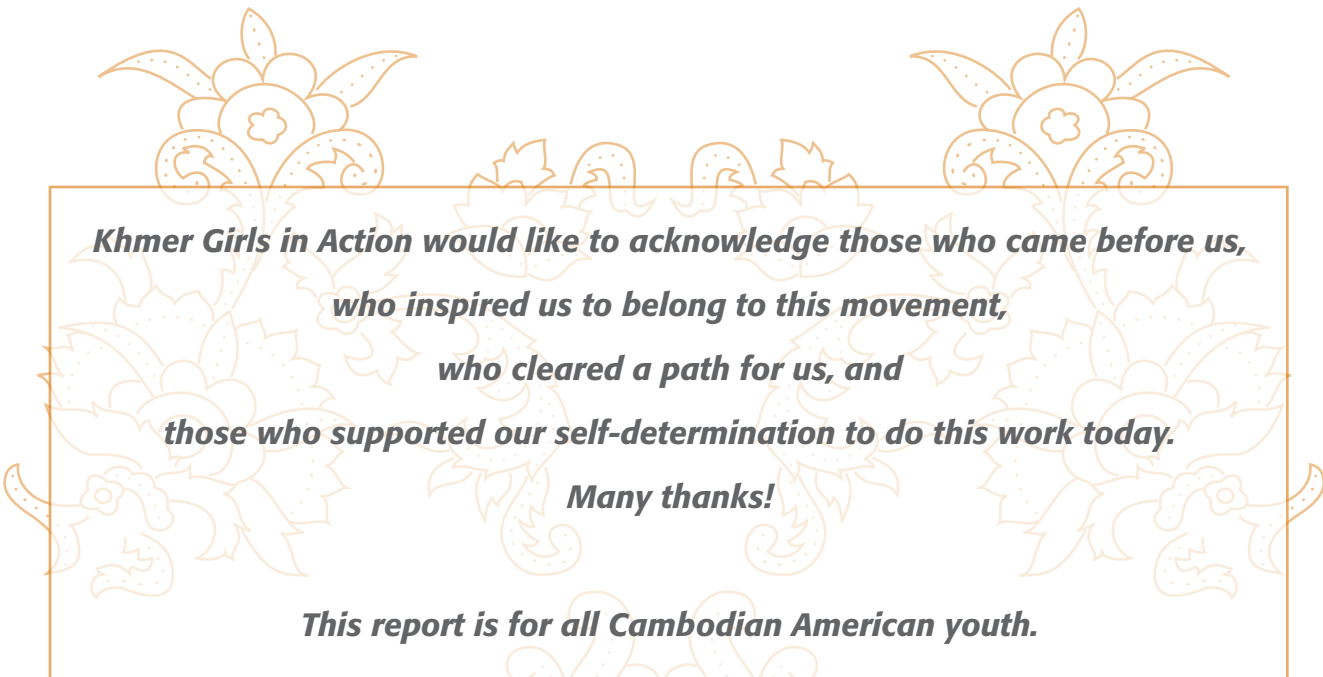




# STEP INTO LONG BEACH:

Exposing how Cambodian American youth are under resourced, over policed and fighting back for their wellness



***Khmer Girls in Action would like to acknowledge those who came before us,  
who inspired us to belong to this movement,  
who cleared a path for us, and  
those who supported our self-determination to do this work today.***

***Many thanks!***

***This report is for all Cambodian American youth.***



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Cambodian American Youth Experience in Long Beach, California

In this report we present the experiences and opinions of second generation Cambodian American youth, much of which has not been formally documented. This report is groundbreaking for a myriad of reasons. Youth developed, disseminated, and analyzed a survey of approximately 500 youth in Long Beach, California. They also conducted focus groups and analyzed and disseminated these findings as well. Their findings highlight issues that touch upon every aspect of their lives, from parental expectations to racial profiling to sex and sexuality.

As a newer immigrant community to arrive in the United States, second generation Cambodian Americans experienced unique challenges in adapting to mainstream American culture. While the Cambodian population is dispersed throughout the United States, Long Beach, California has the largest population of Cambodians outside of Cambodia. We hope that our focus on Long Beach as the research site provides insights into issues specific to all Cambodian American communities. More broadly, we hope that these issues are also applicable to all second generation youth in urban communities.

### ⇒ Demographics of Survey Sample

The survey analysis contained within this report is based on a sample of 333 of the survey respondents.

- ⇒ About 75% of the survey respondents are between the ages of 15–17 and 55% are female, while 45% are male.
- ⇒ Fifty-three percent (53%) of the survey respondents have 5 people or less in their family and 47% have 6 or more family members.
- ⇒ Only 4% of the survey respondents are immigrants, so the majority of the survey respondents are second-generation and were born in the United States.
- ⇒ Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents indicated that English is the primary language spoken at home, while 23% reported that Khmer is the primary language spoken at home.

### ⇒ Educational attainment, access and discrimination

Youth found it difficult to bridge the gaps between aspiring and being encouraged to attend college and the actual steps it takes to achieve this goal.

- ⇒ The majority of youth survey respondents reported that their parents expected them to attend and complete college. However, many of the youth and their parents lacked basic information about preparing for and attending college.
- ⇒ High numbers of youth also felt that they experienced discriminatory treatment at school. Qualitative data demonstrates that youth may have equated discrimination at school with a lack of resources and access.

### ⇒ Discrimination

Youth survey respondents experienced discrimination in many aspects of their lives, which in turn impacted their access to economic security, college attainment, and safe neighborhoods.

- ⇒ Approximately 56% of the youth survey respondents feel that the Cambodian American community faces discrimination. When asked about experiencing discrimination, Cambodian American youth surveyed feel that the Cambodian community faces discrimination within the following key areas: language (56%), job

opportunities (68%), racial profiling (73%), and education attainment (74%).

- » In regards to experiencing differential treatment based on race/ethnicity, the males surveyed were more likely to report being treated or perceived negatively based on race/ethnic group.

### » High rates of racial profiling

Racial profiling by law enforcement is often thought of as targeting African American and Latino males. However, the majority of the Cambodian American youth survey respondents had experienced racial profiling in various forms.

- » The males in the survey sample experience these specific acts of discrimination and racism at higher rates than the females.
- » Racial profiling by the police was experienced by the male survey respondents in the following ways. Approximately 39% were stopped by law enforcement, 38% were pulled over, 23% were arrested, 21% were taken to the police station, and 16% were hurt physically.

### » Deportation

Deportation is another example of discrimination and racial profiling experienced disproportionately by Cambodian American families.

- » Approximately 1 in 3 Cambodian American youth (34.7%) know someone in their family or community that has been deported or is facing deportation.
- » The deportation of one individual from a family impacts economic, familial, and housing stability.

