

SEARAC National Southeast Asian American Equity Agenda: Our Community's Policy Priorities for 2018-2020

MISSION

SEARAC is a national civil rights organization that empowers Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American communities to create a socially just and equitable society. As representatives of the largest refugee community ever resettled in the United States, SEARAC stands together with other refugee communities, communities of color, and social justice movements in pursuit of social equity.

COMMUNITIES

For SEARAC, Southeast Asian American (SEAA) is a political identity that comes from the shared experience of people who came to this country as refugees from the US occupation of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. SEAs now number close to 2.7 million,¹ and most of them arrived in the United States as refugees, are the children of refugees, were sponsored by refugee families, or arrived as immigrants. **Yet socioeconomic, educational, health, and immigration challenges, stemming from SEAs' unique refugee experiences, are often overlooked and masked behind the broader Asian American "model minority" myth.**

For example, SEAA communities experience poverty at very high rates, with 11% of Lao families, 13% of Vietnamese families, 14.9% of Cambodian families, and 16.3% of Hmong families still living below the poverty line.² Additionally, about half of



 SEARAC

SEAs in the US are foreign born,³ and struggle to learn English. According to US Census estimates from 2011-2015, 38.3% of Cambodian, 36.7% of Hmong, 34.5% of Lao, and 48.6% of Vietnamese households that speak English less than "very well," compared to 8.6% of total US households.⁴

Southeast Asian Americans include people from dozens of diverse ethnic and language groups, including but not limited to:

- Cham, a Muslim minority group
- Hmong
- Khmer
- Khmer Kampuchea Krom, or ethnic Khmer
- Khmer Loeu, or Highland Khmer
- Khmu

¹ American Community Survey (ACS) - U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 3-year estimates

² American Community Survey (ACS) - U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 1-year estimates

³ American Community Survey (ACS) - U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 1-year estimates

⁴ American Community Survey (ACS) - U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_SPT_DP02&prodType=table.

- Lao, otherwise referred to as Lao Loum or lowland Lao
- Lu Mien or Mien
- Montagnards, or Highlanders of several different ethnic groups
- Vietnamese
- Taidam

*Certain ethnic Chinese also have heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

OUR COMMUNITY-CENTERED PROCESS

SEARAC highly values community input to ensure that our organizational priorities truly reflect the needs of SEAA families across the country. In order to secure alignment between grassroots and national work, SEARAC interviewed more than 30 key partners from 10 states across our education, health, and immigration work. In addition to hearing from the community, we also considered an assessment of organizational capacity to narrow down our ultimate policy priorities outlined below.

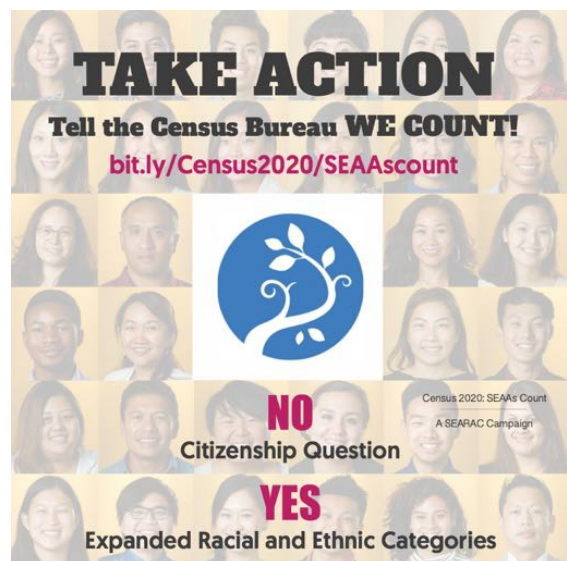
2018-2020 Policy Priorities

CENSUS 2020

“We are seeing the need to include public education around census to our work priorities. There is so much fear, uneasiness, and distrust of the current Administration, and we are concerned about how this will impact the 2020 Census count for the Southeast Asian American community. We don’t want to pressure community members to fill out a form when they are afraid, and the best way to combat that fear is with education.” –Ay Saechao, Southeast Asian American Access in Education (SEAD) Coalition, Washington

