

# TRANSFORMING ORANGE COUNTY

## ASSETS AND NEEDS OF ASIAN AMERICANS & NATIVE HAWAIIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS



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**Ellen Ahn**, executive director of Korean Community Services

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**Shikha Bhatnagar**, executive director of the South Asian Network

**Mary Anne Foo**, founder and executive director of the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)

**Jei Garlitos**, principal and coordinator of Alternative Education with the Anaheim Union High School District

**Caroline Hahn**, past president of the Orange County Korean American Bar Association

**Naz Hamid**, parent in Irvine; ran for the local school board

**Ken Inouye**, former chair of the Orange County Human Relations Commission; past president of the national Japanese American Citizens League

**Charles Kim**, cofounder and first executive director of the Korean American Coalition

**Eduardo Lee**, cofounder of Wahoo's Fish Taco

**Michael Matsuda**, superintendent of the Anaheim Union High School District; founding member of the Orange County Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)

**Tam Nguyen**, former president of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce; owner of Advance Beauty College; former president of the California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) Alumni Association

**Tricia Nguyen**, CEO of Southland Integrated Services, formerly known as the Vietnamese Community of Orange County (VNCOC)

**Jonathan Paik**, Orange County director of the Korean Resource Center

**Jane Pang**, cofounder and board member of Pacific Islander Health Partnership (PIHP)

**Victor Pang**, cofounder of Pacific Islander Health Partnership (PIHP)

**Vattana Peong**, executive director of The Cambodian Family

**Edwin Tiongson**, project director of ELEVATE AAPI (Equitable Learning Experience Valuing Achievement, Transfer and Empowering Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) at Irvine Valley College

**Audrey Yamagata-Noji**, vice president of Student Services at Mount San Antonio College; served on the Santa Ana School Board for 25 years; volunteer with Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP)

**Cyril Yu**, former president and current board member of the South Coast Chinese Cultural Association; senior deputy district attorney at the Orange County District Attorney's office; ran for the Irvine School Board

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*Photo courtesy of Vattana Peong*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**O**range County—the third-most populous county in California and the sixth-most populous in the United States—exemplifies the major demographic shifts sweeping the nation. These shifts have transformed this predominantly homogenous, White, and suburban county into one that is highly diverse and urbanizing, where Asian Americans & Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (AA&NHPI) now comprise 21% of the county’s 3 million residents. With nearly 600,000 Asian Americans and over 19,000 Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI), **Orange County is home to the nation’s third-largest AA&NHPI population.**<sup>1</sup>

Although the county’s fastest-growing population—from 2000 to 2010, the Asian American population jumped 41% in contrast to 6% growth for the county as a whole<sup>2</sup>—data and research on AA&NHPI in Orange County are surprisingly limited. Three years after the data-driven demographic report on the AA&NHPI of Orange County,<sup>3</sup> *Transforming Orange County* attempts to better understand the county’s complex and diverse AA&NHPI community. Relying on rich narrative context and analysis from diverse community leaders (see table),<sup>4</sup> this report examines **six areas where AA&NHPI strengthen the county but also areas of concern that have been largely overlooked:** (1) building sustainable communities, (2) economic development and disparities, (3) K–12 and higher education, (4) health care services, (5) political participation and civic engagement, and (6) civil rights advocacy. In each of these chapters, we analyze the many contributions and resources that AA&NHPI bring to the county (“assets”) as well as identify significant issues challenging AA&NHPI that must be addressed (“needs”), and conclude with key policy recommendations. With *Transforming Orange County*, we seek to increase knowledge, foster dialogue, and reevaluate policies about AA&NHPI communities in the county, and we hope this report sparks additional discussion, research, and action.

### Interviewed Community Leaders

Ellen Ahn	Executive director of Korean Community Services
Hussam Ayloush	Executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Greater Los Angeles Area Chapter (CAIR-LA)
Shikha Bhatnagar	Executive director of the South Asian Network
Mary Anne Foo	Founder and executive director of the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance (OCAPICA)
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*The quotes from these interviews are represented verbatim in this report, with some shortened for space considerations, shown by an ellipsis. The only other modifications are to help provide context, shown in brackets.*

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

### Chapter 2: Building Sustainable Communities

The rapidly changing demographics of the county and the subsequent residential shifts have resulted in an incredibly diverse and multicultural county. From 2000 to 2010, the Asian American population increased in every city in Orange County.<sup>5</sup> For decades, AA&NHPI have been drawn to Orange County, leading to increased AA&NHPI homeownership. AA&NHPI have also created ethnic enclaves and related cultural amenities, which continue to attract new residents to the county.

