

CAMBODIANS



Greensboro was selected by the federal government to be a primary Cambodian resettlement site in the early 1980s. An initial group of about 200 Cambodians was resettled in an attempt to establish an ethnic community whose members could assist one another. That community has remained stable and grown to several hundred people. Additional Cambodians moved to Davidson County from other states, expanding the Cambodian community in the Triad to about 1,500 people.

These refugees were survivors from the trauma caused by the Chinese Communist, Khmer Rouge holocaust. The U.S. supported government in Cambodia had been overthrown in 1975, and in the late 1970s, the Khmer Rouge slaughtered millions of Cambodians in their attempt to establish a new society. The upper classes, intellectuals, and former U.S. military supporters were especially targeted for elimination. Most of the Cambodians who came to the United States were rice farmers who, driven from their home lands, had escaped to refugee camps in nearby countries.



• DID YOU KNOW?

- Khmer is the ethnic term for most of the people from Cambodia, as well as the name of their primary language.
- About 800 years ago there was a Khmer civilization centered around Angkor Wat that was larger than European cities of that period. Angkor Wat and adjoining temple ruins are still considered one of the Wonders of the World.
- Cambodia, though a small agricultural country, has been well known for its rich artistic and musical traditions.

- Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.

• CULTURE

LANGUAGE The language most commonly spoken in Cambodia is Khmer. Other languages such as English, French, Thai, and Chinese are sometimes used in school and business settings in Cambodia.

In Guilford County, most older Cambodians still speak only Khmer and need an interpreter, but most second generation Cambodians speak English. This trend has led the older generation to fear that their traditions and language will be lost by younger Cambodians. Efforts are underway to help this community retain their language, dances, and other customs.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND

BELIEFS The main religion in Cambodia is Buddhism. There are also small Muslim and Christian populations in Cambodia. The early refugees to North Carolina were primarily Buddhists and most are still practicing Buddhists. Cambodians are usually conscientious about following religious practices, recognizing Buddhist holidays, and participating in rituals such as taking food to temple monks.

In the mid-1980s, with the help of a grant from a local foundation, a Buddhist temple was established in Greensboro.



One purpose was to provide mental health services to the many traumatized Cambodians. This temple has proved to be a valuable resource for community building and cultural heritage preservation. The monk who came to serve in 1989 spoke Khmer, Lao, Thai, and English. The end result was a viable ethnic and religious enclave that attracted other Buddhists, including Laotians.

SOCIAL CLASS In Cambodia, the upper classes, including intellectuals and military leaders, were largely wiped out during the Khmer Rouge occupation. The refugees who originally came here were mostly farmers with very limited educational and financial resources, considered to be lower class citizens by U.S. standards. Cambodians in the Triad have tended to remain primarily a working-class population.

EDUCATION For Cambodians, as for other refugee groups, education is viewed as a way to gain respect and advance in the community. Still, few Cambodians in Guilford County have sought higher education or obtained college degrees. One reason for this may be that less-educated parents do not get very involved with their children's schooling.

EMPLOYMENT Because most Cambodians who came to the Triad had been rice farmers, they had limited skills for employment here. Many were able to obtain only entry-level jobs in factories and various trades. Now, some have become skilled tradespersons, such as jewelers and mechanics. Many Cambodians have lost their jobs in recent plant closings and lay-offs and, with limited skills, have had difficulty finding other employment.

TIME ORIENTATION Coming from a farming background, the refugees who arrived here had an association with time that was related to agriculture. In Cambodia, they would go out to the fields in the morning when they got up, work all day, and return home in the evening. Because they did not share the American concept of “clock time,” they often did not show up at scheduled appointments or other events. Also, because family issues would always take precedence over other activities, any family needs that developed would be addressed first, with no consideration to previously scheduled appointments.

FOOD AND DIET The traditional Cambodian diet is a healthy one, comprised primarily of rice and fresh vegetables. This remains true among some refugees. However, many have begun to follow a more typical American diet, including fast foods and other less healthy foods. As a result, some more typically American diseases are now appearing within this population.

LEISURE Most Cambodians like to socialize with others in their community. They may entertain in their homes or go to the temple to meet with friends. Watching videos and singing with Kareoke

machines are popular activities.

Gambling and betting are common practices that have traditionally been enjoyed among Cambodians. This has led to some problems with local law enforcement when gambling has occurred in Cambodian businesses.

• FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

Cambodians, like most other Southeast Asians, place a high value on family relationships. Large extended families often live in close proximity and, in fact, several generations may live in the same house. Elderly family members are cared for in the home throughout their lives, and families do not consider placing them in nursing homes.

GENDER ROLES In theory, the man is the head of the household, responsible for working and providing for the family and for making major decisions. Women are expected to deal with household matters and to care for the children. In reality, women now usually work outside the home and share responsibilities, including making family decisions and handling the family finances.

Because so many men were killed in the war in Cambodia,

there was a larger proportion of women to men in the original group of refugees. This resulted in more families headed by widowed or separated women. This also resulted in more cross-cultural marriages among Cambodians in this country, although this is generally not considered acceptable.

