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Social Meanings of Marijuana Use for Southeast Asian Youth

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Abstract

The paper describes findings from a pilot study of drug use and environment for Southeast Asian youths in the San Francisco Bay Area. From interviews with 31 drug-involved youths living in two low-income predominantly ethnic minority neighborhoods, smoking marijuana emerged as pervasive and highly normative. Smoking marijuana provided a means for coping with the stresses of home and community life, and located youths, moreover, within an alternative ghetto lifestyle of rap music, marijuana smoking and youth crime, as modeled by co-resident ethnic minority peers, with which many Southeast Asian youths identified. The findings indicate the importance of the social environment as well as social status in the substance use of this group of second-generation youth.

Keywords

Southeast Asians; drug use; adolescents; second-generation

INTRODUCTION

A sudden drive-by, or a visit from my grandfather. Death. If someone I know will be gone tomorrow. Will I ever wake up?

... Noises outside. Fast-moving cars. Me or my brothers not coming home. What tomorrow may bring..... [from "Worries" by Paokeeng Saephanh¹]

This poem by a Laotian youth from the San Francisco Bay Area eloquently evokes the tensions within which many second-generation Southeast Asian youth in the U.S. are growing up. From the 1970s through the 1990s, large numbers of Southeast Asians arrived in the United States as refugees; secondary migration resulted in large concentrations of these refugees in a few states, with California having the largest numbers. Many Southeast Asian families in California have found themselves living in depressed urban or suburban areas—low-income and predominantly ethnic-minority neighborhoods with poor resources for dealing with the tremendous cultural shifts and economic challenges these immigrants have faced, but with ready availability of alcohol and other drugs and pervasive violence, crime and youth gangs. Few studies have addressed the substance use of their children. This paper considers the social meanings of marijuana use for these youth.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, Southeast Asian youth have been identified with poor school outcomes and other risk behaviors and are disproportionately represented in the juvenile

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¹This poem appeared in *Quietly Torn* (Saecho, n.d., ca. 1999). The poet, a Mien teen, was a participant in the Richmond Youth Project.

justice system (Le 2001; Lai 2003; NCCD 2003). In 2003 the death of a fifteen year-old Laotian honors student in a shooting apparently targeting a drug- and gang-involved family member underlined the critical situation of Southeast Asian youth in the area.

Anthropologists from the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley conducted a pilot study of the relationships between drug use and the social environment for Southeast Asian youths. In open-ended interviews, the researchers asked drug-involved youths to reflect on a range of topics including their relationships with their families, peer groups, neighborhood and school, and their knowledge of and involvement with drugs, gangs and violence. This pilot study was intended to guide further more focused research on drug use among this population. The findings presented here relate specifically to marijuana, the drug most commonly reported among our respondents.

Children of new immigrants commonly feel pressured to be both “American” and at the same time deeply and essentially of their parents’ world. For Southeast Asian youths growing up in the East Bay, the primary experience of “America” has been their neighborhoods. While the use of marijuana is not unknown in the world of their parents, in the world of their peers “it’s everywhere,” as one respondent said. Review of our pilot data indicates that for these youths, smoking marijuana not only provides a means of coping with the stresses of home life and the “hard” world of their neighborhoods, but also locates youths within an alternative “ghetto” lifestyle of rap music, marijuana smoking and youth crime. Southeast Asian youths’ use of and attitudes towards marijuana indicate that the world within which these youths are coming of age is neither that of their immigrant parents, nor yet the U.S. mainstream, but rather the world of youth anti-heroes, the subculture of the ghetto which is most salient in the neighborhoods within which these youths are growing up.