Unfortunately, Orange County experiences ongoing anti-Asian sentiment, discrimination, and segregation. The burdens of housing are also undeniable—all communities, including AA&NHPI, need more affordable housing and housing assistance programs. Homeownership among Asian Americans (58%) and NHPI (46%) is overall lower than non-Hispanic Whites (67%).<sup>6</sup> In such an expensive county as Orange County, this disparity in homeownership is masked by the focus on wealthier overseas Asian homebuyers.

Moreover, housing insecurities among AA&NHPI are often difficult to document and are rendered “invisible” by informal housing arrangements (e.g., extended family members sharing living quarters to mitigate expenses) and an undeniable stigma related to housing instability. Many AA&NHPI are reluctant to seek housing assistance due to concerns with family separation or immigration status. Housing insecurities are a particular concern for aging monolingual AA&NHPI, whose population is expected to grow 240% by 2060, comprising 33% of the total AA&NHPI population across the United States.<sup>7</sup>

To address these issues, it is critically important to collect and report disaggregated data on housing and sustainable community needs, and to ensure linguistically and culturally competent outreach, education, and assistance for AA&NHPI (e.g., financial education, tenant rights, affordable housing options, foreclosures)—both for tenants and homeowners, and particularly for seniors. Media and policy makers must help fight persistent anti-Asian sentiment and create a more welcoming county for all ethnic groups. Additionally, the county requires sustainable housing solutions, including the development and preservation of affordable housing stock.

### **Chapter 3: Economic Development and Disparities**

As the county’s fastest-growing population, the economic contributions of AA&NHPI are undeniable. In 2012, AA&NHPI businesses brought nearly \$26 billion in revenue and over 100,000 jobs to the county.<sup>8</sup> AA&NHPI are integral to the county’s workforce and are driving the growth of AA&NHPI business and commercial centers, emerging “next-generation” entrepreneurs and innovators, and transnational economic connections—including the increase in the number of businesses and developments established by overseas Asian entrepreneurs. Numerous major computer and technology companies, founded or run by Asians or Asian Americans, are headquartered in Orange County.

In contrast, AA&NHPI also face poverty, unemployment, and significant income disparities among ethnic groups. While 12% of Asian Americans in Orange County live in poverty (below general poverty rate of 13%), certain ethnic groups, including Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, and Cambodian, have higher-than-average poverty rates. Countywide, poverty rates for Thai Americans (20%), Vietnamese Americans (16%), and NHPI (15%) are particularly high.<sup>9</sup> There are also ongoing reports of workplace discrimination, worker exploitation, and resistance to Asian business owners. Small businesses, especially immigrant-owned businesses, still struggle with developing the legal, compliance, and accounting knowledge to thrive.

To bridge these disparities, it is critical to collect and report disaggregated data on poverty, unemployment, workforce challenges, and the needs of consumers and small businesses. Culturally and linguistically competent “know your rights and responsibilities” materials are recommended for both workers and business owners. Additionally, initiatives that protect low-wage workers and employees from discrimination and retaliation based on immigration status must be strengthened, and ultimately policy makers should create a comfortable business environment for diverse business owners, entrepreneurs, and workers.

## Chapter 4: K–12 and Higher Education

Orange County is home to some of the nation’s top-ranked K–12 public schools, attracting diverse AA&NHPI to the county. In the 2016–2017 school year, Asian Americans comprised 18% (88,279) of the students in the Orange County public school system, and NHPI comprised 0.4% (1,725) with concentrations in the Irvine (49%, 16,504), Westminster (39%, 3,367), Fountain Valley (37.5%, 2,394), and Garden Grove (35%, 15,638) school districts.<sup>10</sup>

AA&NHPI educators, administrators, and parents have made significant contributions in Orange County, including the development of language immersion programs, ethnic studies curricula in K–12 schools and local colleges, and the presence of many AA&NHPI in higher education. AA&NHPI have also developed important university-community partnerships.

Despite their many strengths, AA&NHPI still face educational needs such as an ongoing lack of resources for English language learners and immigrant families, including the growing challenges of undocumented students. Contrary to the “model minority myth” that Asian Americans are all inherently smart and college bound, Southeast Asians and NHPI do face significant and persistent educational disparities (e.g., 19% of NHPI have obtained a college degree or higher compared to 38% of the general population,<sup>11</sup> and NHPI high school graduation rates in Orange County are below average).<sup>12</sup>

Many children of immigrants or refugees face immense academic pressures, creating a significant need for culturally competent mental health services—particularly for transnational families. Increased school bullying and harassment of AA&NHPI students is also a growing concern in addition to the continuing lack of AA&NHPI representation among educators and school administrators.