Boys and girls are treated differently and are held to different expectations. Boys are allowed more freedom to go out for activities, while girls are expected to stay home and help their mothers. Young people are not allowed to “date” in the American style. Traditionally, marriages have been arranged by the families. Disagreements over this have caused much conflict between generations in families settled in the United States.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH There are many misunderstandings between young Cambodians and the older generations. Because the



young people speak English and are more involved in mainstream culture, they have become more empowered. This results in conflicts, and even estrangement, between parents and children over the traditional roles.

Cambodian parents do not oppose physical punishment as a form of discipline, but they are not generally abusive. Still, through a lack of understanding of cultural practices, the Department of Social Services became involved with some families among the original settlers. One Cambodian health practice called “coining” involves repeatedly rubbing an ill person firmly with a coin. The practice can leave welts on the recipient and health providers, in some cases, have mistakenly believed that they were seeing signs of child abuse.

Families do not use the formal community childcare systems, even if both parents are working. An elderly grandmother may take care of many small children in the home. While these children are generally nurtured, they are not exposed to normal child development activities and are often less prepared when starting school.

One challenge for Cambodian youth is that they are unable to turn to their parents for help in school, because of the language and educational limitations of

their parents. Also, because their parents have had only a narrow range of employment opportunities, there have been few models for adult careers beyond factory work or other unskilled labor.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Cambodians generally avoid confrontation. This frequently causes misunderstandings because they will say “yes” to be polite even when they really mean “no.” Other responses that may mean “no” include a change in subject, statements such as “it’s okay” or “no problem,” or simply no response at all. Healthcare providers should not, therefore, make automatic assumptions that treatment protocols or directions for follow-up care are understood or accepted.

GREETINGS & SHOWING

RESPECT Young Cambodians use standard American greetings. Older Cambodians may no longer expect the traditional forms of greeting (such as bowing and lowering the head with hands in prayer position), however, they do expect to be greeted first when family introductions are made. It is important to *all* Cambodians that they be treated with respect and courtesy.

GESTURES & CUSTOMS Some

customs can be determined by paying close attention to what others are doing. For example, when there is a pile of shoes at a door, visitors should also remove their shoes before entering the



room. Offers of food and drink should be accepted, as should an offer of the only chair in the room. Effusive, loud or over-familiar behaviors are considered bad manners. Displays of anger or confrontation are also considered unacceptable. Other behaviors perceived as rude include pointing at a person’s face or calling someone to come over by extending one finger.

Children and youth are expected to approach adults with respect. When elderly persons are sitting, young children should not stand up higher or walk in front of them without lowering their heads. Girls are not allowed to whistle or sit with their legs

spread apart. Men should not approach single women to start a conversation because it is considered disrespectful.

• HEALTH & WELLNESS

HEALTH BELIEFS Cambodians are not likely to seek intervention from the Western healthcare system for most illnesses, and they practice few preventive medical treatments. They are more likely to use traditional medicines, such as herbs or other products they can obtain at local Asian stores. The traditional Khmer people also often rely on spiritual healing practices.

Because Cambodians will normally only seek treatment for serious injuries or long-term health problems, they are unlikely to have primary care doctors, and are more likely to use Emergency Room services. Some are now seen through agencies such as HealthServe Medical Center.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Because the early Cambodian refugees had been exposed to very traumatic situations prior to coming to the United States, post-traumatic stress disorder is a significant issue for the older generations. They would not seek

help from traditional mental health services. One reason the Buddhist Temple was established was to meet these needs. Cambodians are still more likely to seek help from monks at the Temple than to seek mental health services from a professional provider.

ALCOHOL USE The use of alcohol has become a problem among some Cambodians. In their homeland, access to alcohol was limited, and Buddhist tradition frowns upon excessive use of alcohol. Drinking is considered a very “American” behavior. Some Cambodians drink to excess simply because they have never learned to drink in moderation.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING CARE Cambodians may be slow to seek healthcare from Western practitioners for a number of reasons. For one thing, within their culture there may be more acceptance of illness or discomfort. Also, there is a reluctance to complain or discuss symptoms. Other obstacles are the same as those observed in many refugee communities: lack of insurance, transportation, and knowledge about how to access Western medicine. In addition, there is general confusion about how the healthcare system works, including determining eligibility

for services, learning the appointment system, knowing how to get prescriptions filled, and understanding directions for treatment protocols.



OUTREACH TIPS

- Be respectful and courteous, particularly when someone appears shy or is reluctant to speak up. It may take patience and time to conduct assessments and determine symptoms or health concerns.
- It is considered inappropriate to stare at someone, so do not make prolonged eye contact with someone during your discussions.
- Be aware that many Cambodians think of health issues in spiritual terms, believing that a problem might be related to their Karma or that they are possessed by

spirits. It may be useful to work in collaboration with local temples to help gain acceptance for Western medical treatment.

- Gaining the cooperation of older family members who are respected may increase compliance with recommended treatments.

• | ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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• | SHARING COMMUNITY

- The Greensboro Buddhist Center is the most popular place for community gathering. Cambodians in Greensboro go there for special traditional events and some just gather to visit friends. The grounds include acres of vegetable gardens, and the monks welcome people to come and share the food.

The Buddhist Center is located at 2715 Liberty Road in Greensboro. (336) 272-1607 or 272-6297.

- Cambodians also like to go to the Cambodian Market located on Coliseum Blvd. The number there is (336) 273-3150.

The Khmer Aid Group of the Triad is the name of the original community organization that was developed by Cambodians. Now most of its activities have been taken over by the Buddhist Center.

