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An Agenda for Policy Change: Participatory Research and Data Collection by Southeast Asian Youth

Kohei Ishihara

Summary

In a policy-making world that is influenced by “model minority” ideology and racial aggregate data, Southeast Asian Americans have become one of the most underrepresented and misunderstood Asian American communities. Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong youth leaders in Providence, Rhode Island, protested this lack of representation by surveying 16 percent of the city’s Southeast Asian youth population. This data became the first of its kind to provide a quantitative and qualitative portrait of the lives and issues experienced by the city’s Southeast Asian residents. Youth leaders were trained in survey administration and data analysis in order to design and execute the survey. Survey results revealed the very intricate and oppressive realities faced by Southeast Asian youth, including lack of education, gang violence, racial profiling, inter-generational conflict, as well cultural conflict over ideas of gender and sexuality. Youth leaders used the data and a process of consensus decision making to develop a list of policy-change recommendations targeting Rhode Island decision makers and power brokers.

Introduction

In March 2002, the U.S. and Cambodian governments signed a repatriation agreement, allowing for the forced removal, or deportation, of Cambodian American refugees. This struck a central nerve within the Southeast Asian community in Providence, Rhode Island, setting off a wave of heightened civic engagement and political involvement. Those known as the “0.5 Generation” were affected the most by the new change in immigration law—they are the generation who were born in war-torn Southeast Asia, grew up in refugee camps, and became the first Cambodian teen-

agers in the United States. Many formed protective street gangs as teenagers and found themselves arrested, incarcerated, and later, placed into immigration detention facilities.

In Providence, an unlikely coalition formed among the “0.5 Generation,” high school teenagers, and gay and lesbian college students—all interested in protesting the repatriation agreement. The coalition evolved into the Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM), which coordinated street protests, direct actions, and education drives in the community. All over the nation, informal Southeast Asian youth groups as well as formal nonprofit organizations saw a surge in Southeast Asian youth leadership and activism protesting immigration law. Coined the “largest Cambodian American youth movement in U.S. history” by PrYSM cofounder Sarath Suong, Southeast Asian young people—many aided by nonprofit organizations—arranged protests and organizing campaigns in Philadelphia, PA; Seattle, WA; Lowell, MA; Providence, RI; Long Beach, Oakland, and San Francisco, CA; New York City, NY; and Madison, WI (Suong, 2011).

PrYSM evolved into a nonprofit organization in 2004 with programs designed to cultivate youth leadership and community organizing campaigns. However, campaigns, such as the one to increase translation and interpretation services within the Providence Public School District, came to a standstill as policy and decision makers asked youth leaders to present data. Data did not exist. Not one single Rhode Island institution—from the police department to the Department of Human Services—had ever made an attempt to collect data by ethnicity. To the campaign for translation and interpretation services, this meant that the public school district was not only unaware of the need for translation services but even lacked baseline data such as the number of Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong students enrolled within schools or the district as a whole.

Providence is only a microcosm of the nation. The lack of data and knowledge about Southeast Asian communities has long obscured and thwarted attempts to address issues in education, civil rights, and racial justice. Hidden within racially aggregated data sets and also misunderstood because of popular ideology such as the model minority myth, Southeast Asian Americans remain one of the most misunderstood ethnic-racial groups in the United States.

PrYSM’s youth and young adult leaders quickly viewed the acquisition of data as one of the most important issues they could

work on in order to advance the overall interests of the Southeast Asian community. In 2006, the organization embarked on a major project: the 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey. The term *Southeast Asian* is used in its local Rhode Island context, specifically referring to the Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong refugee communities that resettled in the city after the Vietnam War.

Survey Methodology

PrYISM youth leaders received technical assistance and training from the Data Center¹ and took three months to design, edit, and produce the survey. The target population was defined as Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight living within the boundaries of the city of Providence. Youth leaders oversaw nine separate drafts before the survey was finalized. Questions were crafted to be unbiased and neutral in tone and language, so as to obtain sound and reliable results. A pilot was conducted among twenty youth before coming up with the final draft of the survey.

Another three-month period was used to collect survey data. PrYISM opted to use the “snowball” method of data collection and collected surveys from a wide variety of contexts—schools, door to door, public parks, and community events. All survey participants identified as Cambodian, Laotian, or Hmong; lived in the city of Providence; and were between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. The survey included more than sixty questions (see Table 1).

Each week PrYISM youth leaders met to calculate, track, and organize completed surveys, as well as to undergo additional trainings, such as role plays, in order to increase effectiveness and minimize bias. After three months of surveying, 365 individual surveys were collected—comprising more than 16 percent of all Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong youth living in Providence.

