

## INTRODUCTION

SEARAC and Advancing Justice – LA were founded on a legacy of advancing the civil rights and human dignity of Asian American communities. In order to carry out our respective missions in ways that do justice for the communities we serve, our advocacy must be informed by disaggregated data that highlight the unique needs, disparities, and assets for each of the different ethnic groups that make up the Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) category. AANHPI are not a monolith. Together this community is made up of people of nearly 50 ethnicities who speak more than a hundred languages. However, when looking at data in aggregate, we are often labeled as the “model minority” and used as a wedge to undermine policies that promote the civil rights of other communities of color.

Given this context, *Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities* is a resource to amplify the SEAA story through disaggregated data to highlight the pressing issues and resilience of this community today. For SEARAC, SEAA is a political identity that comes from the shared experience of people who came to the U.S. as refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the aftermath of the U.S. occupation in Southeast Asia. This report presents data that disaggregate Southeast Asian Americans from the Asian American category. However, due to data availability, disaggregation of data in this report is limited to Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese American as distinct ethnic groups, and the combination of these four ethnic groups as a distinct Southeast Asian American category. It seeks to dispel “model minority” myths by showing that many in our communities have invisible needs and require access to culturally and linguistically sensitive and appropriate services.

This report provides, in addition to general demographic data, data highlighting some critical issues facing SEAA such as resettlement, immigration, education, health, economic justice/housing, and civic engagement. Although a large portion of the report features national data, it also highlights a few states with sizable populations of SEAA; therefore, California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Texas, and Washington are covered in greater depth in this report. Much of the data come from the U.S. Census Bureau, including the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey. Because Census data are limited, data from other sources are also used.

We hope that this report will serve as tool to empower communities to enact change—to call for policies that protect our community’s rights, to invest in the needs and resilience of our community, and to deepen partnerships across sectors to build equity for the SEAA community. While the topics covered here are not meant to be an exhaustive list of all issues that matter to the SEAA community, we believe they are an important first step to sharing the overall state of SEAA today with:

- Policy makers, government officials, and government agencies—to inform the creation of culturally relevant policy interventions that lead to equitable outcomes for SEAA families.
- Foundations and donors—to inform the need for long-term resources and investments to support a thriving SEAA community.
- Service providers—to inform the development and application of culturally sensitive services as well as intentional investment in building a workforce pipeline composed of members from impacted SEAA communities.
- Community members and the general public—to inform community organizing, education, mobilization, and community building around a broader SEAA political identity.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over 2.5 million Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) live in the United States. *Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities* serves as a resource for communities, organizations, policy makers, funders, corporations, and others wanting to understand and uplift the diverse and growing SEAA community. Some of the key findings include but are not limited to the following:

### **SEAA are a relatively young and growing community.**

At over 2.5 million, SEAA compose 14% of the entire Asian American population in the country, growing by 38% between 2000 and 2010 (nearly four times the national average of 10%). More than half live in California, Texas, and Minnesota. California remains home to the largest SEAA population with 36% of the community living there. Alaska, West Virginia, Nevada, Wyoming, and Arizona are the states with the fastest population growth for this community, ranging from 92% in Arizona to as high as 142% in Alaska. Additionally, SEAA are a generally young population. The median ages of all SEAA ethnic groups are lower than the average U.S. population's median age of 37.2. Vietnamese and Hmong Americans have the highest and lowest median ages among SEAA of 34.1 and 20.5, respectively.

### **SEAA still struggle with socioeconomic insecurity.**

Across multiple measures of income, SEAA fare worse than average. Nationwide, close to 1.1 million SEAA are low-income, including about 460,000 who live in poverty. All SEAA ethnic groups have lower per capita incomes than average, with Hmong Americans faring worse than all racial groups across multiple measures of income. Nearly 60% of Hmong Americans are low-income, and more than one of every four live in poverty. Because of this, SEAA also struggle with housing stability. Among SEAA ethnic groups, with the exception of Hmong Americans, renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing. Those with home mortgages are also more likely to be housing cost-burdened than average (32%). Vietnamese American mortgagors (45%) have the highest rate of being housing cost-burdened than all racial groups.

