

Laotian Americans

HISTORY

Lao People's Democratic Republic is a small communist country between Vietnam and Thailand with China to the north. Its population is about 5.7 million, with most people living in valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries. Half the country's people are ethnic Lao, descendents from the Thai

Laos traces its history and origins to the kingdom of Lan Xang, in 1353, which covered much of what today is Thailand and Laos.

people who began migrating southward from China in the first millennium A.D. The predominant religion is Theravada Buddhism. The official and

dominant language is Lao, a tonal language of the Thai linguistic group. In the late 18th century, the Thai ruled over Laos. Following their colonization of Vietnam, the French integrated all of Laos into the French empire. In 1954, Laos was granted full sovereignty. In December 1975, the communist Lao People's Democratic Republic was established. The harsh policies, deteriorating economic conditions, and enforced political control, prompted an exodus of lowland Lao and ethnic Hmong from Laos. From 1975 to 1996, the U.S. resettled some 250,000 Lao refugees from Thailand, including 130,000 Hmong.ⁱ

DEMOGRAPHICS

Approximately 150,000-200,000 ethnic Laotians live in America according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The states with the highest concentrations are California, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina. About 18.5% of Laotian Americans live in poverty.ⁱⁱ

Laotian American Age Distribution, Yr 2000	
>18	34.4 %
18-64	62.1 %
<65	3.4 %

HEALTH BELIEFS

Laotian views of physical and mental wellness are tied to a person's ability to sleep and eat without difficulty. Illness may be attributed to the loss of spirits to inhabit the body and maintain health. Language, cultural issues, and transportation are the three most significant barriers for Laotian Americans to obtain access to healthcare. When care is sought, medical history may be incomplete due to reluctance to volunteer information. Therefore, many will seek family or community for health problems and treatment. Also, most Laotian Americans focus on acute illness and not on disease.ⁱⁱⁱ

REFUGEE EFFECTS ON HEALTH

Southeast Asian refugees are a high-risk group for psychological distress and mental disorders. The experiences of war trauma (lack of food/water, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, kidnapping, etc.), re-education camps, and refugee camps, and the tasks of adjusting to a new country are all associated factors. In addition, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may cause symptoms such as: disturbing dreams and other sleeping difficulties, emotional numbness, and may be confused with stress. However, data describing this problem is lacking. Also, some refugees have developed distrust for authority figures and may delay professional health until a health problem becomes unbearable. Other refugees may simply not know where to go to seek treatment. Furthermore, researchers have found that depressive symptoms decrease over time as refugees become more proficient in English and gain employment.^{iv}

OTHER HEALTH ISSUES

- In California, cancer rates vary by ethnicity. Prostate cancer is highest among Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese American, and Hawaiian men. Lung cancer is most common among Cambodian and Laotian American men. Stomach cancer is seen most in Korean men.^v
- Asian Americans have one of the highest rates of Hepatitis B. In the majority of the U.S. population the rate is less than 1 in 200, for Asian Americans it is 1 in 10. Hepatitis B is highly correlated with Liver cancer. Furthermore, Asian Americans have the highest rates of Liver cancer among all populations in California; 5 times higher than for whites. Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian, are particularly at high risk.^{v/vi}
- Asian Americans as a whole have low rates of pre-term birth, infant mortality, and few births to teens and unwed mothers. However, the figures differ when separated by ethnic group. Laotian Americans have the highest teen birth rate of any ethnic or racial group in California. There are 19% of births to Laotian mothers who are teenagers, while 12% of births across all races occur among teens. This may due to 2/3 of Asian American women being sexually active, yet less than 40% use regularly use contraception.^{v/vii}

References

- ⁱ The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research Electronic Affairs Publication Office. October 1, 2005.
- ⁱⁱ Census 2000 Special Reports-We The People: Asians in the United States. Issued December 2004.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Refugee health-Immigrant health. Retrieved March 16, 2006 from:
http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/refugee_health.htm.
- ^{iv} Bowman, et al., "Asian American and Pacific Islander Health in Michigan.
- ^v Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in California. Fact Sheet. Retrieved March 16, 2006 from: <http://www.cpehn.org/pdfs/APIAHF%20-%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.
- ^{vi} Asian and Pacific Islander American Health In Michigan – University of Michigan School of Public Health, 1995-1999.
- ^{vii} National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum. Reproductive Health Care and APA Women: A Fact Sheet.

Resources

- National Asian Women's Health Organization:
<http://www.nawho.org/pubs/NAWHOCC.pdf>
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center:
<http://www.searac.org/lanapress.html>
- Asian American Net:
http://www.asianamerican.net/org_main.html
- Southeast Asian Organizations:
http://www.navasa.org/national_organization_list/southeast_asian_organization.htm
- Laotian American Society:
<http://www.lasga.org>
- Laotian American Women Association:
<http://www.lawadc.org/history.htm>