defined themselves as “Japanese alone” decreased by about 6% in 2000 from the 1990 Census figure. However, when the number of persons who defined themselves as “Japanese in combination with one or more other races and/or detailed Asian groups” was included with the number of persons who defined themselves as “Japanese alone,” the total US Nikkei population could be said to have grown by

35.6% to 1,148,932. In this way, a single change in collecting information makes a previously invisible part of our community visible.

• **In this report,** for the sake of brevity, we will use the term *Japanese Plus* (or Japanese +) in reference to the multiethnic or multiracial persons just mentioned; that is, those who defined themselves in Census 2000 as “Japanese in combination with one or more other races and/or detailed Asian groups.” We will use the term *Japanese Inclusive* in reference to the Japanese Plus group together with persons who defined themselves in Census 2000 as “Japanese alone.” In Figure 1, for example, the upper portion of each two-part bar represents the Japanese Plus component of a given age group, and the lower portion represents the Japanese Alone component. Each two-part bar in its entirety represents the Japanese Inclusive population in a given age group.

Figure 1
Illinois Japanese Alone & Japanese + by 10 Year Age Range

Source: 2000 US Census



- **The Japanese Inclusive figure** for the State of Illinois places the total Nikkei population at 27,702 (see Figure 1). Of that number, 20,379 persons indicated that they were Japanese Alone. Thus, 7,323 Illinois residents make up the state’s Japanese Plus group.

- **The popular perception** is that the Japanese American community consists mainly of senior citizens. As shown in Figure 1, however, Census 2000 data indicate that more than 60% of the Japanese Inclusive population in Illinois is under 40 years old.

- **In Illinois,** there are 7,538 Nikkei youth aged 0 to 19 years. Among both the 0- to 9-year-olds and the 10- to 19-year-olds, those who are Japanese Plus outnumber those who are Japanese Alone (see Figure 1).

- **As might be expected,** about 85% of the Illinois Nikkei population (23,231 out of a total of 27,702) live in Cook and the surrounding counties. But what might be a surprise is that even in Cook County; Chicago is no longer the home to most Nikkei. Of those who live in Cook County, about 40% live in the city; the rest are suburban Cook County residents (Table 1).

Table 1
Japanese Inclusive Population in Selected Counties in Illinois

Source: 2000 US Census

SELECTED ILLINOIS COUNTIES	NUMBER OF JAPANESE INCLUSIVE
Cook County	17,398
Suburban Cook	10,284
City of Chicago	7,114
DuPage County	2,251
Lake County	2,151
Will County	602
Kane County	476
McHenry County	353

