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Message from the Editors

Asian American and Pacific Islander Youth: Risks, Challenges and Opportunities

Karen Umemoto and Paul Ong

The image of the Asian American whiz kid is harming our youths. The simplistic portrayal of Asian Americans as the ‘over-achievers,’ the ‘overrepresented’ in higher education, and as ‘overcoming’ racial obstacles has cast a pernicious shadow over those who have not fared so well—Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youths who have dropped out of school, who are caught in the juvenile justice system, and those who struggle to regain the ground they may have lost in the turmoil of adolescence. The whiz-kid stereotype not only sends the message that “if these kids can do it, why can’t you?” but has also fostered a longstanding neglect by the research community of the serious hardships experienced by many AAPI adolescents.

There is no question that adolescent violence and related risk behaviors are a serious problem in the U.S. today. Violence is a major concern along with its precursors, including various forms of delinquency and aggressive behavior. Although the level of adolescent violence has decreased since its peak period a decade ago, it remains higher than in most industrialized countries and is considered a major public health concern (National Institutes of Health 2006). In fact, homicides remain the second single cause of death (13 percent) among youth aged 10-24. High-risk behaviors related to youth delinquency and morbidity also remain a problem. The latest survey of the National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YBRSS), conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to monitor the top health risk behaviors among youth, showed that 30 percent of male high school students carried a weapon on campus, with 10 percent carrying a gun and 7 percent carrying a weapon on school property. Among both males and females, 36 percent engaged in one or more physical fights, with 14 percent engaging in a physical fight on school grounds. Other indicators include drink-

ing, substance abuse, and various forms of victimization (Centers for Disease Control 2005). Prevalence rates of youth violence and delinquency tell a sad story, with significant differences among ethnic and racial groups, including higher rates of child mortality and death from firearms among African American and Latino youth (Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2005).

Comparably, very little is empirically known about AAPI youths, but the available information shows that certain groups face serious problems. For example, a study using 2001 YRBSS data revealed that Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders experienced the highest rates of being threatened or injured with a weapon on campus, being in a physical fight, carrying a weapon, using alcohol, using marijuana on school property and having drugs made available to them on school property (Mayeda et al. 2006). One of the first prevalence studies focusing on AAPIs, using sample surveys conducted in Hawai'i, showed Samoan youths reporting significantly higher rates of violence than other ethnic groups surveyed, and Filipino, Hawaiian, and Samoan youths reporting significantly higher rates than Japanese on overall indicators of high-risk behavior (Mayeda et al. 2006). These findings illustrate the importance of disaggregating the AAPI adolescent population by ethnicity and gender.

This volume of *AAPI Nexus* contains five articles that help fill the gap in the literature. The Resource Paper "Profiling Incarcerated Asian and Pacific Islander Youth" by Arifuku, Peacock, and Glesmann offers rare data that disaggregate the numbers and characteristics by ethnic group. The paper is a result of mining individual-level administrative records, producing valuable information about one of the least known populations—incarcerated AAPI youth. They use files from the California Youth Authority (CYA) to develop detailed profiles of AAPI and non-AAPI wards with regard to demographic characteristics, offenses committed, duration of incarceration, parole, and discharge. The data shows that some AAPI ethnicities were overrepresented in the CYA population with high levels of gang involvement. Among the noted facts is that AAPI wards had the highest percentage with honorable discharges and the lowest percentage with a dishonorable discharge.

Over the past several decades, there has been a concerted effort to identify factors that pose a risk for or serve as protection against delinquency and violence using large sample and longitudinal studies of youth. These "risk and protective factors" include

characteristics such as neighborhood environment, family characteristics, school influences and individual traits. Those factors that pose a risk vary depending on the type of delinquency and developmental stage of the individual as well as their co-occurrence with other variables. For example, being male of low socioeconomic status with low school attachment may pose a risk, but only in combination with other risk factors and in the absence of certain protective factors, such as strong parental bonds.