### **SEAA continue to face challenges to equitable education outcomes.**

SEAA have glaringly lower rates of educational attainment compared to Whites and Asian Americans as a whole across different levels of education, including high school graduation, college access, and college completion. Nearly 30% of SEAA have not completed high school or passed the GED, a rate more than double the national average (13%). Among SEAA ethnic groups, Cambodian Americans are the least likely to hold a high school diploma or GED. In addition, one quarter of SEAA hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to the one-half of Asian Americans who do. Among SEAA ethnic groups, Vietnamese Americans (28%) have the highest rate of attaining a higher-education degree, whereas Laotian Americans (14%) have the lowest rate—the same as Latinos.

### **SEAA greatly benefited from the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and continue to be highly dependent on public health insurance for survival.**

Prior to 2010, SEAA experienced high levels of uninsured rates. Although the rate of uninsured continues to be high, the ACA considerably decreased the percentage of uninsured SEAA. The greatest percentage decreases were seen in Cambodian Americans (20% to 15%) and Laotian Americans (18% to 14%). Additionally, Hmong and Cambodian Americans are more likely to have public health insurance than the

average population. Hmong Americans have public health insurance enrollment rates similar to African Americans (39% and 38%, respectively). Cambodian Americans, with 31% enrolled in public health insurance, have a rate similar to that of Latinos (33%). Unfortunately, despite growing access to health care, SEAA still battle with a significant number of physical health and mental health disparities due to the lack of services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

**The migration of SEAA into the United States has changed largely from refugee admissions to family- and employment-based visas.**

Nearly 60% of SEAA were born outside of the U.S. (a rate similar to that of Asian Americans as a whole), with 45% arriving before 1990, a rate higher than the nationwide average (35%). Until 1998, the large majority of applications for green cards among SEAA were for status changes from refugee to lawful permanent resident (LPR). Since the late 1990s the main pathways to enter the U.S. as an LPR have been through family and employment methods. Nearly 21,000 Southeast Asians immigrated to the U.S. in 2017, 95% percent of whom arrived via family-based lawful permanent resident status.

**SEAA immigrants continue to be impacted by mandatory detention and deportation policies passed decades ago.**

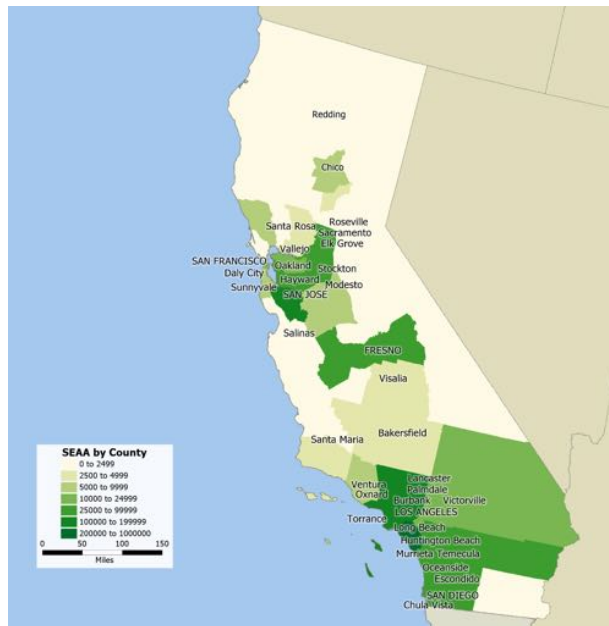
The inadequate support of SEAA refugees upon initial resettlement, coupled with the rise of mass incarceration and the growth of immigration detention and deportation in the U.S. have made this community uniquely vulnerable to the prison-to-deportation pipeline. SEAA continue to feel the impact of punitive, short-sighted, one-size-fits-all policies created in 1996 that ignored how individuals have transformed their lives since serving their debt to society. Instead, these laws expanded the definition of deportable offenses such as “aggravated felonies” and made it mandatory for all immigrants, including LPRs, to be detained by the immigration system and eventually deported. The number of SEAA deported to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam more than doubled between 2015–16 and 2017–18, with over 95% of deportations in fiscal year (FY) 2018 accounting for individuals repatriated to Cambodia and Vietnam. Additionally, nearly 75% of the deportations in FY 2018 were due to aggravated felony charges, many of which were for convictions from up to 20 years prior.