SOUTHEAST ASIANS IN THE BAY AREA

In the realm of drug research, mainland Southeast Asia has perhaps been best known as a major site for the cultivation of the opium poppy and the production of opiates, and there is little data on marijuana use. Cannabis (known as *ganja* or *kanja*) has traditionally been used in the production of textiles, and valued for its nutritional and medicinal as well as psychoactive properties. Westermeyer listed cannabis as one of several psychoactive substances consumed by various ethnic groups in Laos (Westermeyer 1988). The waterpipe commonly used in the United States for smoking marijuana, known as a “bong,” most likely has its origins in Southeast Asia—*bong* in Thai (*bang* in Lao, *babong* in Khmer) refers to a bamboo waterpipe used for smoking tobacco or marijuana (a practice which may traditionally be limited to older men). Others have noted the use of cannabis seeds, leaves and stalks as herbal remedies for ailments including headache, eye strain and pain, nausea, constipation, skin disorders, and burns, and the use of hemp in ritual, particularly funerals (Clarke and Gu 1998). Marijuana is also a common traditional ingredient in soups and curries in Indochina, and Bay Area Southeast Asians have noted that use of marijuana in cooking is not uncommon among the older generation. No studies to date have looked specifically at marijuana use among the younger generation of Southeast Asians growing up in the U.S.

“Southeast Asian” here refers to people from Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam, a region formerly referred to as “Indochina.” Consequent to the Vietnam War, between 1975 and 1991, just over 1 million Southeast Asians had been resettled in the U.S., with the largest numbers overall settling in California.

Like other immigrants in the U.S., Southeast Asians have struggled with the many impacts of their limited English abilities, lack of education and training in applicable skills, persistent low-income status and isolation in poor and crime-ridden neighborhoods (Portes

and Rumbaut 2001). Most Southeast Asians, moreover, arrived in the U.S. having experienced multiple traumas: war, forced evacuation, forced labor, torture, lack of food or water, inadequate shelter, sexual abuse, imprisonment, stays in refugee camps of months or years, having witnessed torture, murder and executions, and separations from or deaths of family members and loved onesⁱⁱ. Many have continued to suffer from mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Nicassio 1985; Kroll, Habenicht et al. 1989) and have struggled with substance abuse problems that have been un- and under-diagnosed and treated, primarily abuse of alcohol, opiates and over-the-counter medications (Yee and Thu 1987; D'Avanzo, Frye et al. 1994; Amodeo, Robb et al. 1997; D'Avanzo 1997; O'Hare and Van Tran 1998).

In the San Francisco Bay Area, Southeast Asians have settled in the East Bay communities of East Oakland in Alameda County and in Richmond and San Pablo in West Contra Costa County, as well as in San Francisco's Tenderloin district and the South Bay city of San Jose. These families have found themselves living in some of the poorest areas of the East Bay. Successive waves of immigrants—African Americans from the U.S. South, Mexican and Central Americans, Southeast Asians, and more recently Eastern Europeans—have established footholds in California in declining suburban areas such as Richmond/San Pablo and East Oakland. At the 2000 census, the population of the city of Oakland was 36% African American, 31% white, 22% Latino and 15% Asian (compared to the U.S. percentages of 12%, 75%, 13% and 4% respectively). Twelve miles to the north along the East Bay corridor, the population of the city of Richmond in 2000 was similarly counted at 36% African American, 31% white, 27% Latino and 12% Asian. The overall crime index (per 100,000 people) for Richmond in 2002 was 18,002, more than 4 times the national rate of 4,119, including a murder rate 13 times the national rate (77 per 100,000 people, compared to 5.6); while the overall crime index for the city of Oakland at 29,875 per 100,000 people was over 7 times the national rate, with a murder rate nearly 20 times the national rate (108 per 100,000 people) (from Federal Bureau of Investigation Crime Reports reported at www.areaconnect.com).

Southeast Asian immigrants have tried to recreate some of the social contexts of life in the old country. Many keep lush herb and vegetable gardens in tiny backyards or clusters of pots on apartment balconies; some men take weekend trips to hunt or fish. The development of ethnic enclaves through secondary migration (Miyares 1998) has meant that populations have been large enough to support at least a minimal degree of social structure familiar from back home. Churches, temples and senior centers have provided settings for community support groups; holidays and weddings have provided regular moments of cultural renewal for Southeast Asian adults.

