Incarceration:
Asian and Pacific Islanders

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

Binghamton University
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Introduction

Asian and Pacific Islanders inside prison are an invisible population in the United States, incarcerated behind bars without a voice. Time and time again, these individuals are casted away and forgotten, shuffled inside the criminal justice system and sentenced to a dehumanized isolation from the “outside” world...

Inside their incarceration, stories and experiences are seldom talked about. Asian and Pacific Islander inmates in the prison-industrial complex are too often unexamined and overlooked as a critical problem, and continue to be marginalized and under-represented as a result. Moreover, an inherent lack of information and attention from mainstream news media, legal studies and academia, utter neglect from their own communities, language, culture, and family background represent some notable problems. As such, an ambiguous space occupies the middle filled with unasked questions: Who are the Asian and Pacific Islanders inside prison? What are their backgrounds, stories, and experiences? Why has their prison population increased? And what kinds of resources are available in and out of prison?

“The United States is the world's leader in incarceration with 2.3 million people currently in the nation's prisons or jails – a 500% increase over the past thirty years.”

- Incarceration Project
Popularly conceptualized as the model minority, Asian and Pacific Islanders are not exempt from the increasing prison population in the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population skyrocketed by 250 percent—an unprecedented rise in the prison population in their history. In addition to increasing incarceration rates, deportation has also increased in dramatic numbers, particularly in the Asian and Pacific Islander community. Unfortunately, the terms “Asian” and “prison” have only been a recent phenomenon in both criminal justice and legal studies. Relevant search results on the Internet and any academic database available evidently demonstrates that there are a shortage of articles and studies dedicated to research and study of Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners. Crime statistics, in particular, have included Asian and Pacific Islanders commonly as “Other” or lumped into a category that does not adequately address diversity. While there exists a copious amount of information about racial disparities and other ethnic minorities, Asian and Pacific Islanders remain to be often excluded from the important conversation and dialogue.

At the heart of the issue, there is a substantial lack of information. The first step is to take the bold initiative to learn about these individuals and listen to their background, stories, and experiences. With this knowledge, further research and education needs to be done to appropriate resources to meet and address the needs of Asian and Pacific Islanders in prison to limit future incarceration.

“Between 1998 and 2006, there was a 61.6 percent increase in total deportations of people of Asian nationalities.”

- Asian Prisoner Support Committee
About the project

“Incarceration: Asian and Pacific Islanders” is an educational project and study conducted by Johnny Thach as a part of the Community Engagement Program (CEP) in the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies (DAAAS) at Binghamton University, also known as the State University of New York at Binghamton.

Johnny Thach is a senior undergraduate student enrolled at the State University of New York at Binghamton majoring in Asian and Asian American Studies. In his sophomore year, he transferred from American University in Washington, DC, where he had studied Law and Society and criminal justice and worked with many student organizations.¹

For one semester, this project concentrated on Asian and Pacific Islanders and incarceration in the prison-industrial complex. In an underserved field of study, this project exists as a potential stepping-stone and an honest effort from a college student to learn about the prisoners’ lives and struggles.

The project has three primary goals:

1. Promote voice in a public space
2. Create awareness on-campus with students about the increasing incarceration and deportation of Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners
3. Publish information and resources that can be of service to an outside audience

¹ Class of 2012 and could be reached at jthach1@binghamton.edu.
Purpose and focus

This guide is a compilation of useful and relevant information and resources for the reader that may help to better understand some of the critical or underlying reasons behind Asian and Pacific Islanders and incarceration, and the fundamental lack of information towards the field of study.

In time, I hope that with the use of this guide, legal studies and academia will also be available to address the growing number of Asian and Pacific Islanders inside prison and the rise in deportation. Most importantly, this guide could be utilized as a solid resource to promote awareness and advocate for meaningful dialogue and discussions, both of which are much needed.

I have included the interviews of two prominent figures: Eddy Zheng and Terry Park. Both of which have been extremely generous to donate their time and talk about their extraordinary to inspirational stories and experiences either as a former prisoner or teacher. In order to promote a voice and create awareness in a public space, I organized a compelling and artistic campus event, “Re-telling of Eddy Zheng: Former Prisoner, Community Leader, Advocate” and re-read one of his poems, “Autobiography@33,” and constructed a galleria timeline about his life from immigrant to prisoner. Third, I published an article in Asian Outlook to arouse awareness about Asian and Pacific Islanders and the prison-industrial complex with a concentration on higher education.

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2 Asian Outlook is the literary, cultural, and activist student-run campus publication on Asian and Asian American issues.
**Community Engagement Program** is a structured course-based platform directed by Professor Lisa Yun that cultivates and supports students with a passion for service, success, and self-development. The Program offers a unique opportunity to bridge traditional “classroom” education with “real world” application via direct interaction with mentors, groups, organizations, and institutions. There are two components to the Program: to educate the campus and public about some aspect of Asian American communities, and to culminate in a final project or study that can be accessed by the academic body and general public via a publicly available database, collection, or paper.

For more information: [http://www2.binghamton.edu/aaasp/undergraduate/community.html](http://www2.binghamton.edu/aaasp/undergraduate/community.html)
Chapter 1

Little research to date has been done about Asian and Pacific Islanders and incarceration. However, the first step is to examine and understand the intricate connection between the present-day Asian and Pacific Islander population in the United States and the number of people behind bars as a result of the prison-industrial complex.

I. Who are Asian and Pacific Islanders?

“Asian and Pacific Islanders” has been defined and measured in many different, diverse, and complicated ways. According to the U.S. Census Bureau:

“Asian” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as Asian or reported entries such as Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Other Asian or provided other detailed Asian responses.

“Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as Pacific Islander or reported entries such as Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, and Other Pacific Islander or provided other detailed Pacific Islander responses.
II. What is *incarceration*?

Incarceration is the confinement or detention in a jail or prison as a punishment or sentence for a crime that had been committed.

III. *Behind bars in the United States*

The United States has over 2.3 million people behind bars, which is more than any other country in the world. In addition, more than 1 in 100 American adults are behind bars.³ Although the United States only has less than 5 percent of the entire world’s population, it represents an astounding one-fourth of all prisoners in the world.⁴

“More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities... three-fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color.”

- The Sentencing Project

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³ Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7270607.stm
IV. Population

The Asian and Pacific Islander population has been increasing exponentially. In the 1990 Census, only 6.9 million resided in the United States. According to the 2010 Census, there are now over 18.5 million Asian and Pacific Islanders living in the United States, more than at any other time in the nation’s history. This number represents a 46 percent population growth from 2000 to 2010. Asian and Pacific Islander population growth has surpassed that of any other racial group, including both Latino/as and African Americans. Out of the nation’s total population, Asian and Pacific Islanders make up 6 percent:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td>308,745,538</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>231,040,398</td>
<td>74.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>42,020,743</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>5,220,579</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asian and Pacific Islander</strong></td>
<td>18,546,051</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Other Race</td>
<td>21,748,084</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total population is equal to the number of respondents. In the 2010 Census, there were 308,745,538 respondents. The total of all race categories alone or in combination with one or more other races is equal to the number of responses; therefore, it adds to more than the total population. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Table P1.
V. Concentration of Asian Americans

California and New York are the two states with the highest number and concentration of Asian Americans in mainland United States. Both states are historically satellite states for early Asian immigration with the Angel Island and Ellis Island. One also cannot underscore the historical importance of Hawai‘i.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. States</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>5,556,592</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>1,549,494</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>1,110,666</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>795,163</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawai‘i</td>
<td>780,968</td>
<td>57*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>668,694</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>604,251</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Community of Contrast, AdvancingJustice.org and U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.
*Over 57 percent of Hawai‘i’s total population is Asian American, making it the country’s only majority Asian American state

San Francisco Chinatown in early 1900s
VI. Fastest growing racial group

Asian and Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing racial group/ethnic minority since discriminatory immigration quotas were removed in 1965. According to the 2010 Census, the Asian American population in the United States increased 46 percent between 2000 and 2010, not including Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, which is faster than any other racial group nationwide. South Asians, including Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Indians, also had the highest rates of growth:

![Percent Population Growth Chart]

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2010 Censuses.
*By Race and Hispanic Origin

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5 1965 Immigration Act removed the national origins system, which had limited many Asian and Pacific Islanders from immigrating to the United States.
VII. High percentage of foreign-born or immigrants

Asian and Pacific Islanders have a high percentage of foreign-born or immigrants in the United States. Immigrants continue to come to the United States from Asia represented by large numbers of immediate relatives, family-sponsored and employment-based programs. According to the Census Bureau’s 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year estimates, approximately 60 percent of Asian Americans had been born outside the United States, which is a rate higher than that of Latino/as, African Americans, and non-Hispanic Whites. In fact, between 2000 and 2009, one in three of the 10.6 million Asian and Pacific Islanders are foreign-born that entered the United States. Accordingly, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Bangladeshis, Indians, Taiwanese, and Pakistanis have the highest percentage of population who are foreign-born:

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey, 3-Year Estimates
*By Race and Hispanic Origin, United States 2007 to 2009
VIII. Growing Incarceration

Not only has the Asian and Pacific Islander population been significantly increasing in alarming rates, but also the number of Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population, in both the federal and state levels, has been increasing in dramatic numbers:

- According to Sheila A. Bedi in “The Constructed Identities of Asian and African Americans: A Story of Two Races and the Criminal Justice System,” just alone in the past ten years, Asian and Pacific Islanders have experienced their incarceration rate quadruple (184).
- Among the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners in California, the largest percentages are Vietnamese and Filipino, followed by Pacific Islander and Laotian.6
- According to the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, over the recent years the criminal justice system and pressing immigration policies have increasingly criminalized Asian and Pacific Islanders and other communities of color.
  - In California, one study found that 64.6 percent of the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners were made up of immigrants and refugees.
  - In 2004, the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population in the United States totaled 12,799, a perceptible 30 percent increase from 9,825 in 1999.
- Asian and Pacific Islander inmates have the highest proportion of violent crime offenses compared to other racial groups.
- According to the 2010 Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), the total violent and

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serious violent victimizations have decreased to 18.7 million, about a 34 percent drop from 2001, their lowest levels since 1993.\(^7\)

\(^7\) This fact is much speculated, because the decrease in the total of violent and serious violent victimizations does not match the increase in incarceration rates in the United States, especially for Asian and Pacific Islanders that are experiencing the highest incarceration rates in their history.
Explanations

I. Small population

Despite the proportional growth of the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population inside, Asian and Pacific Islanders still represent only 1 percent of the total prisoner population and experience the lowest incarceration rates disproportionately less than blacks and Latino/as. On the surface, the small population is easily overlooked and treated as a minor problem, and the common belief that there is no need or problem for society to examine. However, the reality is that the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population has been increasing and the voices of the 1 percent still remain hidden and unexamined. Marginalized, these prisoners need to be treated also as people that exist inside prison rather than invisible. Unfortunately, with the stigmatism that surrounds prison and crime—in many cases even their own community rejects them. There are some intermittent factors that contribute to their incarceration that should be considered in order to understand the growing Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population.

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8 Source: http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/magazine/issue-14-spaces/inside-men. Despite the small population, we cannot overlook them; they deserve a voice and equal attention as any other groups.

9 Because of cultural expectations and shame, often times Asian and Pacific Islanders can be rejected by their family and community. Particularly, the community, especially because of the model minority stereotype tends to ignore the fact that Asian and Pacific Islanders are in prison and commit crimes in order to upkeep the model citizen image. This does not apply to all, though. Many families are supportive and caring amidst incarceration of a family member.
II. Racial Paradigm

In the United States, there exists a racial paradigm that imagines race as a binary concept that is either black or white.

Particularly, Bedi in “The Constructed Identities of Asian and African Americans: A Story of Two Races and the Criminal Justice System” elaborated:

“The criminal justice system is inherently racialized because people of color and new immigrants are disproportionately represented as both victims and perpetrators of crime. [In citing Paula Johnson] not only is race used to identify criminals, it is embedded in the very foundation of our criminal law. Race helps determine who the criminals are…” (182).

The specific notion of a race imaginary of a black-white dichotomy is being reinforced in the criminal justice system and also in legal studies and academia, and subsequently limits people’s understandings and willingness to engage in meaningful social and social discussions about Asian and Pacific Islanders’ presence in the criminal justice system in the United States. Rather, Asian and Pacific Islanders are excluded, devalued, and there exists an inherent racial disparity. Asian and Pacific Islanders are considered as “Others,” which has increasingly been evident in national crime

10 Similarly, Robert S. Chang in “Disoriented: Asian Americans, Law, and the Nation-State” in his discussion about the black/white racial paradigm mentions that “this notion of race limits people’s understandings and willingness to engage with the history and current situation of Asian Americans in the United States” (11).
statistics and data, especially in treating Asian and Pacific Islanders as the criminal offenders.

On the other hand, the criminal subculture is divided in association between whites and blacks. Blacks or African Americans, and most recently Latino/as, are contrasted in opposition to the constructed white racial subject. The nation’s two main crime measures, the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) both highlight comparative data between whites and blacks while incorporating the “Other” category that is composed of “composed of Asian Pacific Islanders, and American Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos, if only one of these races is given”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most serious offense</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Hispanic origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All offenses</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent offenses</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property offenses</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor vehicle theft</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stolen property</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug offenses</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other unspecified</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order offenses</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other public order</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other offenses</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Corrections Reporting Program, 2009 - Statistical Tables, Table 4. New court commitments to state prison, 2009: Offense, by sex, race, and Hispanic origin

*http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=2174
The prison-industrial complex itself is a procedural institution influenced by race and gender categorization. Race itself is an identity inside prison that strongly determines social group affiliation. Asian and Pacific Islanders have historically also pitted against whites in cases of naturalization, anti-miscegenation laws, and immigration restriction and then reform. Asian and Pacific Islanders have been treated in racial subordination to whites—first that they were barred from testifying in court and second, segregation in schools. While this kind of race-based discrimination towards people of color has decreased, it still affects many parts of our public institutions. As the United States is a historically immigrant country, we must also consider Asian and Pacific Islanders in all forms of discussion and avoid misrepresentation. Not including them in discussion is dangerous with the possibility of leaving out a particular prison population that faces unique struggles and challenges.