While a multitude of risk and protective factor research has been conducted, only recently has there been attention paid to specific Asian American and Pacific Island youth. One milestone in this area was the establishment of the Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center as one of select National Academic Centers of Excellence on Youth Violence Prevention by the Centers for Disease Control. Now two separate entities, one based at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and one at the University of Hawai'i School of Medicine, they focus on research, training and community mobilization to reduce violence in AAPI communities.

This volume features one study conducted with the support of the NCCD-based center, "Self-Reported Rates and Risk Factors of Cambodian, Chinese, Lao/Mien, and Vietnamese Youth Delinquency" by Le and Wallen. The study is based on a sample of 329 Cambodian, Chinese, Lao/Mien, and Vietnamese youth. The authors examine the role of psychosocial-cultural related factors such as individualism/collectivism, intergenerational/intercultural conflict, and ethnic identity in delinquency. Demographics, individual, and peer domains contributed more explanatory variance for serious violence, while individual and parental domains contributed more explanatory variance for family/partner violence. Consistent with official statistics, rates of serious violence among Southeast Asian youth were higher than for Chinese youth.

Qualitative evidence is also useful in studying AAPI youths. The Research Article "You got to do so much to actually make it" by Mayeda, Pasko, and Chesney-Lind examines the intersection of gender and ethnicity in shaping the problems facing Samoan girls in Hawai'i. The study utilizes focus groups and interviews with Samoan community leaders, other key informants, parents, and adolescent girls to study ways Samoan girls negotiate a social terrain characterized by both racism and sexism. Participants discuss unfavorable biases in schools, unequal domestic gender roles,

western legal confines, and a lack of positive role models as critical issues for Samoan girls in contemporary society.

One of the most important challenges in addressing youth delinquency and violence is designing culturally appropriate prevention and intervention strategies. Models that are based on the general population do not necessarily fit the specific historical and cultural characteristics within the AAPI population. The Research Article, "The Role of the Family in Asian American Juvenile Delinquency," by Huynh-Hohnbaum shows how one of the large national data sets can be analyzed to examine models in delinquency prevention as it may apply to AAPI families. The author utilizes the family delinquency theory to frame an examination of family characteristics as predictors for delinquent acts against property and persons by AAPI adolescents. The data come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which is a nationally representative sample of seventh to twelfth graders. The secondary analysis finds that parental monitoring serves as a protective factor for delinquent acts against property, and family structure is a predictive factor for delinquent acts against persons. Overall, the findings partially supported the family delinquency theory, underscoring the importance of developing culturally appropriate theories.

An area of misdirected policies due in part to the lack of more grounded understandings of the problem is gang prevention and intervention (Umemoto 2006). There are relatively few studies of gang formation in AAPI communities upon which better policies and practices can be developed (Alsaybar 1999). The Practitioner's Essay "Asian Americans on the Streets: Strategies for Prevention and Intervention" by Vigil, Nguyen, and Cheng presents an analytical framework to understand gang involvement and offers a number of recommendations based on their research using life histories of Vietnamese and Cambodian youth gangs collected over a span of fifteen years. The authors propose a multi-faceted prevention and intervention strategy that includes the community and schools to heighten cultural awareness for children and parents. It is also recommended that policies take into account the nuanced differences between Asian communities and bring together multiple stakeholders including officials and hard-core gang members to improve communicative problems that have resulted in gang prevention and intervention policy failures. Seen together, these articles illuminate new and important findings and contribute to the critical conversation

on the risks, challenges and opportunities facing AAPI youth.

This volume also contains a non-theme but related Research Article. "Thalassemia and Asian Americans: Living and Coping with Uncertainty" by Woo. Thalassemia is a potentially life-threatening genetic blood disease for which Asians in California are at highest risk, compared to other population groups. This health risk is particularly relevant for youths because early intervention can improve the quality of life and optimize life expectancy. Mandatory screening at birth is how most cases are discovered. This article focuses on chronic forms of thalassemia and what it means for patients and their families to live with the illness. Steps to address this health issue include increasing public awareness and stimulating discussion about social interventions that might enable individuals to lead healthier lives.

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