Table 1: Population of Southeast Asian Youth Surveyed in 2006

	Population Size in RI	Surveys Collected	Percentage of Total
Cambodian	1,479	239	16.2%
Laotian	442	77	17.4%
Hmong	318	59	18.6%
Total	2,239	375	16.7%

Source: U.S. Census 2000, Summary File 4, Detailed Tables PCT003011–PCT003025 and PCT003115–PCT003129

The survey was split into two parts—a confidential section and an anonymous section. The confidential section was administered first. Identifiable information, such as a person’s name or address, was not solicited. Next, respondents were instructed to fill out the anonymous section, which solicited more sensitive information such as experience with gangs, sexual health and identity, and domestic violence. The survey administrator would stand away from the survey taker, so that the survey taker had privacy when completing this section. Once it was completed, the survey respondent was instructed to seal his or her answers within a blank white envelope, provided to the respondent, and deposit it into a bag.

Information in the confidential and anonymous sections of the survey was linked only through randomly generated unique codes preprinted at the bottom of the survey. The confidential section of the survey was assigned a unique numeric code, and the anonymous section of the survey was assigned a unique letter code. These unique randomized codes were then linked through a database, allowing PrYSM to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the survey respondents while maintaining the ability to cross-reference data from both sections.

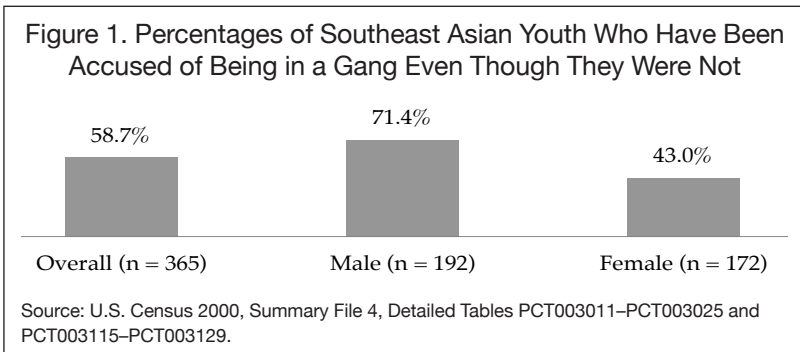
Findings

With answers to more than sixty questions that could be cross-tabulated, hundreds of data sets became available. After careful analysis, data revealed trends—from the expected to the alarming—around issues specific to gender, sexuality, and education, as well as experience with violence, gangs, and law enforcement. For example, data on education underscored the reasons why “Asian Pacific” males in Providence had the lowest graduation rate (54%) compared to all other racial-gender groupings (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2008).²

The survey revealed two important correlations associated with the problem of dropping out of high school. First, dropping out of school was closely linked with skipping or “bunking” from school. Of the respondents who dropped out of school, 64.5 percent reported that they skipped school at least a few times a week.³ Three out of every four Southeast Asian youth reported skipping school, and more than 66 percent of those who reported skipping school, did so more than once a week.

Data revealed that disengagement from the school system started early on and was linked to the issue of repeating grades or staying back a grade. Of those who skipped school, 40.8 percent also stayed back a grade, and 72.1 percent of dropouts were once held back in school.⁴ Among those who had not dropped out of school, only 25.8 percent had been held back a grade.

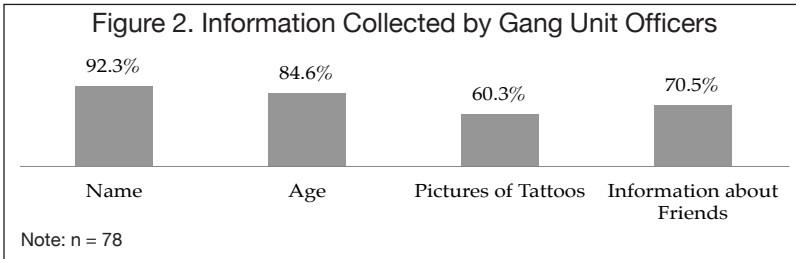
Another important discovery was qualitative and quantitative data on youth experience with law enforcement. The survey revealed distrust between law enforcement and youth. As seen in Figure 1, one out of every two Southeast Asian youth reported being wrongly accused of belonging to a gang. When broken down by gender, seven out of every ten Southeast Asian males reported being wrongly accused of being in a gang. These frequent accusations have led many Southeast Asian youth to feel that they are targets of racial profiling, as 32.1 percent of respondents said they were targeted by law enforcement because they are Asian.⁵



Another factor of distrust was the resentment caused by being detained by Gang Unit police officers for questions and information. Out of the 365 youth surveyed, 115, or 31.5 percent, had interacted with the Gang Unit. Specifically, almost one in two Southeast Asian males (or 45.8%) had interacted with Gang Unit officers.⁶ As a practice, Gang Unit officers conduct “field interviews” with youth and record information into a Gang Database. Figure 2 shows the most common types of information solicited during these interviews.