EXAMPLE: From the beginning, a suspect would be identified by his/her race, color, and other external features. Throughout the entire booking process, it follows a similar trend of race and gender categorization. Not to mention crime statistics in its perpetuation.
III. Model Minority Myth

Dylan Rodriguez in “Asian-American Studies in the Prison Industrial Complex” emphasized:

“…the lever through which Asian-American decriminalization obtains its social truth—vis-à-vis a self-fulfilling white social imaginary that claims to witness, and subsequently proclaims the creeping ascendance of studious, law-abiding Asian minorities—is the same cultural/political fulcrum that historically militarizes white civil society against its more ominous Black/Brown racial antagonists and cultural pathogens” (251).

Asian and Pacific Islanders have often been disassociated with crime due to the model minority myth implicating that they are not a disadvantaged ethnic group in the United States. Robert S. Chang in “Disoriented: Asian Americans, Law, and the Nation-State” described a national poll conducted by the Wall Street Journal and NBC News in the spring of 1991 that found, “the majority of American voters believe that Asian Americans are not discriminated against in the United States” and “believe that Asian Americans receive too many special advantages” (48). In fact, the myth ignores any present-day discrimination. It also assumes that there is equal opportunity and status. The model minority myth assumes that all Asians in the United States are success stories that overcame discrimination with high academic achievements and low crimes rates, and subsequently consider them to be the least likely to commit deviant behavior and crimes. Criminological data and research further reinforce this stereotype. Thomas L. McNulty and Paul E. Bellair in “Explaining racial and ethnic differences in
serious adolescent violent behavior,” found that Asian youth are significantly less likely to be involved in serious acts of violence and live in less structurally advantaged and more stable communities. In reality, the stereotype is fallible, because not all Asians are the same and do not have the same benefits and backgrounds. Yet, the model minority myth only illuminates the success of a few Asians and ignores the blatant negatives that are also in association. If Asians are not considered as criminals and there is a lack of availability of information, then resources will also be disproportionate to fit their needs:

According to David L. Eng and Shinhee Han’s “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia”:

“Those Asian Americans who do not fit into the model minority stereotype (and this is probably a majority of Asian American students) are altogether erased from—not seen in—mainstream society. Like Kingston’s grandfather in China Men, they are often rejected by their own families as well” (62).

Under the model minority myth, Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners are significantly marginalized and treated as non-existent in the system, and also ostracized from their own communities, even though they do and need to be heard.
IV. Overt and Covert Discrimination

Another level that creates discrimination towards Asian and Pacific Islanders is the concept of overt and covert discrimination. 1965 marked a critical watershed period in the history of Asian and Pacific Islander history. Under the 1965 Immigration Act, the United States lifted restrictions on immigration and naturalization that subsequently led to the dramatic rise of the population of Asian and Pacific Islanders in the country. In addition, pre-1965 had been marked as a regulatory restriction and exclusion period in history that represented overt discrimination towards Asian and Pacific Islanders. For example, the “yellow peril” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers in particular and excluded them based on their race. The National Origins Act of 1924 further restricted Asian and Pacific Islanders based on their origins and limited the amount of Asians who could enter the country from any Asian country to 2 percent of the number of people already residing in the United States. Furthermore, the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 continued to restrict Asian immigration and naturalization.

In contrast, the Immigration Act of 1965 and subsequent immigration reform led to an increase of immigrants from Asian countries and into a period that represented covert discrimination in that it did not become as apparent that Asian and Pacific Islanders are discriminated and leads into subtle and invisible issues. Asian and Pacific Islander incarceration is one of these issues. Yet, these subtle and invisible issues still exist and affect their communities, even though they might not be visible in mainstream news media and other sources of information.
V. Refugee and Immigrants

According to Angelo N. Ancheta in “Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience,” two out of three Asian Americans are immigrants (85). However, Asian and Pacific Islanders needed to be treated in consideration that while a large population are immigrants, inside that population as refugees, a particularly different group. According to the United States Department of Homeland Security, refugees are persons who came to the United States to escape persecution in their country of origin. Refugees are immigrants who applied for admission while living abroad, while asylees are immigrants who applied for admission at either a port of entry or within the United States. One particular distinction that differentiates refugees and asylees from immigrants is that they do not come to the United States by choice. Many of them are forced to leave, because of various conditions in their home country that force them to leave. Events following the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, led to the mass departure of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

In “Between Two Cultures: Struggles of Vietnamese American Adolescents,” Peter Van Do attributes the struggles of second-generation Vietnamese Americans and their subsequent deviance and youth rebellion to the inability to adapt to American culture and a generational and culture gap that separates them from their parents:

“...parents were the major focus of criticism of these second-generation Vietnamese Americans. Lack of knowledge of their ethnic culture, parental strict behavior, and emotional support were stressed as core problems, while most urged greater understanding across the generational gap” (7).
Parents struggle with work and earning a living, the English language, and the culture, rules, and standards; as a result, many parents often push their children to work harder in school and have high expectations of them to do well in school and understand their struggles to both come to the United States and make a living for the family, but lack words of encouragement and understanding about the struggles the second-generation Vietnamese American youth face (9-10). American culture also often conflicts with traditional Vietnamese culture in that American culture teaches about being more outspoken and opinionated, while the latter teaches listening and being obedient at home and to older people (10).

Inability to for parents to understand and also for them to adapt to the American education system, language, and culture, leads many youths to participate in gangs and juvenile delinquency and dropout due to poor school performance and grades. These factors represent a significant struggle that affects second-generation Vietnamese American youth to assimilate in the United States.

Southeast Asians remain relatively disadvantaged. Although the United States had originally offered extensive refugee assistance and relief for Southeast Asian refugees, due to the changing role of refugees, many of the programs had been liquidated by state and federal legislatures. The result led to increases in unemployment and poverty in the Southeast Asian communities:

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12 In “Punishing the ‘Model Minority’ Asian-American Criminal Sentencing Outcomes in Federal District Courts” by Brian D. Johnson and Sara Betsinger (2009), the two authors describe that while East Asians (Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans) tend to have the highest socioeconomic and educational outcomes, Southeast Asian groups tend to be relatively disadvantaged.
According to Eric Tang’s “Collateral Damage”:

“A recent story conducted in the northwest Bronx—home to over 85 percent of New York City’s Southeast Asian community—reveals a 65 percent unemployment rate in this community. In California, newspaper headlines announce a new wave of Southeast Asian gang violence, as well as a rapid increase in the number of Southeast Asian prison inmates” (462).

Problems and difficulties in refugee adaptation and assimilation played an important role based on understanding their background and history as well as treating them with unique characteristics that differentiate them from immigrants. Accordingly, Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, Pakistanis, Vietnamese, and Bangladeshis have the highest unemployment rates in the Asian and Pacific Islander community for those 16-years-old and older. Hmong, Bangladeshi, Cambodian, Pakistani, and Vietnamese Americans also have the highest poverty rates. As such, one can appropriate specific needs and programs to help Southeast Asians in which many of whom are refugees and asylees.
VI. Language Restriction

Ancheta in “Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience” wrote:

“English-language acquisition is also a problem for Asian immigrants because of the major differences in syntax, intonation, and vocabulary between English and many Asian languages; elderly immigrants in particular often attain little more than minimal capability in English. The major political constraint on English language acquisition is the low priority given to funding for adult ESL classes. Because of inadequate resources among school districts and community college districts, waiting lists for ESL classes in some cities have numbered in the tens of thousands” (109).

According to the 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, about one-third or approximately 32 percent of Asian Americans are “limited-English proficient” or LEP and have some difficulty communicating in English. In some communities, nearly half are LEP; limited-English proficiency is defined as persons who speak English less than “very well.” According to the 2000 Census, Southeast Asians, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs are considered underrepresented Asian ethnic groups that have the highest language difficulties, with Vietnamese at 62.4 percent as English spoken less than “very well.” One exception is Chinese at 49.6 percent with limited-English proficiency.

13 “Limited-English proficient” is the actual definition of the term; it is a term not well defined and leaves ambiguity with that particular definition.
14 Cited from A Community of Contrasts, Asian Americans in the United States: 2011, a report conducted by the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice
Non-English speakers often suffer many disabilities and treated as inferior and unwelcome, because of the dominance of the English language. In addition, with limited-English proficiency, often times there are barriers in language and communication. All of this can lead to subordination and underrepresentation of the Asian and Pacific Islander community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Foreign-born</th>
<th>English spoken less than “very well”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(%) of total A/PI</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Asians</td>
<td>11,859,446 (100.0)</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,858,291 (23.8)</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>2,385,216 (18.3)</td>
<td>67.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
<td>1,855,590 (16.2)</td>
<td>75.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>1,226,825 (10.5)</td>
<td>77.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>1,212,465 (10.9)</td>
<td>76.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1,152,324 (7.8)</td>
<td>39.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>212,633 (1.8)</td>
<td>65.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laotian</td>
<td>196,893 (1.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>184,842 (1.7)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>150,093 (1.1)</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other A/PI</td>
<td>770,758 (6.0)</td>
<td>56.5</td>
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</tbody>
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Chapter 2

“You raise some really good points about AAPIs incarcerated in the prison industrial complex in our country. We know all too often that these individuals fall under the radar, and we’re doing our best to bring more visibility to the issues our community faces on a federal scale.”

- Miya Saika Chen, White House Initiative on Asian American Pacific Islanders

“To date, I have had no experience with Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners or formerly incarcerated people. Most of my clients have been Caucasian and African American. A few have been Latino and Native American.”

- Karima Amin, Prisoners Are People, Too

“I literally can't think of a single person we've heard from who has identified themselves as API, or even had a surname that seemed like they might be. It doesn't seem like a lot of people have written about API experiences in the criminal justice system either…”

- Brian Zbriger, Binghamton Prisoner Support Network
“I don’t see many if any among the youth prisoners we visit, and access to them is in any case blocked.”

- Professor William Martin, Binghamton Justice Projects

“We take thousands of calls every year from prison families and only occasionally is race/ethnicity/culture relevant to the question, which is generally about a prison or parole issue. We have not had any API families in our support groups that I can recall.”

- Alison Coleman, Prison Families of New York


“Asian Americans are too often ignored in discussions of criminal justice. This idea reinforces the notion that Asian Americans occupy an ambiguous space in the racial hierarchy, being placed below Whites but above African Americans and Hispanics.”
Profile:

**Eddy Zheng** immigrated with his family from China in 1982 when he was only 12-years-old with dreams of better education and opportunities. However, things did not work out as imagined. He could not adjust to his new life in the United States and subsequently struggled with language and cultural differences. In addition, his parents had to work throughout the day to keep the family financially stable and food on the table. With his parents unable to be there for him and left alone, Eddy made friends with others that were in a similar situation as him and did not do well in school. All of these circumstances led him to a mistake. At 16, Eddy was arrested and convicted for felony charges of robbery and kidnapping of a family in his community, which was done for money. After his arrest, his family did not have money to pay for proper legal representation and translation services provided to him did not help him to understand in its entirety his charges and about the criminal justice system. Although he was underage, a California judge sentenced him as an adult to a life sentence behind bars.

Incarcerated inside prison, though, Eddy went through an inspirational process of transformation. He focused on bettering himself, investing in education, and learning English. Even behind bars and amidst all the struggles, he achieved his General Educational Development (GED) and then and Associate of Arts (AA) degree with the college program at San Quentin. Eddy also petitioned for Ethnic Studies courses to be added into the prison curriculum and worked at the library. Soon after, he fought for his
freedom. Since his release, Eddy dedicates his time working with at-risk youth in the San Francisco Bay Area to prevent violence and delinquency, and speaks about the effects of the prison-industrial complex on the Asian and Pacific Islander population.

After his release, Eddy dedicates his time working with at-risk youth to prevent violence and delinquency at the Community Youth Center, Community Response Network, and many other San Francisco Bay Area programs and organizations. In addition, he has become pivotal in speaking about Asian and Pacific Islanders inside prison and also about prison injustices. Eddy authored the first book to highlight the stories and perspectives of the growing Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population in “Other: An Asian and Pacific Islander Prisoners’ Anthology.” Most recently, he has been working to release a documentary about this life in Breathin’ The Eddy Zheng Story.

I had met Eddy through an e-mail exchange with the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, created by a simple e-mail with an elongated description of my project and also a number of questions that I had based stemmed from my interests. Ben Wang, the co-chair of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee and co-editor of his book, “Other: An Asian and Pacific Islander Prisoners’ Anthology,” returned my e-mail and only a few days later, Eddy e-mailed me with the opportunity to schedule a phone interview and arranged a time to talk.

After reading much about Eddy and his story that has been public online,15 I wanted to ask him my own questions. Our discussion focused on his life from immigrant to prisoner, which started with

15 His story is actually one of the most publicly available stories online. There is a significant lack of perspectives from an Asian and Pacific Islander about the prison system in this country.
his background and story and transitioned into his experiences as an Asian and Pacific Islander incarcerated behind bars. Towards the end, I asked him about his motivations and sources of empowerment. All of which came back with inspirational answers, especially about what breathin’ meant to him.