### » High rates of depression

Youth survey respondents reported alarming rates of depression that could be linked to other mental health and health related issues such as alcohol abuse.

- » Of the survey questions that addressed health and safety issues, the youths' responses to a Center for Epidemiologic Studies Short Depression Scale (CES-D 10) about how often they felt depressed were alarming.
- » Youth survey respondents had high scores on a scientifically validated measure of depressive symptoms. This finding suggests that these youth may be at significant risk for developing or having depression.

### » Cultural Stigmas around Sex, Sexuality, and Sexual Orientation

The cultural stigmas around discussing sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation prevent youth from participating in open, honest discussions, seeking educational resources, and relying on familial support.

- » Young women, young men, and LGBTQI youth in the Cambodian American community experience cultural stigmas around sexual activity that makes it difficult to discuss sex.
- » While a large number of the survey respondents (86%) know where to get access to sex and health education, many youth don't put into practice what they know about safe sex and pregnancy prevention.
- » Since it is challenging to discuss sex or sexuality, little is known about the Southeast Asian number of Cambodian youth that identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Inter Sex (LGBTQI).

## Recommendations

In the area of Immigrant and Refugee Rights, we recommend the following:

- » Prevent continued state and federal cuts to programs that provide families with economic security, which would in turn support the sustainability and development of communities.
- » Ensure that Cambodians with low levels of English proficiency are provided with programs that ensure language access, government services that provide English language translation and interpreters and programs that assist Cambodian parents develop English language skills.
- » Provide information to parents and students about college preparation and the college application process. At a minimum, minority outreach programs such as GEAR UP and TRIO should actively recruit Cambodian American students as participants. Schools and school districts could also develop information and resources to be disseminated in Khmer to parents and students.
- » Improve high school dropout prevention programs by actively outreaching to and recruiting Cambodian youth.
- » Integrate ethnic studies into the K-12 education curriculum; specifically integrate Cambodian refugee experiences into the local education curriculum and Cambodian refugee history into special projects developed by the school district.
- » Develop and implement programs that encourage cultural competency training for school counselors.
- » Construct systematic ways in which communities can address deportation issues through legal aid services, community organizing, and community based services.

In the area of Reproductive Justice, we have the following recommendations:

- » Devote additional resources to reproductive health education beyond abstinence.
- » Evaluate existing reproductive health education available to youth in the local area.
- » Collaborate with other community based organizations to develop culturally appropriate reproductive health education curriculum in K-12 education.
- » Reject continued state and federal cuts to programs and funding streams that support reproductive rights for women, which would in turn support the sustainability and development of communities.
- » Invest funds from the Affordable Care Act to develop strategies for improving preventative care and public health education.

In the area of Health and Safety, we have the following recommendations:

- » Improve access to and knowledge of available mental health services.
- » Ensure that school staff and teachers are able to address bullying in a culturally competent manner by providing workshops.
- » Establish a local youth commission to provide input and insight on the development of local enforcement, economic development and community revitalization policy.

# FORWARD

Cambodians migrated to the United States following the Vietnam War and the withdrawal of American troops from Southeast Asia. Nearly 2 million Cambodians died from starvation, disease, and murder between 1975 and 1979 as a result of the brutal Khmer Rouge. Most Cambodians came to the United States as part of the Refugee Act of 1980.<sup>1</sup> The influx of Cambodian refugees to the United States reached its peak between 1979 and 1987, during which approximately 137,000 of the over 147,000 refugees were admitted. Nearly 60% of the refugees resettled in California (84,000), with Long Beach becoming the home for the largest Cambodian community (19,998) in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

*"I think that communities should do their own research because... we are the professionals in our own community. We know the stories, we know how things are and we know what needs to be changed."*

—Reyna Tin, age 18, youth organizer

Most Cambodians who came to the United States suffer from the effects of the war and some possess serious conditions including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and various physical ailments.<sup>3</sup> Marshall and colleagues (2005)<sup>4</sup> reported that an astonishing 62% of Cambodian refugees residing in Long Beach suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is the first and only psychiatric epidemiologic survey of Cambodian American refugees two decades after their resettlement in the United States. This is the highest level of PTSD diagnosis found amongst any group ever studied (including combat veterans). There is also data and research that suggest high rates of negative health-related, educational and developmental outcomes among Cambodian American youth, including high rates of teen pregnancy, gang involvement and dropping out of school.

The Cambodian population in Long Beach plays a critical role in how the emerging second generation develops and defines its identity, role, and contribution within the Cambodian community and broader American society and culture. While Cambodian

refugees experienced firsthand the trauma of the Khmer Rouge War, genocide and resettlement, the second generation bears the impact of this legacy while also negotiating the challenges of being youth of color in the United States.

Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) was founded in Long Beach by 1.5 and second generation Cambodian American youth and supportive community members to identify the factors that contribute to negative community conditions and to impact and determine their own solutions. KGA's mission is to build a progressive and sustainable Long Beach community that works for gender, racial, reproductive and economic justice led by Southeast Asian and Cambodian American young women. This report documents a community-based research project conducted by second generation Cambodian American youth in Long Beach and focused on gathering comprehensive data on the needs of their community.

## Methodology

This study began as a partnership between Khmer Girls in Action (KGA), the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the DataCenter in order to highlight issues facing Cambodian American youth and their families in the Long Beach community. *Khmer* means Cambodian in the Cambodian language. For the sake of clarity, throughout this report, the term Cambodian will be used to refer to people of Khmer/Cambodian descent. *Khmer* also refers to the native language and will be used throughout the report to refer to language.

The study utilized two primary methods of data collection: focus groups and an anonymous survey administered by youth to other youth within the Long Beach Cambodian community. With approval from the UCLA Institutional Review Board and the KGA advisory board, data collection began in the spring of 2009 with focus groups and continued through the spring of 2010 with the self-administered youth surveys.

Guided by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework,<sup>5</sup> KGA youth members played a critical role throughout the study, including developing a survey, collecting and analyzing survey data and sharing research findings with community stakeholders.

## Focus Groups

A total of five focus groups were conducted, three all-female and two all-male, with an average of eight participants in each group. KGA youth members examined the common themes that emerged



## Ranking

ANSWERS - HAVE SOME TIME IN PRIZE  
THE - EDGES THE BEAR  
ANSWERS - CAN INCLUDE  
SUPPORTIVE - IMPROVE  
CAN - GUNGE OPINION - ADD/TRADE



from the focus group data through a series of workshops and listening sessions, with the goal of developing a community survey to demonstrate larger trends among Cambodian American youth in Long Beach.