Moving Mountains Equity Summit 2017  
March for Southeast Asian American Equity in Washington, DC

## STATE DATA

### California

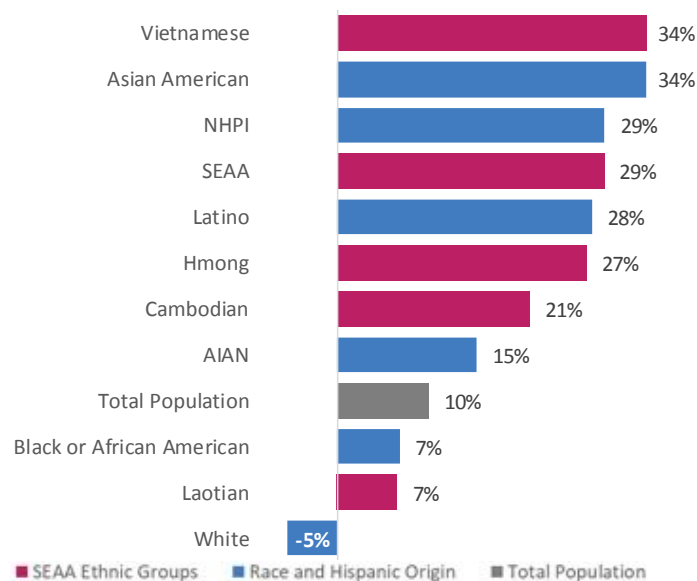


U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.

Over 910,000 Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) live in California. It is home to the largest population of SEAA.<sup>i</sup> Although Southeast Asian refugees settled in every U.S. state from 1983 to 2007, refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos initially resettled in California more than in any other state.<sup>ii</sup>

### POPULATION GROWTH

By Race, Hispanic Origin, and Ethnicity, 2011–2015



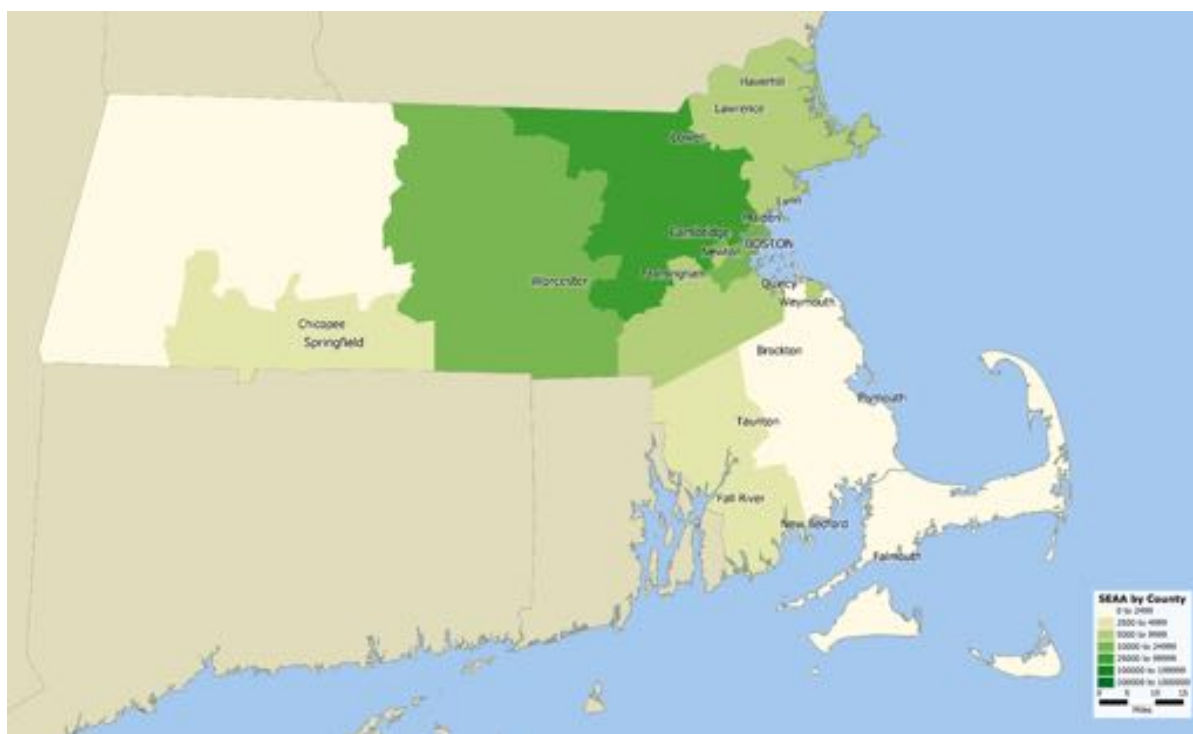
- The SEAA population in California is growing more than average. The rate of growth among Laotian Americans is slightly slower than average at 7%—the same as Blacks or African Americans.