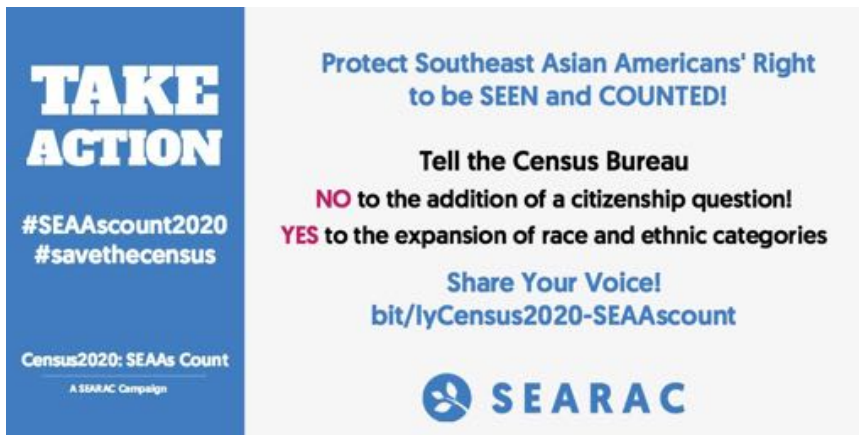
SEARAC believes that a full, fair, and accurate census, and the collection of useful, objective data about our nation’s communities, are vitally important for our community’s self-determination. The systemic barriers that SEAs face are **only** made known through the collection and reporting of disaggregated data on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) categories through the US census. Without this quantitative data, our community’s national needs would be hidden under broader Asian American categories and therefore rendered invisible.

The 2020 Census will serve as a critical tool to collect data on SEAA communities that will inform apportioning congressional district seats and federal funding for education, health, transportation, and a variety of programs and services on which SEAs rely at the state and local levels.



For example, the following programs are all accessed by SEAs with lower incomes: Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Title I Grants to Local Education Agencies (school districts), National School Lunch Program, Section 8 Housing, and Head Start/Early Head Start.⁵ An accurate count will be critical to sustaining these essential programs.

The Trump Administration recently decided to include a citizenship question in the 2020 Census questionnaire. SEARAC is fearful that the inclusion of this question will undermine the legitimacy of the census count by discouraging many individuals from participating. In 2017, SEAs were devastated by the biggest mass deportation roundup of Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants in history.⁶ Furthermore, deportation enforcement is rumored to more than double in the SEAA community this year.⁷ As a result, SEAA immigrants and their families carry legitimate fears of being targeted and separated from their loved ones.



Additionally, this is the first time that census will be administered primarily through electronic means. This shift to electronic data collection creates additional challenges for community members already struggling with language access and lack of education around the significance of data collection in their communities. The combined harm from adding the citizenship question (if it is not reversed) and inaccessibility of electronic data

collection would severely impact our SEAA families, in addition to many others who are already at greater risk of being undercounted—including people of color, young children, and low-income rural and urban residents.

SEARAC's national census policy priorities include:

- Opposing census suppression - opposition to the addition of a question to ask whether an individual is a US citizen.
- Expanding disaggregated data - expansion in the collection of disaggregated race and ethnic categories to ensure that SEAs are accurately counted, including the addition of extra Southeast Asian specific checkboxes (e.g. Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, Iu-Mien, etc.)
- Resourcing communities for an accurate count - expansion of federal and private foundation resources so that resources are provided to SEAA community-based organizations that are able to conduct community outreach, education, and mobilization in a culturally competent way to ensure a full and accurate count of SEAs.

⁵ Andrew Reamer, *Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds*, initial analysis, George Washington University, June 2017

⁶ “Southeast Asian American Community Responds to the ICE Roundup of Cambodian & Vietnamese Americans”: <http://www.searac.org/resource-hub/immigration/southeast-asian-american-community-responds-ice-roundup-cambodian-vietnamese-americans/>

⁷ “Cambodian Deportations to Begin”: <http://www.searac.org/our-voices/press-room/press-release-cambodian-deportations-begin/>

EDUCATION

“Data disaggregation continues to be a top priority for our community. We remain dedicated to informing the successful implementation of the All Students Count Act on the state level by ensuring that policymakers are reaching out to and engaging with the youth in our city to highlight the specific barriers they face toward getting an education.” –Chanda Womack, Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), Rhode Island

While many Asian American ethnic groups have higher college attainment rates compared to the general US population, SEAA communities have glaringly low educational attainment.

According to census data, 33.9% of Cambodian, 30.2% of Hmong, 30.2% of Lao, and 27.8% of Vietnamese adults over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma, compared to 11.4% of white adults.⁸ These rates also differ by gender.

High school completion rates of Hmong and Lao women are lower than men.⁹ Additionally, SEAs battle with lower than average English proficiency, making learning even more difficult. Households that speak Vietnamese at home rank third in the total number that speak English less than “very well,”¹⁰ even though people who identify as Vietnamese either alone or in combination comprise of only 1.1% of the total US population.¹¹

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15_SPT/DP02//popgroup~001|002|034|039|043|048.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15_SPT/B15002//popgroup~002|034|039|043|048.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/16_5_YR/B16001.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15_SPT/B01003//popgroup~00.