### Survey

With the support of KGA staff, KGA youth members developed survey questions based on the identified focus group themes, which included issues of identity, family, school experiences, and community dynamics. Additional questions of interest were added to the survey by KGA staff and UCLA partners. KGA youth members collected a total of 502 self-administered anonymous surveys from Cambodian American youth at community organizations and high schools in Long Beach. Youth survey participants were provided with an information sheet that described the study's goals, procedures, and were ensured that their involvement in the study was voluntary. The survey questions captured themes that were first identified in the focus group. Survey participants were between the ages of 13 and 19 and had at least one parent or guardian of Cambodian descent.

### Listening Sessions

A total of three post survey listening sessions were conducted to share some preliminary survey results and to capture more detailed stories and qualitative data. KGA youth leaders led and facilitated these listening sessions. Solutions were also generated during the listening sessions.

About 75% of the survey respondents are between the ages of 15–17 and 55% are female, while 45% are male. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the survey respondents have 5 people or less in their family and 47% have 6 or more family members. Only 4% of the survey respondents are immigrants, so the majority of the survey respondents are second-generation and were born in the United States. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents indicated that English is the primary language spoken at home, while 23% reported that Khmer is the primary language spoken at home.

We used STATA and SPSS for data analysis. Trends in the survey data were analyzed by KGA youth members, staff and UCLA partners. The analysis in this report is based on 333 survey respondents for which there were complete information on the survey questions.



# INTRODUCTION

## The Cambodian American Experience in Long Beach

In this report we present the experiences and opinions of Cambodian American second generation youth, much of which has not been formally documented. Within the first section, we describe the demographic contexts in which they live, an urban predominantly minority and working-class community. The complex ways in which Cambodian American youth experience education, particularly barriers to achievement and moving on to college, is documented in the next section, "Educational Attainment and Access." In the "Acculturation and Generational Issues" section, the youth surveyed and interviewed describe their connections to Cambodian culture and language and how these contribute to their racial and ethnic identities. Racialized and criminalized identities frame the next section, "Unprotected and Underserved," in which we demonstrate the high rates of racial profiling of Cambodian American youth, especially males, in Long Beach. This data could be a lens into the criminalization that Southeast Asian youth experience throughout the country along with the relatively high,

yet inadequately documented, rates of deportation and depression among our communities. Lastly, in the "Reproductive Justice" section, we present findings on the difficulties youth experience in discussing sex and sexuality, the lack of understanding/openness around LGBTQI issues, and the gaps between knowledge and practice in terms of safe sex and pregnancy prevention.

As one of the newest ethnic groups within the United States, the second generation Cambodian American population has more recently experienced issues related to adapting to mainstream American culture than other Asian American groups. While the Cambodian American population is dispersed throughout the United States, we hope that our focus on Long Beach, California as the research site provides insights into issues specific to all Cambodian American communities. More broadly, we hope that these issues are also applicable to all second generation youth in urban communities.



# FINDINGS

## Demographic Analysis/Contexts: Cambodian American community largely low income

Cambodians in resettled communities have experiences similar to those of other low-income, immigrant groups such as high levels of domestic violence,<sup>6</sup> criminal and gang violence<sup>7</sup> and low socioeconomic status. Like many Asian American households, Cambodian Americans struggle with unemployment and underemployment. A recent report from Los Angeles for A New Economy (LAANE) concludes that Los Angeles County contains “extraordinary high levels of poverty and a staggering number of residents lacking the income to meet their basic needs. . . . The situation is even more extreme in the cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach. . . .”<sup>8</sup> Asian American households have long been seen as earning higher than median income levels; however, the socioeconomic status of the Cambodian American community definitively disproves this myth.

Based on census data analysis from the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), Cambodian families possess a poverty rate of 15.4%, the second highest poverty rate for all Southeast Asian ethnic groups. Cambodians also have the highest rate of being

uninsured than any other Southeast Asian ethnic group as well as the second lowest median per capita income at \$15,953.

The Cambodian American youth survey respondents live in households where there are several income earners. About 80% of the survey respondents have 2–4 people earning income for the household and 60% of the survey respondents have 3 or more individuals in their families earning an income. While this evidence is based on survey respondents, it also gives us insights into the relatively high median family income for Cambodians in the U.S. based on the 2000 Census, which was \$43,850. In contrast, median personal income for Cambodians was \$16,000, demonstrating how median family income may be misleading. According to the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 36% of Cambodians in Southern California live below federal poverty line.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, 61% of Cambodians in Southern California live in households with extended family members such as grandparents and/or live in household with another nuclear family in addition to their own.

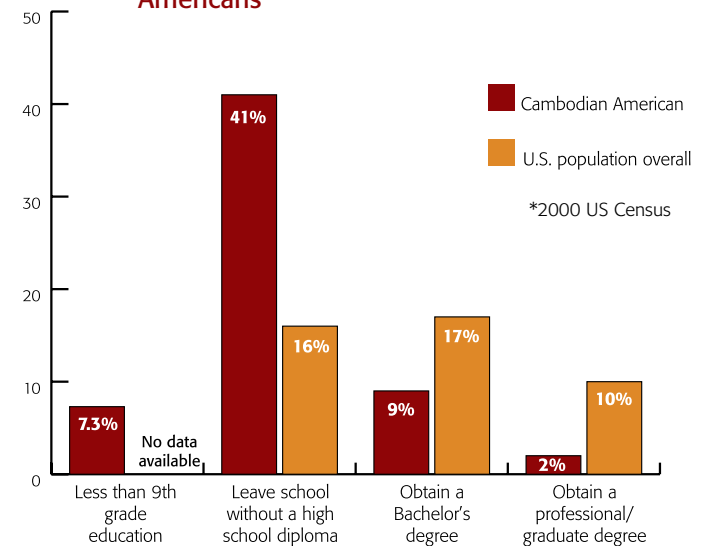
## Educational attainment and access

All young people deserve a quality public school education that provides the resources and opportunities to access a college education. According to the 2000 Census, approximately 37% of Cambodians in the United States have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education,<sup>10</sup> with 41% of them leaving school with less than a high school diploma (compared to 16% overall in the U.S.),<sup>11</sup> 9% have Bachelor degrees (compared to 17% overall in the U.S.)<sup>12</sup> and 2% have graduate or professional degrees (compared to 10% in the U.S.).<sup>13</sup>

Similar to other immigrant groups, Cambodian parents place their hopes and aspirations for a better future on their children. Approximately 97% of the youth surveyed said that their parents expect them to go to college. Along these same lines, 93% of the youth surveyed said that their parents also expected them to get good grades. Cambodian parents view the educational achievement of their children as their pathway out of poverty. While the majority of the survey respondents prioritized “being able to go to college as important,” many of the youth and their parents were unaware of the specifics regarding pathways towards and accessing higher education. Additionally, there are high dropout rates for Asian American

high school students in Long Beach, yet these are often overlooked due to the focus on African American and Latino dropouts.