- The median age of Californians is 35.2. Among SEAA ethnic groups, Vietnamese American is the only group with a median age higher than average at 35.7. Hmong Americans have the lowest median age of 20.6.<sup>iii</sup>

- Nearly half of Hmong Americans in California are under the age of 18—the highest proportion of youth compared to all racial groups and other SEAA ethnic groups.<sup>iv</sup>

- Hmong (19%), Cambodian (15%), and Laotian Americans (14%) have the highest proportions of college-aged young adults (ages 18–24).<sup>v</sup>

## Massachusetts

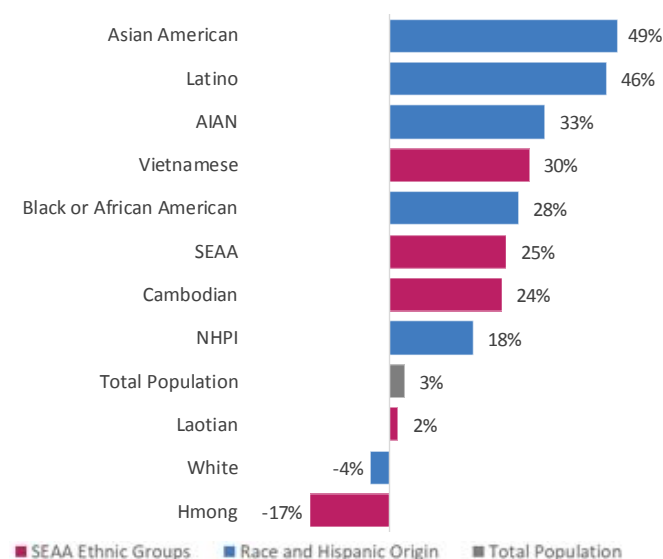


U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.

The fifth-largest population of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) is in Massachusetts. The state is home to the second-largest population of Cambodian Americans. The SEAA population grew by 25% from 2000 to 2010. Thirty-five percent of SEAA in Massachusetts reside in Middlesex County—primarily in the city of Lowell. Suffolk, Worcester, and Essex Counties also have large SEAA populations.<sup>vi</sup>

## POPULATION GROWTH

By Race, Hispanic Origin, and Ethnicity, 2000 to 2010

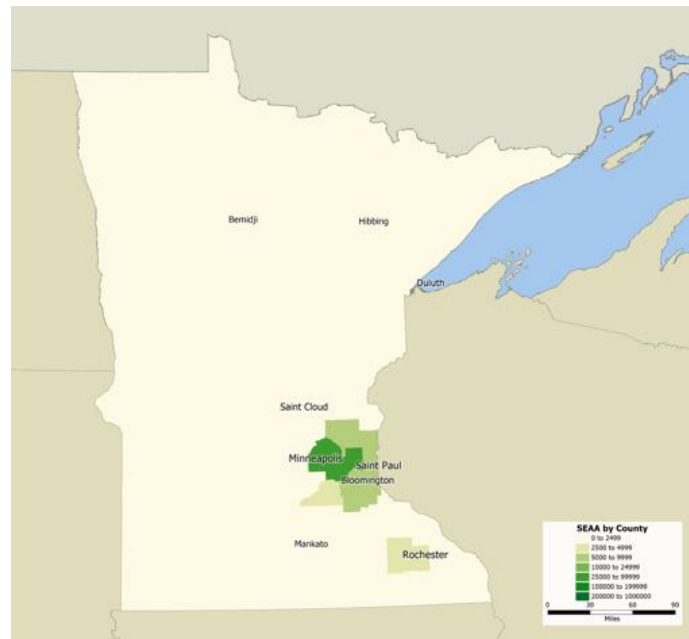


- The median age of people living in Massachusetts is 39.1. The median ages across all the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) ethnic groups are lower than the average. Among SEAA ethnic groups, Vietnamese Americans have the highest median age at 32.3, and Hmong Americans have the lowest at 22.

- SEAA are proportionately younger than average. Whereas 22% of the population in Massachusetts is less than 18 years old, 30% of the SEAA population is.

- SEAA (13%) have a higher percentage of college-aged young adults (ages 18–24) than average (10%).