Their children, however, have had to attend some of the most violent schools in some of the poorest school districts in the country. Drive-by shootings and other forms of gang violence are common; gunshots and police sirens have regularly disrupted the suburban quiet. There are few recreational and fewer employment opportunities for youths. Alcohol and drugs, on the other hand, are easily available. Drug sales have represented a viable source of income for many of the respondents of our study.

Southeast Asian refugee communities in the U.S. tend to be culturally and linguistically isolated, and somewhat insular—families and clans often attempt to address problematic issues internally. Asian families tend to see substance abuse as shameful (Kuramoto 1995; Berganio, Tacata et al. 1997), and individuals and families are typically reluctant to seek

ⁱⁱSee for example eloquent accounts in Faderman (1998), Szymusiak (1999) and the memoirs of Haing S. Ngor (1987), popularized in the film "The Killing Fields."

treatment as well as to discuss their substance use issues. The pilot study was thus the research team's first approach to a population which could be considered doubly "hard to reach." In order to assess the dimensions of drug use in their neighborhoods, families and peer groups for Southeast Asian youths and peers, the investigators sought currently- or formerly drug-involved youth and young adults (between the ages of 16 and 26) from Richmond/San Pablo and East Oakland as key informants. While the respondents cannot be said to represent the diversity of Southeast Asian youths in the U.S., they were remarkably thoughtful and frank, and their reflections provide useful insights into norms and attitudes related to marijuana among this understudied group.

METHODS

Respondents were recruited through a combination of contacts with youth-serving agencies and snowball referrals. Program coordinators and counselors working with Southeast Asian youths were asked to refer youths who might fit the study criteria; after the potential respondents contacted the research team, the counselors were no longer involved and the study findings were discussed with agency staff only in the aggregate. Respondents who met the study criteria were invited to schedule an interview; upon completion of the interview, respondents were invited to refer other potential respondents. Informed consent was obtained for all respondents, and parental consent was obtained for all underage respondents. All potential respondents were screened for drug use status by self-report before being selected for an interview. All respondents were compensated for their time, and additionally received a small finder's fee for referring qualified potential respondents.

Of the 31 respondents interviewed, over a third self-identified as Cambodian, nearly a third as ethnic Mien, and approximately 20% as ethnically Lao. Respondents of mixed-ethnicity were generally mixed-Asian, e.g. one parent might be Vietnamese and the other Chinese, or Lao and Thai, etc. Nearly half the respondents were female, and over half were under age 18. 61% of respondents came from East Oakland in Alameda County, while 32% of respondents resided in the Richmond/San Pablo area in West Contra Costa County. 81% of respondents reported having ever used marijuana, compared to 29% who had ever used Ecstasy and 29% who had ever used other drugs (primarily methamphetamines, but cocaine and hallucinogens were also named); see Table 1. Approximately a third of the respondents had current or prior involvement with the juvenile and/or adult justice systems. Both in-school and out-of-school youths were interviewed.

The study utilized ethnographic methods to gather data on drug use and environment. In-depth confidential interviews lasting from one to two hours were conducted by two trained research assistants, both of whom were known to Southeast Asian community members. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and covered topics including household demographics; educational experience; immigration background; sense of ethnicity; relationship with family; social networks; sense of neighborhood; availability and use of alcohol and other drugs in their neighborhoods and peer groups; experiences of gangs and violence; and sense of future. The interviewers were trained in the use of probes to deepen the quality of responses. Regular staff meetings to discuss the progress of the data collection, together with the research teams' review of incoming transcripts, allowed for emergent themes to be further explored in subsequent interviews. For example, due to concerns from the cooperating agencies that youths might be uncomfortable talking about their own drug use, respondents initially were only asked to describe drug use in their neighborhoods and peer groups in general. As it became apparent that respondents were quite comfortable and even interested in talking about their own drug use histories, such questions were included. Thus for the pilot study, drug use data for the entire sample is not

available; a project collecting more detailed drug use histories and for a larger sample of Southeast Asian youth is currently underway.