To address these deficiencies, AA&NHPI require ethnic-specific data on educational challenges and attainment, greater access for English learners, more sustainable dual-language and bilingual programs, more culturally competent outreach and education for parents and families, and more culturally appropriate mental health programs. Anti-hate and anti-bullying policies must be strengthened and include supportive services for students, with specific support for undocumented students. Policy makers should also consider expanding ethnic studies curricula, building a pipeline to bring more underrepresented ethnic groups into roles as teachers and administrators, and advocating for policies that promote equal opportunity and diversity for all students in Orange County.

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“It’s such a vast diversity of Asian American groups—in terms of language and orientation and generation and educational needs and parental background and income levels—that it’s just hard to lump everybody together, which just means that the work that you do has to be sensitive to all those different things.”



Photo courtesy of Mary Anne Foo/  
OCAPICA

## Chapter 5: Health Care Services

AA&NHPI have historically been lumped together as a monolithic group, leading to misperceptions that AA&NHPI as a whole have better health outcomes than other racial groups, and in some cases, the general U.S. population. However, the lack of disaggregated AA&NHPI data often masks specific health issues, including

significant differences between Asian American and NHPI populations.<sup>13</sup>

In Orange County, AA&NHPI have helped build a culturally and linguistically diverse health care workforce and lead culturally competent community-based organizations (CBOs), which provide a safety net for the underserved or those lacking health access. AA&NHPI also bring cross-cultural collaborations and a holistic and comprehensive approach to health.

In terms of needs, top issues include access to health insurance, limited capacity and funding for CBOs, and an underrepresentation of certain AA&NHPI groups as health care professionals. Insufficient culturally competent behavioral health services are a constant challenge. Acknowledging mental health challenges has significant stigma for most ethnic communities, and when AA&NHPI do seek help, it is difficult to find culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Disparities in behavioral health services are amplified for some populations such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans who have experienced the trauma of civil war, displacement, postwar survival, and escape as refugees. Similar issues of stigma and the complex family dynamics of “saving face” magnify the need for more awareness and education programs related to domestic and family violence.

NHPI populations face particular health disparities that are often overlooked because of the lack of disaggregated NHPI data and their relatively smaller population. In 2012, the death rate for NHPI in Orange County was 864 per 100,000 people, which was the highest for all racial groups.<sup>14</sup> Improving health care services and programs for NHPI is critical.

Among the key responses needed are greater collection and reporting of disaggregated data on health disparities, conditions, and access, with a special focus on underserved populations such as NHPI. Linguistically and culturally competent outreach, education, and assistance for all aspects of health care service delivery are essential, as is more funding and support for culturally competent CBOs and more cultural competency training for health care professionals. Policy makers should

also focus on developing health career pipeline programs and community health worker (e.g., *promotores*) programs that target AA&NHPI.

## Chapter 6: Political Participation and Civic Engagement

Historically AA&NHPI in Orange County were discouraged and even prevented from political participation and civic engagement. While many barriers have been removed, AA&NHPI continue to face other challenges in exercising full civic participation, including intracommunity political divides that complicate voter outreach and mobilization efforts, and hamper the ability for AA&NHPI to unite and work together as a political force.

Community strengths include the growing visibility of AA&NHPI elected officials and the subsequent increase in political clout. AA&NHPI have also utilized legal efforts to ensure better political representation and have had success in mobilizing voters, especially limited English proficient ones. Federal and state laws protect the rights of limited English proficient voters. AA&NHPI-serving CBOs have also played a critical role in increasing civic engagement among community members through nonpartisan voter mobilization campaigns.

Community concerns include outreach challenges to first-generation voters and gaining a cohesive AA&NHPI political identity. AA&NHPI could potentially represent up to 20% of Orange County voters but only currently comprise 14% of voters.<sup>15</sup> There are persistent barriers for political candidates and a lack of both strategic representation and sustainable political leadership. There is also a growing need to foster the next generation of civic leaders and to channel more philanthropists in supporting civic engagement initiatives.

Policy recommendations include the collection and reporting of disaggregated data on voter registration, party affiliation, and voter turnout. More funding should be directed to linguistically and culturally competent assistance for voter registration, naturalization, and nonpartisan voter programs. Redistricting, districting, and existing legislation (i.e., Federal Voting Rights Act and the California Voting Rights Act) are important tools for ensuring better political representation. Policy makers and community leaders should also focus on building a pipeline of AA&NHPI running for office, including the appointment of board members and commissioners as stepping stones to elected office, and developing a sense of civic participation at earlier ages.



