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Nicholas A. Jones

Director and Senior Advisor of Race and Ethnic Research and Outreach, Population Division  
U.S. Census Bureau

Rachel Marks

Chief, Racial Statistics Branch, Population Division  
U.S. Census Bureau

Cynthia Davis Hollingsworth

Program Manager for 2020 Census Data Products and Dissemination  
U.S. Census Bureau

**Re: Feedback on Hmong Coding in the Detailed DHC-A Proof of Concept**

Dear Mr. Jones, Ms. Marks, and Ms. Hollingsworth:

We, the undersigned 57 Hmong American; Southeast Asian American; and Asian American, Native Hawai'ian, and Pacific Islander organizations write to express our concern regarding the inclusion of Hmong under the East Asian regional group, rather than the Southeast Asian regional group, in the 2020 Census Data Products, including the upcoming Demographic and Housing Characteristics products and last year's 2020 Census State Redistricting File (Public Law 94-171) Summary File. We urge you to recategorize Hmong as Southeast Asian and, moving forward, improve how the U.S. Census Bureau conducts outreach to diverse communities to accurately assess and represent how they self-identify.

As Hmong and Southeast Asian refugee organizations, we have advocated at all levels of government for disaggregated race and ethnicity data to ensure that our communities are seen and equitably supported by public policies. Our organizations played critical roles in ensuring

our diverse communities were counted in the 2020 Census, such as providing in-language outreach and support.

### **Hmong Americans' origins are as refugees from Southeast Asia.**

Southeast Asian American (SEAA) is not only a geographic identity, but also a political identity that comes from the shared experiences of people who came to this country as refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. SEAs now number over 3 million, and the vast majority are refugees, the children of refugees, and their family members. Beginning in 1975, when the U.S. withdrew from its direct and covert military interventions, large waves of people from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam arrived in the U.S. as refugees fleeing war, genocide, or persecution. This community includes Hmong Americans. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. recruited Hmong people in Laos for the CIA's "Secret War," and upon the U.S.'s withdrawal from Southeast Asia, tens of thousands of Hmong people fled retaliatory persecution in Laos to resettle in the U.S. as refugees.<sup>1</sup> Upon enactment of the Refugee Act of 1980, the number of refugees from Southeast Asia increased exponentially, and Southeast Asian refugees made up more than half of those who sought refuge in the U.S. for the next decade. The closing of the final temporary shelter in 2004, at the Buddhist monastery at Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand, led to the final wave of Hmong refugees to resettle in the U.S. in 2004 and 2005.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Census Bureau's own data describes this history. According to the American Community Survey, nearly all foreign-born Hmong Americans migrated from Southeast Asia, which the Bureau defines as including the following countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The most recent American Community Survey estimates show that 95.6% of Hmong Americans reported Southeast Asia as their region of origin, while only 1.6% reported East Asia.<sup>3</sup>

### **Improperly categorizing Hmong Americans as East Asian conceals the inequities they experience as refugees from Southeast Asia.**

Today, SEAs continue to experience disparities across multiple measures of social, health, and economic security as a result of their refugee history and their marginalization by U.S. society. Nationwide, over 1 million SEAs are low-income, including about 460,000 SEAs who experience poverty. All SEAA ethnic groups have lower per capita incomes than average, and Hmong Americans fare worse than all racial groups across multiple measures of income. Nearly

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<sup>1</sup> See: Yam, K. (2021, July 30). Hmong Americans are often obscured by model minority myth. Why Suni Lee's win means so much. *NBC Asian America*.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/hmong-americans-are-often-obscured-model-minority-myth-why-suni-lee-n1275567> ; Rahim, S. (2022, May 16). Preserving the history of America's 'secret war' in Laos. *NBC*.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/preserving-history-americas-secret-war-laos-rcna28893>

<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asia Resource Action Center and Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles. (2020). *Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities*.

[https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC\\_NationalSnapshot\\_PrinterFriendly.pdf](https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC_NationalSnapshot_PrinterFriendly.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the American Community Survey by AAPI Data ([www.aapidata.com](http://www.aapidata.com))

60% of Hmong Americans are low-income, and more than one of every four live in poverty.<sup>4</sup> Around a quarter of SEAA adults, including Hmong Americans, aged 25 and older have not graduated high school, compared to 12% of all Asians. An additional 56% of Hmong American high school graduates have not continued to complete a bachelor's degree, compared to 32% of all Asians, an aggregate figure that includes many actual East Asian Americans, such as Taiwanese Americans (16%) and Chinese Americans (27%).<sup>5</sup>

Hmong Americans' shared migration history with and similarities in outcomes as other SEAs requires that Hmong Americans are accurately categorized as Southeast Asian by region of origin, especially if small population counts in certain areas of the country necessitate a less granular disaggregation by region of origin rather than by ethnicity. Lumping the relatively small Hmong American community – approximately 323,000 in 2020<sup>6</sup> – with much larger Asian American communities numbering in the millions, that originate from East Asia and have different histories and outcomes in the U.S., will obscure the disparities and unique challenges experienced by Hmong American and other Southeast Asian American communities. Without accurately identifying the Hmong American community, critical government programs that are reliant on these data sets will fail to identify the disparities and inequities this population experiences and meet its needs.

