

## PRESS RELEASE



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### National Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Ally Groups Discuss Impact of Mass Criminalization on AAPI Community

*The groups advocate for restorative criminal justice policies by communities most impacted, as U.S. House Reps. Judy Chu and Bobby Scott provide remarks*



*AAPI leaders called for smart criminal justice reform and an end to the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline. Photo credit: Phuong Do.*

**Washington, DC**—During a Congressional briefing at Cannon House Office Building yesterday, national advocacy organizations representing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) groups and their allies shared a policy report on the impact of mass incarceration on the AAPI community entitled “AAPIs Behind Bars: Exposing the School to Prison to Deportation Pipeline.”

Discussing the impact of mass incarceration and mass criminalization within the AAPI community, the policy report was created after a historic convening held in June 2015 inside the walls of San Quentin State Prison in Northern California. The June gathering had connected more than 100 leaders, including

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activists, funders, lawmakers, policy experts, and community members, with actively incarcerated AAPI prisoners.

Yesterday's Congressional briefing included remarks from Reps. Judy Chu (CA-27, CAPAC chair) and Bobby Scott (VA-3). Rep Barbara Lee (CA-13) attended the event to meet with impacted members from her district. In addition, formerly incarcerated individuals and those with pending deportation orders were invited to reflect on their personal experiences.

### **ABOUT THE AAPIS BEHIND BARS POLICY REPORT**

Written in collaboration with the prisoners enrolled in an Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC) transformation and racial healing program called Restoring Our Original True Selves (ROOTS), the report offered a number of policy recommendations that would better serve the incarcerated AAPI community, including the implementation of culturally competent programs, reformation of sentencing laws, reinstatement of Pell grants to fund prisoners' college educations, repeal of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and the creation of a prison-to-jobs pipeline, among others.

Officially categorized as "Others" throughout much of the prison system, AAPIs represent a population that is often overlooked. In 2013, there were 118,100 "Others" in the state and federal prison system, comprising 9% of the state and federal prison system.<sup>1</sup> During the prison boom of the 1990s, the AAPI prisoner population grew by 250%, while disaggregated data shows that certain Asian subgroups, such as Southeast Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, have significantly high rates of arrest and incarceration.<sup>1</sup> Closely tied to the rise of mass incarceration is the growth of immigration detention and deportation, which has increased for AAPIs overall, and Southeast Asian Americans in particular. In fact, Southeast Asian American communities are three to four times more likely to be deported for old convictions, compared to other immigrant communities.<sup>2</sup> Incarcerated AAPIs also experience unique challenges, including cultural stigmas, lack of community awareness, and disownment from their families.

### **ABOUT THE CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING**

The briefing was hosted by Asian Americans Advancing Justice - LA (AAAJ-LA), Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance / AFL-CIO (APALA), Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC), the National Education Association (NEA), the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) and the National Council on Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), in collaboration with the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC).

Moderated by Paul Jung, of AAAJ-LA, the panel of formerly incarcerated individuals included Naroen Chhin, I Love Movement, Philadelphia; Lundy Khoy, SEARAC, Washington, D.C.; David Kupihea, API Rise, Los Angeles; Kristopher Larsen, Formerly Incarcerated Group Healing Together (FIGHT), Seattle; Harrison Seuga, APSC, Oakland; and Eddy Zheng, APSC, Oakland.

Panelists shared stories of events that profoundly impacted their lives, from being born in refugee camps, growing up in poverty, enduring sexual abuse, and being victimized by bullying. They also stressed the importance of education both inside and outside prison walls, and called for the AAPI community to come together to fight the cycle of injustice collectively.

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“The Southeast Asian American narrative continues to be overlooked in the debate for more humane criminal justice laws. These refugee communities face overwhelmingly high rates of poverty, school push-out, mental health disorders, and criminalization, as a result of their unique history of trauma. The failure to understand these challenges have led to an increasing number of inmates being funneled from detention to deportation—a reality our lawmakers must understand if they are truly committed to creating a system of restorative justice for all.”

*Quyên Dinh, Executive Director  
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)*

“Not only do we have to work to fix our broken prison system, we have to work to fix our immigration system.”

*US Rep Judy Chu  
CA-27*

“Following the first-ever AAPI Behind Bars convening last summer, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) will continue to engage key stakeholders, allies, formerly and currently incarcerated people, as well as unions and the broader labor movement, to disrupt the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline. We must find ways to create a pathway for rehabilitation and restorative justice for individuals who are part criminal justice system. APALA will continue to prioritize mass employment and education while organizing to dismantle the mass incarceration structure that criminalizes people of color in America.”

*Gregory Cendana, National Executive Director  
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA)*

“Our incarceration rate is so big that it’s counterproductive.”

*US Rep Bobby Scott  
VA-3*

“During the past decades, we've witnessed an unprecedented number of youth of color incarcerated in this country. The current narrative lacks the visibility of Southeast Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders who are disproportionately impacted by this era of mass incarceration. And consequently, culturally relevant services at various points of contact—whether in schools, communities, jails, prisons, and immigration detention center—are severely lacking for these populations. If we truly desire a meaningful second chance for those who are directly impacted, then a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive, rehabilitative approach needs to happen now.”

*Paul Jung, Staff Attorney  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Los Angeles*

“As educators, our members are intimately aware that the model minority myth not only harms the AAPI community by preventing our schools from building the much needed infrastructure to support AAPI students, but it also contributes to the mass criminalization and incarceration of AAPI youth, which is a problem that has largely been ignored. Our legislators must address the horrible effect of broken policies and a lack of inclusion and support for this community. If we don’t talk about it, we’ll never be able to offer resources to eradicate the problem or provide opportunities accessible to all.”

*Merwyn Scott, Director of Minority Community Organizing & Partnerships  
National Education Association (NEA)*

“As a formerly incarcerated person who has spent 21 years behind bars, I am intimately aware of the detrimental impact incarceration and deportation have on me, my family, and my community. The Asian American and Pacific Islanders’ (AAPI) migration to the school-to-prison-and-deportation pipeline conflicts with the model minority myth due to cultural shame and stigma within the community. As the country is embarking on finding alternatives and solutions to mass incarceration, it is imperative that currently and formerly incarcerated people are included in the process. I hope this Congressional briefing will inspire people and policymakers to learn about the challenges of AAPIs behind bars and advocate for resources to provide disaggregated data and invest in mass education and employment for all people.”

*Eddy Zheng, Co-Chair  
Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC)*

## REFERENCES

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2. Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse [online]. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2015. Available at: [trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/court\\_backlog/deport\\_outcome\\_charge.php](http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/court_backlog/deport_outcome_charge.php). Accessed 25 August 2015.

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