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Southeast Asian youths at risk, study concludes

Data on Vietnamese, Laotian arrests challenges stereotype of 'model minority;' language barrier plays a role

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A newly released study on youth crime in Richmond shatters the so-called "model minority myth," by showing high crime rates among Southeast Asians.

At a press conference Friday, a diverse coalition of community leaders including Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia and Richmond Mayor Irma Anderson said the study's findings revealed that Vietnamese and Laotian families in Richmond are isolated by language barriers and little understanding of social systems.

As a result, the families struggle economically and their children are performing poorly in school. They are also more likely to get involved in crime. Vietnamese and Laotian youth are arrested on a per capita basis more than any other ethnic group besides blacks, according to the study.

"Before now, Southeast Asians have always been compared to Chinese and Japanese, who are usually associated with over-achievement," said Sang Saephan, 21, a member of Southeast Asian Leaders. "This study gives a better idea of how each subgroup is doing."

While Southeast Asian youth represent a small part of Richmond's population, there are about 500 Southeast Asian juveniles in Richmond, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

The study points to a disturbing trend that was previously unknown, presenters said. In the West Contra Costa Unified School District, about 48 percent of ninth-grade Vietnamese students scored at or above the national average, while 43 percent were well below the average. Many Laotian students, 69 percent, failed to achieve average scores.

Saephan said Southeast Asians are having difficulty assimilating into American culture largely because they have only been immigrating to the United States for the past 30 years. The Japanese and Chinese have been immigrating to the United States since the 19th century and have well established community support systems that ease the transition for new arrivals.

"I hope this study can raise awareness about issues in the Southeast Asian community," Saephan said. "And hopefully it will result in more programs that can help them make the transition to American culture."

Gioia said the study could result in programs that end linguistic isolation, including employment information for parents and culturally specific after-school programs and activities for their children.

"The study shows a clear relationship that exists between poverty, academic achievement and crime," he said. "It's clear that the earlier we intervene in the lives of at-risk youth, we can increase the likelihood of a better outcome in that child's life."

The \$25,000 study, titled Hidden Challenges, was sponsored by the Southeast Asian Youth and Family Alliance and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. It took 18 months to complete and uses statistical information from the Richmond Police Department, West Contra Costa Unified School District, the county probation department and the 2000 U.S. Census.

The study was inspired by the death of 15-year-old Chan Boonkeut, an honor student who was shot in the head when she answered the door of her Richmond home. The alleged target was a family member who reportedly was affiliated with a Southeast Asian youth gang.

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