## Minnesota

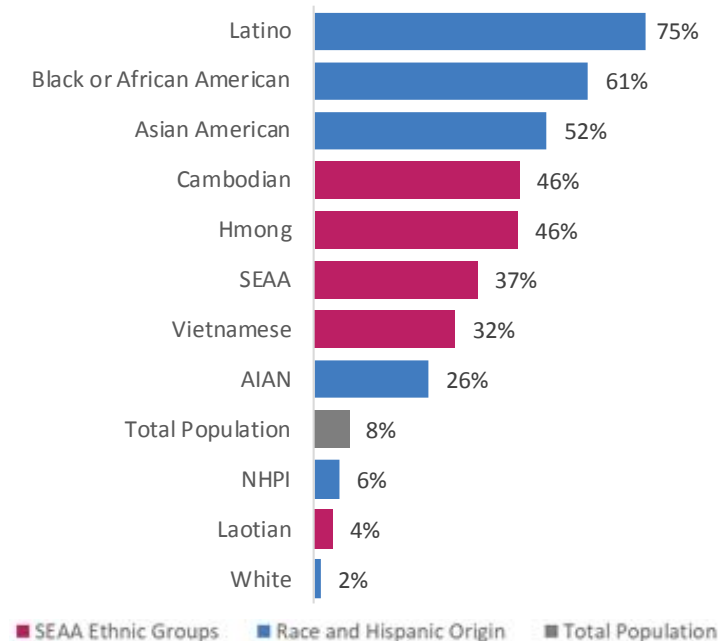


U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.

Minnesota is home to the third-largest population of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA), about 115,000. The second-largest population of Hmong Americans resides in this state. Ramsey County has the largest concentration of SEAA, 81% of whom live in St. Paul.<sup>vii</sup> There is also a large community of SEAA in Hennepin County.

## POPULATION GROWTH

By Race, Hispanic Origin, and Ethnicity, 2000 to 2010



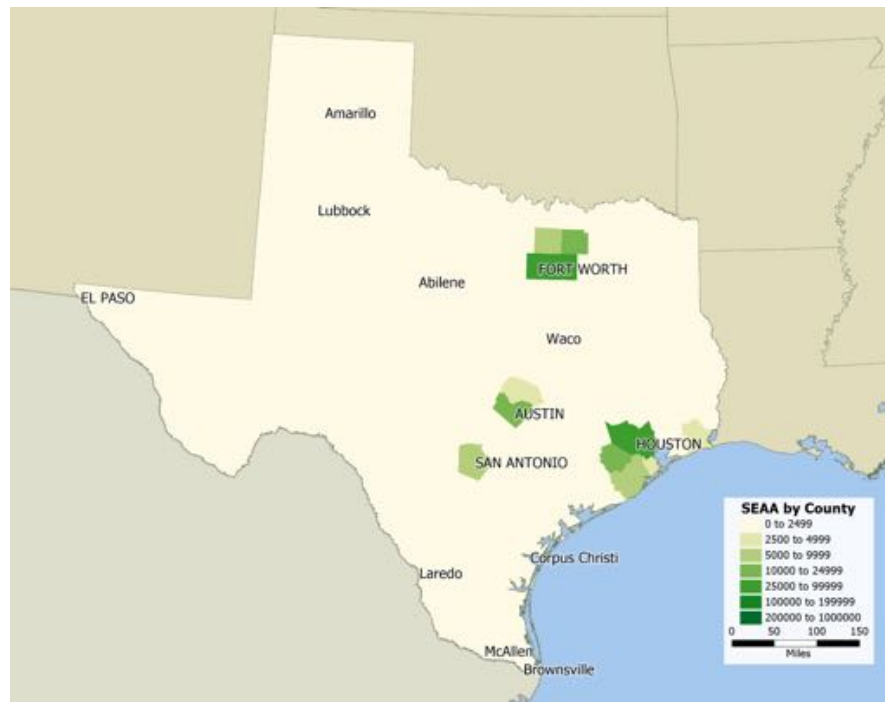
- The SEAA population in Minnesota is growing faster than average. The rate of growth among Laotian Americans (4%) is slower than average.