All interviews were conducted in English; the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts edited by the field staff, which was particularly useful for transcribing and annotating terminology such as slang, gang name acronyms and drug names. The transcribed interviews were entered into the ATLAS.ti qualitative data management software and coded using items from the data collection instrument, as well as themes that emerged from preliminary or later analyses of the transcripts. The coded transcripts were analyzed by simple codes (e.g. “marijuana,” “peer group,” “drugs”) and word searches (e.g. “smoke,” “weed,” “neighborhood”) as well as meta-codes (e.g. “identity,” “drug typologies,” “ideology”), and by cross-referencing codes and words.

FINDINGS

Smoking Weed: “Everybody Does It”

Most respondents described marijuana as very prevalent in their social circles and readily available in their neighborhoods, even more so than cigarettes or alcohol: “Because weed, they don’t ask you for I.D.” [*Cambodian female, age 20*]. Several of our respondents themselves had sold marijuana, as well as other drugs, and many were eloquent in their knowledge of and preferences regarding available varieties of the substance.

Most of the respondents described marijuana use as a central feature of their socializing with friends (“kicking it” or “chilling”). When asked what they and their friends did when they got together, a typical response was: “Smoke weed, and take drugs. Drink. Just go to someone’s house and play video games” [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*]. Parents and community groups in these neighborhoods have repeatedly pointed to the lack of safe and accessible public facilities or programs for youths; most respondents described hanging out at their own or friends’ homes, or roaming the neighborhood:

We used to cut school and go to one of our friend’s house, and their parents not home too. So we just stay out there, hang out, drink, smoke. You know, just kick it with a lot of people, and it was fun. But then since his parents found out, we couldn’t go back there no more, we end up hangin’ at a cemetery, ‘cause we didn’t have no place to go, we just wanna be somewhere [*Cambodian female, age 24*].

Many youths also described “hotboxing,” i.e. smoking marijuana in a car with the windows rolled up, a practice prevalent in American youth culture. Respondents additionally reported smoking marijuana in “blunts,” i.e. cigars or cigarillos with the tobacco filling replaced by or mixed with marijuana. The prevalence of blunt smoking in youth subcultures has been recently noted (DHHS 1999; Golub, Johnson et al. 2004). The pilot study respondents sharply differentiated smoking marijuana, generally referred to as “weed,” from use of other substances, which they called “drugs” or “dope.” While smoking marijuana was described as “no big deal,” use of other substances was seen as more socially stigmatized:

You could smoke weed in front of a porch, right, and you can smell it, they wouldn’t care, you know, but... just like, you’re doin’ dope, you don’t want nobody to see you doin’ dope. You could smoke weed, that’d be cool ‘cause everybody does it, but doin’ dope it’s like another story” [*Cambodian female, age 24*].

Users of marijuana were similarly differentiated from users of hard drugs, referred to as “crackheads,” “dopefiends,” “addicts,” or “narcs.”ⁱⁱⁱ These attitudes are similar to reports from other studies of drug-involved youth in the U.S. and Europe (Glassner and Loughlin

1987; Parker, Aldridge et al. 1998; Furst, Johnson et al. 1999) and may be seen as Southeast Asians youths' adoption of current and salient drug use practices and norms.

The Ghetto Lifestyle: "You Gotta Do Hard Stuff"

Both Richmond/San Pablo and East Oakland are located in "the flats" of the East Bay Area, known for lower SES, higher levels of crime and violence, and poorer schools, compared to the more affluent communities in the East Bay hills. Many respondents reported normative violence, inter-racial tensions, and armed aggression and hostility from other residents as well as constant harassment by police in their neighborhoods. When asked to describe his neighborhood, rather than describe his physical environment one youth described the phenomenological one:

I mean, it's like, you always gotta look behind you. I mean, it's always like a test, you know. Life is a test, you know, they test you, you know, they look at you, they test you, they gonna come up to you, they gonna say somethin', what's up, you know, they wanna see, what's your reaction, you know just step up to the plate, and if you can't, they're gonna think you're soft, so they gonna just push you, let's see if you got any money. I mean, it's mostly people like, been in and out of jail, in and out of jail, it's like, when you get out, you have nothin'. So they try to hustle. They always try to hustle 'cause they ain't got nothin' [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