*Photo courtesy of Caroline Hahn*

## Chapter 7: Civil Rights Advocacy

“So [we do] a lot of educating policy makers and funders all the time that ‘We’re really different now. You can’t lump us all together. And it’s even more different. There’s even more of a divide now. . . . [We’re] really different! We’re on a spectrum!’”

Orange County has an unfortunate and long history of anti-Asian sentiment and Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles (Advancing Justice-LA) has handled a number of hate crimes and discrimination cases arising within the county. Anti-immigrant rhetoric in 2016 and 2017 was a concern for many of the community leaders interviewed but also highlights the leadership of AA&NHPI in fighting for civil rights and improving race relations within Orange County. Other assets include AA&NHPI leadership in coalition-building across different ethnic groups and working closely with Orange County’s growing Muslim community. With attacks on Muslims and immigrants increasingly intertwined, many AA&NHPI and Muslim groups and leaders are now working together to support each other, finding strength in numbers.

The community requires culturally competent immigration and naturalization services and an escalating need for services for the undocumented Asian American and Pacific Islander population. An estimated 52,000 undocumented immigrants in Orange County identify as Asian.<sup>16</sup> However, these numbers are inexact since this part of the Asian American community is largely hidden out of fear or shame and is consequently lacking access to critical services and programs. Despite deep trust with these communities over the years, nonprofit organizations are seeing that the fear extends to people refusing to seek health and social services, even when critically needed.

Other challenges are intertwined with the rising number of hate attacks and the corresponding difficulty in tracking and responding to these incidents. As diverse as Orange County is, it still has pockets that are a magnet for hate group activities, and hateful sentiments have become more visible in the current political climate. The 2016 report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations found that Orange County had the highest number of anti-Muslim incidents, including hate crimes and other discrimination, in the state (363 out of 1,556 reports), an increase of 68% from the previous year.<sup>17</sup> In light of this escalation, coalitions beyond the AA&NHPI communities should be strengthened in order to achieve broader and deeper impact.

Again, disaggregated data would avoid masking ethnic-specific issues and ensure that culturally and linguistically competent legal information and services are provided to AA&NHPI. Policy makers should support comprehensive immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented and secures citizenship for eligible AA&NHPI. There should also be culturally competent outreach and education on the importance of reporting hate incidents and support for cross-ethnic racial coalitions and community-based programs that prevent and respond to hate violence.

## CONCLUSION

The most consistent theme throughout *Transforming Orange County* is the importance of disaggregated data in order to understand the nuanced diversity of the AA&NHPI community. Aggregated data masks significant disparities affecting specific ethnic groups, especially Southeast Asians and NHPI.

Another recurring theme is the deficiency of linguistically and culturally competent outreach and education materials and services for every subject covered in this report. Due to the diversity and complexity of the AA&NHPI population, each ethnic group within the AA&NHPI umbrella has unique linguistic and cultural needs.

Finally, the report highlights the importance of continuing to strengthen AA&NHPI-serving community agencies; cross-ethnic coalitions; and organizations that amplify the assets, needs, and voice of AA&NHPI community members. The majority of AA&NHPI are immigrants or refugees, and many have experienced the hate and racism rooted in myths of the “perpetual foreigner” or misconceptions of being an economic threat. Unfortunately, with ongoing economic, diplomatic, and other tensions with China, Pakistan, North Korea, and other Asia Pacific nations, AA&NHPI are likely to continue to experience escalated hate fanned by global events and political rhetoric.

## NOTES

1. Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance. 2014. *A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Orange County*. Los Angeles: Asian Americans Advancing Justice.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. The report draws on data from both primary and secondary sources, and in particular highlights the voices and experiences of 20 community leaders who live and work in Orange County. Please refer to the table listing the interviewed community leaders. Many of those interviewed became involved in the AA&NHPI community from the 1990s onward, and their insights highlight the emerging influence of AA&NHPI in Orange County during this time. We made significant efforts to include a broad cross-section of both Asian American and NHPI leaders and communities. Unfortunately, given limitations of resources and time, this report is not meant to be exhaustive in terms of issues or AA&NHPI-specific ethnic groups covered.
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17. Council on American-Islamic Relations. 2016. *Civil Rights Report 2016*. Sacramento: Council on American-Islamic Relations.





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