



Widening the Lens on  
Boys and Men of Color

CALIFORNIA AAPI & AMEMSA PERSPECTIVES



Building Democratic  
Philanthropy

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Only ten years from now, by 2023, it is projected that the majority of children in the United States will be non-white. As they are our future workforce, it is in the best interest of our nation that young people of all backgrounds have an equal chance to become healthy, contributing members of society. But rather than being supported to become a diverse, educated American workforce, over the past 30 years young people of color have found themselves on a sinking playing field as a result of deepening economic inequality, racism, failing public education systems, increasingly punitive and intolerant criminal justice laws, and insufficient culturally competent health services and prevention. In recent years, a growing body of research has focused the attention of funders and policymakers on how these trends have more seriously and disproportionately harmed the life chances of boys and young men.

Efforts to improve the life chances of young people of color must not overlook Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and



South Asian (AMEMSA) communities, especially in California which is home to the largest Asian American populations and the second largest Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations in the country. In California, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing racial groups. AAPIs now make up 15% of the California's total population, and roughly one out of four people of color in California.

## Why This Report?

Founded in 1990, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy is a national member-supported philanthropic advocacy organization dedicated to advancing philanthropy and Asian American/Pacific Islander communities. Our members include foundations, staff, and trustees of grantmaking institutions, and nonprofit organizations in ten regional chapters in the United States. AAPIP engages communities and philanthropy to address unmet needs; serves as a resource for and about AAPI communities; supports and facilitates giving by and to our communities; and incubates new ideas and approaches for building democratic philanthropy.

For years, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) have been rendered largely invisible within philanthropy – both within organized philanthropy, and in recognition of AAPI communities' distinct philanthropic traditions. In 1992, AAPIP published *Invisible and In Need*, which found, among other things, that investment in AAPI communities from 1984-1990 amounted to no more than 0.2% of all philanthropic giving by foundations. Fifteen years later, in 2007 AAPIP followed that seminal report with *Growing Opportunities: Will Funding Follow the Rise in Foundation Assets and Growth of AAPI Populations?*, revisiting the same core analysis, finding that foundation funding to AAPI communities from

1990–2002 amounted to no more than 0.4% of all foundation funding although the AAPI population had doubled between 1990 and 2004. In 2012, foundation investments in AAPI communities had dropped to 0.3%. Lack of investment in AAPI communities remains an enduring challenge to philanthropy.

While aggregated data on AAPI and AMEMSA communities show higher indicators of income and education than the general population, the available disaggregated data makes it clear that certain subgroups have high rates of poverty and linguistic isolation, and low levels of educational attainment. Youth in these communities are rendered invisible with the prevalence of the “model minority” myth, which holds that Asian Americans are more successful than other racial and ethnic groups.

With respect to current philanthropic initiatives on boys and men of color, most of the research used to develop these initiatives did not disaggregate the “Asian” category, and disadvantaged AAPI and AMEMSA boys and men are often not included in these funding initiatives. In response to AAPI and AMEMSA organizations’ concerns about the lack of attention to boys and men in their communities, AAPIP undertook a community-based research effort as an initial step towards building knowledge within philanthropy about AAPI and AMEMSA boys and men of color.

In the context of the growing “majority minority” population in California, the limited engagement of AAPI and AMEMSA communities in foundation-led strategies to advance social change is a missed opportunity. The growth of AAPI and AMEMSA populations has many implications for social change efforts in California. With respect to including impacted voices in strategies to address disparities, Census data reveals that the number of poor Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in

California increased 50% and 138%, respectively, between 2007 and 2011. State projections reveal that as the white baby-boomer population continues to age into retirement over the next two decades, a lower percentage of the working-age population will be white and a larger percentage will be Latino and Asian. These younger populations will help maintain the potential for growth of the labor force and the economy in California. And as the 2012 elections demonstrated, AAPIs are a growing force in the electorate.

To align our inquiry with the current discourse on the social determinants of health disparities most affecting boys and men of color, we chose to frame this inquiry around issues of education, law enforcement/criminal justice, immigration and discrimination in the lives of AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men. The study methodology consisted of:

- A total of six focus groups involving over 40 community-based organization leaders and affected young men from the Bay Area, the Central Valley and Long Beach/Los Angeles (see Appendix A).
- One-on-one interviews with 12 key informants working on AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men’s issues in California (see Appendix B).
- Literature review encompassing poverty, discrimination, education systems, policing, criminal and juvenile justice systems, immigration enforcement, national security policies, and LGBTQ issues as they relate to AAPI and AMEMSA communities and boys and men of color.

This report begins with an overview of issues of poverty, immigration, gender, sexual orientation and culture as experienced by marginalized AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men, before focusing more specifically on challenges they face with respect to the criminal justice and education systems.

## Context of Poverty, Immigration and Culture Among AAPI and AMEMSA Boys and Young Men

### **Some AAPI subgroups have high rates of poverty.**

Some AAPI ethnic groups have poverty rates exceeding or similar to African Americans and Latinos, and far exceeding those of whites. For example, Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Hmong, Lao and Mien) children of refugees who faced hardships of war, displacement and expulsion from their native countries are among the poorest communities in the nation. AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men who are undocumented or part of mixed status families also face poverty and financial instability.