Interview:

Q: When you emigrated from China to the United States, what problems did you face? Could you explain why could not adjust?

Eddy: I came to the United States in 1982 when I was 12-years-old. I came here on November 7, 1982. Just 9 days ago, it was my twenty-ninth anniversary here in the United States. Out the 29 years in the United States, 21 of those years I was locked up in a prison in detention. I have actually got an entry in my blog about that a couple days ago. 29 years in the United States, 21 locked up. You know, 9 years in the so-called “free world.” That, and a lot of these questions you may have, you can look at my blog and read the articles that are written about me so you can already get a lot of information from that already. When I first came here, when people come to any kind of country, United States, or when you go to a different kind of country, you have to look at the fact that most of the time people are like, “Oh, you come to this country.” But for younger people, it is like: “Do you have a choice, to come to this country or not?” I did not have a choice to come to this country

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16 Eddy would start off all of our e-mail exchanges with “Happy new breath Johnny” which I thought was fascinating and wanted to since then ask him what that meant. Breathin’ is also emphasized on his website.
back then. My parents or grandparents thought there was a need to come to the United States for better education and better opportunity for the children, which is myself, my older sister and my older brother. But it turns out that when I was 12-years-old, I actually did not have a safe zone whether I want to come to the United States or not. Other people may have their perception of the American dream, but I did not know what that was, because I was only 12-years-old.

Coming to the United States, there were three challenges that you have to deal with: the language barrier, that is number one, and number two has to deal with the cultural differences, and number three is the generational gap. Language barrier; being that coming to the United States at the time in 1982, I started going to middle school in seventh grade. When I was in seventh grade, I knew my ABCs first from China. I learned my ABCs, but not how to really speak more efficient and to understand what other people were talking about. When I went into the classroom, I could not understand what was going on. I had to answer questions and I was being picked on while trying to understand. That was created by my immigration; and the cultural differences was because, in China and in its past, China had already been opened up to the United States. In the recent years, in the 70’s, Richard Nixon visited China and the Chinese opened up to the West. My parents at the time, in the 1980s, decided to come and we were not able to go back to China. When you look at those types of situations, you got to look at the background of the individual and the background of the Asians coming into this country, so people can address them properly. The other challenge that I talked about is the generation gap is my parent’s way of parenting. You know, in China and after coming to the United States had changed. They were pretty affluent and considered the middle class in China, but after coming
to the United States, they had to start all over. Financial stability became a big challenge. They had to work, and I was pretty much left on my own. You know, so I am on my own trying to adjust to the school system, adjust to the culture, adjust to being on my own without much support. Going from China to adjust was very difficult. It was very easy for me to just hang out with other immigrants who were in the same situation. When we were in the same situation then it was easy to learn all the bad things, all the delinquent things, rather than focus on investing in education, learning English, and trying to better ourselves as my parents, grandparents made those sacrifices for us.

“When I first came here, when people come to any kind of country, United States, or when you go to a different kind of country, you have to look at the fact that most of the time people are like, “Oh, you come to this country.” But for younger people, it is like: “Do you have a choice, to come to this country or not?” I did not have a choice to come to this country back then.”
Q: When you were 16 and put into the criminal justice system and how did you feel as a teenager at the time and how did you adjust to prison life?

Eddy: Well, it was difficult, because of the fact that we did not understand. I did not understand the language. I did not understand the criminal justice system. My family does not understand it. I did not understand it. My translator, and my sister and brother did not understand it. The other thing is that they could not afford to hire an attorney. What is really crucial in the way how it immediately affected me and my case was also because of my estranged factor, my parents’s experience, so instead of telling my grandparents, who had the financial means to hire an attorney for me, they did not say anything to my grandparents. They did not say anything to our relatives. Nobody knew that I got in trouble when I was arrested.

“I did not understand the language. I did not understand the criminal justice system. My family does not understand it. I did not understand it. My translator, and my sister and brother did not understand it.”

I went to through the criminal justice system with pretty much the public translator and that was it. Whatever the public translator was saying to me, I pretty much do not understand, because there
was no direct translation services for me to try understand it. Even though they sometimes do translation services in the court, I could not understand all these legal terms, terminology, and what does it mean, like all these other things. I could not comprehend it. That was really difficult, you know. Navigating through that. And I was even under the precondition that I did not even know I had been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole until I got into prison. I was under the assumption that I was only doing nine years and I would be out. When I was already in the system, they told me that I actually got a life sentence and explained to me what that meant. It was either I made a parole date and ask them to take me to the parole board and determine whether they were going to let me out, or I have to die in prison. I would have to be in prison for the rest of my life. That is what life without possibility meant. It was tough, but then when you are in the system it was always tough. Because I was already handicapped by not understanding the language, handicapped by not understanding the culture, American culture, it was tough to navigate through that, too. That time, I really could not navigate, because I do not have my family close-by. They may be able to, through outside, they can help me, but inside, they cannot do anything. I am on my own. It is tough, but then, how you survive is definitely having other Asians with you while you are inside. Even though we had a small number, we were able to help each other, so that is how I survived inside.

“And I was even under the precondition that I did not even know I had been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole until I got into prison. I was under the assumption
that I was only doing nine years and I would be out. When I was already in the system, they told me that I actually got a life sentence and explained to me what that meant.”

Q: How were you also treated by the guards and by other prisoners that were not API?

Eddy: Well, it depends on the time, the year, and the prison. When I first entered the system, in 1986, there were less prisons in the state of California. I mean nationally there were little prisons, even though that is the beginning of the prison-industrial complex. But still, there were not that many people. Then, but then inside the prison system at the time, there are violent individuals inside the prison system. Many people get shanked while inside the prison system, so a lot of times, it becomes a matter of survival, because the fact that we are APIs and we have less numbers and we are pretty much on a different level. We are the “minorities of minorities” inside the system, but just because the fact that we do not affiliate with any specific gangs, or creating things, we are pretty neutral when the guards are dealing with African American, Latinos, and the Whites inside. That was a good thing, but as the time went on, the system changed due to the overpopulation of the prison, and the dynamic shift that also went on at the time.

Actually, in San Quentin, for example, being there back in the days, it was known that if you mess with one Asian, you have to
mess with all the Asians. If we have five people and you mess with one of us, then you pretty much have to mess with five people. Twenty. Thirty. Fourty. It’s fair game. Pretty much, we really do not start much trouble. We try to mind our own business. In that sense, it helps it a little bit. The guards have this whole system. The thing when talking about living in a total institution, such as prison, that in itself is oppressive. The fact that their interest is oppressive. The more intrusive guards, because they have the uniform, they have the baton, they have the maids, they have the Benz, immediately those standards are also oppressive.

“We are the “minorities of minorities” inside the system...”

Then coupled with some of the guards that who were racist, who have a chip on their shoulder when it comes to deal with prisoners, they would always make their own rules and regulations, to be oppressive towards the prisoners. There were opportunities for guards to create race riots inside the prison system. For example, a guard could start a fight between a certain group of people inside, and give weapons to one group of people so one group of people have weapons and while the other group does not.

Inside the prison system, people who are prisoners they live in a so-called, “comical” conduct. Do not snitch. You do not tolerate child molesters. You do not tolerate rapists. When you are a murderer, you are okay. When you are a robber, you are okay. If you are a child molester, rapist, or snitch then you are not okay. You cannot belong in our population, and sometimes the guard
will purposefully drop the information out in the yard where other prisoners can find it about the individual and then they will go stab him. And then the treatment of the prisoners back in the days, they can strip you anytime. They can strip search people right in the middle of the yard in front of hundreds of people and they can just order you to be strip-searched and you had to comply. Sometimes they would beat you down pretty much if you do anything that would make them want to take a personal vendetta towards you.

Q: Were there also stereotypes and racial misconceptions that played around in prison? Such as model minority, dehumanized, and perpetual foreigner, such as being an “Other.”

Eddy: Being an Asian or what we considered as “Other” is always tough in the sense. Because of stereotypes, we get to be called, “Chinamen,” “gook,” and all that name-calling all the time. When I first did not speak English, people used to call me all kinds of names. I did not even know what they have been calling me. I could not understand what kind of derogatory terms they used on me. I did not understand what they were talking about. That happens a lot, you know, from the whites, African Americans. It happens. We are small in stature, most of us, and some people will try to bully people even in prison and people try to do crimes.

Q: And you had mentioned in your autobiography that you were lucky that other prisoners thought you knew kung fu—
Eddy: Yeah, and that was another issue. To think that all the Asians know karate, Kung Fu, or martial arts or something, they will not mess with you. The one good thing is that if you think that sometimes they go mess with someone else. The other thing is that if I am assuming that this guy knows Kung Fu, or any type of martial art, I do not want to take any chances. I am not going to fight this guy. I am just going to stab this guy. So, it has both negative and positive effects. When you are mysterious, like if you are not as talkative, not as active socially and talking to people, they will be intrusive about things about people, and they will make those assumptions. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it does not.

Q: Were you stabbed or even got into a fight in which you felt like your life was endangered?

Eddy: Well, yeah, actually I got into one fight, the only fight I got into in my prison. It was actually with another Asian. We had a disagreement in the beginning stage of my incarceration. Normally, when you fight against each other, with other people, it is normally a fistfight. But in that situation, this guy wanted to pull out a knife and try to use the knife on me and so I got into a fight and then I got stabbed a few times. I felt that was a need for me, you know, you do not think about it when you are fighting, but there was a need to maintain your reputation. You cannot just let somebody stab you and not do anything about it so you have to kill him or you got to hurt that guy. If not, then, everybody will lose their respect. They are not going to respect you. And if they are not going to respect you, they are going to think that if that guy did
that to you then I can do that to you, too. I had to go through that internalization process, whether I want to do that [hurt him] or not. For me, it was a mistake and I should not be in that position anyways, because I should know better, but because of the situation and all the adrenaline that was involved in it, and the peer pressure that was involved in it, that is how I got into that situation. But, I was able to do soul-searching and internalization. I was able to let that go. I did not hurt that prisoner. I did not try to do anything. Instead, I just decided that I needed to learn from that mistake and then move on. But at the time, the situation was that I had to kill this guy. If I do not, then I will not be able to hold my head up high in the prison. That would be kind of the institutional mentality that you have to take revenge on that guy.

But later on, one of the guys, what he basically told me was that you have to do this. If you do not do this, then people would not respect you. You will always have this hanging over your head. But, ultimately, what he was saying was that you have to look into the mirror every day. And so he asked me:

“If you look in the mirror everyday and you feel that you are comfortable with what you are seeing, at what is looking back at you, then you know what you need to do. Then do that.”

So I look in the mirror, and I look at myself, and I see what is looking at me, and I thought that I was comfortable with not doing anything to that guy. I can live with that. And I did not [hurt him]. A few years later, when I received a parole date, I was about to go home, my friend, the guy who told me you must do this. He wrote
me a letter to say, “Hey, you are a better person than I am. You are a bigger man than I am. I would not have been able to let that go. You were able to let that go. Now you are going to be able to go home. And I am still in prison.” Yeah, really, we had that dynamics going at that time. Fights happen all the time in prison.

Q: As part of the Prison University Project, when teachers would come and teach university-level courses, how did that help you? Did prisoners, in San Quentin and in prison overall, have access to many books? Were there a lot of resources?

Eddy: Actually, when I was engaging my educational process in San Quentin, it was not called the Prison University Project. Prison University Project was just started in probably 2005, or maybe later 2006. Before, it was just the college program inside San Quentin that was started by this professor, Naomi Janowitz, from UC Davis. She was part of the religious department. She started to bring volunteers to come into prison and start teaching classes for free. It was not until later on, until everything, until I went to solitary confinement with a couple of my friends who founded the proposal advocating for Ethnic Studies, it was then that we started having a faculty committee, having a student body, then after all that, then they later on turned that prison college program into a non-profit organization and created the Prison University Project, where the directors can pay money from the funds that they raised. During that time and that process, it was not as monopolized as what it is right now. We have a lot of professors coming in from nearby universities and also from New York State. One of the first professors that came through was Professor Steven Hartnett from
UC Berkeley, and then we also have people from New York University that came to teach Sociology. From that experience, I started to become socially and politically conscious. And the resources that we had was that professors would bring books and teaching materials, and there were certain courses they can teach, and some the administration did not allow. And, so, as resources were concerned, I worked at the library and I also have a couple of other people who were scholars and they worked at the library too. We were able to buy and purchase a lot of books, to be able to get more critical literatures that we were able to purchase. The resources were fairly good, and also we were allowed to have books inside the cells and with friends and people I have met, they sent us books. Definitely, for me, education was pretty important. It helped me to become who I am today.

Q: Was it a small portion of these prisoners taking college courses?

Eddy: At the beginning, it was a small percentage of the prison taking classes, because you had to have a GED in order for you to, or a high school diploma, in order for you to be able to take the college courses. For you to learn your material, you need to at least comprehend the material. People later on also had the English 99 teaching people how to write and learning how to write better for them to be able to pass the test. If you feel that you can write and comprehend, then you can sign up for classes. To respond, many of the people participating in this educational process in the beginning, when it was formed in 1996, it was a small percentage of people, and most of those people were lifetime prisoners. Later
on, me and myself and an African American and another white, was the first to be graduates from the college program, and we all got AA degrees, and we were all in the newspaper. And then later on, a lot of the short-termers started to engage in this process. We were even trying to get a BA system accreditation inside the prison, but there were a lot of prison politics. Also with people who were running the Prison University Project right now, they did not want to have a BA program. They just wanted to have an AA program. With all the people who after they got their AA, they could not continue their education, their higher education.