The "code of the street" (Anderson 1998) has been described for other youths growing up in poor communities of color (Bourgois 1995; Decker and Van Winkle 1998). In social settings in which violence and aggression are constant threats, youths—particularly males but females as well—have learned to present a "macho" or "hard" self to command respect and deter aggression from others. Many respondents commented on drug preferences among youth in their neighborhoods, noting that while other youths used club drugs such as Ecstasy and psychedelics, the respondents and their peers avoided these, not only because these substances were considered "drugs," but also because they induced a subjective state of weakness which these youths could not afford. Alcohol and marijuana, on the other hand, were more associated with "hardness":

You know how Ecstasy's like... I felt like I was so weak. I couldn't do nothing. I couldn't even get up and I dropped and everybody's blurry. Oh gosh, you cannot take it.... [*Cambodian female, age 24*].

It [Ecstasy] made you feel alright, but I felt kind of stupid, a little bit. I'm not gonna do that.... All my friends, they only mess with weed, that's it... they got all types of different weed, Light, Bammer, Bomb, Black Widow, Sweet Tooth ... Mexican weed is one of the sweet kinds. All the Mexicans smoke it 'cause they like it. But if you smoke it too much, it don't hit you no more. But everyone [I know], it's like, they want to get hit hard. They smoke the other ones. You gotta do hard stuff like Black Widow, that's strong [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

Many respondents, both male and female, identified with a ghetto youth culture, transcending ethnic lines. At the time of this study, many East Bay Southeast Asian youth dressed, carried themselves and talked in ways modeled by California African American and Latino youths. Oversized jeans and puffy down-filled jackets were standard for males and females; alternately, young women wore their jeans tight in the current style, with oversized earrings and elaborate hairstyles, and most males wore their hair buzzed short and no facial hair. Southeast Asian youths' speech patterns mirrored the dialect, rhythm and inflections of

ⁱⁱⁱThe respondents did not use any such label for marijuana smokers; neither, however, did the interviewers attempt to solicit such identifiers. Future studies are planned to collect data on such terminology.

local African American youths, as did the preferred expressive art forms: rap music and poetry, particularly “gangsta” rap.

Gangsta rap emerged from the hip-hop youth subculture and music genre, but specifically featured alcohol, sex, guns, cars, and marijuana (Ross and Rose 1994; Perkins 1996). Gangsta rap can be seen as a salient marker of the ghetto youth culture; yet its most compelling force, at least for the respondents in the study, may have been its ability to articulate their sense of reality, the ways they experienced the world around them. When asked to whom they looked up, many respondents mentioned their parents, but others spoke of rap artists such as Tupac Shakur:

He’s like a ghetto poet. And all his raps is talking about his thug life and all that, gangster life. And it’s amazing how he made a poem, it’s called “A Flower That Grows in the Concrete,” it’s a good poem. Flower growing in the concrete, it’s like, love in the ghetto, you know? And the ghetto kids running bare-feet in the street, with no shoes on, with no dirt to plant on, no trees and all that, you know, just plain street. You see a flower that grows in the concrete at a corner with a street light. That’s amazing, you know? That’s like, life [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

For many youths in this study, their ghetto identity stood in sharp contrast to the world of their parents:

They [the parents] are different ‘cause, I’m like a ghetto person and they’re like, you know, calm. [A ghetto person is] like, listenin’ to rap music, and... just... I don’t know [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

Many youths indicated a desire to go to college, get a job to support a family; many were unsure if they would be able to attain these goals. While their parents hoped for their children to do well and help move the family out of the ghetto, the aspirations of some of their children reflected less the American dream and more the American reality as they have experienced it:

[My future,] I don’t know. I don’t have one, but I have a dream though. My dream is to be a rapper, get a nice big crib, with hecka girls, hella weed... Yeah, one day, I’m gonna stand up on the stage and just rap for everybody, about gangsta life and all that [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

Stress and Drama: “Weed Makes You Forget Stuff”

When asked why, in their opinion, Southeast Asian youths used drugs and alcohol, a common response was that teens smoked marijuana because of “stress” and “drama.” While drug use for stress reduction is far from unique to Southeast Asian youth, the specific contours of stress for these youths may have influenced their preference for marijuana as well as shaped the ensuing complications. “Stress and drama” included anxieties related to school, romantic relationship, friendships, as well as the stresses of the urban environment and their family situation—worries such as gunshots in the night or a visit from a grandfather cited by the young Lao poet at the opening of this paper.

