



The Right to Heal: Southeast Asian American Mental Health in California

A RESOURCE FOR POLICYMAKERS

SEARAC, with support from community-based partners and individuals across California, launched *The Right to Heal* report to highlight key challenges for Southeast Asian Americans (SEAAs) in accessing mental health care in the state and to provide policy recommendations to address needs of the community. In 2019, we collected nearly 250 comments from community members and conducted community surveys, focus groups, and informant interviews throughout California. Our data demonstrate that **mental health care is not appropriate or accessible to SEAAs, and often fails to serve communities with higher rates of mental health issues and trauma due to experiences of war, genocide, and displacement.**

KEY THEMES

1. Culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health care must consider all areas of culture, intersectionality, intergenerational factors, healing, and language
2. Access to appropriate care is critical to healing and ending the cycle of trauma that also affects newer generations of SEAAs
3. Effective community solutions exist to address barriers of care, but they are not practiced or invested in widely enough

DID YOU KNOW?

SEAAs experience higher rates of mental health challenges, including major depression, PTSD, and other anxiety disorders, compared to the general population due to experiences of war, genocide, and displacement.



62% of older Cambodian adults experience symptoms of PTSD compared to 3% of the general population

75% of directly impacted respondents indicated that they were never able to receive appropriate mental health services

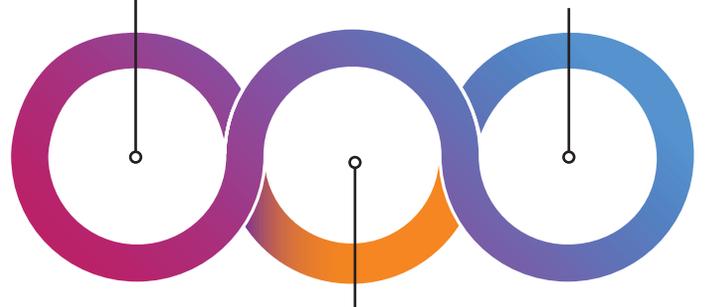
ONLY 70% Asian American and Pacific Islander mental health providers are available for every 100,000 AAPIs in the United States, with the lowest ratios of native language-speaking health care professionals for Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong Americans

THE HARMFUL CYCLE

Experiences of war, loss, trauma, and displacement can lead to:

Higher risk of clinical depression and stress

Intergenerational effects where children of refugees can develop symptoms of trauma



Experiences with financial difficulty, poverty, abuse, neglect, chronic illness, increased family stress, and decreased ability to parent

IMPACT OF (IN)APPROPRIATE CARE

- 60% of directly impacted individuals shared that the multitude of challenges they experienced discouraged them from seeking further care
- Mental health challenges have a “ripple effect” on families; intergenerational trauma caused by unaddressed mental health issues leads to more severe trauma for subsequent generations, creates difficult parent-child relationships, and fosters a culture of silence around trauma for children and youth
- Of respondents who successfully received care, 91% specifically mentioned how appropriate mental health services helped improve their conditions, and 53% indicated how it gave them a sense of hope and provided a positive outlook on mental health

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“The word for having a mental health issue in Khmer is ‘khuorkbal,’ which translates to something wrong with the brain or brainless. Growing up, my mother used the word ‘khuorkbal’ in a derogatory term which was a term that I did not want to be associated with.”

SEAA RESPONDENT

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Increase access:** prioritize targeted community education, outreach, and navigation, as well as prevention and early intervention
- 2. Invest in community assets:** recognize nontraditional mental health care providers, fund healing-centered care toward community empowerment and engagement, and support community resource hubs and integrated services
- 3. Improve quality of care:** ensure language access in resources and materials, enforce the use of skilled interpreters, disaggregate data, and increase provider diversity and cultural humility
- 4. Integrate mental health services** through school-based Adverse Childhood Experience screenings
- 5. Fund research on community-specific needs** and the development and implementation of appropriate, effective services

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For a full list of references and acknowledgements, please see the full report at:

bit.ly/SEARACRight2Heal2021