These disparities are exacerbated by a number of factors at the K-12 levels, including lack of language access support for students and parents, as well as the lack of high-quality culturally relevant in-school and out-of-school support. For instance, research shows that taking ethnic studies classes can increase school attendance, grade-point average, and the number of earned school credits.¹² However, in a recent statewide California AAPI youth assessment conducted by SEARAC and the Asian American and Pacific Islander Coalition Helping Achieve Racial and Gender Equity (AAPI CHARGE), survey results showed that only 39% of AAPI youth respondents said they have taken classes that taught them about their racial and ethnic history, culture, and identity. SEAs also face barriers to attaining higher education. Fifty-eight percent of Cambodian, 53.9% of Hmong, 59.3% of Lao, and 49.1% of Vietnamese Americans have not attended college for any period of time, compared to 39.6% of white students.¹³

¹² Thomas S. Dee & Emily K. Penner, 2017. "The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol 54(1), pages 127-166.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/15_SPT/DP02//popgroup~001|002|034|039|043|048.

As students from low-income, refugee communities, SEAA youth find it difficult to bridge the gap between aspiring to attend college and actually achieving this goal, due to a lack of awareness on how to navigate the college admissions process.¹⁴ Because many SEAA students represent the first generation in their families to attend college, they need support in preparing for a college-level curriculum. Yet limited support exists for students to access, afford, and complete higher education.

SEARAC’s national education policy priorities include:

- Data equity – To properly understand the unique education, socioeconomic, and linguistic barriers that SEAA students face, SEARAC advocates for the collection and publication of disaggregated data, cross-tabulated by gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status.
- Culturally relevant K-12 support to increase high school completion – SEARAC advocates for policies that promote culturally competent student services and learning environments in schools, including accessible ethnic studies curricula, meaningful English language learner support, and effective parental engagement to help SEAA students reach their full potential through high school completion.
- College access, affordability, and completion – SEARAC advocates for TRiO, GEAR UP, Pell Grants, and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), which provide SEAA students with the support necessary to access a post-secondary education and persist in completing a degree. SEARAC also supports race-conscious college admissions policies that look beyond test scores to assess a student’s capacity to thrive in college.

HEALTH



"I am asking that [Congress] oppose efforts to repeal the ACA and Medicaid expansion and work toward protecting my care. Thov pab kom peb cov neeg pluag muaj kev mus kho mob. Nws tseem ceeb tshaj li! (Translated - Please help our poor people have a way to healthcare and seek care. It is the most important thing!)" –Dr. Ghia Xiong, The Fresno Center, California

Most state and federal health systems fail to tease out data on SEAs from “Asian Americans” overall, making it difficult to understand the rich diversity of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) languages, cultures, and experiences that carry wide variation in health needs. The traumatic experiences of war, genocide, and displacement left many SEAs with physical and mental health conditions that have gone untreated. This mass collective trauma and the stressors associated with relocation, including English language difficulties and cultural conflicts, continue to affect the emotional health of many SEAA refugees and their children.¹⁵ SEAs suffer disproportionately from hepatitis B, which can lead to

¹⁴ Khmer Girls in Action. (2011). *Step Into Long Beach: Exposing How Cambodian American youth are under resourced, over policed and fighting back for their wellness*. Accessed online at http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/KGA_LongBeach_report_web.pdf

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). *Mental health: culture, race, and ethnicity: a supplement to mental health*. Rockville, Md: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services. Retrieved from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44243/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK44243.pdf

cirrhosis, liver cancer, and liver failure.¹⁶ Hmong and Vietnamese women are at higher risk of cervical cancer than other racial/ethnic groups.^{17 18}

Because so many community members are limited-English proficient and low income, many families struggle to access the care they need to treat these urgent and chronic conditions. Aggregated data has historically concealed significant health disparities within the SEAA community.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, combined with the diligent advocacy and outreach of SEAA-led and -serving community-based organizations and advocates, greatly increased access to affordable health care for SEAs.

By 2015, uninsured rates were reduced by half as access to both public and private health insurance increased for the SEAA community. In 2017, Congress led efforts to repeal and undermine the ACA and Medicaid expansion that would have had a devastating impact on health care access for the SEAA community. According to the Congressional Budget Office, efforts to repeal the ACA in 2017 would have left 15-32 million more people uninsured by 2026.¹⁹

SEARAC’s national health policy priorities include:

- Data equity – SEARAC advocates for the collection and publication of disaggregated AANHPI health data, cross-tabulated by gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic, to properly understand the unique health disparities within the AANHPI community.
- Mental health – SEARAC advocates for additional funding and resources for culturally and linguistically appropriate preventative and early intervention mental health services for all, regardless of age and immigration status.
- Culturally and linguistically appropriate care – SEARAC advocates for policies that improve the quality of health care by increasing culturally and linguistically appropriate services.
- Access and affordability – SEARAC advocates for accessible and affordable health care by protecting and building on the successes of the ACA and Medicaid that have helped SEAs of all ages.