**FIGURE 1. Educational Attainment of Cambodian Americans**



Youth spend the majority of their time in schools, and these should be places where they feel welcome and safe. Of the survey respondents, 47% believe that others at school assumed they spoke English poorly. Additionally, 56% of the survey respondents believe that people didn't like them. Approximately 54% of the youth surveyed also believe that they are treated unfairly and 54% believed that their friends were treated unfairly at school. Also 40% believed that they are wrongly disciplined and 33% believed that they are graded lower than they deserved.

The qualitative data demonstrates that youth may equate discrimination at school with a lack of resources and access. One youth stated the following, "The hardest part is how to pay for college. Where am I going to get the money? My family is not going to pay for college, they already have a hard time just paying the bills. If I get into college it's a miracle."

TABLE 1. Experiencing discriminatory treatment at school

Type of treatment	Percentage of youth
Others assume I speak English poorly	47%
People don't like me	56%
I am treated unfairly	54%
My friends are treated unfairly	54%
I am wrongly disciplined	40%
I was graded lower than I deserved	33%

## Acculturation and Generational Issues

Cambodian youth face different challenges as they negotiate their identity as Cambodian and American. Cambodian culture places a large importance on respect for elders and upholding cultural values. Youth survey respondents possess great respect for their parents and elders; however, they also feel strongly about being able to make their own choices and stand up for themselves. Youth of color contend with a wide array of feelings in regards to their race and culture. In Long Beach, we have found that when Cambodian American youth are surrounded by peers and a large community of the same ethnic background, they are more likely to be proud of and interested in learning about all aspects of their culture including language, food and traditions. See Table 2 below.

### Language

According to the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, 64% of Cambodians are foreign born and 56% of Cambodians are limited English Proficient. The majority of the Cambodian youth surveyed (65%) primarily speak English at home. However, a large proportion of them also understands and speaks Khmer. Within Cambodian immigrant communities, adults often depend upon their children to translate everything, from government documents to household bills.<sup>14</sup> This places a large burden and responsibility on Cambodian youth. KGA's work with Cambodian young women has shown that Cambodian American daughters are the ones who often act as interpreters for their parents, grandparents, and extended family.

TABLE 2. Expressions of Ethnic and Cultural Identity

Description of cultural connections	Percentage of respondents
It is important for me to feel connected to Cambodian culture.	69%
I feel a close to other Cambodian people.	52%
I feel a strong sense of belonging to others in the Cambodian community.	52%
If I were to describe myself to someone, one of the first things I would say is that I'm Cambodian.	69%
I am proud to be Cambodian.	85%
I feel good about Cambodian people.	72%
People from other races think that Cambodians are as smart as people of other ethnic/racial groups.	41%
People from other races think that Cambodians have made important contributions.	25%

One young woman describes these experiences:

*"It was hard because I don't know as much Khmer. I felt awkward because I can't speak it that much. When my mom had to go to housing . . . she would tell me to talk to them because it's easy for me to speak to them and understand them because she didn't understand English. I've been translating ever since I started high school."*

—Towery Chau, age 15

For the most part, grandparents and parents still speak Khmer and do so when talking to their children.<sup>15</sup> However, the youth mostly respond and talk to their parents in English.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes this results in miscommunication between generations. This puts a strain on the relationships between parents and children as the expectations for young people may be difficult to meet.

This could indicate that while a second generation of Cambodian Americans has formed, the lack of language access by parents and grandparents and their dependence on second generation youth can work to reinforce barriers to educational access and social mobility. Parents' limited English proficiency also hinders their ability to navigate the education system and ultimately undermines their ability to support their children in seeking higher educational attainment.

## Unprotected and Underserved: Health and Safety

### Discrimination

Cambodian American youth experience discrimination in many different ways, from everyday racial slights to racial profiling by law enforcement. Approximately 56% feel that the Cambodian American youth surveyed believe that they face discrimination. When asked about experiencing discrimination, Cambodian American youth surveyed feel that the Cambodian community faces discrimination within the following key areas: language (56%), job opportunities (68%), racial profiling (73%), and education attainment (74%).

The males surveyed are more likely to report being treated or perceived negatively based on their race/ethnic group. Males also report experiencing more negative behavior from peers than females, such as being teased and feeling isolated from their peers. Male survey respondents also report experiencing "threats" and "physical abuse/violence" at higher rates than females.

KGA defines safety as freedom from state, economic and gender violence that affect physical and psychological health and well-being. Bearing the impact of the intense violence and loss their parents and families experienced along with resettlement in the US, Cambodian American youth also experience negative health outcomes from criminalization, specifically racial profiling and deportation.

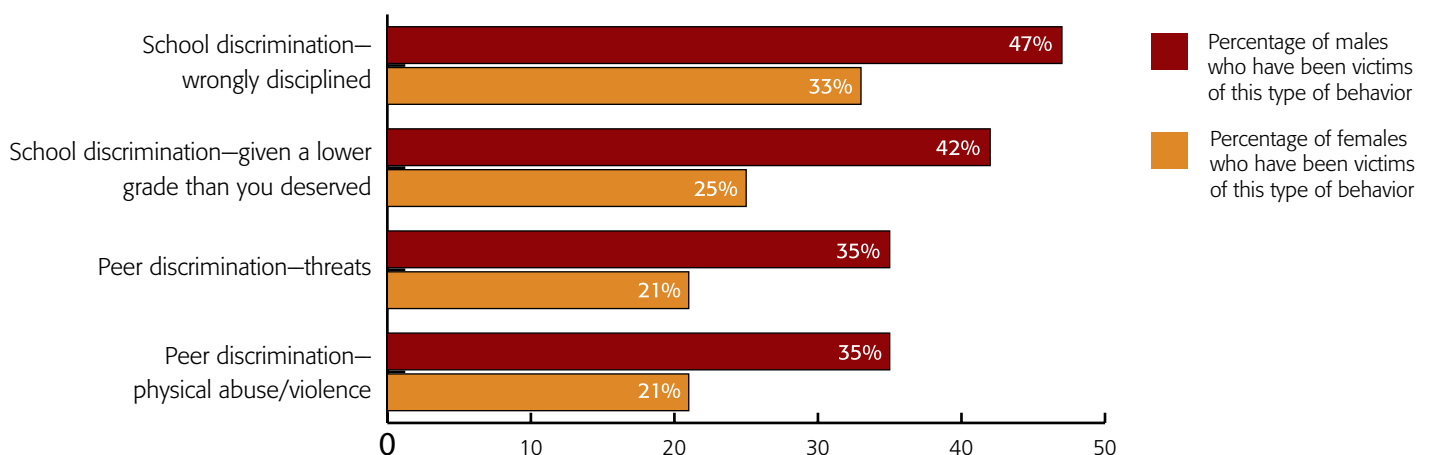
### High rates of racial profiling

Racial profiling and experiencing the negative effects of racial stereotypes occur at all levels for the male sub-group of the survey population. This occurs between peers at schools to being targeted by law enforcement because of stereotypical perceptions of Cambodian Americans.