### **For low-income AAPI and AMEMSA youth, poverty and language barriers continue to be a major barrier to educational attainment.**

In California, Southeast Asians have similar rates of high school/GED completion as Latinos – around 40%. Low-income AAPI and AMEMSA boys are invisible and neglected in schools, left on their own to struggle with language barriers, illiteracy, bullying, misrepresentation of history and culture in curricula, lack of culturally competent teachers, and lack of support in accessing higher education. AAPI and AMEMSA immigrant families, particularly refugee and undocumented families, have high rates of linguistic isolation that severely limit their educational opportunities.

### **Trauma and mental health issues are both a cause and a consequence of many of the challenges facing AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men.**

This was a particularly strong theme among AAPI and AMEMSA refugee communities. Researchers have demonstrated a strong response connection between exposure to violence and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in AAPI youth, particularly in Southeast and Central Asian

refugee communities. Migrants coming from experiences of war and massive social upheaval are at particular risk for PTSD, which can be chronic and persistent. While many of the younger generation have not directly experienced the same trauma as their parents and extended family members, the PTSD in the family may affect the home environment and create tensions.

### **Definitions of masculinity in AAPI and AMEMSA communities often reflect patriarchal norms.**

Most of the study participants described the cultures of immigrant parents in their communities as reinforcing male power in the family and in the leadership of the community. In immigrant families, young AAPI and AMEMSA men were described as confused about masculinity or identity in part because family structures and the roles of men and women in the U.S. are dramatically different in comparison to the family's homeland.

### **Cultural stigmas associated with LGBTQ identities can lead to negative health outcomes.**

Within most AAPI and AMEMSA cultures, masculinity is rigidly defined as heterosexual. AAPI and AMEMSA young men and boys face cultural stigmas that can associate being “out” with shaming their families. Study participants who have experience working with AAPI LGBTQ populations shared that experiencing racism and homophobia across varying environments can lead to risky sexual behaviors with negative health outcomes.

AAPIs now make up 15% of California's total population, and roughly one out of four people of color in California is AAPI.



## Criminal Justice System Impacts

**Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander boys and young men are routinely profiled by police.** In communities with larger concentrations of Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian youth, young men and boys are routinely stopped and searched by police in their cars and on foot, and questioned in public places. They are often assumed to be gang members even if they are not. Gang databases were identified as a problem particularly for Southeast Asian boys and young men, with serious consequences including enhanced criminal charges for minor offenses. Also, anecdotal information from our study participants suggests that LGBTQ boys and young men are at high risk of encountering or ending up in the criminal justice system because painful family situations lead them to become homeless.

**Certain AAPI subgroups have high rates of juvenile arrests and incarceration.** The few local studies of California AAPI youth and the criminal justice system show high rates of arrest and incarceration for Cambodians, Chinese, Laotians, Samoans and Vietnamese. Attorneys and researchers participating in this study shared that some AAPI boys are at high risk of being tried as an adult or for out-of-home placement. An important factor in arrests and incarceration on AAPI boys and men is gang stereotypes, which can lead to enhancements of criminal charges. Without strong advocacy by parents and/or community legal advocates, AAPI boys can easily fall through the cracks and into the criminal justice system. AAPI parents, especially immigrant parents, often do not know how to maneuver the juvenile justice system.

**Re-entry challenges.** For AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men, returning to home communities after prison comes with numerous challenges. As in other communities, incarceration shapes and alters young men's sense of self and ways of navigating in the world, and brings with it the potential for serious trauma and mental health issues. Youth who exit after turning 18 are not eligible for a range of child-focused social services, alienated from school settings, and stigmatized from employment if they have felony convictions. Returning to communities was described by study participants as

very painful for many AAPI and AMEMSA ex-offenders, who are viewed as having shamed their families and communities, and are often shunned. Without adequate and culturally competent support for ex-offenders and their families, formerly incarcerated youth can easily return to criminal activities and gang involvement.

**AMEMSA boys and young men are often specifically targeted for national security-related profiling.** Since the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), AMEMSA people have faced a range of challenges restricting their ability to live full and healthy lives, including racial profiling, government surveillance and hate crimes. Young men and boys in AMEMSA communities have faced particular scrutiny, stereotyped as at risk for “radicalization” and treated as a threat within U.S. borders. Federal and state policies following 9/11, such as Special Registration, have targeted immigrant AMEMSA young men age 16–35 in particular. The questioning of thousands of AMEMSA residents by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) directly following 9/11 and in the years since has been focused on young AMEMSA men ages 18–33, and FBI informants target young Muslim men for entrapment. Although Sikhs are not Muslims, Sikh boys and men who wear turbans are routinely profiled in airports by the TSA.

**Laws and policies criminalize AAPI and AMEMSA immigrants.** The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 made it harder for undocumented immigrants to adjust their status or apply for asylum, and easier to deport documented immigrants for legal violations both great and small. Over 1,500 Cambodian Americans now face deportation and more than 500 have already been deported to Cambodia. More recently, policies like 287(g) and “Secure Communities” that leverage local law enforcement have pushed the number of deportations to historic highs under the Obama Administration. With a direct line between police and immigration, AAPI and AMEMSA individuals get picked up for minor things such as traffic violations, and put into deportation proceedings. For low-income immigrants, deportation pushes their families further into poverty.