¹⁶ “Asian American Health Assessment,” Asian American Resource Center Nonprofit, 2014, accessed September 22, 2017, http://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Communications/Asian_American_Health_Assessment_document_2014-.pdf

¹⁷ “Status of Vietnamese Health: Santa Clara County, California 2011,” Santa Clara County Public Health Department, 2011.

<https://stanfordhealthcare.org/content/dam/SHC/about-us/public-services-and-community-partnerships/docs/chna-implstrat.pdf>

¹⁸ Nancy K. Herther, Zha Blong Xiong, Karen Ritsema, Rebecca Vang, and Ri Zheng, “Health Disparities Research in the Hmong American Community: Implications for Practice and Policy,” *Hmong Studies Journal* no. 13.2 (2010): 1-31.

¹⁹ Congressional Budget Office, “H.R. 1628, American Health Care Act of 2017,” accessed September 22, 2017, at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/52752>

IMMIGRATION

“We are continuing to see the huge impact of deportations among SEAA families in Minnesota. Because of this, our community is working hard to help families directly through support groups, by providing guidance and advice, hosting family dinners and fundraisers, etc.—anything to show folks that they are not alone. It’s a small thing that we can do to show that they have an entire community behind them.”

—Jenny Srey, #ReleaseMN8, Minnesota

SEAs are the largest community of refugees ever resettled in America. However, our refugee and immigrant communities continue to be uniquely vulnerable to the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline, unjust mandatory detention and deportation policies, and the US attempt to end family-based immigration.

At least 16,000 SEAA community members have received final orders of deportation to the countries they originally fled as refugees. More than 13,000 of these were based on old criminal records (78% of total SEAA deportation orders, compared to 29% of all immigrants with deportation orders).²⁰ Many of these community members came to this country as refugee children and were raised as Americans.

For SEAs who are lawful permanent residents, naturalization is a critical tool to avoid the impacts of deportation. Overall, the SEAA foreign-born population has naturalized at higher rates compared to other immigrant communities, but naturalization remains a critical need for those who are eligible but

lack the resources, knowledge, and access they need to naturalize.



According to the 2013 Census, approximately 68% of Cambodians, 69% of Lao, 74% of Vietnamese, and 70% of Hmong Americans born abroad have naturalized, compared to only 46% of immigrants overall.²¹ However, in 2013, only 18% of eligible Cambodians, 11% of eligible Laotians, and 16% of eligible Vietnamese green card holders naturalized, which means that a sizable portion of the population faces barriers to naturalization.²² Not naturalizing poses several risks to the Southeast Asian American community. Long-time lawful permanent residents are vulnerable to deportation. Low-income seniors who do not naturalize risk the loss of critical Social Security benefits.

²⁰ Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, “U.S. Deportation Outcomes by Charge, Completed Cases in Immigration Courts”: http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/court_backlog/deport_outcome_charge.php

²¹ U.S Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey, 3-Year Estimates.

²² Center for Migration Studies, “Estimated Population Potentially Eligible to Naturalize, by Country of Origin and State of Residence: 2103,” accessed June 16, 2017, <http://cmsny.org/more-naturalization-data/>

Lastly, SEAA families are harmed by threats to dismantle our family-based immigration system. Since the end of the wars in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, many SEAA families have depended on family-based immigration to reunite with their loved ones.

In 2016, an average of 92% of SEAA immigrants received a green card through a family-based visa petition. Particularly, 53% of Vietnamese, 16% of Cambodian, and 12% of Laotian immigrants did so due to extended-family visa sponsorship for siblings, parents, and adult children²³ — a category that the White House and some members of Congress have recently tried to cut.

Many more continue to wait for years due to massive backlogs in the outdated system. Immigrants from Vietnam face the fourth largest number of visa backlogs, as 250,944 people wait in line to reunite with a loved one.²⁴ Cambodia has a backlog of more than 9,000 people, and Laos has a backlog of close to 2,000.²⁵ Family members caught in these lines can wait up to 13 years for their application to be processed.²⁶

SEARAC’s national immigration policy priorities include:

- Ending unjust mandatory detention and deportation laws – SEARAC advocates for just immigration laws that prioritize due process protections for all immigrant communities, regardless of criminal history.
- Strengthening naturalization programs – SEARAC advocates for additional funding for education and outreach programs that reach low-income, limited English proficient communities to support them through the naturalization process.
- Protecting family immigration – SEARAC defends against policies that threaten our family-based immigration system and supports legislation that seeks to shorten the process of family reunification

²³ Department of Homeland Security, “Table 10: Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Broad Class of Admission and Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal year 2016”: <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2016/table10>

²⁴ “Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2017”:

https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/ImmigrantStatistics/WaitingList/WaitingListItem_2017.pdf

²⁵ Asian Americans Advancing Justice, AAJC

²⁶ “Visa Bulletin For February 2018”: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-bulletin/2018/visa-bulletin-for-february-2018.html>