Discussions and studies of state violence and criminalization largely focus on men; however, we seek to increase the awareness of its impact on women. While men are largely targeted, women's lives are also deeply impacted by racism and discrimination, mostly through the criminalization of young mothers of color but in other ways as well. The impact of state violence and criminalization on Cambodian and Cambodian American males also has a domino effect on the women in their lives, through loss of household incomes, the lack of presence and availability of fathers, and the missing partners, brothers, and other male relatives.

According to a 2008 Report for the ACLU,<sup>17</sup> the authors found that racial profiling targeted African Americans and Latinos at much higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group in Los Angeles and surrounding cities. Asian Americans as a group comprise 18% of the prison population. Between 1990–2000, the API prison

**FIGURE 2. Discriminatory behavior experienced by male and female youth**



population grew by 250% while the overall prison population only grew by 77%.<sup>18</sup> Cambodian American youth in Long Beach report that they consistently experience racial profiling. Cambodian American and other Southeast Asian youth experience criminalization similar to that of African Americans and Latinos.

The survey respondents experience racial profiling by the police in the following ways. One in three (1 in 3) youth are frequently stopped or pulled over by the police in the past year. The males in the survey sample experience all the negative aspects of discrimination and racism at higher rates than the females. (See Figure 3 below.)

**Deportation**

In addition to racial profiling, Cambodian Americans experience criminalization through high rates of deportation. The passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) in 1996 has had a particularly negative impact on the Cambodian American community and increased the detention and deportations of immigrants and refugees with or without documents.<sup>19</sup> (Official statistics on the number of deported Cambodians are difficult to find.) Approximately 1 in 3 Cambodian American youth (34.7%) know someone in their family or community that has been deported or is facing deportation. Mostly men are deported, but there are increasing numbers of women who are as well. While the lives of Cambodians who are deported and experiencing the removal process are greatly impacted, so are the lives of their partners, children and families. The deportation of one individual from a family upsets economic, familial, and housing stability.<sup>20</sup>

**High rates of depression**

High rates of depression are the result of consistently feeling unsafe and prone to criminalization. Of the survey questions that addressed health and safety issues, the youths’ responses to a Center for Epidemiologic Studies Short Depression Scale (CES-D 10) about how often they felt depressed were alarming.

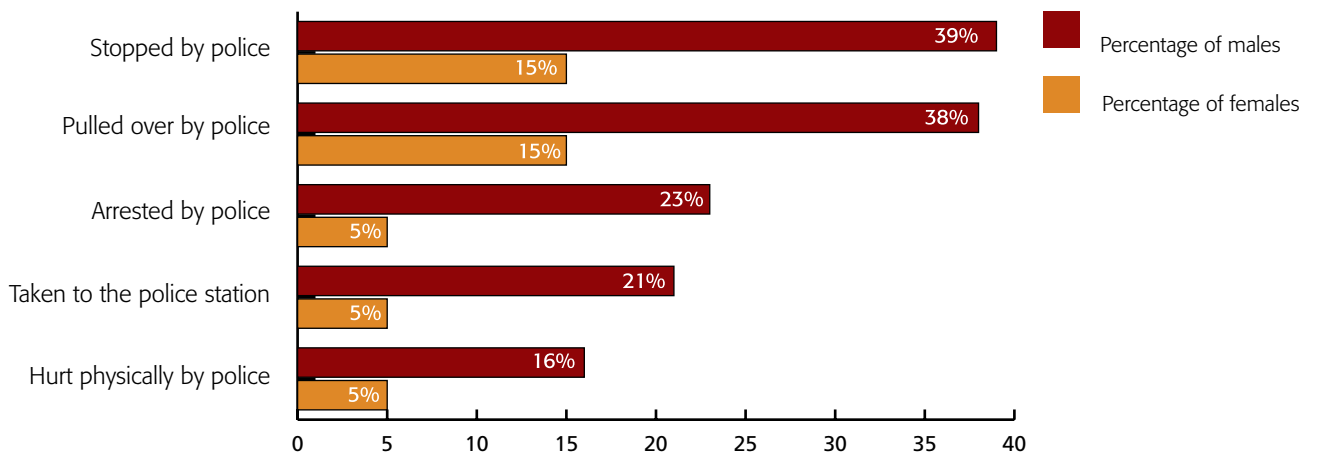
A young woman describes how she attempted to alleviate her feelings of depression with alcohol.

*“At first I tried the drinking thing but it made me more depressed and made my life worse and I took time to myself...KGA helped me, talked (to) and supported me when I was down. Take time for myself and re-evaluating what I want in my life right now...and focus on what I can do to make it better.”*

—Brittany Sibounheuang, age 15

These feelings of depression can also trigger or aggravate other health and mental health issues such as alcohol and drug abuse.

**FIGURE 3. Type of Racial Profiling by Police Experienced by Youth**



## Reproductive Justice: Opening Closed Doors

Cambodian American youth experience criminalization through deportation, racial profiling, and discrimination. Additionally, Cambodian American women experience criminalization through the policing of their bodies. The abilities of women, particularly young women of color, to own and define their sexuality, gender identity and reproductive rights is constantly challenged by discrimination, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia and ageism in the United States. Therefore, we believe that reproductive rights intersect with other areas of oppression such as gender inequalities and provide the foundation to our concept of reproductive justice. Reproductive justice is having the power and resources to make healthy and informed decisions about one's bodies, gender, sexual orientation, family and lives. Race, gender, age and class discrimination faced by young women of color are barriers to their ability to acquire services or culturally appropriate reproductive health information. KGA has also been organizing against parental notification laws, which regulate young women's rights to making their own, confidential decisions about their reproductive health.

