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## COVID-19 - Revealing Unaddressed Systemic Barriers in the 45th Anniversary of the Southeast Asian American Experience

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## COVID-19—Revealing Unaddressed Systemic Barriers in the 45th Anniversary of the Southeast Asian American Experience

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### Abstract

2020 marks the 45th year anniversary of the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) experience, starting with the first wave of refugees who fled Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam as a result of American occupation and wars throughout the region. Collectively, this community is the largest community of refugees ever to be resettled in America. Yet despite four decades in this country, Southeast Asian Americans continue to face disparate challenges like other low-income, immigrant, refugee, communities of color—ranging from poverty, to educational inequity, health disparities, and harsh immigration policies. COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed and exacerbated systemic barriers that have always existed for Southeast Asian American communities. This paper explores those impacts in economic, education, health, and immigration enforcement and concludes with thoughts on the way forward.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Advocacy, Community needs

### Summary

2020 marks the 45th year anniversary of the Southeast Asian American (SEAA) experience, starting with the first wave of refugees who fled Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam as a result of American occupation and wars throughout the region. Collectively, this community is the largest community of refugees ever to be resettled in America. Yet despite four decades in this country, Southeast Asian Americans continue to face disparate challenges like other low-income, immigrant, refugee, communities of color—ranging from poverty, to educational inequity, health disparities, and harsh immigration policies. COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed and exacerbated systemic barriers that have always existed for Southeast Asian American communities. This paper explores those impacts in economic, education, health, and immigration enforcement and concludes with thoughts on the way forward.



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### **Economic Impact**

Close to 1.1 million Southeast Asian Americans (SEAs) are low-income, including about 460,000 who live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015). Even before the COVID-19 global health pandemic, SEAs were surviving through the support of social benefits, such as food stamps, at higher rates than other American families (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Additionally, 16%-30% of SEAs worked in service industry jobs, many of which were impacted with closures during COVID-19 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). During these times in particular, SEAs have been struggling with economic insecurity. For example, Southeast Asian Development Center in San Francisco shared, “Our community members have been hit hard financially with many lost jobs/income. Our agency surveyed about 163 of our community members and about 78% have lost their jobs.” Additionally, in 970 phone calls conducted by The Cambodian Family Community Center, based in Santa Ana, California, the top four identified challenges included paying rent, paying utility bills, obtaining food, and applying for unemployment. And while the federal government issued economic support payments and other stimulus measures to support small businesses and expand unemployment insurance, Southeast Asian Americans, particularly those who work cash-based jobs or lack immigration status, are barred from accessing many of these benefits.

### **Education Impact**

Despite the best efforts of educators and school staff, many SEAA students have been left behind during widespread school closures. The transition to remote, online learning has revealed longstanding gaps in digital access among SEAA families. Twelve percent of Cambodian, 9% of Hmong, 11% of Lao, and 9% of Vietnamese American households lack a broadband internet subscription (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Even for families with internet access, a scarcity of devices has prevented all SEAA children from fully accessing online instruction. SEAA households are larger than the average US household, ranging from around four to six people per household (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2020). Additionally, 18% of Cambodian, 15% of Hmong, 16% of Lao, and 15% of Vietnamese Americans live with other relatives. In larger households, often with multiple children, family members must share a single device, which has resulted in limited hours for each child to learn from home during the pandemic.

SEAA college students have also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventeen percent of SEAs live in poverty and another 23% of SEAs are low-income (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2020). As a result, many SEAA students pursuing higher education rely on financial aid and employment to pay for college. However, the economic shutdowns due to the pandemic and the revenue shortfalls for institutions across the country that have shut down campuses are limiting these sources of financial assistance. Marian, an upperclassman at a large public institution in the Southeast, had relied on her on-campus job to help cover for her living expenses. When her campus shut down, she lost her job and struggled to pay rent. Although she received some financial assistance in the past, she had to take on additional loan debt for the summer to pay for her living expenses without a job.