Q: Could you explain why a Bachelors degree was not accepted? Why was it against it?

Eddy: Because it has to do with the university, the people in the university who accredit the degrees are from Patten University out of Oakland, California. And the people who want to bring in a BA program are from St. Mary’s. We have a power struggle between the professors from St. Mary’s and professors who are from Berkeley in trying to go with Patten University. It also has to do with the prison administration that just wants to stick with the AA program, and the combination of those makes it so that we do not have an AA program. During that whole process was us advocating for the Ethnic Studies program or more Asian American history classes. That is all another history that we can talk about. Yeah, not having a BA program and some of the professors do not even come back anymore. All the people that got

17 Bachelor’s Degree
their AA program, they just take electorate classes and other classes that they have to offer. For all the people that have graduated, that was the highest level they can go unless they have money then they can afford to do more courses for themselves.

**Q: After you petitioned for Ethnic Studies, did you actually receive Ethnic Studies courses?**

**Eddy:** No. Well, I filed a lawsuit against them and won a settlement. I wanted to have more classes, more Asian American literature classes, but the court says it is not within their jurisdiction to order the prisons to provide that program. They can make a suggestion, but they cannot force them to do it. But now, right now, time-to-time, they bring in and teach different literature classes there and there. Actually, I am not sure how much it in fact helps the people inside. I still go into San Quentin right now, because I am trying to create a Cultural Competency program to help the API population. That has been tough trying to establish. Because in San Quentin, the way that San Quentin works is that there are too many programs inside so they do not have enough space. They do not have enough time slots to do their programming, but in the system, there is no self-help program that is really provided for the Asian and Pacific Islander population. We want to try to make history and be the first one to do that.

**Q: Can you talk about your motivations and inspirations? What change happened, while you were in prison, while you**
were incarcerated, that drove you to stay strong, to get an education, to keep breathin’, and fight to be free?

**Eddy:** For me, it was a process. It was a life process. What really motivated me to engage in the educational process was the fact that when I was trying to learn how to survive inside the prison system. I realized that if I did not know English, if I do not speak English, if I cannot read and write, then I am always going to have minimal skills. Jobs as well have to specifically require you to think. It is hard labor. That is one thing. The other thing is my parents always say that with the time you are there, you should get an education. For me, it like was when I started to learn English. I did it to better myself, so that I could also try to understand other people, what other people are saying to me, or about me. Once I did that, I was able to get my GED after I learned English and how to read and write. Once I passed my GED, I immediately got a better job. Before I was doing laundry, I was doing furniture and stuff. Now I am just behind a desk doing typing. Later on, I was able to learn more. When you talk about education and empowerment that was exactly what happened. The more I learned, the more I did that. My self-esteem got higher and confidence got higher, and I believed that “Hey, I actually can learn.”

The change really came about when I started engaging the program in San Quentin. When I went back to San Quentin, it was 1993, when I started to engage this process of transformation, I went back to San Quentin and I really started to try to improve myself more. For example, I noticed that I have an accent, a very strong accent at the time. I heard about this program, called, “Hooked on Phonetics,” and I just started to go to “Hooked on Phonetics” and it worked. People, my fellow prisoners and my friends, would laugh
at me and would always make jokes for going to “Hooked on Phonetics” and other stuff. People will always try to put you down and try to clown on people, but they are not doing anything to improve themselves. They think they were already at the level they need to be. They already know how to read and write. For me, I did not really care. I just started going to class and do my best to engage in the program. When I started taking getting As, I mean when I started taking college classes and started getting A’s, I felt more confident. When I started getting the validation from the professors culminating that I actually earned those A’s, and that they just did not give it to me, because I was a prisoner, that I was a nice guy and they just wanted to give it to me. It was because I earned it and through those validations, I was able to be more motivated to want to learn, to do well, to maintain that grade point average. Also, with the encouragement from my professors, from other people, really got me interested in learning. After that, you know, I started learning more. During my educational process, I was able to meet a lot of scholars, and a lot of people. Like for example, I met Helen Zia while I was in prison. I met Yuri Kochiyama—a whole bunch of different people. They always write to me and I have people that continue to support, my family and friends, and this is what I do. At this point, it has to deal with focusing that I know I can make a difference in the community and I want to make a difference in the community. I want to make amends for what I have done. Before, I did not know the consequences of my actions.

“For example, I noticed that I have an accent, a very strong accent at the time. I
I started to educate myself. I started to learn how to take responsibility for my actions. I also started to search for like some type of higher power in a sense of spirituality. I was going to church. I was trying to read all these kinds of spiritual books. I read a lot of spiritual books, trying to find myself, find where I belong, how I fit in. It was through all those processes, I was able to learn how to discipline myself, to stay focused, and really engage in this process. And also become an advocate, because not only I was able to learn and empower myself, now with the knowledge that I have, I was able to identify a lot different injustice inside the prison system. I was able to utilize whatever skill I have to help other people.

**Q: Breathin’ Could you talk about what it means to you?**

**Eddy:** Well, I think it is, for me, it is when I keep talking about the breath it is about appreciating life. It is about appreciating the
many things I have, because without the breath, the breath is what sustains our lives, you know, if I can breathe, if I do not have the breath then I will be dead. But then we are breathing everyday and we take that breath for granted, because we are so used to it that we expect it. We expect that we will have that next breath. But then, because of that, we often forget that that breath may not come. While you hold this breath, the next breath may not be there, so you must appreciate every breath at all times and every day. That has to deal with mindfulness. To be able to be mindful for what we have, to be mindful for the things that we do. It has to do with mindfulness. I always want to remind myself that the breath is what sustains us and we have to focus on our breath, because that is how I survived in prison—

When there was chaos around me, when things are not happening my way, or things are oppressive, hopeless, when I am feeling all that, I always go back to my breath and start taking deep breaths, and keep breathe in and breathe out, focusing on my breaths and that would calm me down and also allow me to appreciate my life and appreciate what I have. I will give you an example. The most intensive time that I had was when I was in solitary confinement, not knowing whether I was going to go home or not, because the fact that I was in solitary confinement. I would always try to look, appreciate what I had. At the time, it was during the time that I realized that I was one of the most rich people in the world. Even though I was in that cell, 24-hours a day behinds bars and concrete, I knew that I had a family who would always be there to support me. I have hundreds of friends who have been supportive of me and write letters to me. I have all the books I need to read inside the cell. I have enough food to eat inside the cell. I have a blanket. I have a bunk to sleep whereas people around me do not have as much as I have. When I look at another level, there are a lot of
homeless people on the streets maybe people who are living in their little house are starving. There are children who are starving. People are addicted to drugs. People do violence. Looking at all that, on that level, I thought I was rich at the time, even though despite the fact that I was inside solitary confinement and do not know if I was going to go home.

“I always want to remind myself that the breath is what sustains us and we have to focus on our breath, because that is how I survived in prison. When there was chaos around me, when things are not happening my way, or things are oppressive, hopeless, when I am feeling all that, I always go back to my breath and start taking deep breaths, and keep breathe in and breathe out, focusing on my breaths and that would calm me down and also allow me to appreciate my life and appreciate what I have.”

I always try to focus back on that breath and appreciate. I also remember seeing the guards everyday and just hearing all the yelling and the commotion that comes out of prison while I was in solitary confinement. And when I saw a fruit fly buzzing by me, I really appreciated that fly’s presence, because that allowed me to
realize that I am not alone. That there is another creature out there, there are other people out there that may be in more suffering than I am. That I should not have anything to complain about. It all goes back to that breath. How to be appreciative of what we have and not taking that breath for granted, but in the same way, the chance that you honor, honor being alive, that that breath is also somebody else’s breath. It is not just my breath. We think that our parents will always be there for us. We think that food is always going to be at the table. We think that we do not have anything to give to have clothes on, and do whatever I want, but that can be all taken away at any second. If you do not appreciate that, then you would not know. Then you would not be living fully and responsibly, so that is what that breath is about. That is why I always start my salutations with “Happy new breath.” Sometimes I have to ask myself again, to think of that breath, because of all the things that I am doing and all the responsibilities that I am taking on, that I forget to sit back and breath, inhale, hold, and then exhale.

Q: In your opinion, why has there been a lack of information about APIs or API prisoners and why in legal studies there is just not an honest effort to learn about how they are being treated inside the criminal justice system?

Eddy: I think it’s a combination of many things. I think what it goes back into for our own people is cultural difference. What are we used to, because of the old tradition, we are used to talking about the good things and not talk about the bad things, because we do not want people to look at us, because of the past, and that we have problems. That goes hand-in-hand with the model
minority myth that has been created in this country, especially in our generation living in the United States. The other thing is the cultural difference. From our home country to coming here, we are conditioned to not talk about any type of challenges that we may have, because that is considered family business. That is considered our problem. We do not put out our problem or what is considered our business out in the community or in public. After we start with that, people do not talk about it and they do not even have the statistic along with that, because they do not compare us with the overall population, about people who are incarcerated or have been deported. They think that our number is insignificant to them, to even talk about it, to address it. That is why on the national front, there is nothing, nobody even talk about that. In reality, a lot of the API prisoners are suffering inside the prisons, but also outside the system, domestic violence, deportation issues, but we do not talk about it. In general, that is the way it is.

“From our home country to coming here, we are conditioned to not talk about any type of challenges that we may have, because that is considered family business. That is considered our problem. We do not put out our problem or what is considered our business out in the community or in public.”
Q: What can be done then, or what can I do, as a student, or what can people in general do?

Eddy: Yeah, as a student, definitely. Research is one thing. Talking to other people and try to get an idea of what they are going through or what experience they have been through. That is important. Also, it is about cultivating compassion. It is about understanding that we are all part of this community together. That is important. As a student, maybe utilize your college. Utilize your skills to be able to raise awareness about the situation. What you are doing right now is part of creating awareness, to share part of some other people’s struggles and stories. That is why when I engaged in my educational process inside, I learned about the African American history and their struggles more before I even learned about API struggles and their histories. I learned about the slaves. I learned about civil rights and racism before I even learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese internment camps, Filipino working in Alaska in the canneries, people from Korea, Japan, China, all came to Hawaii to work in the plantations. I learned about other people before I learned about my own country, so then there is a need to learn. We need to learn about other people’s cultures and then we need to learn about our own culture and find commonalities and raise discussions. That is how we can provide solutions, specifically when dealing with the issues of incarceration and deportation. Whenever we talk about deportation issues, we talk about the Hispanics and the Latino population, but it affects other populations also. People just do not know about it. That is why we have to talk about it. We have to engage in that process of discussion and just have a conversation about those issues.
Terry Park

Profile:

Terry Park is an avid mentor and teacher to prisoners at San Quentin. Terry himself is a Ph.D. candidate in the Cultural Studies Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis. He has taught college classes, more specifically, Asian American Theater under the Prison University Project (PUP) at San Quentin from January to May 2011. Prison University Project is a non-profit organization behind the college program at San Quentin. Its mission is to provide higher education programs to people incarcerated at San Quentin and to stimulate public awareness and dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California. Terry also has connections with the Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC).

I was able to luckily meet Terry through Sandy Woo, my graduate advisor, in the Community Engagement Program at Binghamton University. Also through an e-mail exchange, I focused my questions about higher education and Asian and Pacific Islanders incarcerated inside San Quentin. It has transitioned into a discussion about his experiences teaching inside and the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners that he taught in his time there. At the same time, Terry entered Mr. Hyphen for the Asian Prisoner Support Committee and I asked him questions about that particular event, also on behalf of Asian Outlook. The discussion then moved to his experiences teaching at San Quentin, what he taught, and how he interacted with his students as well as his opinions of them.
Interview:

Q: Congratulations on winning Mr. Hyphen 2011 for APSC. Could you briefly talk about your motivations in entering the contest?

Terry: Thanks, well, primarily it was to represent APSC to get them more visibility, because I mean they are the only national API prison-focused organization in the nation. You know, they are a really small group. They do not have a lot of money, so when I was thinking of an organization to represent I thought of them first. And, you know, I had heard about Mr. Hyphen. I had several friends who had competed and Pahole, who had won in 2009. He encouraged me to submit an application. I did not think I was in their league, but I thought why not give it a shot and see what happens and it turned out all right.

Q: What kind of performances did you do to win the hearts of the audience and the judges?