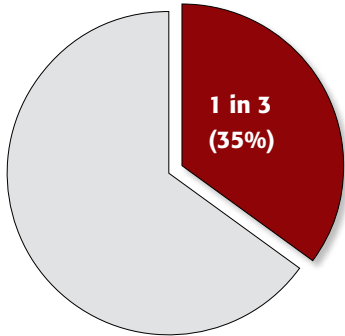
Young women, young men, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Inter Sex (LGBTQI) youth in the Cambodian American community experience cultural stigmas around sexual activity that makes it difficult to discuss sex. KGA youth members relay that their parents don't think young people should be talking about sex. For example, KGA youth members shared that sex is described negatively by their parents as well as a "bad" thing to do. One young

woman describes how these views create barriers. "I wish I'm able to talk to my family or parents about sex without it being a BIG problem. I want them to feel comfortable with me about it." Sex isn't freely or openly talked about among youth or between generations; it's considered a private matter and if you do talk about sex and sexuality, many youth believe that they are judged negatively. As a result, young people receive little to no information from their families about reproductive health or sexuality. Additionally, there are little to no resources for support, consultation and counseling and even less of these services that are culturally competent.

While a large number of the survey respondents (86%) know where to get access to sex and health education, many youth don't put into practice what they know about safe sex and pregnancy prevention. A large percentage of the female survey respondents (44.24%) know that abstinence is not the only way to prevent pregnancy, while a majority of the male survey respondents (61.65%) know this. Nearly all youth surveyed, 92%, believe that they know how to prevent the transmission of STIs, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. However, KGA has found that while many youth possess the knowledge around safe and healthy sex practices and pregnancy prevention, they do not consistently put these into practice. Additionally, while youth know how and where to access information about reproductive health, they may not feel comfortable accessing these services because of a lack of cultural competency and understanding on the part of the providers.



**Sexual Orientation**



Through our survey we found that 1 in 3 (35%) youth identify themselves or someone in their family as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Inter Sex (LGBTQI).

While it is challenging to talk about sex, it may prove just as challenging to talk openly about sexual orientation. KGA youth members think that it is hard to come out because there is shame and judgment placed on a person and his/her family if they identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Inter Sex (LGBTQI). While this subject is considered taboo, when it does get discussed, KGA youth members report that it is the norm to make fun of LGBTQI people. Youth also report that LGBTQI youth face violence and/or the threat of violence in school and within their neighborhoods.

Since it is challenging to discuss sex or sexuality, little is known about the Southeast Asian number of Cambodian youth that identify themselves as LGBTQI.

One LGBTQI youth explains why it's very difficult to come out.

*"I couldn't come out to my parents, not at this point, not even in a million years. It's frightening & scary for me to think about coming out to them about how I am. I think they would be upset & disappointed. They wouldn't accept it. . . They'd probably find ways for me to not be like that. I don't want to hide it from them, but knowing how they are, it's going to be really tough to come out. If I knew they were accepting about it in the first place I could, but hearing them talk about it with other people it's frightening. . . . Why can't Khmer parents just accept it?"*

—Anonymous LGBTQI youth





# CONCLUSION



After collecting and analyzing the youth surveys, KGA members have discovered that a variety of issues around education, health access, and violence are impacting their quality of life and ability to thrive.

Over the summer, KGA members from the Khmer Justice Program (KJP), the Youth Leadership Program (YLP), and the Young Womyn's Empowerment Program (YWEP) developed a platform that demands that all young people's wellness gets placed at the center of policy-making, decisions, and the creation of resources and opportunities in Long Beach.

Additionally we would also like to end this report with an invitation for support for our social justice campaigns. One of the ways would be to support any or all of the following recommendations in your capacity as a community member, politician, policy analyst or foundation personnel.



## Youth Wellness Platform

### YOUTH at the C.O.R.E. Creating Opportunities & Resources for Empowerment

- 1. WE WANT CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION** that reflects our community's history, diversity, and strengths (this includes ethnic studies, history, language, food & dance).
- 2. WE WANT AN ENCOURAGING AND POSITIVE COLLEGE AND 21ST CENTURY CAREER PREP** environment for all students.
- 3. WE WANT TO BE TREATED WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT** in schools and in our community (regardless of our age, race/ethnicity, or immigration status).
- 4. WE WANT COMPREHENSIVE INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO SERVICES** in our community about our bodies, genders, sexualities, relationships, and reproductive health (regardless of our age, sex, gender, or sexual orientation)
- 5. WE WANT ALL FAMILIES TO BE ABLE TO LIVE SUSTAINABLY** with access to economic opportunities, education, affordable housing, and healthcare.

STAND WITH OUR YOUTH by signing onto our Wellness Platform today.

Go to [www.kgalb.org](http://www.kgalb.org)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were written by KGA in conjunction with SEARAC based on the data gathered through this project. We hope that the issues highlighted here encourage policy advocacy and organizing and are used for these purposes.

In the area of Immigrant and Refugee Rights, we recommend the following:

- ❖ Prevent continued state and federal cuts to programs that provide families with economic security, which would in turn support the sustainability and development of communities.
- ❖ Ensure that Cambodians with low levels of English proficiency are provided with programs that ensure language access, government services that provide English language translation and interpreters and programs that assist Cambodian parents develop English language skills.
- ❖ Provide information to parents and students about college preparation and the college application process. At a minimum, minority outreach programs such as GEAR UP and TRIO should actively recruit Cambodian American students as participants. Schools and school districts could also develop information and resources to be disseminated in Khmer to parents and students.
- ❖ Improve high school dropout prevention programs by actively outreaching to and recruiting Cambodian youth.
- ❖ Integrate ethnic studies into the K-12 education curriculum; specifically integrate Cambodian refugee experiences into the local education curriculum and Cambodian refugee history into special projects developed by the school district.
- ❖ Develop and implement programs that encourage cultural competency training for school counselors.
- ❖ Construct systematic ways in which communities can address deportation issues through legal aid services, community organizing, and community based services.

In the area of Reproductive Justice, we have the following recommendations:

- ❖ Devote additional resources to reproductive health education beyond abstinence.
- ❖ Evaluate existing reproductive health education available to youth in the local area.
- ❖ Collaborate with other community based organizations to develop culturally appropriate reproductive health education curriculum in K-12 education.
- ❖ Reject continued state and federal cuts to programs and funding streams that support reproductive rights for women, which would in turn support the sustainability and development of communities.
- ❖ Invest funds from the Affordable Care Act to develop strategies for improving preventative care and public health education.

In the area of Health and Safety, we have the following recommendations:

- ❖ Improve access to and knowledge of available mental health services.
- ❖ Ensure that school staff and teachers are able to address bullying in a culturally competent manner by providing workshops.
- ❖ Establish a local youth commission to provide input and insight on the development of local enforcement, economic development and community revitalization policy.