### **Health Impact**

As survivors of war, genocide, and poverty in the United States, SEAs have higher rates of chronic health challenges that have increased their vulnerability under COVID-19. For example, a study conducted by RAND Health in 2005 reported that nearly two-thirds of Cambodian refugees

from their study suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and more than half had depression. In contrast, only 3% of the U.S. population had suffered from PTSD, and about 7% had major depression (Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, & Chun, 2005). Additionally, while nationwide data is difficult to find on leading causes of death, data from the California Department of Public Health indicated that cancer and heart disease are the leading causes of death for SEAA in California (California Department of Public Health, 2017). Under COVID-19, these health disparities have been further exacerbated with community members facing increased mental strife, including increased isolation for elders impacted by social distancing measures, and increased generational and cultural tension between youth and parents who are home-bound due to school closures and lay-offs. Additionally, because disaggregated data on COVID-19 does not exist for Asian American communities, the seemingly lower rate of COVID-19 contraction by Asian Americans paints a misleading picture and conceals the real impacts facing SEAA communities who have higher rates of pre-existing chronic health conditions compared to other Asian American communities. However, some data with large concentrations of SEAA communities have been able to reveal the higher rates of COVID-19 for SEAA communities. For example in Long Beach, where Cambodian Americans comprise the majority of the Asian American population, a report by LA-ist found that,

Asians make up 15% of those hospitalized for COVID-19 in the city of Long Beach, while comprising 13% of its population. Confirmed infections among Asians in Long Beach—14% of the total caseload—is also slightly higher than their population share. That's not true elsewhere in L.A. County, where so far, existing data suggests a lower infection rate for Asians (Huang, 2020).

The lack of disaggregated data for SEAA communities during COVID-19 exemplifies one of the major systemic barriers that prevent communities from being seen and served appropriately, especially when that data during this pandemic can save lives.

#### Immigration Impact

There are more than 14,000 Southeast Asian immigrants living in the United States with old criminal records (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse). The fears that they carry have not diminished during the global pandemic. Instead, these fears are heightened due to the lack of uniform information regarding ICE check-in protocols and expectations, rumors of increased targeting by ICE for those with old convictions (Sacchetti & Hernández, 2020), and worries around detention facilities that are overcrowded and unsanitary, making the spread of illness rampant and deadly. Despite the pressing health concerns of many in the country, the Trump Administration has also signaled its intent to continue to target and ramp up removals after issuing an expansion of visa sanctions on Laos (Phonevilay, 2020) in June 2020 to force the country to increase the number of deportees it accepts from the United States. The dehumanization of immigrants seeking to better their lives sadly continues during this global health emergency, leaving many Southeast Asian American families to juggle the impossible task of surviving illness and death in the midst of potentially losing family members to deportation.

#### Conclusion

The challenges revealed during this COVID-19 pandemic epitomize one of the biggest lessons learned from the SEAA experience: that the road to recovery will require long-term systemic changes as opposed to short-term fixes. As the largest community of refugees ever to be resettled in America, we are inheritors of short-term refugee policies that provided immediate aid

for 3-6 months, and inheritors of long-term broken economic, education, health, and immigration policies that have perpetuated generational poverty and socioeconomic inequality across our communities for over four decades. However, we are also a community defined by family, love, and resilience against all odds. It is this legacy that we will continue as communities across the country respond in the most inspiring of ways to feed, house, and care for those most in need through food drives, tele-health, virtual education programming, fundraisers, and advocacy for those left behind or left out of the stimulus packages. Like our ancestors before us, we will continue their legacy of resilience as we fight to redefine America by using this pandemic to call our nation to action to address the long-term economic, education, health, and criminal justice reforms necessary to create just, thriving communities.