- The median age of Minnesotans is 37.4 years. The median ages across SEAA ethnic groups are lower than average. Hmong Americans have the lowest median age of 20.1 years.<sup>viii</sup>

- Forty-four percent of Hmong Americans in California are under the age of 18—the highest proportion of youth compared to all racial groups and other SEAA ethnic groups. The proportion of Hmong Americans who are less than 18 years old is more than double that of Whites.<sup>ix</sup>

- SEAA (15%) have a larger proportion of college-aged young adults (ages 18–24) than average (9%) and all racial groups.<sup>x</sup>

## Texas

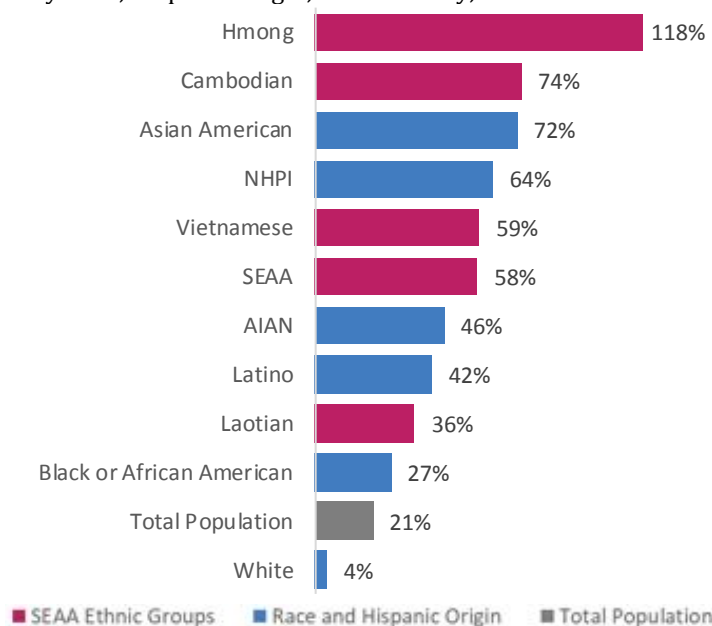


U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.

Texas has the second-largest population of Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA). There are nearly 260,000 SEAA who reside in Texas, and it is a growing population. The second-largest population of Laotian Americans and Vietnamese Americans reside in the state. The largest concentration of SEAA in Texas is in Harris County. Eighty-six percent of SEAA in Harris County live in the city of Houston.<sup>xi</sup>

### POPULATION GROWTH

By Race, Hispanic Origin, and Ethnicity, 2000 to 2010



- The SEAA population in Texas is growing more than two times the average.

- The median age of Texans is 33.6.

Vietnamese Americans have a median age similar to the average (33.9). Other SEAA ethnic groups have lower-than-average median ages, among which Hmong Americans have the lowest median age of 23.8.<sup>xii</sup>

- Hmong Americans (36%) have the highest proportion of youth (less than 18 years old) compared to all racial groups and other SEAA ethnic groups.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Washington

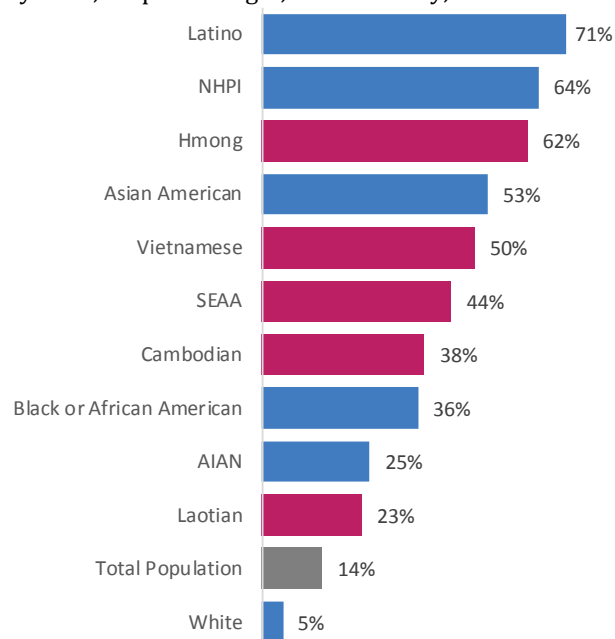


U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.

Over 81,000 Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) live in Washington, a state that is home to the fourth-largest population of SEAA. Among SEAA ethnic groups, it is home to the third-largest population of Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans, and the fourth-largest population of Laotian Americans.<sup>xiv</sup>

## POPULATION GROWTH

By Race, Hispanic Origin, and Ethnicity, 2000 to 2010



■ SEAA Ethnic Groups ■ Race and Hispanic Origin ■ Total Population

- The SEAA (44%) population in Washington is growing at a rate more than three times the average (14%).<sup>xv</sup>
- The median age in Washington is 37.3. All SEAA ethnic groups have lower median ages than average. Hmong Americans have the lowest median age of 22.4.<sup>xvi</sup>
- The proportion of SEAA (30%) youth is larger than average (24%).<sup>xvii</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Decades after initial resettlement in the United States, Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) still face unique barriers as a result of their refugee legacy. The following policy recommendations are provided by SEARAC and are limited only to the areas of data equity, education, health, and immigration. We acknowledge that these recommendations are by no means a complete list of all policy interventions needed to bring about equitable outcomes in our community, but we hope this is a solid first step toward initiating deeper discussions on solutions needed to address challenges SEAA face today.