Terry: For the talent portion, I did this. It is kind of difficult to explain. Well, at first, I was thinking of doing a scene from my solo show. I used to be an actor before I went into grad school at UC Davis and I did a solo show off Broadway in 2006 in New York City, so I was thinking about just doing a scene from my solo show, but I heard that last year’s winner did something “really-out-there.” Basically if you want to win Mr. Hyphen, you really have
to push the envelope. So I decided to do air guitar, which is something I have never done before, but I had seen some Youtube clips and always thought it was pretty awesome. I constructed this narrative where I had a Tiger Mom played by my friend, Tiffany Eng, and she was dressed up as a tiger with a little tiger hat and tiger paws. And I played her son, but not a Tiger Son. I tried to pick a different kind of animal to express sort of the Asian American who thinks of himself and is unique, so I thought of a unicorn. So I dressed up as a unicorn where I got a horn, like a unicorn horn that I bought online, and then I borrowed Tiffany’s wig. She had this glam rock, straggly, black wig. I found one of those ridiculous unicorn t-shirts with lots of bright colors with a rainbow and a castle. And then I wore Tiffany’s daisy dukes. So that was my uniform. Oh, and leggings—I had pink, purple leggings. I had two songs. The first song was Pachelbel’s Canon, the sort of wedding song, and then the second song was from Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure. It’s the sort of a Beethoven rock piece. And then a friend of mine, Derek, he is in Magnetic North; it is an Asian American hip-hop group. He mixed the two songs together to form this one song so and in-between the two songs, I had a theatrical interlude where my Tiger Mom walks on stage and sees her son rocking out, dressed up as a unicorn, doing air guitar, and then I recorded this dialogue with my voice doing both parts, me and my Tiger Mom, and she says, “What are you doing? You look like an idiot. I’m disappointed in you. We immigrated to the U.S. so that you could follow your dreams, so you can either be a doctor or an engineer.” And he says, “No, I don’t want to be a doctor or engineer. I want to be a unicorn. I am a unicorn. I want to do air guitar. This is what I want to do.” Basically, I used air guitar and the unicorn as figures to talk about Asian Americans who do not fit the usual mold, who go against the model minority myth.
And then eventually in the second song, the Tiger Mom is so overwhelmed by her son’s passion and moves that she starts to dance and go crazy. Both the Tiger Mom and the son come together at the end and it’s a triumphant ending. If you see the video, it makes more sense.

Q: Besides the talent portion, was there anything else?

Terry: The second event was Q&A and the third event was sleepwear. There is a new Asian American t-shirt company called Bok Choy Apparel. I think they are based here in the Bay Area. During the sleepwear portion, we were supposed to somehow creatively use their t-shirt logo and incorporate it into our own sleepwear costume. I went in the opposite direction of the other candidates. A lot of them kind of showed off a lot of their muscles and skin. I did not show off anything. I completely covered up. I wore pink pajama bottoms that said, “I love you,” all over with lots of hearts, and then I borrowed Tiffany’s Christmas sweaters, one of those ridiculous Christmas sweaters with a chimney and a Santa Claus sticking out. And then the main thing for this sleepwear uniform was the visor. I bought three visors. I bought like a mini-visor, a medium visor, and then this super-deluxe visor, so when I came on onstage, I had all three visors on, but you could only see the super-deluxe visor so it made it look like I had only one visor on. And then I kind of danced around and I did this, well, not a strip tease, but I took off the super-deluxe visor and then I still had another visor on and then people thought that was funny. I took off the second visor and I still had another visor and then I had the
Bok Choy Apparel on the brim of the visor. Oh, and then I had a shake-weight, too.

Q: When you won, what was the first thing that came to mind?

Terry: I think the first thing that came to mind was: “You gotta be kidding me!” And that is what some friends of mine said when they saw my expression. It was one of shock. I mean I really did not think I was going to win. I mean I knew I had a shot, but the other guys were really great. They gave great performances, great responses during the Q&A, you know, good-looking guys. I thought: I’m this short, weird, unicorn, air guitar playing, visor wearing guy; so I didn’t think they would go for that, but they did, so I was shocked and really happy for APSC and actually Eddy was in the audience. When they announced that I had won, he jumped up on stage and grabbed the monster check and held it up and was really, really happy and I was happy to see him that ecstatic.

Q: For the Q&A, could you talk about a few questions that they asked you?

Terry: They asked all of us the same two questions and then we each got a wild-card question. The wild-card question was, “What was the most pressing issue facing Asian Americans today?” I talked about the prison-industrial complex, which made sense for me. I talked about API prisoners and how they are an invisible
population within the API community. And especially how many Southeast Asians are incarcerated as youths.

**Q: Could you talk about how you got involved with the APSC?**

**Terry:** I taught a class in Asian American Theater at San Quentin this past Spring and this was through the Prison University Project. That is the organization that runs this college program at San Quentin and they provide an Associate of Arts degree. Previously, I TA’ed a modern Korean history class, two years ago in ’09, and I did that for a few weeks, but I had a great experience and wanted to come back and teach my own class so that is when I taught this Asian American Theater class. And then I ran into an old friend of mine who is a member of the APSC. I ran into her at the gym and she asked me what I was doing and what I was up to, and I said that I was teaching this class at San Quentin. And she said come to one of our meetings and she talked about APSC and what they do, so I went to their meeting a couple of weeks later.

**Q: In your words, what are the effects of prison-industrial complex on low-income people of color, including the growing number of Asian Americans?**

**Terry:** Just in general, looking at the prison-industrial complex and forms of incarceration as state violence and a way in which resources get diverted from education, mental health, other sources of social services to various forms of policing and incarceration, which affects low-income people of color. But then, right, most people do not think about how Asian Americans are included in
that and those forms of incarceration, because they are usually not thought of as working-class. But, because of APSC, I know that the API prisoner population has increased something like 30 percent from 1999 to 2004 and has continued to rise and specifically Southeast Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders as well as some Chinese and South Asians as well. And I think what is specific to the problems of incarceration of API youth is, well, one major factor I think is the legacy of war on Southeast Asians so looking at the ways in which the Vietnam War and/or genocide in Cambodia have continued to haunt Southeast Asians; so there is issues of trauma that circulate within the Southeast Asian communities and how that trauma translates into drug use, alcohol abuse, fractured families, communities, language difficulties, just you know, general problems of adapting to American life and how those problems get placed on these shoulders of Southeast Asian youths. And then that leads to certain kinds of criminal activity or illegal activity. And even during the arraignment phase, not having translators to help these API youths understand what kinds of sentences they are facing.

I know a lot of the students that I have had at San Quentin, when they were first arrested, a lot of them did not speak English, so it is really amazing how their efforts in conjunction with programs like the Prison University Project that they have been able to learn English, take college classes, get an Associate degree, and you know, learn about the different conditions and forces that have led to their incarceration in ways that they can improve themselves and their communities once they get released, if they get released.
“And I think what is specific to the problems of incarceration of API youth is, well, one major factor I think is the legacy of war on Southeast Asians so looking at the ways in which the Vietnam War and/or genocide in Cambodia have continued to haunt Southeast Asians...”

Q: How was it like teaching or working with prisoners? What was your role as a teacher and did you face any limits or specific difficulties?

Terry: There are a lot of restrictions on what you can bring in, so basically what you can bring in is some paper, a folder, I mean, they provide you with pencils and markers and erasers and books of course for the students. Because of the lack of materials I could bring in, I made my theater class pretty much a literary criticism class, so I had the students read one play per class. Oh, and probably the biggest limitation was when there was a quarantine that hit San Quentin and that pretty much disrupted not just my class, but also a bunch of classes for three weeks. I had to quickly re-do my syllabus and move things around and, you know, slip messages to PUP employees to give one prisoner who then could give the message to the other prisoners in my class. I mean it was hectic. Once the quarantine was over, it was never exactly the same again, but man, I think it was a testament to the students. They are so bright and so committed to the class, and to the
readings, and just to their education in general, that things, despite what happened with the quarantine, things were still okay. Students, for the most part, were on top of their homework, they still turned in their papers, the papers were really strong and you know, I tell people this, that that class was better than any class I have ever taught or TA’ed whether at UC Davis or Hunter College in New York. They were super smart, very bright, lots of insightful comments. I mean usually like say in UC Davis, I have to bend over backwards to get people to talk. But at San Quentin, often times I would sort of sit back and just allow the discussion to just happen. That I did not really have to do much to get people interested, that they were already engaged in the material. That made my job not just easier, but a lot more fun as an educator.

Q: Could you talk about what classes you taught at San Quentin?

Terry: That Asian American Theater class. It was a general overview of different kinds of plays so the overall theme of the class was permanent war, which is something that then informs my own work and my dissertation. I thought that [theme] was applicable to looking into Asian American Theater and Asian American history, because of the legacies of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Philippine-American War, the wars today in Iraq and Afghanistan and how that has shaped the way in which these playwrights produced a certain vision of Asian America through theater. And I felt like permanent war was a theme that a lot of the students could wrap their heads around, because of their own lives and how the conditions that led them to being incarcerated to be
described as a kind of war, whether it is a street war, growing up as a Crip or a Blood, or growing up a refugee from Vietnam. It was interesting to see how people made these different kinds of connections to this theme of permanent war and related it to these plays, these Asian American plays, and I had one co-teacher for the first few weeks, Joyce Carol Oates, she is an American novelist. She was there just for a few classes and she helped with some of the creative workshops, so I did try to have a creative writing component where they could work on their own pieces, whether poems, plays, but when the quarantine happened, that kind of disrupted the creative aspect, but at the very end of the quarter or the end of the semester, we did have a final presentation of acts, monologues, spoken word, and hip-hop.

“And I felt like permanent war was a theme that a lot of the students could wrap their heads around, because of their own lives and how the conditions that led them to being incarcerated to be described as a kind of war, whether it is a street war, growing up as a Crip or a Blood, or growing up a refugee from Vietnam.”
Q: In your own words, how important has higher education become for these API prisoners?

**Terry:** I think it is really important in general for all of the prisoners that I have encountered at San Quentin. I think specifically in regards to API prisoners, there is a larger sense of shame in being incarcerated that when, well, maybe this is a sort of a generalization, but say if a white person gets imprisoned, it is not seen as a marker of shame on the white community compared to say someone like Eddy Zheng, or another API prisoner who gets imprisoned, because you know, there is this notion that Asian Americans are not criminals or are not poor that they fit this model minority stereotype so to be in prison completely goes counter, runs counter against this model minority myth and I think these API inmates are aware of that and so education is a way in which they can rectify that or repair that damage that they feel like they have inflicted upon not just themselves, but their communities and then I think it is a way, at least with my class, a way in which they can learn more about their history, whether it is a more general sense of Asian American history or more specific about being Chinese or being Vietnamese or being Korean and again going back to this theme of war. How war and empire, the presence of U.S. Empire in Asia has led in some ways to the incarceration of API youth. To make those connections between the Vietnam War and their current situation as poor Southeast Asian refugees in California and how that might lead to being imprisoned. It is a form of empowerment to know why they are in prison in the first place, that it is not completely their fault. Yes, they did make certain mistakes, but there are certain reasons why they were led to
these mistakes and that these reasons have a larger social, political, economic history.

“…there is this notion that Asian Americans are not criminals or are not poor that they fit this model minority stereotype so to be in prison completely goes counter, runs counter against this model minority myth…”

Q: Did you notice any problems or challenges that they [API prisoners] face while incarcerated?

Terry: [Terry in talking about his discussion with one Cambodian student in his theater class] one of the challenges is trying to organize some of the more older and first-generation API prisoners who have English language difficulties. He was talking about the need to have translation services and just getting them more interested and involved in participating in some of these groups, because there are tons of groups that are at San Quentin. You know, a lot of self-improvement, educational organizations, but I guess for some of the older inmates or the ones that cannot really speak English, they do not see what the point is and are not participating in these groups.
Q: What is one common misconception that you see for APIs in prison?

Terry: The misconception was that there are no API prisoners. I would want to shift the conversation or the language from that API prisoners are not capable of committing crimes to API people, in general, suffer from a lack of resources or a lack of access to resources just like other people of color and low-income people of color. That is where the model minority myth comes into play. That we do not need access to mental health services or housing or legal education that, “We have made it and we are fine.” But the reality, and especially the reality for Southeast Asian refugees, is that a lot of these basic resources are not accessible and again the legacy of war that has ripped apart a lot of these communities and families and so, unfortunately, that could lead to certain types of activity that are criminalized.
“Re-telling of Eddy Zheng”

In order to share Eddy’s story with Binghamton University campus, I decided to organize an event entirely open to the public, which became known as “Re-telling of Eddy Zheng: Former Prisoner, Community Leader, Advocate.” Under the Community Engagement Program and the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies, I had advertised the event to many different, diverse, and multicultural student organizations and clubs, campus, and professors that taught classes related to the prison-industrial complex.18

18 Advertisement entailed posting over 100 flyers around campus, sharing a general description and event to student organizations and clubs (and departments) to send to their listserv, and more.
Format of the event started with a brief introduction about this project and then I showed a re-telling of his life from Eddy in the White House Initiative “What’s Your Story” Video Challenge online. After the video clip, I followed with a personal re-telling of Eddy’s poem, “Autobiography@33” as a spoken-word piece. After reading his poem, I invited the audience to inhale and breathe and then exhale, and expressed Eddy’s thoughts about the importance of breathing. Moreover, with the resources and the room available I decided to organize a galleria timeline about Eddy’s journey from immigrant to prisoner according to the different stages in his life as described in his poem, which was all

19 The White House Initiative “What’s Your Story” Video Challenge aimed to collect stories of Asian Americans about their experience and community leadership. Filmed by Ben Wang, the video clip could be found at: http://vimeo.com/31453465.
done under creative means with typography, using almost 200 pieces of paper to construct piece-by-piece quotes from our interview. Alongside these enlarged quotes, I had images featuring Eddy, San Quentin, and more. Also, I printed news articles about different stories, such as his petition for Ethnic Studies and a copy of a case-brief of Eddy’s petition to the Board of Immigration Appeals.  

This idea came with the help of Sandy Woo. My original plan was to play direct recordings from my phone interview with Eddy, but there was a lot of background interference that made it difficult to listen to. As a result, this last-second adjustment was intended to be an artistic means to express to the audience an illustration of Eddy’s journey, to create humanization, as well as a powerful means with the use of typography to convey to the audience the different struggles and problems Eddy had faced as an Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant. “Galleria timeline” is a term for my chronological timeline along the wall on the left side of the room and a gallery of images, typography, and articles as a form of expression. Stages: @33, @16, and @12.