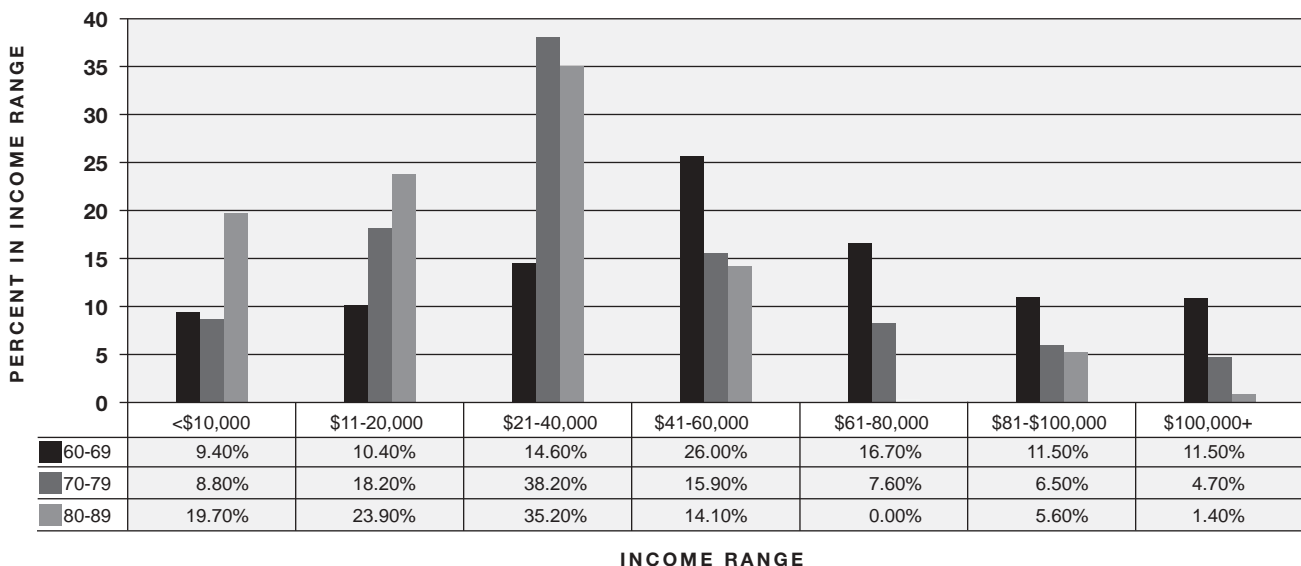
Focus on Seniors

Among the salient demographic data presented in Census 2000, two facts about Nikkei seniors in the Chicagoland area stand out. First, in Cook County and Chicago, the percentage of city dwellers gradually increases from about 40% among the 60- and 61-year-olds to about 80% for those 85 and above. Older Nikkei seniors tend to live in the city; younger ones tend to live in suburban Cook County. Second, in the same geographic region, the number of 70- to 79-year-olds (1,958 Japanese Inclusive) is notably greater than the number of 60- to 69-year-olds (1,599 Japanese Inclusive). Therefore, area social service and housing agencies with large numbers of Nikkei seniors as clients should plan for a shrinking pool of Nikkei elderly and a more dispersed senior population.

Further Census data will be available at a later date. The following findings reflect the results of the NCA survey.

- **The entire NCA sample** expressed widespread support for senior services, health care services, and information and referral.
- **About one tenth** (9.4%) of those 60- to 69-year-olds who reported income on the NCA survey have a household income of \$10,000 or less, while nearly one fifth (19.7%) of those aged 80 to 89 are at the lowest income level (Figure 2). Generally, the older respondents report lower incomes than the younger seniors.
- **Among the older half** of the sample (i.e., aged 60 or more), more than one third live alone, and of those who live alone, about one quarter have incomes of \$10,000 or less. These seniors are more vulnerable, have few financial resources and may be at risk for social isolation.
- **For the most vulnerable elderly** (those who have incomes less than \$10,000 and live in Chicago), about 80% want and need an ethnic service provider, and one that can meet their language needs.
- **Although** the case of the most vulnerable elderly is very specific in the kinds of ethnic services needed, English-speaking, American-born Nikkei feel a “comfort level” in utilizing ethnic service organizations such as the JASC.

Figure 2
Current Household Income by Age for Those Age 60 and Above



Being Nikkei Matters

Table 2
Critical Issues Facing the Japanese American Community

Source: Nikkei Community Assessment

CRITICAL ISSUES LISTED IN RANK ORDER	% SELECTING ITEM AS CRITICAL ISSUE	% SELECTING ITEM AS CRITICAL ISSUE BY AGE RANGE		
		<30 YRS	30-59 YRS	60+ YRS
Preserve cultural heritage	64.2%	71.2%	65.2%	62.5%
More Japanese American leadership	44.1%	45.5%	43.0%	44.8%
More inclusion of multiracial issues	37.0%	57.6%	38.7%	32.7%
Preserve community through social gatherings	34.6%	50.0%	37.6%	29.8%
Civil rights advocacy	26.1%	33.3%	26.7%	24.5%
Collaboration w/ Asian American groups	25.2%	27.3%	25.6%	24.5%
Other	2.2%	4.5%	3.2%	1.0%

- **The ranking of critical issues** shown in Table 2 is supported by write-in comments of NCA respondents. Preserving cultural heritage and community is still very important. There is reflected a need to address multiracial issues more directly, and a recognition that we will need more leadership going forward. While not among the highest ranked, a significant percentage indicated the importance of civil rights, and the comments underline the need to collaborate both within and beyond the Nikkei community.