Many of the study respondents indicated poor relationships with their primary families. In the East Bay, adult Southeast Asians often worked long days, perhaps holding two jobs, leaving little time or energy for their children. Language barriers existed within many families; while the first generation of immigrants had worked hard to learn English as adults, more or less successfully, most of their children spoke English as a first language and may not have been fully fluent in their parents’ first language. Children often found themselves acting as *de-facto* heads of household, and performing tasks related to interacting with the outside world which would have been traditionally the domain of adults. As has been noted

for other immigrant families (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), such role reversal within families placed youth and parents in tense and often contradictory situations, with youth over-functioning for linguistically- and culturally-isolated parents. Southeast Asian youths noted that when school officials called or sent letters to inform parents of children's troubling school record, more often than not the children themselves translated—or mistranslated—these reports.

Because of this role reversal, parents may have felt they had little or no control over their children. Criminologist Tony Waters has theorized that the inability of elders to establish control over second-generation youth has historically set off waves of youthful crime in many immigrant communities in the U.S. (Waters 1999). Older Southeast Asians have frequently complained that U.S. laws regarding child abuse prevented them from disciplining their children; role reversals and parents' depressed social statuses may have encouraged the second generation to further disregard their parents and the older generation:

Man, we drink anywhere we want, and whatever. It don't really matter. We smoke in the house, we drink in the house, we go to other property, we drink up in the house, whatever. We do whatever we want [*Mien male, age 16*].

Second-generation youths seeking to “fit in” with drug-using peer groups found themselves increasingly at odds with their parents. Drug use and its attendant problems—poor school performance, crime and arrest—in turn generated family drama and stress.

One of the reasons [why kids use drugs] is that they won't fit in. The other reason is that they're really stressed 'cause they got a hard time at home or something else... 'Cause your parents are yelling at you for this reason and all that, then you're gonna relieve your stress, so you go to your friend's house to smoke weed, just to relax. 'Cause you know, weed makes you forget stuff [*mixed-ethnicity male, age 16*].

Southeast Asian youths and families found themselves locked in painful cycles wherein parents' responses to the youths' lifestyles pushed youths further into use of drugs. Alienated from their families of origin, many respondents described their peer groups and particularly youth gangs as alternative families (a topic to be explored in further studies). Unfortunately, the “ghetto” lifestyle has put many of youths in conflict not only with their parents' and the older generation of Southeast Asians, but with the law as well. City of Richmond police data for juveniles (age 10–17) for the year 2000 show rates of arrests for the relatively small population of Southeast Asians were strikingly similar to those for more-numerous groups in the same city: 6 arrests per 100 for Laotians, or 22 arrests for a population of 439 youths, somewhat lower than African American youths (8 in 10, or 421 arrests for 5,139 youths) but higher than for Latino youths (2 in 100, or 82 arrests for 3,477 youths) (NCCD n.d.) While most of these arrests were for property crimes, probation officers note that most Southeast Asian youth in the system are involved with drugs, primarily marijuana.

It should be noted that many of our respondents were trying to quit their use of drugs, including marijuana, even as they upheld the ghetto ideals and represented an oppositional identity. For some, their quit attempts were due to the terms of their probation; others, however, described a consciousness change, as illustrated in the closing of a short play written by a group of Southeast Asian teens in Richmond:

The reason I'm here is 'cause I was a young thug going around breaking the rules of the street and trying to maintain my composure. When I'm on the outs in my mind all I think of is “f— the rollers^{iv}” and do my thug lifestyle smoking weed and

fighting with the enemy. But I noticed that everytime I do one of those crimes I end up in some place locked up [from “*Caught Up*”^v].