Following Eddy’s release from prison, he was detained by immigration, put into further detention, and subject to deportation back to China.
Members of the audience and galleria timeline
Another snapshot of audience and galleria timeline
The audience primarily included a professor with her two daughters, and undergraduate and graduate students. They never heard of Eddy before this semester and his story was shocking for many of them, which many of them expressed to me after the event. The outcome was extremely diverse. Some students came from hearing about the event from their professor. Others saw the advertisement on the daily campus newsletter and decided to come. Interestingly, although I supplied food (pizza) and refreshments at the event, everyone appeared too transfixed by the galleria timeline to even eat until about 15 minutes looking. All in all, the event gathered much positive feedback, an emotional and inspirational event for many of the audience.

“Re-telling of Eddy Zheng: Former Prisoner, Community Leader, Advocate”
Talking about the API prison population...

Another means to create awareness to different kind of audience was to publish an article. Accordingly, I wrote two pieces that were published in *Asian Outlook*.\(^2\) The first piece featured my parts of my interview with Terry and about his experiences in the Mr. Hyphen competition. The second piece was authored by me to share the problem about the growing Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population in the United States and higher education with Binghamton University and their reader base outside: surrounding college campuses and alumnus.

\(^2\) Published in *Asian Outlook* Volume XXV, Issue 2: “Special Edition: Asian Americans in Higher Education”
TALKING ABOUT THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER PRISONER POPULATION

By Johnny Thach

TAKE A MOMENT AND THINK about Asian and Pacific Islanders in higher education. Would the first thing that comes to your mind be an Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner behind bars taking college-level courses for an Associate of Arts degree? Probably not. In fact, the grim reality is that Asian and Pacific Islanders in the prison-industrial complex have become an invisible population.

They are shuffled away inside the system and isolated from the outside world. A startling lack of attention and coverage by mainstream news media, legal studies and scholarship has marginalized them. Our own community needs to examine and address the growing numbers of Asian and Pacific Islanders behind bars.

Most of them do not even have a voice and their stories and experiences are left unheard.

Some fundamental questions needed to be asked are: Who are the Asian and Pacific Islanders incarcerated inside prison? What led to their increase in the prison population? What are their stories and experiences? What kinds of resources are available for them in and outside of prison?

But first let us analyze how the prison population today relates to the Asian and Pacific Islander community. The United States has over 2.3 million people behind bars, more than any other country in the world. While the United States has less than 5 percent of the entire world’s population, it represents an astounding one-fourth of all prisoners in the world. What is perplexing is that more than 60 percent of the incarcerated are racial and ethnic minorities.

It has been a common notion that Asian and Pacific Islanders experience the lowest incarceration rates. They also are viewed as model minorities under the model minority myth. Asian and Pacific Islanders now represent the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the civilian population. However, the number of Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population, in both the federal and state levels, has been increasing in dramatic numbers as well. Just in the past ten years alone, Asian and Pacific Islanders have experienced their incarceration rate quadruple. Between 1990 and 2000,
the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population also increased by 250 percent. Similarly, in 2004, the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population in the United States totaled 12,799, a noticeable increase from 9,825 in 1999. In California, one study found that 64.6 percent of the API prisoners were made up of immigrants and refugees. In addition, over the past years, the criminal justice system and pressing immigration policies have increasingly criminalized Asian and Pacific Islanders and other communities of color. Between 1998 and 2006, there was a 61.6 percent increase in total deportations of people of Asian nationalities.

In spite of the increasing prison population of Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States, there has not been a plethora of established information and awareness across the nation. Particularly, the model minority myth presumes that Asian and Pacific Islanders are success stories that overcame discrimination with excellent academic achievement and low crime rates. The myth subsequently creates this mainstream fantasized image of Asian and Pacific Islanders not as criminals, but rather as law-abiding citizens. However, what has continued to be overlooked is that not all Asian and Pacific Islanders are the same. Many have diverse backgrounds and continue to face unique struggles, especially when an overwhelming number of those incarcerated include refugees and immigrants.

Even in crime statistics about arrest and incarceration rates, Asian and Pacific Islanders have been lumped into either one category as “Asian or Pacific Islander” or have been listed as “Other” races. The latter represents a kind of Otherization, a type of marginalization and separation much attributed to the criminal subculture misconception. This misconception entails that the criminal justice system has been dominated by only whites and blacks, and in some statistics, with Hispanics aswell. Evidence of this can be found from the two main crime measures, the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). These crime measures drastically change the perception of Asian and Pacific Islanders as Others by stating: “The ‘Other’ category is composed of Asian Pacific Islanders, and American Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos, if only one of these races is given.” The Asian Prisoner Support Committee (APSC), recently re-established in 2005 in California, has been one of the very few prisoners’ advocacy organizations in the nation that addresses specifically on the needs of Asian prisoners in the United States. As it stands, these issues have been even less talked about and focused on the east coast. With the absence of dialogue, there remains an ambiguous space that incorporates Asian and Pacific Islanders.

To date, Eddy Zheng is an Asian and Pacific Islander community leader, motivational speaker, social justice activist, and an advocate for at-risk youth, the poor and undereducated in California. Yet, only nine years ago, he was incarcerated behind bars, passionately fighting for his release from prison. Eddy spent 21 years behind bars for a crime that he did not even understand. When he emigrated from China with his family in 1982, he did not have a choice as to whether or not to stay or immigrate as a child. His parents, although affluent and considered middle-class in China, decided to start anew in the United States for better education and opportunities for not only Eddy, but also his brother and sister. Much unbeknownst to his family, immigrating to the United States translated into many difficulties and problems. In order to support the family, his parents had to work and could not take care of Eddy. Without much parental support, it soon became increasingly hard for him to adjust to the American school system, culture, and being on his own.

“it was difficult, because of the fact that we didn’t understand,” he said. “I didn’t understand the language; I didn’t understand the criminal justice system.”
four years later, the police arrested the then 16 year old Eddy for kidnapping and robbery of a family and put through the criminal justice system.

"It was difficult, because of the fact that we didn’t understand," he said. "I didn’t understand the language; I didn’t understand the criminal justice system."

His incarceration had been induced by a number of unwarranted factors that could have been prevented if he had access to appropriate resources. Eddy’s family could not afford proper legal representation. Other relatives did not even know that he had gotten into trouble because of the shame that it brought to his family. The translation services provided by the judge had been inconsistent and failed to help Eddy understand the exact charges he faced. As a matter of fact, Eddy could not understand all the legal terms and terminologies, and the overall criminal procedure. Even after his sentence, he didn’t know that he had been sentenced as an adult to life.

"And I was even in the preconditions that I didn’t know I had been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole until I got into prison," Eddy said. "I was under the assumption that I was only doing nine years and I would be out, they told me that I actually got a life sentence and explained to me what that meant."

Higher education in prison did play an immediate role in his life. Established in 2002, the Prison University Project is a non-profit organization that works behind the college program at San Quentin, a state prison in California. In brief, the organization provides prisoners with an education and an opportunity to receive an Associate of Arts degree with the completion of their college-level courses. Even before the Prison University Project had been established, Eddy continued his education in San Quentin and started to undertake English-language classes. In our discussion about his education and what had empowered him, Eddy highlighted that he wanted to challenge and better himself. He also wanted to understand what other people were saying; as a result, he started to learn how to speak and communicate in English. Education, for him, became a source of empowerment that translated into confidence for him to transform and change his life. One part of his outstanding activism in his incarceration was that he organized a petition for ethnic studies courses to be included into the curriculum inside the prison. He continues to attribute a lot of his support from encouragement by the professors and other teachers that taught inside the prison.

Eddy’s story is just one story about an Asian and Pacific Islander’s incarceration in prison. He has taken the initiative to publish the first-ever anthology of works by Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners entitled, Other: An Asian and Pacific Islander Prisoners’ Anthology, in order to illuminate the different stories and perspectives of the growing prisoner population in the United States. However, there still remains to be a lack of knowledge about the different topics that led to their incarceration and also what kinds of people are being placed into prison. In reality, many Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners suffer from language barriers and also cultural and generational differences. The predicament remains that many of their troubles are not made public. Not knowing that these issues exist is extremely problematic as it paves a path for Asian and Pacific Islanders to be neglected, to be disproportionately represented, and to be victimized. More awareness needs to be made towards Asian and Pacific Islanders incarcerated in prison in order to encourage more dialogue, legal studies and scholarship about these prisoners. In particular, higher education in prisons has not been often talked about, especially from an Asian and Pacific Islanders’ perspective. In fact, education can be used as a vehicle to examine how college classes affect Asian and Pacific Islanders’ perspective. Furthermore, education can be used as a vehicle to examine how college classes affect Asian and Pacific Islanders’ perspective. Furthermore, education can be used as a vehicle to examine how college classes affect Asian and Pacific Islanders’ perspective.

Sources:

Chapter 3

Two Relevant Case Stories

There have been some cases about Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States that have been incarcerated in the prison-industrial complex. Here are two compelling stories about two individuals processed through the criminal justice system in recent years:

David Wong illegally immigrated to the United States when he was 18-years-old after he had dropped out of school in China, his native homeland. David’s mother encouraged him to immigrate


23 As a continuation of this project, I hope to have the opportunity to go into prisons and interview Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners. These two case stories only represent the surface. There are more stories, and these two case stories offer a starting point. I encourage the need to continue to search for stories from an Asian and Pacific Islander perspective.

and thought that his father in the United States would be able to help him keep his life in track. However, the opposite happened. His life was derailed. Left to himself for much of his life in the United States, it became hard for him to adjust because he could not speak English. Even though David had worked in many jobs, he could not find a stable one and moved from job-to-job. In time, David met a few friends that convinced him to partake in an armed robbery. He, however, never made it to the scene of the crime. David was pulled over by a police officer and subsequently arrested for carrying a firearm in his pocket. David never heard from his friends again and his father neglected him out of shame and family traditional values.

In the end, David was convicted of armed robbery and then sentenced to eight years to Dannemora.25 Even worst, in his incarceration, David was charged with murder of another inmate, committed while at the yard. However, this time, circumstances around the murder made his case controversial: the prison guard observing above pointed David as the murderer had done so with binoculars some distance away; he first claimed that the culprit “appeared to be white,” but later pulled his statement and said that it was in fact an “Oriental.”26 Subsequently, the guard asked another inmate if he saw the stabber, but he said that the culprit was black. Only when the guard showed him a picture of David and offered an early parole for his participation asked him did the inmate point David out as the culprit. David was convicted for the murder and sentenced to 25 years to life without a legitimate chance to defend himself against the charges, because his translator

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25 Dannemora is a state prison located in upstate New York, isolated with a cold climate. It is known for being the oldest maximum-security prison and third oldest prison in the state.
26 At the time, it meant that it was either David or another person, because there were only two “Orientals” in Dannemora.
appointed by the court did not even speak David’s dialect and neglected his needs.

After his murder conviction, David realized that he needed to learn English in order to fight back against the prison and legal system. He decided to learn English and then also the law in order to fight to regain his freedom. Soon, David learned about criminal law that surprised even his peers. He was even able to help other inmates with only a Chinese-English dictionary about the law. David started to appeal his case and slowly collected support in the community, which created more awareness. In 1991, the David Wong Support Committee was formed in order to advocate for David’s release and a closer look into his murder conviction.27

According to the *New York Magazine* article, *He Got Life*:

“It turned out that many inmates who’d been in the yard at Dannemora the afternoon of the murder knew the real killer’s identity. As one prisoner later said, “I think the whole facility except the administration knew that . . . David Wong was framed.”

Shortly after, a miraculous breakthrough was made by Joe Barry, the private investigator assigned to David’s case. He was able to track the inmate that pointed David as the culprit 14 years ago. Even though all the inmates knew that David was framed on the

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27 After David was released, he was picked up by Homeland Security and detained. Since his release and subsequent detention by immigrations, the David Wong Support Committee disbanded and there have not been any new developments.
day of the murder, they did not want to “snitch,” which is highly stigmatized in prison culture, and point out the true killer. As a result, David was left to take the blame for a murder he did not even commit. In fact, the actual killer had died shortly after the murder and all that was left was David’s innocence.

As such, his attorneys submitted the new evidence and had six inmates testify about the stabbing, and four named David innocent. However, even after the charges were dropped and David was released, the court sent him immediately into a Homeland Security detention facility, because he is an illegal immigrant—to await his deportation back to China.  

