

## FACT SHEET

### MCCORMACK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GLOBAL STUDIES GERONTOLOGY INSTITUTE

#### **The Prevalence of Sensory Deficits, Functional Limitations, and Disability among Older Southeast Asians in the United States**

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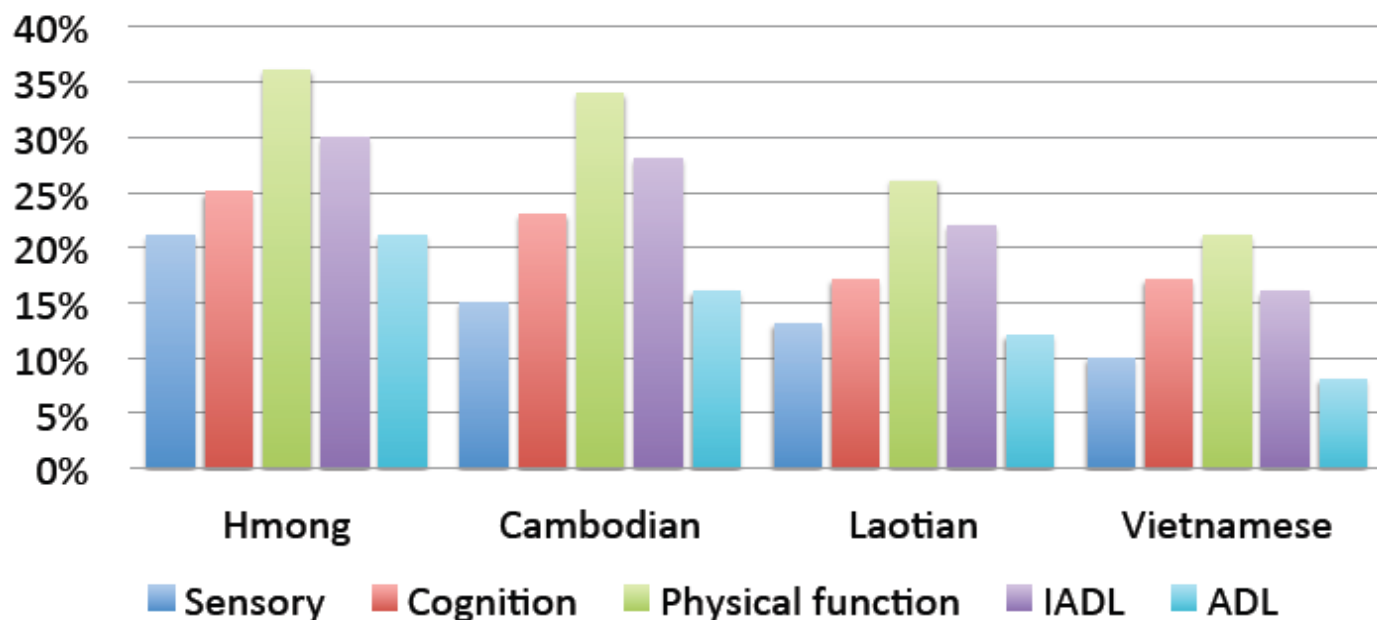
Although much has been written about disability in the general population, little is known about Southeast Asian disability and even less is known about this issue for older Southeast Asian persons. Existing research on Asian disability, more generally, highlights the "healthy immigrant" effect, and suggests that Asians as a whole experience lower risk of disability than their non-Asian peers. Yet disability profiles within the Asian community differ from one another and should be examined more closely.

**Background:** Most Southeast Asians (SEA: Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese) entered the US as refugees, with substantial waves of immigration occurring between 1975 and 1990. Heterogeneity in late-life disability across these ethnic groups has not been adequately examined. We expect heterogeneity because of many factors, including cultural views of health and health care, historical factors, exposure to conflict and persecution, immigrant characteristics, and socioeconomic status.

**Data:** We used pooled data from the 2003-2007 American Community Surveys. The study sample includes men and women aged 55 and over, who were born outside of the United States and are classified as Southeast Asian origin (N=9,413). We described five types of limitations: hearing and vision deficits (sensory), cognitive limitations (memory), physical function limitations, Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) limitations, and basic Activities of Daily Living (ADL) limitations.

**Findings:** As a group, SEAs have higher levels of disability than those reported for other Asian-origin groups. Among the SEA population examined here, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian groups were all more likely to report having sensory deficits, functional limitations, and disabilities than the Vietnamese. Immigrants who arrived after 1990 were more likely to report these conditions than their counterparts who arrived earlier. Limited English language proficiency and having less than 12 years of education are additional risk factors for disability. Hmong and Cambodian groups had similar disability profiles, with the highest rates of disability among the groups considered.

### Percentage disabled within each Southeast Asian group of foreign-born elders



**Discussion:** Previous studies found that Vietnamese elders report substantially higher levels of disability than do other large Asian American groups. However, comparing older members of four refugee populations with Southeast Asian origins reveals that other groups, specifically Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian, report even greater disadvantage in terms of disability than do the Vietnamese.

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*Source:* American Community Surveys, 2003-2007, obtained from IPUMS (<http://www.ipums.org/>). Disability rates refer to foreign-born individuals aged 55 and over.