Anecdotal answers to questions on the survey revealed a disturbing presence of police misconduct—from the use of illegal detainment and unwarranted searches to using intimidation tactics in order to encourage youth to reveal an association with a gang.

The severity of the problem required further probing and investigation. Focus groups with gang-involved youth as well as interviews with Southeast Asian community leaders were conducted. Their perspectives consistently zeroed in on one important strategy often left out of discourse on violence prevention: the lack of trust between police and Southeast Asian youth is closely linked with the violation of youths' civil and political rights.



Although the survey presents the most comprehensive and intensive study of Southeast Asian youth in Rhode Island, it is important to note a few of its limitations. The “snowball” method of data collection ensured that PrYSM could gain access to a population that has been traditionally under the radar, with soaring rates of linguistic and cultural isolation.⁷ However, because PrYSM used individual connections to friends, family members, and popular places for young adults, the findings of the survey may not as accurately represent the attitudes of Southeast Asian youth as much as a more random and representative sample might.

Recommendations

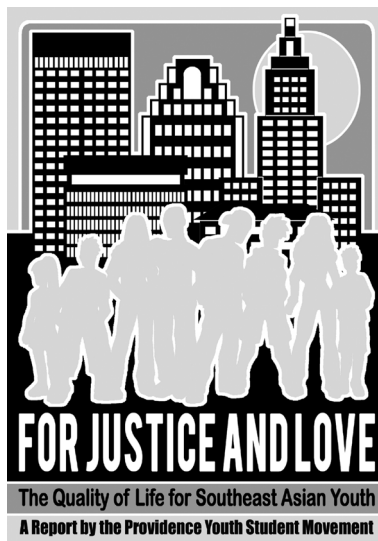
During early 2010, a new cadre of PrYSM youth leaders were trained in data analysis and asked to work in groups in order to develop specific policy recommendations to address community issues that appeared in the survey data. Youth used consensus decision making to prioritize and narrow down the list to twenty-seven separate policy recommendations. After a four-month process, the language of each recommendation was finalized and the document was titled “The Southeast Asian Youth Agenda for Policy Change.” What follows is a selection of policy-change recommendations:

1. State and municipal agencies and all publicly licensed health care institutions should responsibly collect and report data by ethnicity, not just race.

2. Establish a clear, fair definition and list of criteria for gang membership and involvement to inform the practices of the Providence Police Department and the Gang Unit.
3. If, according to the established definition of gang involvement, a youth has been “inactive” for a reasonable period of time, his or her information should be permanently removed from the database.
4. The city of Providence and state of Rhode Island should support and invest in a translation and interpretation infrastructure in order to provide equal access for the Southeast Asian community and other linguistically isolated communities.
5. Private philanthropy and foundations should start a funding stream and scholarship program for Southeast Asian students.
6. Offer Southeast Asian-language courses in public high schools and support the study of a student’s own language.

The end result of the 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey is the publication of a report called *For Justice and Love: the Quality of Life for Southeast Asian Youth*, which was published in-house by PrYSM (see Figure 3). The report incorporates several other elements of research, including results from four focus groups, in-

Figure 3.



formation from twenty-two interviews, and the use of secondary sources and research. *For Justice and Love* includes a copy of the actual survey and is available by contacting the organization.

Notes

1. The Data Center, based in Oakland CA, is a 30+-year-old organization providing research training and technical assistance to social justice groups seeking to conduct participatory research. For more information, see www.datacenter.org (accessed August 8, 2011).
2. According to the Rhode Island Department of Education, “Asian Pacific” males had a 54% graduation rate during school year 2005-6, the lowest graduation rate compared to all other racial categories.
3. The 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey: sec. A, ques. 8A, broken down by “Did you drop out of high school?” (sec. A, ques. 9).
4. The 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey: sec. A, ques. 6, broken down by “Did you drop of out high school?” (sec. A, ques. 9).
5. The 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey: sec. C, ques. 4 (and same broken down by gender (sec. B, ques. 3)
6. The 2006 Southeast Asian Youth Survey: sec. C, ques. 4
7. According to the 2000 U.S. Census (Sample File 4), 35 percent of Laotian households, 40 percent of Cambodian households, and 47 percent of Hmong households were linguistically isolated.

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KOHEI ISHIHARA graduated with honors from Brown University, earning a bachelor of arts in ethnic studies. Kohei cofounded the Providence Youth Student Movement in 2001 and worked as a Lead Organizer before serving as the Executive Director from 2004 to 2011.