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28 For more information, see: http://www.socialism.com/drupal-6.8/?q=node/750
Entre Nax Karage is a Cambodian refugee that came to the Texas, United States when he was only 8-years-old after his family escaped from the atrocities of Khmer Rouge. Even with a steady job and life, he was convicted of murder in 1994 for the murder of his 14-years-old girlfriend. Her body was found in a creek behind a grocery store. Entre was a high school graduate with training in auto mechanics with a good job in a silicon wafer fabrication factory. The police found blood inside his car, which his girlfriend used to drive to the grocery store. In addition, DNA was never taken; prosecutors thought Entre had beaten and strangled his

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girlfriend with a coat hanger in a rage of jealousy after find her having sexual relations with another man. In fact, Entre was playing a game of blackjack when his girlfriend told him that she was going to the grocery store located about only a block away. He allowed her to take his car, which she had driven numerous times without problems. When his girlfriend did not return, Entre started to become worried, upset, and started to look for his girlfriend. Frantic and unable to find her after seven hours of searching, he found a police car in the neighborhood and told the officers that his “cousin” was missing and the officers took him to the police station to file a report.30

At the station, the police confronted Entre with the news that his girlfriend was found dead and her body brutally beaten. The police officers then interrogated Entre for more than 6 hours in which he wrote the officers a written statement insisting he was innocent. Moreover, the medical examiner found DNA on his girlfriend’s body, but did not match that of Entre’s. Discontent and still without any other suspects, prosecutors used this evidence and fabricated that Entre found her with another man and killed her out of jealous rage. During the trial proceedings, Entre did not know anything about the American legal system, but insisted that he would be found innocent, because he knew that he did not commit the crime. The prosecution used witnesses, all Cambodians with similar refugee background that had limited-English capability, with the exception of a few police officers that sided with the law enforcement. Only a Thai translator was present for Entre, if needed. The first testimony came from his girlfriend’s stepfather that spoke in broken English throughout the trial. He testified that

30 While acceptable by Entre and his family that he was dating a 14-year-old girl, American culture does not accept and frowns on such relationship and holds it to much stigmatism.
he saw his daughter and Entre fight once in his apartment, because he was jealous. The prosecution then asked him questions about time, which the stepfather had trouble answering; he could hardly understand and often fumbled his statements. Another testimony frequently conflicted with her police statement. As a result, it had to be written by a police officer, because of the language conflict and have her sign it to approve the “legitimacy” of the statement. There were also no eyewitnesses or conclusive evidence at Entre committed the murder. All of the evidence presented at trial was based on hypothetical theories that incriminated Entre for the murder.

“I never hurt anybody in this whole life,” Entre said to the judge before she sentenced him to life. “Why do you want to take an innocent man and a family away? Why you want to do this to me? I didn’t do anything.”

Based on the extremity of violence used on his girlfriend that led to her death, the judge found him guilty beyond a reasonable doubt and convicted and sentenced Entre to a life sentence, placing him in death row. Entre spent the subsequent 7 years in prison learning about the law until he finally was able to write a motion with the help of another inmate to get DNA samples. Only through this motion did it persuade authorities to run a test of the DNA found on his girlfriend’s body in a database of serious offenders created in 2001, in which they were able to find another man charged with aggravating kidnapping and sexual assault of another 14-years-old girl. Entre was released from prison and received a full pardon after and exonerated of all his charges.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

There is still much work that needs to be done with regards to Asian and Pacific Islanders incarcerated in prison. With the semester that I have had to work on this project, I have had the opportunity to contact various organizations and figures across the nation that work with prisoners. As it remains, the Asian Prisoner Support Committee is the only prisoner advocacy group I have found that focuses on Asian and Pacific Islanders. In addition, with the professors and organizations I have talked to on campus and in the state of New York, the results were grim. Many expressed that they have not worked with Asian and Pacific Islanders in mutual agreement that they have not been in contact with such prisoners at all. This leaves me to wonder if resources are satisfactory enough to help with their rehabilitation and re-entry after prison, especially when many Asian and Pacific Islanders do face problems, especially the common theme of language and/or culture. Especially on the east coast where there are not as many prisoner advocacy organizations as the west coast, there needs to be more awareness and firm action to draw attention and collect stories in order to take initiative and learn about these lives as individuals. Accordingly, with this information, we can better understand the underlying reasons that lead to their incarceration and create helpful resources that strive to reduce the incarceration rates.

Most importantly, the Asian and Pacific Islander prisoner population has been increasing in the recent years. If it so continues that there is a lack of awareness, information, and action
to address the problems of such prisoners, the invisible population will continue to increase relatively unnoticed.

Deportation is also another important issue that I was unable to cover as a result of the time constraint. With the events of September 11, 2001, unwarranted arrests and detention of many immigrants that have led to their deportation is a critical topic that needs to be examined. Under United States immigration law, “aggravated felony” refers to a term used for an immediate deportation and removal from the country if an immigrant has committed crimes of a sentence of at least a year whether or not that sentence has been suspended. Framed as immigration reform, it is arguably a means for the United States to target and deport unwanted immigrants from the United States, significantly reducing their numbers. As a result, there has to be more transparency with how these individuals are treated by immigration and customs and in their incarceration while awaiting their deportation.

More dialogue and discussions are fundamental. We cannot continue to ostracize and isolate prisoners through the criminal justice system. Despite their crimes, we also need to treat them as individuals and find solutions to help them and also others that potentially commit crimes in the future.

Eddy eloquently puts it at the end of our interview:

“We need to learn about other people’s cultures and then we need to learn about our own culture and find commonalities and raise discussions. That is how we can provide solutions, specifically when dealing with the issues of incarceration and

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32 Many immigrants first serve time in the United States and then deported. In addition, a lot of non-violent crimes can lead to deportation.
deportation. Whenever we talk about deportation issues, we talk about the Hispanics and the Latino population, but it affects other populations also. People just do not know about it. That is why we have to talk about it. We have to engage in that process of discussion and just have a conversation about those issues.”

We need to make these discussions and dialogue happen. By doing so, we will also create awareness. One way to do this is by illuminating their stories and experiences behind bars, especially when there is a lack of the “Asian and Pacific Islander perspective” in the prison narrative. Eddy’s book, “Other: An Asian and Pacific Islander Prisoners’ Anthology,” has been the very first step in collecting the stories of Asian and Pacific Islanders behind bars. There needs to be many more, especially on the east coast. Hopefully, there could be work that interviews law enforcement officers, prison guards, and Asian and Pacific Islander prisoners in the prison-industrial complex, and that would be used as valuable research. In the end, we also need to convince and encourage legal scholars and academic figures to incorporate Asian and Pacific Islanders in their studies. No longer can such a relevant and compelling field of study be underserved and marginalized.
References


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Chapter 5

Resources

This collection of multicultural, prison advocacy, social service, and more resources focus on two states: California and New York. Both states are home to the highest number/population of Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States. In addition, I have included nationally based organizations, many of which are located in Washington, DC. Other resources are information useful, but not localized or organization-based in New York, California, or National. Please e-mail jthach1@binghamton.edu if interested in adding to this compilation or changes needed:
New York

Binghamton Justice Projects

http://www.justiceprojects.org/

Binghamton Justice Projects brings together a wide variety of activities in the Binghamton, New York area that address the local, national and global incarceration and social justice crisis—and seek to advance alternative justice systems.

Center for Community Alternatives

http://www.communityalternatives.org/

Center for Community Alternatives is a leader in the field of community-based alternatives to incarceration. Its mission is to promote re-integrative justice and a reduced reliance on incarceration through advocacy, services and public policy development in pursuit of civil and human rights.

Center for Constitutional Rights

http://www.ccrjustice.org/

Center for Constitutional Rights is dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Founded by attorneys who represented civil rights movements in the South, the Center for Constitutional Rights is a non-profit legal and
educational organization committed to the creative use of law as a positive force for social change.

**Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants**

*http://users.bestweb.net/~cureny/*

The New York Chapter of Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants works to mobilize public opinion in favor of needed reforms of the criminal justice system, strengthen family bonds of inmates, and educate the public, public officials, and interested organizations about the best options available in issues that have an impact on the criminal justice and socialization systems.

**Coalition for Parole Restoration**

*http://parolecpr.org/*

Coalition for Parole Restoration formed in New York by families of persons in prison, friends of persons in prison, formerly incarcerated persons, prisoner’s rights attorneys and community activists. Its mission is to organize families and friends of prisoners so that they could advocate for fair parole practices as well as to educate the community about the effects these practices were having on families and communities.

**Correctional Association of New York**

*http://www.correctionalassociation.org/*
Correctional Association of New York was founded as a result of the concerns about brutal conditions in prisons and the lack of support services for former prisoners. Through advocacy, public education, and development and promoting workable alternative proposals, the Correctional Association seeks to create a more fair, efficient and humane criminal justice system and a more safe and just society.

Desis Rising Up and Moving

http://drumnation.org/

Desis Rising Up and Moving was founded to build the power of South Asian low-wage immigrant workers, youth, and families in New York City to win economic and educational justice, and civil and immigrant rights.

Families for Freedom

http://www.familiesforfreedom.org/

Families for Freedom is a New York-based multi-ethnic defense network by and for immigrants facing and fighting deportation. The organization aims to repeal the laws that are tearing apart our homes and neighborhoods; and to build the power of immigrant communities as communities of color, to provide a guiding voice in the growing movement for immigrant rights as human rights. Families for Freedom is a source of support, education, and campaigns for directly affected families and communities and has evolved to an organizing center against deportation.

Fortune Society
http://fortunesociety.org/

Fortune Society is a nonprofit social service and advocacy organization whose mission is to support successful reentry from prison and promote alternatives to incarceration, thus strengthening the fabric of our communities. Fortune Society works to create a world where all who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated can become positive, contributing members of society.

The Center for Law and Justice

http://www.cflj.org/

The Center for Law and Justice is a tax-exempt community based organization that has provided criminal justice education, advocacy, and public policy analyses. The organization envisions a peaceful, just, and compassionate community that provides each resident with equal access to the goods, services and opportunities of that community. It also seeks the fair and just treatment of all people throughout the civil and criminal justice systems, and works to reduce reliance upon incarceration.

The New York State Defenders Justice Fund

http://www.newyorkjusticefund.org/

The New York State Defenders Justice Fund advocates and organizes to improve the quality of public defense services in New York State and nationally. The Justice Fund supports alternatives to incarceration, a more just and equitable prison system, and improved reentry systems and specifically seeks to end racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and other forms of discrimination.
New York Prisoners

http://www.newyorkprisoners.com/

New York Prisoners is an organization that provides general information, support, and resources for New York State prisoners and parole for prisoners, their family members and friends.

New York State Prisoner Justice Network

http://www.nysprisonerjustice.org/

New York State Prisoner Justice Network grew out of the New York State Prisoner Justice Conference held in Albany in March 2010. The network works to facilitate communication and connection with a wide range of New York State organizations and individuals working on a diversity of prisoner justice issues to share ideas, information, energy, strategies, hope, and inspiration. Its goal is to build an individual and collective strength to challenge and change New York’s criminal justice system.

Organization of Chinese Americans – NY

http://www.oca-ny.org/

The New York Chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans is one of over 80 chapters and affiliates across the country dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic wellbeing of Asian Pacific Americans in the United States. The organization is a community leader in advocating on important
local and national issues, including voting rights, immigration reform, language rights, health care reform, hate crimes and hate media.

**Prison Action Network**

http://www.prisonaction.blogspot.com/

Prison Action Network seeks to unite people who are incarcerated in New York State, people who have a loved one in a New York State prison, and people who care about the impact incarceration has upon our society.

**Prison Families of New York**

http://www.prisonfamiliesofnewyork.org/

Organization that offers resources for formerly incarcerated people and families and friends of prisoners, such as support groups in the state, information about visiting, and tips for families.

**Prisoners Are People, Too**

http://www.prp2.org/

Prisoners Are People, Too was created in 2005 and is a monthly documentary film and speaker series that meets to enhance the general public’s awareness of prison issues and includes networking, referrals, community building, action organizing, and camaraderie as well as community education.
Prisoners’ Legal Services of New York

http://www.plsny.org/

Prisoners’ Legal Services of New York was established in 1976 and provides legal representation and assistance to prisoners in New York State prisons to help secure their civil and human rights and to advocate for humane prisons and for a more humane criminal justice system.

Binghamton Prisoner Support Network

http://www.prisonersupportnetwork.blogspot.com/

Binghamton Prisoner Support Network aims to offer support to people incarcerated in the many institutions of the United States criminal justice system. The network launches OFF Magazine, a free publication written primarily by and for prisoners.

South Asian Americans Leading Together

http://www.saalt.org/

South Asian Americans Leading Together is a national, nonpartisan, non-profit organization that elevates the voices and perspectives of South Asian individuals and organizations to build a more just and inclusive society in the United States.

Southern Tier Advocacy and Mitigation Project

http://www.stamp-cny.org/
Southern Tier Advocacy and Mitigation Project is an all-volunteer, non-profit, community based organization that challenges pollution, criminalization, exploitation, and incarceration by encouraging self-respect, empowerment, leadership, and self-determination among young people, adults, and families most affected by criminal justice and environmental policies.

**The Albany Social Justice Center**

*https://sites.google.com/site/albanysocialjusticecenter/*

The Albany Social Justice Center is a grassroots community organization, which through its programming and projects confronts the roots and structures of oppression.

**The Bronx Defenders**

*http://www.bronxdefenders.org/*

The Bronx Defenders provides legal representation and services in criminal defense for those arrested and accused of crimes and also support for families.

**The Legal Aid Society of New York**

*http://legal-aid.org/*

The Legal Aid Society of New York is the oldest and largest in the nation, private and non-profit organization that provides legal services and representation to low-income New Yorkers under the
belief that no New Yorker should be denied access to justice because of poverty.

**The Osborne Association**


The Osborne Association offers opportunities for individuals who have been in conflict with the law to transform their lives through innovative, effective, and replicable programs that serve the community by reducing crime and its human and economic costs. The organization offers opportunities for reform and rehabilitation through public education, advocacy, and alternatives to incarceration that respect the dignity of people.

**Urban Justice Center**


Urban Justice Center serves New York City’s most vulnerable residents through a combination of direct legal service, systematic advocacy, community education, and political organizing.