DISCUSSION

Many studies have identified the primary role of peers and peer groups in the substance use of adolescents and young adults (Urberg, Degirmencioglu et al. 2000; Andrews, Tildesley et al. 2002; Dishion and Owen 2002; Hussong 2002). Studies of substance use and misuse among ethnic minorities, particularly immigrant populations, have additionally found acculturation to be a significant variable (Chen, Unger et al. 1999; Unger, Cruz et al. 2000). Segmented assimilation theory in particular has foregrounded the importance of the specific social milieu within which immigrants find themselves. For example, Bankston and Zhou found that Vietnamese youth growing up in inner city New Orleans tended to the patterns of risk behavior manifested by co-resident ethnic minority peers (Bankston and Zhou 1997).

The findings from our pilot study suggest that marijuana use of Southeast Asian youth may be seen in this way. Growing up in depressed suburban communities such as Richmond/San Pablo and East Oakland, they can be seen to have adopted the most salient social form around then, that of the ghetto lifestyle with its embrace of rap music and musicians, idolization of the gangsta, and normative use of marijuana as well as involvement in crime and violence.

While the literature on adolescent and young adult use of specific drugs is still somewhat underdeveloped, national datasets indicate that marijuana is one of the most commonly-used substance, along with alcohol and cigarettes (Johnston, O'Malley et al. 2003; CDC 2004). Recent epidemiological analyses of marijuana use in U.S. urban areas have lead some scholars to propose that the 1990s represented an epidemic in marijuana use, with a vanguard of youth who tended to become involved in the justice system (Golub and Johnson 2001). Youth who came of age in this period have consequently been referred to as the “marijuana/blunts generation” (Golub, Johnson et al. 2004). This is the era within which the children of Southeast Asian immigrants have come of age in the U.S.

Our pilot study suggests that the inclusion of Southeast Asian youth in the blunts generation reflects not only the era in U.S. history within which they came of age, and the neighborhoods within which they and their families have found themselves, but as well their own dark awareness of their social status—children of refugees and new immigrants as well as denizens of “the hood.” In describing themselves as ghetto, Southeast Asian youths locate themselves not only in opposition with their parents and older generation Southeast Asians, but in opposition with the mainstream U.S. society as well. For youth unsure of their own future, from families still dealing with the repercussions of violent dislocations from their past, smoking marijuana can be a way to set aside stress as well as manifest a counter-cultural identity in a tangible and visceral way. “Chilling out” with marijuana-smoking peers can provide both a means of fitting in with other youths with similar experiences and marking oneself as “other” as well as attaining a chemically-induced respite from the worries, the stress and drama, of daily life.

As the present study is based on a small and non-random sample, the findings cannot be held to represent the marijuana use of all U.S. Southeast Asian youth. As an in-depth look at the normative role of marijuana use among these youth in urban and suburban California, the

^{iv}“Rollers” are the police in street slang (www.blackstate.com/allthingsghetto/ghettoslangdic).

^vThe script for this play, written by a collective of Mien teens participating in the Richmond Youth Project, appeared in *Quietly Torn* (Saecho n.d., ca. 1999).

study does, however, open promising avenues for investigation. Comparisons to non-drug-using Southeast Asian peers, as well as to co-resident African American and Latino youth, from the same areas could aid in isolating the risk factors which lead to involvement with drugs. Comparisons with Southeast Asian youth in rural or small-town areas could confirm or negate the influence of the urban/suburban milieu. Finally, the pervasive role of marijuana use in the lives of these youths indicates that further attention is needed to the risky behaviors in which Asian/Pacific Islander youths may be engaging.

Biographies

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Table 1

Study respondents' background and drug use

	N = 31
Ethnicity	
Cambodian	35%
Mien	32%
Lao	19%
Vietnamese	13%
Mixed (non-exclusive)	23%
Age	
15–17	55%
18–21	26%
22–26	19%
Gender	
male	58%
female	42%
Neighborhood	
East Oakland	61%
Richmond/San Pablo	32%
other	7%
Ever Marijuana	81%
Ever Ecstasy	29%
Ever Other Drugs	29%
Ever Cigarettes	74%
Ever Alcohol	94%