**The U.S. Census Bureau should improve how it engages diverse communities to accurately assess and represent how communities self-identify.**

We are concerned by the Bureau's lack of engagement of Hmong American, Southeast Asian American, and other Asian American, Native Hawai'ian, and Pacific Islander communities while developing the 2020 Census Data Products. In the Bureau's own words, the race and ethnicity questions in the 2020 Census "provide[d] ways for all respondents to self-identify their detailed identities."<sup>7</sup> However, the Bureau has not applied the principle of self-identification to its subsequent data products based on the results of the 2020 Census. We are further concerned that this issue has existed since at least 2021, when the Bureau released the 2020 Census State Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File that inaccurately categorized Hmong Americans as East Asian (see Appendix F: Hispanic Origin and Race Code List).

As members of the Hmong American, Southeast Asian American, and broader Asian American, Native Hawai'ian, and Pacific Islander communities, we request that the U.S. Census Bureau improves its engagement of our diverse communities when developing essential data sets like the Demographic and Housing Characteristics products, particularly regarding variables like race and ethnicity that are self-identified. Additionally, we request a meeting between the U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> *Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities*.

<sup>5</sup> AAPI Data. (2022 June). *State of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the United States*. <https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/State-AANHPIs-National-June2022.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of 2020 American Community Survey Five-year Public Use Microdata Sample

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021 June). *2020 Census State Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File*.

[https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/summary-file/2020Census\\_PL94\\_171Redistricting\\_StatesTechDoc\\_English.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/technical-documentation/complete-tech-docs/summary-file/2020Census_PL94_171Redistricting_StatesTechDoc_English.pdf)

Census Bureau and Hmong American leaders so that the Bureau can learn more about the Hmong American community and discuss ways to better support them.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on this critical resource for our communities, policymakers, researchers, and the public. If you would like to discuss the contents of this letter further, and to schedule a meeting with community leaders, please contact Kham S. Moua (he/him), SEARAC National Deputy Director or Anna Byon (they/them), SEARAC Director of National Policy, at [anna@searac.org](mailto:anna@searac.org).

Sincerely,

Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL)  
Freedom Inc.  
Hmong American Partnership (HAP)  
Hmong Cultural Center of Butte County (HCCBC)  
Hmong Innovating Politics (HIP)  
Hmong National Development (HND)  
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)  
Stone Soup Fresno  
The Fresno Center

**Additional Hmong and Southeast Asian Organizations**

Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE)  
Black and Brown Womyn Power Coalition, Inc.  
Cambodian American Girls Empowering  
Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia  
Cia Siab, Inc.  
Filipino Students Association at Johns Hopkins University  
Hmong American Women's Association  
Khmer Community of Seattle King County  
Khmer Girls in Action  
ManForward  
Vietnamese American Roundtable  
Wisconsin United Coalition of Mutual Assistance Associations, Inc. (WUCMAA)

**AANHPI and Non-AANHPI Organizations**

AAPI Victory Alliance  
Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF)  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - AAJC  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta  
Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote)  
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO  
Asian Real Estate Association of America  
Asian Texans for Justice

Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO)  
CAP Services, Inc.  
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)  
Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM)  
Hamkae Center  
Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce  
Japanese American Citizens League  
Johns Hopkins University Inter-Asian Council  
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association  
National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA)  
National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (NAPAFASA)  
National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA)  
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans - NCAPA  
National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (NQAPIA)  
OCA Asian Pacific Islander American Advocates Utah Chapter  
OCA Greater Chicago  
OCA Utah Chapter  
OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates  
OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates, Orange County Chapter  
OCA-Greater Washington DC, APA Advocates  
OCA, San Francisco Chapter  
Organization of Chinese Americans (Detroit Chapter)  
Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), Westchester & Hudson River Chapter  
Pacific Asian Counseling Services  
SHK Global Health  
Storied Analytics, LLC  
The Organization of Chinese American Central Virginia Chapter  
VAYLA New Orleans