## Endnotes/References/Citations

- 1 Quintiliani, K. 2009. "Cambodian Refugee Families in the Shadows of Welfare Reform." *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 7(2), 129-158.
- 2 United States Census Bureau, 2010 Census, Summary File 1Cached - Simil
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- 5 Wallerstein, N. and B. Duran. 2003. "The Conceptual, Historical and Practical Roots of Community Based Participatory Research and Related Participatory Traditions." *Community Based Participatory Research for Health*. M. Minkler and N. Wallerstein. San Francisco, Jossey Bass: 27-52.
- 6 Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum. *Health Brief: Cambodians in the United States*. San Francisco, CA: August 2006 (revised), page 3.
- 7 Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. The Cambodian Experience, page 5, Appendix B.
- 8 Los Angeles for a New Economy. *Los Angeles on the Edge, Part II—An Analysis of Poverty Data from the U.S. Census Bureau*. Los Angeles, CA: September 2009.
- 9 The Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps).
- 10 U.S. Census Bureau: Cambodian American Census Data. <http://www.hmongstudies.org/CambodianAmericanCensusData.html>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 A relatively small number of the youth survey respondents can understand and speak Khmer. Approximately 22% understand Khmer and 12% can speak at least some Khmer.
- 15 Approximately 88% of the survey respondents believed that their parents understand Khmer and 93% of survey respondents believe that their parents can speak Khmer.
- 16 Nearly 100% of the survey respondents understand English (89%), speak English (88%), and read and write in English (87%).
- 17 Ayres, I. and Borowsky, J. American Civil Liberties Union. 2008. *A Study of Racially Disparate Outcomes in the Los Angeles Police Department*. Los Angeles: CA, October 2008.
- 18 Oh, A. and Umemoto, K. 2009. "Prisoners" in *Encyclopedia of Asian American Issues Today*, Edith Chen and Grace Woo, Eds., ABD-CLIO, Santa Barbara.
- 19 Many Cambodian American detainees are long-term United States residents who have served prison sentences for a broad variety of criminal convictions, many of which are nonviolent and minor offenses. Under IIRAIRA, they are subject to detention. In 2002 when Cambodia and the US signed an MOU, Cambodians were then subject to deportation since Cambodia agreed to accept them, even though they have may have left their countries of origin as young children and may not speak the language or have ties there. Mellen, G. "Immigration Law Makes Deportations Easy But Life is Hard" *The Long Beach Press Telegram*, December 30, 2008.
- 20 Leitner Center for International Law and Justice, Fordham Law School. *Removing Refugees—U.S. Deportation Policy and the Cambodian American Community*, New York City, NY: Spring 2010.

# *UCC Congratulates Khmer Girls In Action*

**In your Research Project on Cambodian youth in Long Beach 2011.**

**We appreciate all your hard work and leadership  
in building a healthy environment for all Cambodian youth.**



“Honor The Past-Build The Future”

2201 E. Anaheim Street, Suite 200

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[www.ucclb.org](http://www.ucclb.org)

## **Our Mission**

Our focus is to assist the Cambodian-American population in adjusting to the changes that confront the communities at large. We are helping by bridging the gap that exists between cultures, languages and the generations.



Congratulations to  
**KHMER GIRLS IN ACTION**  
on the anticipated release of its  
needs assessment report on Cambodian youth



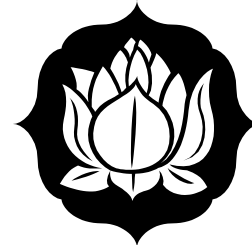
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Congratulations to KGA  
members and staff on the  
release of your report!

*In Solidarity,*



**KGA Board**

(Barbara, Lisa, Preeti, Shiu Ming)

*Thank you, KGA, for leading the way in youth organizing and community-building in Long Beach!*

**ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN  
LEGAL CENTER**



MEMBER OF  
ASIAN AMERICAN CENTER  
FOR ADVANCING JUSTICE

APALC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advocating for civil rights, providing legal services and education, and building coalitions to positively influence and impact Asian Pacific Americans and to create a more equitable and harmonious society. [www.apalc.org](http://www.apalc.org)



**API EQUALITY-LA**  
Asians and Pacific Islanders for Marriage Equality

API Equality-LA is a coalition of organizations and individuals working to build support for equal marriage rights and fair treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the greater Los Angeles Asian and Pacific Islander community.  
[www.apiequalityla.org](http://www.apiequalityla.org)



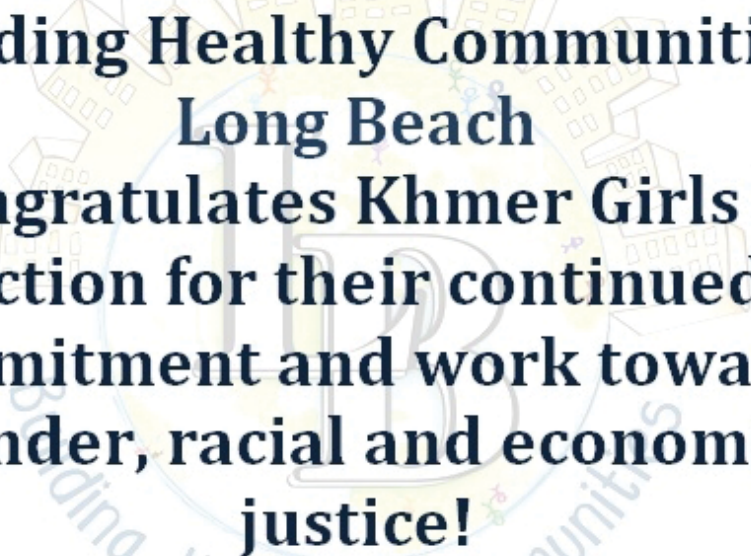
AQWA's mission is to promote the visibility and empowerment of Asian and Pacific Islander queer, lesbian women and transgender individuals and to build a supportive, progressive community through social, political and educational activism.  
[www.aqwa.org](http://www.aqwa.org)



**Asian & Pacific Islanders California Action Network**

***APIsCAN sends sincere CONGRATULATIONS to KGA  
for bold and solid work!!***

**We stand in unity.**

A large, faint watermark logo is centered in the background. It features a circular emblem with a stylized city skyline and Khmer script at the top and bottom. The text "Building Healthy Communities" is written in a light blue, sans-serif font around the bottom half of the circle.

