

Southeast Asian American Youth and Gang Formation

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It has been established that the "model minority" is a harmful stereotype. It ignores a host of problems that plague the Asian American community such as the lack of access to basic needs such as healthcare and insurance. It contributes to mental health issues that stem from the pressure of having to keep up with this stereotype. It is especially harmful to the refugee Asian American population, namely Southeast Asian Americans. The Southeast Asian community has not had the means to use their resources to resettle in the United States. The older members of this population lived through trauma and war to flee their home countries and restart from nothing in a country where they did not speak the language. The 1.5 and 2nd generation would not remember the traumas of the war but they would face traumas of their own. These refugee families are often relocated in urban inner city neighborhoods that are racially profiled and known as areas with high crime rates. They feel unwelcome and they lack a sense of belonging both at school and at home. Many Southeast Asian American youths find themselves caught in gang activity. This paper will argue that Southeast Asian Americans are often victims of the preschool to prison pipeline because of the way that the model minority has caused inter-ethnic tensions and has made them invisible to education system and policy makers barring them from the resources they need, because of a feeling of cultural disconnect from their peers, teachers, and parents, and because of the number of second-wave refugees that came without resources or family which means they lack support from relatives. This lack of resources has also translated to many Southeast Asian American refugees living in poverty having access only to housing in majority Latinx and black inner city neighborhoods where there are a disproportionate number of

patrols. These factors have caused Southeast Asian Americans to find ways to create their own sense of community and belonging in a world where they are unwelcome wherever they go.

Southeast Asians became displaced because of persecution during the Vietnam War. According to Le and Su, the first wave of refugees includes those who arrived just after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 until the mid 1980s (744). These immigrants were usually privileged members of society such as political immigrants who had the support of the American government and society's elites. The second wave of immigrants includes people who fled between 1985 and 1993. These refugees were less privileged and used the most dangerous means to escape often stowing away on planes and boats. These are the people that Americans often refer to as "boat people." Lam writes that most second wave refugees were young adults and adolescents sent to hopefully become future sponsors to pave the way for the rest of the family's immigration (Lam, 3). They could only afford to live in inner cities where there is greater police presence targeting minorities. As a result, these children did whatever they could to earn money often resorting to crime-related activity. Many of the 2nd and 1.5 generation who grew up in these neighborhood and have known America longer than they have known their parents' homeland and quickly learn that joining a gang is one of the few ways they can gain protection in neighborhoods where the police will not.

Because Southeast Asian Americans mostly consist of 1.5 and 2nd generation youths, their parents still have a strong connection to their homeland. They still have to uphold traditional roles and expectations. Much of these pressures stem from marriage and for girls, it is the responsibility to preserve their "purity." These children reject the customs that do not fit their new American lives now that they live in urban cities instead of farmland. Their role models now

consist of American actors and singers such as the Cambodian teen that seemed to admire Madonna in Jeung's article (64). She compared her aunt to Madonna and called her a "modern American." Most of these teens have only known America and they find more value in assimilating than in holding on to their parents' cultures. Southeast Asian parents' experiences further alienate them from their children. Parents who through the years after the 1960s are a "highly traumatized" group still recovering from the aftereffects of a war ("America's New Runaways," paragraph 5). Some do, however, find pride in their ethnic identities not for an appreciation of their cultures, but to feel "unique." It makes them feel special to know that they are bilingual or that they have a culture that others do not. Their rejection of their parents' culture is due to influence from the media and at school in an attempt to fit in but showing pride for their culture is a way for them to conceptualize their positions as outsiders. They feel American and are American but they look and are treated as if they are not. It is a common problem to be too American to one's parents and too Asian at school. This full acceptance of their ethnic identity is how they find the positives in their identities that they cannot escape. This feeling of being unwelcome manifests in the form of gang formation.

There is much discussion about the creation and use of the model minority stereotype to antagonize the Latinx and black communities. This continues to create inter-ethnic tensions between inner city students. One study of the behavior of Cambodian American showed that they felt like outsiders among their minority peers. Many black and Latinx students thought of them as "whiz kids"(Lam, 2). Jeung's research finds that black teens assumed the Cambodian American students were rich because a majority of students on the honor roll are Asian Americans. One of the participants of Jeung's study is a black teenager who says, "if you got

prison... Eighty-nine percent are blacks. [Asians] are on the top, they got all the money. Look at who's on the honor roll. Eighty-five percent of them are Asian. And the rest, you got a couple of blacks, a couple of Hispanics"(68). There seems to be a feeling of solidarity among the African American and Latinx students but the Cambodian Americans, being lumped in with the Asian American model minority stereotype, were seen as another oppressor. Jeung also notes that by the time they reach high school, Asian American boys will have at least one incident of being jumped by a group of African American boys. Cambodian Americans, like the Korean Americans in Los Angeles, were thought to be of the middle class when in reality there is little to no gap between their socioeconomic statuses. Those students are unaware that they are refugee American or of what it means to be refugee American. Cambodian Americans, as well as other Southeast Americans, will find people like them elsewhere and create their own sense of community. They learn how to act in a way that will allow them to survive by watching others around them, black and Latinx children. This is where much of the cultural appropriation within the Asian American community comes from. They also learn to form gangs because those are also present in their environments. They realize that there is strength in numbers and there are few people who will identify as they do so they must find strength where they can.

The model minority stereotype is also harmful because it is said to "exclude Asians from social and educational programs" (Lee and Ngo, 416). It is a useful tool in silencing a group that is already having trouble speaking up about its needs because of the large number of immigrants with limited English proficiency. Not only do other students of color think of them as members of the oppressor group, so do many scholars. Because they are thought to have no problems or disadvantages, many studies do not include them in their studies of education for racial

minorities (416). By studying other articles on minorities Ngo and Lee found that, "(1982) Minorities in Higher Education and Ogbu's (1978) Minority Education and Caste determined that Asian Americans were not educationally disadvantaged and thus excluded them from their studies"(416). To further perpetuate this myth, there is no shortage of studies that selectively choose the data they present to make this stereotype seem true. This makes Asian Americans affiliated with gangs and gang violence even less visible (Lam, 2). These problems seem less legitimate and of less concern to people with the power to change this situation. Policy makers and the like leave this issue untouched. In the case of Southeast Asian Americans. The increasing pressure of the model minority at school combined with the aforementioned feeling of being unwelcome at school and misunderstood at home has caused a rise Southeast Asian Americans running away from home ("American's New Wave Runaways, paragraph 3).

Gangs are an issue in any ethnic group including other Asian American ethnicities, but it is necessary to bring Southeast Asian Americans into the conversation specifically because they are disproportionately affected and yet much less visible due to the possibility of dismantling the model minority stereotype. It is now more important than ever to talk about this issue to the rise in deportations of Southeast Asian Americans, namely Cambodian Americans, who have been affiliated with gangs in the past and have a criminal record. Not only have they served their sentences but those in support of these deportations must understand that it was unavoidable for many of these children. They become products of their environment due to a system that has neglected them.

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