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## About the Authors



**Quyen T. Dinh**, is the Executive Director of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC). Originally formed in 1979, SEARAC was founded by a group of American humanitarians as a direct response to the refugee crises arising throughout Southeast Asia as a result of U.S. military actions. Today, SEARAC is a civil rights organization that represents the largest refugee community ever resettled in America. It works to empower Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American communities to create a socially just and

equitable society through policy advocacy, advocacy capacity building, community engagement, and mobilization.

As Executive Director, Quyen has advocated for Southeast Asian Americans on key civil rights issues including education, immigration, criminal justice, health, and aging. Quyen has spoken widely about Southeast Asian American communities and has appeared in American RadioWorks, NBC, Public Radio International, and Voice of America. Under Quyen's leadership, SEARAC has authored national legislation and passed California legislation calling for transparent, disaggregated data for the Asian American community. Quyen has also extended SEARAC's coalition presence and leadership in other civil rights and social justice movements through her leadership roles with the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), Detention Watch Network (DWN), the Diverse Elders Coalition (DEC), RISE for Boys and Men of Color, and Allies Reaching for Community Health Equity (ARCHE) Action Collaborative. Prior to SEARAC, she built lasting infrastructure for the International Children Assistance Network (ICAN) in San Jose, CA, serving Vietnamese immigrant parents, grandparents, and youth.

Born to Vietnamese refugees, Quyen identifies as a second-generation Vietnamese American. She holds a Master of Public Policy degree from the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of California, Berkeley. Quyen was born in New Orleans, LA, and grew up in Orange County, CA, and San Jose. She currently resides with her husband in Washington, DC.

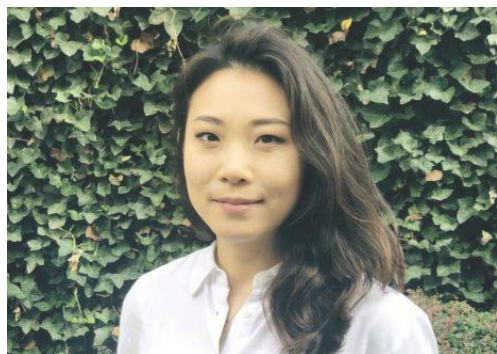


**Katrina D. Mariategue**, is the Deputy Director of Policy and Field coordinating SEARAC's national advocacy efforts promoting social justice and equity among Southeast Asian American communities. Prior to this role, she served as SEARAC's Immigration Policy Manager for three years overseeing the organization's immigration policy and racial healing work. Before coming to SEARAC, Katrina worked in the labor movement for six years at the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-

CIO). In 2011, she was elected to serve as DC chapter president of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), the only national Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) union membership organization. In this capacity, she led the chapter's local advocacy campaigns and

organizing work around immigrant workers' rights, coordinated civic engagement programs for the 2012 elections, and strengthened local networks through extensive coalition building efforts. She also served on APALA's National Executive Board and co-chaired the organization's Young Leaders Council.

Katrina holds a Master of Public Policy degree from the University of Maryland, College Park, where she also served as graduate coordinator at the Office of Multicultural Involvement and Community Advocacy to advise, mentor, and educate AAPI students on campus. In her free time, Katrina enjoys playing with her 2-year-old daughter, food tripping with her husband, binge watching shows on Netflix, and watching Broadway musicals.



**Anna H. Byon**, leads SEARAC's education policy analysis, advocacy, community engagement, organizing, and coalition building efforts as the Education Policy Advocate. Anna aspires to be a public servant committed wholly to educational equity and justice. Previously, they worked for two members of Congress handling education issues as an education fellow with the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies and then as a full-time legislative staffer. They also briefly served as a policy analyst working on special

education transition for District of Columbia Public Schools. In their research training, Anna specialized in coordinating policy, research, and community organizing to support youth-led systemic educational change as a research assistant for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in Rhode Island. Anna holds a Master of Arts in urban education policy and a Bachelor of Arts in education studies from Brown University. In their spare time, they enjoy cooking for other people.



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