**Building Healthy Communities:  
Long Beach  
Congratulates Khmer Girls in  
Action for their continued  
commitment and work towards  
gender, racial and economic  
justice!**

# Congratulations Fierce Sisters

*Khmer Girls in Action*

## On your groundbreaking PAR report!

With love and solidarity,  
NAPAWF-LA



**St. Mary Medical Center Families in Good Health and Educated Men with Meaningful Messages (EM3)**

**Congratulate Khmer Girls in Action for your efforts to build and maintain a strong, healthy, progressive, and sustainable community.**

**Through your dedication, you have created awareness and positive change.**



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*Warren T. Furutani  
Assemblymember, 55<sup>th</sup> Assembly District*



*It brings me great joy to congratulate the Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) on their needs assessment report concerning Cambodian youth in Long Beach. Your commitment to providing the opportunity for people to learn about and understand the issues that face and affect the youth in Long Beach's Cambodian community is commendable. This is a testament to your ability to not only serve, but to empower Cambodian Americans in the Los Angeles County.*

*The benefits of KGA releasing a youth-led research report that promotes the need for a safe and healthy environment extend far beyond the Long Beach community. This organization's prominence throughout Southern California will have a lasting, positive impact on the region as a whole. It is my hope that as KGA continues to grow, so will the opportunities of all Cambodian Americans in the Great State of California.*

*I look forward to the future with great hope, as organizations such as Khmer Girls in Action continue to demonstrate vision and leadership. I wish all of you the best of luck and congratulations.*

*Sincerely,*

**WARREN T. FURUTANI**  
Assembly Member, 55<sup>th</sup> District



SEARAC congratulates  
**Khmer Girls in Action**  
on publishing its report,  
*Khmer Youth Survey Results!*

*Advancing the interests of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans by empowering communities through advocacy, leadership development, and capacity building to create a socially just and equitable society.*

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Congratulations, **KGA**, on your amazing work! Thank you for being such inspiring researchers and leaders. You all are awesome!

With respect and solidarity,

Tu-Uyen Nguyen





**UCLA** Asian American Studies Center

*Congratulations to Khmer Girls in Action on the publication of your historic report "Friends of Khmer Girls in Action", a comprehensive needs assessment report on Cambodian youth in Long Beach, CA.*


*The report is timely, significant, and a much needed resource for community leaders, researchers, students, and policymakers.*

*To information for empowerment!*

*-UCLA Asian American Studies Center  
www.aasc.ucla.edu*

*"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.  
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."  
-Arundhati Roy*

**Congratulations  
Khmer Girls in Action!**



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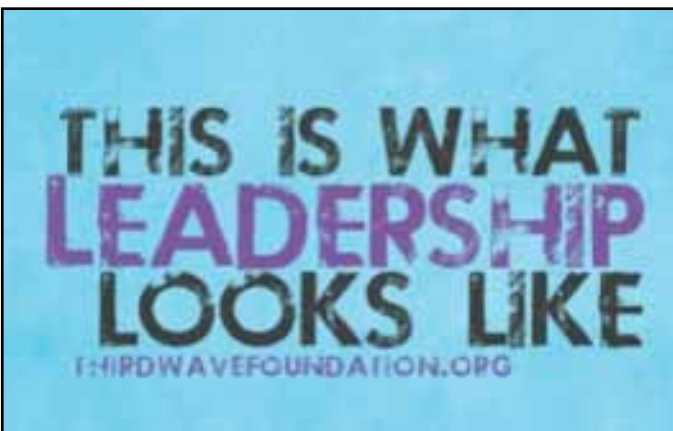
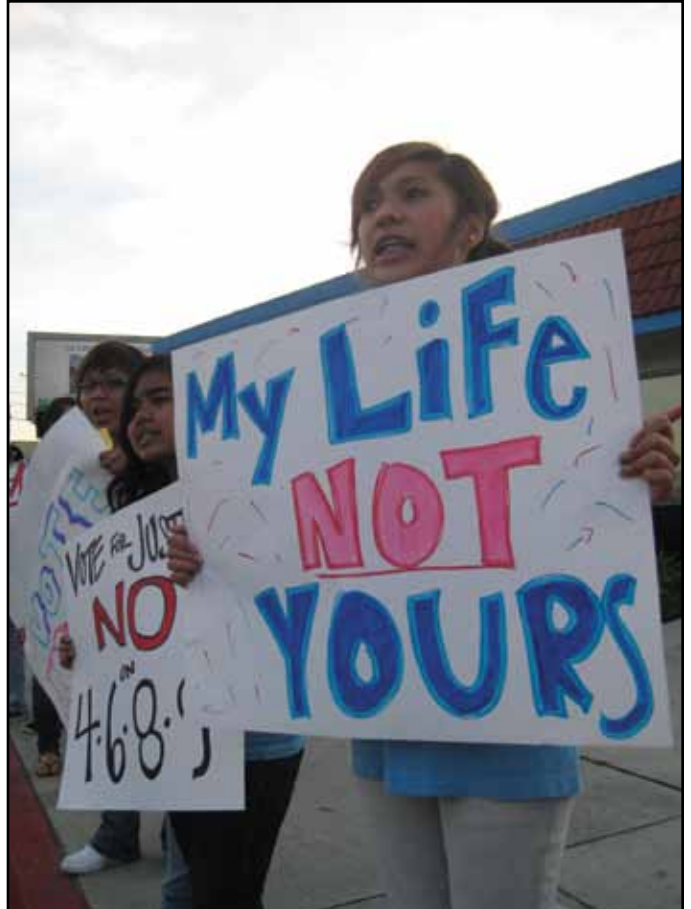
***CPA salutes Khmer Girls in Action for your relentless work in organizing for progressive social change. Congratulations on completing this exciting & important research and report!***

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congratulates Khmer Girls in Action on the release of your youth-led research report. We're proud to be part of the youth organizing movement for social justice in Long Beach.

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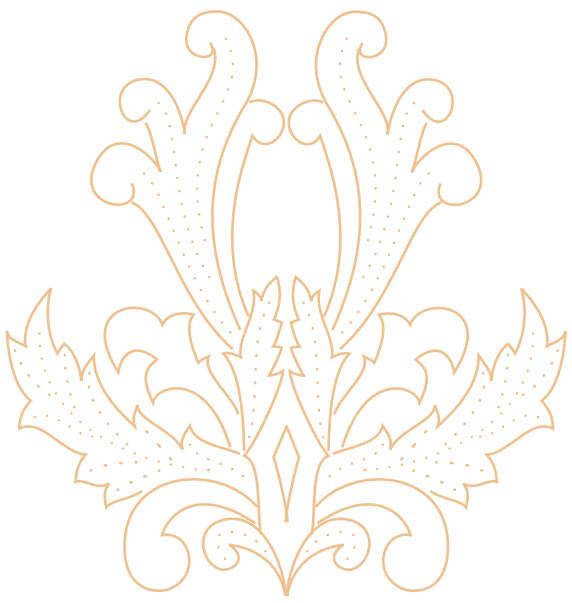
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*Congratulations Khmer Girls in Action!*

*DataCenter was honored to work with you on the Khmer youth report!*



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