- **About two-thirds** (67.3%) of the NCA sample identified themselves as “Japanese American,” with an additional fifth (20.4%) identifying themselves as “Japanese.”

- **About two-thirds** (63%) of NCA respondents support at least one Nikkei organization through membership.

- **About two-fifths** (42.3%) of NCA respondents felt it was “very important” or “important” to belong to a Japanese American organization. This percentage increases with age; about 60% of those 80 and older view such affiliation as “very important” or “important.”

- **Respondents indicated** that they gave basically the same amounts to Japanese American organizations as non-Japanese American ones. Those who give more to Japanese American organizations also give more to non-Japanese American ones. In giving patterns, NCA respondents clearly show support for both ethnic and mainstream organizations.

- **Although** NCA respondents cited mission and reputation as the primary factors driving the decision to support an organization, the third- and fourth-ranked factors were that an organization perpetuate Japanese American cultural heritage and advocate for Japanese Americans and Asian Americans.

Where Do We Go From Here?

There is a lot of hope for the future of the Nikkei community. Just the level of participation in the NCA survey indicates an interest among Nikkei to define themselves and express their vision for the future. The majority of those who responded are highly educated and working as professionals or as managers with incomes of \$41,000 or higher per year. While Census 2000 reveals the multicultural/multiracial dimension of our community, it is also illuminating to know that the vast majority of the community is younger than 60 years old. In contrast, the majority of members of most primarily Nikkei organizations are over 60. They are most visibly involved and provide most of the volunteer and financial resources that support the organizations. Clearly, the numbers, expertise and resources exist in the younger generations to sustain and develop a strong Nikkei community. And there is a vision to preserve cultural heritage and community in ways that are more inclusive of the diversity within and beyond the Nikkei community. Knowing that it is possible will give us the motivation and commitment that we need to be creative, flexible and collaborative in order to bridge the gaps in communication, participation and support so that we grow as a community.

- **There is an emerging need** in our increasingly multiracial community to develop programs that address multicultural issues.

- **Among NCA respondents** who were younger than 30, more than two thirds (69.8%) ranked “youth services” in second place as the kind of social service they would like to be available in the Nikkei community.

- **Social service organizations** such as the JASC once served an exclusively ethnic client base. Now most funding agencies require nondiscrimination in accessibility to services, staffing, and governance. Agencies that once served specific ethnic groups now provide services in a diverse context that includes Japanese cultural competency in the mix. Embracing this diverse context enables agencies to continue to serve Nikkei clients.

- **Nikkei seniors** are underserved. While participation has increased over the last five years, we are serving a small fraction of that group. Programs that support the cultural values of privacy and independence and can provide services across wider geographic and economic boundaries can decrease the service gap.

- **Developing leadership** was identified in the NCA as one of the most important issues facing the Japanese American community. While only 6% indicate interest in serving on a board of directors, 27% of respondents are interested in activities that allowed them to use their professional or personal skills to assist in a project. We may need to redefine leadership and become more creative in using these resources in time-focused ways.

- **Organizations** will need to have a conscious, direct, and active approach to reach out and create connections to those who are disengaged and less involved in formal groups. We will have to utilize more mainstream media and more technological tools such as websites and e-mail to distribute information.

The most important realization that we can make is that we can preserve our culture and sustain our community if we make the conscious commitment to actively work together.

This report opens the dialog in what we hope will become an ongoing conversation within our increasingly diverse and dispersed community. For those who are interested in greater detail about the NCA research data and analysis, a full research report will be made available shortly. Please contact the Japanese American Service Committee at 773.275.0097 or jascinfo@jasc-chicago.org, or watch for an announcement on our website, www.jasc-chicago.org.

Acknowledgments

Through this NCA project, the JASC sought to “take the pulse” of the community by collecting both qualitative and quantitative information. Reaching out to as many diverse components of the community as possible and securing their active participation were essential. Attempting this feat would not have been possible without the cooperation and support of many local Nikkei organizations, groups, and individuals. The JASC is grateful for their generosity.

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