**Women’s Prisoner Association**


Women’s Prisoner Association is a service and advocacy organization that is committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves. Examples of program services available are alternatives to incarceration,
family reunification assistance and family support services, reentry case management, targeted assistance and support, and jail and prison based education and pre released services.
Asian Prisoner Support Committee

http://apscinfo.wordpress.com/

Asian Prisoner Support Committee is based in the Bay Area or Northern California, and works with Asian prisoners to educate the broader community about the growing number of Asians in the United States being imprisoned, detained, and deported. The mission of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee is to expose the root causes of why more and more Asians are going to prison, such as the crisis of our educational system, the lack of access to resources for low-income immigrants, war, and imperialism.

Bar None

http://baronearcata.wordpress.com/

Bar None is a volunteer run, grassroots organization located in Humboldt County which stands in solidarity with incarcerated people and their allies with the belief that prison abolition is a necessary part of building a future that is just, equitable, and empowering for everyone.

Books For Prisoners

http://groundwork.ucsd.edu/
Groundwork Books offers up to one per person, free of charge. Send your request, specifying your interests, and we will send you a detailed booklet for that area of interest. Subjects: politics, spirituality, feminism, dictionaries, culture, social criticism, and select novels.

**California Coalition for Women Prisoners**  
California Coalition for Women Prisoners is a grassroots social justice organization that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgendered people, and communities of color by the prison-industrial complex. The California Coalition for Women Prisoners perceives the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the prison-industrial complex.

**Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles**  
[http://www.chirla.org/](http://www.chirla.org/)  
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles was formed in 1986 to advance the human and civil rights of immigrants and refugees in Los Angeles; promote harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-racial human relations; and through coalition-building, advocacy, community education and organizing, empower immigrants and their allies to build a more just society.

**California Innocence Project**
http://www.californiainnocenceproject.org/

California Innocence Project is a law school clinical program dedicated to releasing wrongfully convicted inmates and providing an outstanding educational experience to the students enrolled in the clinic.

California Prison Focus

http://prisons.org/

California Prison Focus looks forward to the release to general population of all wrongful gang-validated prisoners with indeterminate security housing unit terms, and to the end of the “snitch or die” regime. The organization watches the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to assure that promises are kept and change happens against decades-long security housing unit terms and other human rights violations.

California Prison Watch

http://californiaprisonwatch.blogspot.com/

California Prison Watch is a community resource for monitoring the treatment of prisoners in California, documenting human rights abuses for those imprisoned, and prisoners speaking up for humanity.

Centerforce

http://www.centerforce.org/
Centerforce is a California-based non-profit organization that strives to improve the lives and strengthen the communities of incarcerated people and their loved ones. The organization aims to foster transformative experiences during incarceration, promote successful re-entry, and help reduce the risk of re-incarceration.

**Eddy Zheng Website and Blog**

http://eddyzheng.com/

**Fair Chance Project**

http://fairchanceproject.org/

Fair Chance Project is committed to building a future for all California residents beyond prisons and to transform unjust sentencing laws and parole policies while protecting the human and constitutional rights of those impacts by the prison system.

**Fair Sentencing for Youth**

http://www.fairsentencingofyouth.org/

Fair Sentencing for Youth is a growing, collaborative project powered by many groups and individuals that recognizes that young people are different from adults and that the courts and laws should treat them that way.

**Justice Now**
http://jnow.org/

Justice Now aims to end violence against women and stop their imprisonment with alternatives to policing and prisons and to challenge the prison-industrial complex in all its forms.

Out of Control

http://home.mindspring.com/~outoftime/

Out of Control is a small, self-supporting committee in the San Francisco Bay Area. The committee works in the San Francisco Bay Area Lesbian and Gay Communities, nationally, and internationally to educate people about political prisoners in the United States and about the horrendous conditions in United States prison in general; also has done support work for people with AIDS in prison, and for battered women convicted for killing their abusers.

Prison Action Coalition

http://www.boalt.org/PAC/

Collaborative student organization, with members at Boalt and Hastings Law Schools, that advocates to improve conditions in California’s prisons and assist individual prisoners with legal matters. The Prison Action Coalitions promotes awareness, conducts interviews, research, and documentation.

Prison Law Office
http://www.prisonlaw.com/

Prison Law Office strives to improve the living conditions and protect the constitutional rights of California state prisoners by providing free legal services. The office represents individual prisoners, engages in class action and other impact litigation, educates the public about prison conditions, and provides technical assistance to attorneys throughout the country. Also publishes the California State Prisoners Handbook, which is a self-help resource for prisoners, and their attorneys and advocates.

**Prison University Project**

http://www.prisonuniversityproject.org/

Prison University Project provides higher education programs to people incarcerated at San Quentin state prison to create a replicable model for such programs and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California. The project also aims to challenge myths and stereotypes about people in prison, to publicly raise fundamental questions about the practice of incarceration, and to incubate and disseminate alternative concepts of justice, both with and beyond the academy.

**Legal Services for Prisoners With Children**

http://www.prisonerswithchildren.org/

Legal Services for Prisoners With Children is a non-profit organization that works to restore rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, release people from prison, and
reunify people, families and communities during and after incarceration.

**National Center for Youth Law**

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

National Center for Youth Law is located in Oakland and uses the law to improve the lives of low-income children to ensure that low-income children have the resources, support, and opportunities they need for healthy and productive lives. Their work has been primarily focused on poor children who are additionally challenged by abuse and neglect, disability, or other disadvantage.

**Northern California Innocence Project**

[http://law.scu.edu/ncip/](http://law.scu.edu/ncip/)

Northern California Innocence Project embodies Santa Clara University’s mission to create a more just and humane world through working to exonerate innocent prisoners and pursue legal reforms that address the causes and consequences of wrongful convictions.

**The Beat Within**


The Beat Within is a weekly publication of writing and art from the inside. Its mission is to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity to share their ideas and life experiences in a
safe space that encourages literary, self-expression, some critical thinking skills, and healthy, supportive relationships with adults and their community through commentaries, artwork, and poetry.

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

http://www.e-ccip.org/

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents aims to prevent intergenerational crime and incarceration with the production of high quality documentation on and the development of model services for children of criminal offenders and their families.

Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project

http://www.tgijp.org/

Transgender, Gender Variant, and Intersex Justice Project works mainly with prisoners in California on: alternative sentencing, writing advocacy letters trying to help transgender prisoners get access to hormones, finding attorneys and preparing cases for attorneys.
American Civil Liberties Union

http://www.aclu.org/prisoners-rights

American Civil Liberties Union National Prison Project is dedicated to ensuring that our nation’s prisons, jails, and other places of detention comply with the Constitution, domestic law, and international human rights principles. The National Prison Project aims to substantially reduce the existing incarcerated population, especially among people of color, the mentally ill, and other vulnerable populations; ending cruel, inhuman, and degrading conditions of confinement; increasing public accountability and transparency of jails, prisons, and other places of detention; and expanding prisoners’ freedom of religion, expression, and association to result in a criminal justice system that respects individual rights and increases public safety. Offers some general legal advice, but is primarily involved in large class action lawsuits that challenge conditions of confinement.

Amnesty International

http://www.amnestyusa.org/

Amnesty International is an organization of supporters, activists, and volunteers that mobilized as a global movement of people fighting injustice and promoting human rights. One issue that Amnesty International covers is prisoners and people at risk whose human rights have been violated or are under threat of violation.
Asian American Center for Advancing Justice

http://www.advancingjustice.org/

Asian American Center for Advancing Justice is a leading Asian American civil rights and social justice organization comprising four equal and independent affiliates: the Asian American Justice Center, Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Asian American Institute, and Asian Law Caucus. Its mission is to promote a fair and equitable society for all by working for civil and human rights and empowering Asian American and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders and other underserved communities.

Asian American Justice Center

http://www.advancingequality.org/

Asian American Justice Center strives to advance the human and civil rights of Asian Americans, and build and promote a fair and equitable society for all. The organization is one of the nation’s leading experts on issues of importance to the Asian American community including: affirmative action, anti-Asian violence prevention/race relations, census, immigrant rights, immigration, language access, television diversity and voting rights.

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund

http://www.aaldef.org/
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund is a national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans by combining litigation, advocacy, education, and organizing to work with Asian American communities across the country to secure human rights for all.

**Asian Americans United**


Asian American United aims to build leadership in Asian American communities to build our neighborhoods and united against oppression.

**Asian Law Caucus**


Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco is the nation’s first legal and civil rights organization serving the low-income Asian Pacific American communities, and focuses on labor and employment issues, housing, immigration and immigration rights, student advocacy, civil rights and hate violence, consumer rights, senior rights, and juvenile justice. The organization also helps to set national policies in affirmative action, national security, voting rights, census, and language rights.

**Asian Pacific American Legal Center**

Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California was founded with broad community based support and is now the largest organization in the country focused on meeting the legal needs of Asian Pacific Americans with direct services, community education, training, and technical assistance. The mission of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center is to advocate for civil rights, provide legal services and education, and build coalitions to positively influence and impact Asian Pacific Americans and to create a more equitable and harmonious society.

Books Not Bars

http://ellabakercenter.org/

Books Not Bars organizes the largest network of families of incarcerated youth and champions alternatives to California’s costly and broken youth prison system.

Campaign for Youth Justice

http://www.campaignforyouthjustice.org/

Campaign for Youth Justice is dedicated to ending the practice of trying, sentencing, and incarcerating youth under 18 in the adult criminal justice system. The organization features information and the stories and voices of youths incarcerated as adults.

Detention Watch Network

http://www.detentionwatchnetwork.org/
The Detention Watch Network is a national coalition of organizations and individuals working to educate the public and policy makers about the United States immigration detention and deportation system and advocate for humane reform so that all can receive fair and humane treatment.

**Innocence Project**


The Innocence Project is a non-profit legal clinic affiliated with the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York. The project is a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice. The project also aims to raise awareness and concern about the failings of the criminal justice system.

**Just Detention International**


Just Detention International is a health and human rights organization that seeks to end sexual abuse in all forms of detention. The organization advocates for government accountability for prisoner rape, to transform ill-formed public attitudes about sexual violence in detention, and to promote access to resources for those who have survived this form of abuse.

**Justice Denied**
Justice Denied is a magazine for the wrongly convicted that aims to shed light on injustice in the prosecution, conviction, and punishment of the innocent. Justice Denied provides information about convicted people claiming innocence, exonerated people, awards of compensation to exonerated people, book and movie reviews, and reports about court decisions and law review and journal articles related to wrongful convictions.

Prison Activist Resource Center

Prison Activist Resource Center is a prison abolitionist group committed to exposing and challenging all forms of institutionalized racism, sexism, able-ism, heterosexism, and classism, specifically within the prison-industrial complex. The Prison Activist Resource Center provides a directory free to prisoners upon request, and seeks to work in solidarity with prisoners, ex-prisoners, their friends and families, as well as teachers and activists on many prison issues.

Sentencing Project

Sentencing Project is a renowned national organization that works for a fair and effective criminal justice system by promoting reform in sentencing law and practice, and alternatives to incarceration. The Sentencing Project is a leader in the effort to
bring national attention to trends and inequities in the criminal justice system with research, advocacy, and reform.

**Family and Corrections Network**

*http://fcnetwork.org*/

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated is a part of the Family and Corrections Network that provides ways for those with families of the incarcerated to share information and experiences in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The organization continues to work alongside families of the incarcerated, program providers, policy makers, researchers, educators, correctional personnel and the public.

**White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders**

*http://www.whitehouse.gov/aapi*

White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders works collaboratively with the White House Office of Public Engagement and the designated Federal agencies to increase Asian American and Pacific Islander participation in programs in education, commerce, business, health, human services, housing, environment, arts, agriculture, labor and employment, transportation, justice, veteran affairs and community development. The initiative works to improve the quality-of-life and opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders by facilitating increased access to and participation in federal programs where they remain underserved.
Other Resources

Books Through Bars

http://booksthroughbars.org/pbp/

Books Through Bars has map and contact information for books specifically for prisoners across the United States.

Rights of Inmates

http://public.findlaw.com/civil-rights/more-civil-rights-topics/institutionalized-persons-discrimination-more/le5_6rights.html

Rights of Inmates is a Findlaw self-help directory about the rights of inmates when facing incarceration that is useful for both inmates and family members of prisoners.

Coalition for Prisoners’ Rights

http://www.realcostofprisons.org/coalition.html

Coalition for Prisoners’ Rights publishes a monthly newsletter for 36 years filled with information and writings about the prison-industrial complex.

Cornell Law Resource for Prisons and Prisoner’s Rights

http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/prisoners_rights
Cornell University Law School’s Legal Information Institute provides a self-help overview of prisoners and prisoner’s rights.

**Gang and At-Risk Kids**

http://gangsandkids.com/

Gang and At-Risk Kids is a website with a compilation of question-and-answer letter exchanges with prisoners and visitors. There are also stories and art from prisoners behind bars, statistics, useful information, and resources.

**Jailhouse Lawyer’s Manual**

http://www3.law.columbia.edu/hrlr/jlm/toc/

Jailhouse Lawyer’s Manual is a useful self-help handbook by the members of the Columbia Human Rights Law Review of legal rights and procedures designed for use specifically by people in prison.

**The Business of Detention**

http://www.businessofdetention.com/

The Business of Detention is an online publication with the desire to create an innovative way to present the business of privatized detention services. The online publication focuses on private prison companies and immigration.
The Real Cost of Prisons Project

http://www.realcostofprisons.org/

The Real Cost of Prisons Project seeks to broaden and deepen the organizing capacity of prison/justice activists working to end mass incarceration by bringing together justice activists, artists, justice policy researchers and people directly experiencing the impact of mass incarceration to create popular education material and other resources while explore the immediate and long-term costs of incarceration on the individual, her/his family, community and the nation.