### DATA EQUITY



*“When it comes to educational attainment and success, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are often depicted as “model minorities.” Unfortunately, this narrative is misleading and is a byproduct from the lack of disaggregated data. Taking a closer look at the data through detailed race and ethnicity categories, Southeast Asian American students tell a vastly different story of educational access and achievement.” – Chanda Womack, Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education ARISE)*

The systemic barriers that SEAA face are only made known through the collection and reporting of disaggregated data on Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) subgroups. Without these data, our community’s needs are hidden under broader Asian American categories and, therefore, rendered invisible. Disaggregated data collection and reporting must be reflected in, but not be limited to:

- Ensuring a full, fair, and accurate count of SEAA communities in the 2020 Census by supporting robust translation and outreach to hard-to-count SEAA communities where people live in poverty, are limited English proficient, and/or are fearful of being targeted for deportation due to their immigration status.
- Adopting the optimal question format recommended by the 2015 National Content Test for Census 2020 questions on race and further expanding categories to include Laotian and Iu-Mien to enhance the quality and utility of information collected on Asian groups.
- Encouraging state agencies, businesses, education institutions, researchers, community-based organizations, and philanthropy to prioritize the collection, availability, and publication of demographic data (e.g., gender, language, income, education) disaggregated by AANHPI subgroups, to properly understand the unique disparities within the AANHPI community.

## EDUCATION



*“Many Vietnamese parents are crying out for help because their children [wander] the streets, join gangs, and drop out of school, etc.” —Quyen Vuong, International Children Assistance Network (ICAN) from *Moving Beyond the “Asian” Check Box**

Many SEAA students face cultural and linguistic challenges that make it difficult for them to graduate from high school and access postsecondary education. Barriers include a lack of language access support for students and parents, and lack of high-quality, culturally relevant in-school and out-of-school support. SEAA also battle with lower-than-average English proficiency, which poses additional challenges to success in school. And because many SEAA students represent the first generation in their families to attend college, they often need additional support in preparing for a college-level curriculum, accessing appropriate resources on campus, and affording higher-education costs; yet, such comprehensive educational support is limited, making college completion a challenge. To enhance equitable education outcomes for SEAA students we need:

- Culturally relevant K–12 support to increase high school completion through:
  - Accessible ethnic studies curricula. Research shows that taking ethnic studies classes can increase school attendance, grade point average, and the number of earned school credits.
  - Meaningful English language learner support, including educational programs for English learner students, professional development for educators to work with these students, and additional funding to schools to better serve English learner students.
  - Effective family engagement that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.
  - Developing a pipeline to increase the workforce of SEAA educators and counselors.
- College access, affordability, and completion by supporting:
  - Federal programs that help low-income and first-generation students prepare for and persist in college such as TRIO and GEAR UP. These programs should identify SEAA as eligible students and eliminate any barriers SEAA students face in accessing these programs.
  - Federal and state financial assistance, such as the Federal Pell Grant Program and in-state tuition rates, that help low-income students pay for college.

- Robust and permanent funding for the Asian American Native American Pacific Islander–Serving Institutions (AANAPISI) program, which helps institutions of higher education provide SEAA students with the support necessary to succeed in college and complete their degree.
- Race-conscious college admissions policies that look beyond test scores, which are strongly associated with a student’s socioeconomic status, to assess a student’s capacity to thrive in college.

## SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE



*“I was born to Vietnam War refugees. Living with shame, uncertainty, and broken promises took their toll on an entire people. Forty years later, many of our parents (Vietnam War refugees and victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide) are still living in poverty. Many of us are in prison”. –Zitsue Lee, from AAPIs Behind Bars Mass Incarceration Convening, San Quentin State Prison*

While the scope of this report did not cover much on mass incarceration and criminal justice, we see these issues impacting the SEAA community, particularly the youth, in so many different ways. We believe that restorative justice policies that dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline is an intersectional issue that must be addressed by the following:

- Supporting investments in community youth programs that get young people off the streets.
- Expanding culturally competent education programs and services both within prisons and upon reentry.
- Creating prison-to-jobs pipeline and community integration programs for formerly incarcerated immigrants to allow for culturally sensitive support and healing to help diminish recidivism.

## PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

*"I wished that the services I received had a culturally appropriate aspect. I shared about the trauma and hardships my parents and grandparents faced and how that has an impact on me. They have their issues, and they react harshly and sometimes violently towards my siblings and I. However, the therapist ignored that aspect and almost made me feel like the trauma my parents have doesn't affect me." —Hmong, 25–34 years old, female, straight, from SEARAC Mental Health Story Collection Campaign*



Many SEAA are limited-English proficient and low-income and, as a result, many families struggle to access the care they need to treat urgent and chronic health conditions. The traumatic experiences of war, genocide, environmental exposures, and displacement have left many SEAA, including elders, with physical and mental health conditions that have gone untreated. This collective trauma and the stressors associated with relocation, language barriers, racism, discrimination, and cultural conflicts, continue to affect the emotional health of many SEAA refugees and their children. Due to cultural stigma, lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate care, and unavailability of disaggregated data on the health of the SEAA community, their struggles have been concealed and health disparities rendered invisible. Reducing physical and mental health disparities in the SEAA community requires:

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate care to improve overall wellness through increased access, utilization, and outcomes:
  - Increase funding and workforce to expand the number of care providers who serve our community's unique needs.
  - Investment and utilization of both evidence-based practices and community-defined practices by partnering with community-based organizations to develop best practices in serving SEAA.
  - Accessible and affordable health care coverage for all regardless of preexisting conditions, age, race, language proficiency, gender orientation, disability, and immigration status.
  - Implement policies that require language access in health care for SEAA communities (e.g., policies that identify threshold languages in specific regions with higher density of SEAA).
- Addressing social determinants of health by securing access to healthy living conditions:
  - Increase access to poverty alleviation and food security programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, housing assistance, for all communities regardless of immigration status.

## IMMIGRATION



*"Since the age of 16, I've had to do a lot. Until today, I have to do a lot. I don't blame anyone for that besides immigration. I think it's tough that I had to grow up so fast. I have to take care of my mom and make sure she's mentally and physically and emotionally okay. I have to take care of my dad to make sure he's mentally and physically and emotionally okay. And I have to take care of my sister because she's my baby sister and make sure she's okay."* —Tina

### **Meetran, excerpt from *Dreams Detained, in Her Words: The Effects of Detention and Deportation on Southeast Asian Women and Families***

SEAA community members have been particularly targeted for detention and deportation—challenges made worse by an increasingly harsh criminal justice system. Many SEAA post incarceration must deal with the burden of being targeted for mandatory immigration detention and deportation. Additionally, newer immigrants face their own set of barriers in the broken system as well. Those seeking to naturalize and reunite with their loved ones through the family-based immigration system are facing years and sometimes decades-long wait times, crippling naturalization costs, and lack of language support for limited English proficient elders and community members. Humane immigration policies for fair immigration outcomes for SEAA include:

- Ending mandatory detention and automatic deportation for individuals who have been in contact with the criminal justice system by establishing due process protections for all immigrant communities, and by detangling local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement.
- Promoting naturalization by increasing funding for education and outreach initiatives that target low-income, limited English proficient communities, and decreasing the residency and age requirements for translators during the naturalization process.
- Strengthening the family reunification system by reclassifying the spouses and minor children of lawful permanent residents as "immediate relatives," a category not subject to annual numerical limits, and eliminating discrimination facing LGBT families.
- Establishing the right for immigrants who were previously deported to return to the United States, by eliminating reentry bars in the Immigration and Nationality Act, employing family unity standards for deportation waivers, and establishing an absolute right to reopen proceedings for individuals who were deported because of unlawful removal orders or because their conviction(s) was/were vacated.
- Supporting U.S. refugee and asylum policies that welcome and protect migrants coming to the country seeking refuge and a better life for themselves and their families.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF 1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Report to Congress on the Refugee Resettlement Program, FY 2008.
  - <sup>iii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>iv</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>v</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF2, Table PCT3.
  - <sup>vi</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>vii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>viii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>ix</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>x</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF2, Table PCT3.
  - <sup>xi</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census SF1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>xii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>xiii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>xiv</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF 1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>xv</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF 1, Table PCT7.
  - <sup>xvi</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.
  - <sup>xvii</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 SF2, Table DP-1.