## Education System Impacts

**AAPI and AMEMSA youth are the most frequent targets of bullying in schools.** A 2009 study by the U.S. Justice and Education departments found that more than half of Asian American teenagers are bullied in school – 54%. This rate of harassment far exceeds their white, African American and Latino peers. In California, a survey of over 500 Sikh children from across the Bay Area conducted by Sikh Coalition revealed that 65% of all Sikh boys in middle school with or without turbans suffer some form of racial or religious bullying. The rate is higher for turbaned boys, 74% of whom suffer bias-based harassment. Since 9/11, there have been increasing reports of bullying and exclusion of Muslim students in schools.

**Homophobia and transphobia are compounded by racism in schools.** Among LGBTQ youth, sexual orientation harassment is compounded by racist harassment. When gender expectations of boys mesh with the model minority stereotype, AAPI and AMEMSA boys can be especially at risk. Bullying and an unwelcoming school environment have negative effects on GPA and test performance, and may lead LGBTQ youth in particular to want to drop out of school. Harassment and bullying of AAPI and AMEMSA youth, including LGBTQ youth, can lead to them being suspended or pushed out of schools even though they were victimized. Transgender youth are particularly at risk, because they are most likely to be labeled by school personnel as disruptive simply for being transgender or for how they look.

**The school climate is unwelcoming of many AAPI and AMEMSA youth.** Curriculum and school climate can either alienate students from school or keep them engaged. Students' feelings that curriculum is irrelevant to their life histories – or even blatantly racist – negatively impacts their involvement in school. Teachers and administrators can reinforce negative stereotypes or fears of AAPI and AMEMSA boys. The authority they wield can contribute to suspensions and dropouts among AAPI and AMEMSA youth.



**Language and immigration status are major barriers.** One in ten English Language Learner (ELL) students in California is AAPI. When their own parents cannot access or interface with the school, young people become further isolated from school environments. Few schools provide or have resources to help with translation for immigrant parents, thus limiting parents' contact with administrators and families. In addition, undocumented parents are often afraid to engage with schools due to their status and the culture of fear that has been created by the post 9/11 climate and the rise in deportations.

**Growing up undocumented severely hampers the aspirations and trajectories of youth.** Youth without immigration status are barred from federal financial aid.

Though laws exist in California to provide some undocumented students with access to in-state tuition and scholarships, many eligible students and their parents are unaware of these laws or face barriers navigating the system. While President Obama's 2012 Executive Order allowing some undocumented youth

to receive a two-year work permit has been an important victory for the undocumented youth movement, it is not a long-term solution. Even if they do graduate from college, they do so in a world where their job opportunities are extremely limited.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In many respects, the challenges discussed in this report are challenges AAPI and AMEMSA boys and young men share with their African American, Latino and Native American counterparts. Across many of the social determinants of health, the AAPI and AMEMSA youth described in this report have common cause and a shared destiny with other youth of color.

As with all communities of color and immigrant communities, culturally competent and language-accessible approaches will be necessary to provide the supports AAPI and AMEMSA youth need to live healthy lives. In spite of the tremendous challenges discussed in this report, our research uncovered many community-based programs around the state that are addressing the issues faced by marginalized AAPI boys and young men, some of which are featured in the report.

As the numbers of AAPI and AMEMSA communities grow, they are important constituencies to include in efforts to build the political will necessary to reform large-scale systems like public education and criminal justice. As younger populations, they will be critical to the future growth of the labor force and the economy in California. These communities have a stake in leveling the playing field so that all youth have an equal chance at living healthy and productive lives.

Funders are in a unique position to help grow the community capital and potential of AAPI and AMEMSA communities so that all youth can thrive. AAPI's recommendations to funders include:

- 1. Ensure that culturally competent AAPI and AMEMSA organizations and programs are included in efforts to improve the lives of boys and men of color.** We urge funders to include organizations and youth working in AAPI and AMEMSA communities when designing funding strategies to tackle the issues faced by disadvantaged youth of color. They are often part of the at-risk youth population in California cities and counties, but can't be adequately reached with "one-size-fits-all" strategies.
- 2. Support subgroup research and disaggregation of major data sets.** Funders can support advocacy for policy changes related to data disaggregation, for example at the levels of school districts, criminal justice systems and other public agencies in order to better understand disparities in marginalized AAPI and AMEMSA communities. To directly address research gaps, funders can also support deeper research within specific AAPI and AMEMSA communities.
- 3. Help build the civic engagement capacity of AAPI and AMEMSA organizations.** As the populations they serve grow, it is critical that funders invest in AAPI and AMEMSA community organizations so that they can engage more deeply in leadership development, community organizing and policy advocacy. Given the low level of foundation investment in AAPI and AMEMSA communities, there is an enormous opportunity to engage and build the capacity of these organizations to be part of solutions to the complex issues described in this report.



## **ABOUT AAPIP**

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