
Sample Lesson 15: Cambodian Americans— Deportation Breaking Families Apart

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1–6

Standards Alignment:

HSS Content Standards: 10.9.3, 11.9.3, 11.11.7

Literacy Standards for History/Social Science: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9–10.1, RH.9–10.2, RH.9–10.3, RH.9–10.6, RH.9–10.7, W.9–10.1, SL.9–10.1

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Overview: Cambodian Americans are an Asian American group that is experiencing numerous deportations as a result of a repatriation act passed in the 1990s. This act focuses on deporting Cambodian Americans with felony convictions for petty crimes, even after they have served their time. Over 1,000 Cambodian Americans have been deported to Cambodia to live in a society that is unwelcoming to them and where they often do not have any family or social connections. They are culturally American, yet they are barred from ever returning to the US. Many of them have spouses and children in the US. These family separations are causing generational trauma to spouses, children, and parents. Deported Cambodian Americans are forced to live in a “borderland” as they are also not treated as equals in Cambodia. The criminalization of Cambodian male youth mirrors the experiences of Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x youth. Fortunately, there are organizations that recognize this is a human rights issue and are making this issue known.

Key Terms and Concepts: Cambodia, Immigration Naturalization Act, US involvement in the Vietnam War, US secret bombing of Cambodia, Pol Pot, Killing Fields, refugee, Khmer Rouge, genocide, trauma

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Understand the history of how US involvement in the Vietnam War drew Cambodia into the conflict
- Understand the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the context of wartime political turmoil and how this violent regime instigated the Killing Fields genocide, forcing many Cambodians to flee to the US as refugees
- Understand the specific issues that Cambodian Americans face, including high poverty rates, high incarceration rates, and high rates of deportations

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- Understand the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline affecting Cambodian American youth
 - Understand the impact of these deportations on the Cambodian American community

Essential Questions:

1. What is the history of Cambodian immigration to the US? Why and how did Cambodians come to the US? What are the social and cultural implications of Cambodia's turbulent history for Cambodian Americans today?
2. Describe the Cambodian American community today, and in particular the issue of deportations that they are dealing with.
3. What impact are these deportations having on Cambodian American families, and why are advocacy groups calling it a human rights issue?
4. What are the similarities in experiences faced by the Latinx families dealing with deportations of family members?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Day 1

1. Ask the question, how many people know where Cambodia is on the world map? If a student raises their hand, ask them to come point out where it is on a world map or globe. Also project a picture of the Cambodian flag on the screen if you are able to.
2. Tell the class: today we are going to learn about Cambodian Americans, the history of their immigration to the US, and what issues they are facing today. (Read essential questions 1–4 aloud.)
3. Have students, in pairs, bring up the source “Cambodian Americans” <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link142> and answer the questions on the **Cambodian Americans – Immigration and Experience in America** handout.
4. Have students work in pairs to answer the questions on the handout. They can take turns reading to each other and listening, then turn in the handout at the end of class.

Day 2

1. Jigsaw Expert/Home groups – break students into groups of four and number them 1–4. Tell them they are currently in their home groups, and that each number is going to become an expert on a source that will give them more information about the deportation issue within the Cambodian American community.
2. Before they break into the expert groups – Discuss the deportation issue with your class, give a short 5–10 minute lecture on why and how are Cambodian Americans who were born in refugee camps, have green cards, and have lived in the US the majority of their lives are now at risk of being deported.

Mini Lecture – According to the NPR article, “The US Immigration and Nationality Act,” outlines how non-US citizens may be deported back to their country of origin, even if they’re in the country legally. “Violation of law” is listed as a deportable offense.

The US has been repatriating Cambodian immigrants since 2002, when an agreement was made between Washington and Phnom Penh that said Cambodia would accept deportees. That deal fell apart last year, prompting the Trump administration to impose visa sanctions on some Cambodian officials and families. The two governments eventually worked out a new agreement in early 2018, and Cambodia began accepting Cambodian nationals, this time in even greater numbers than before. Many times Cambodian Americans are deported for a crime they committed when they were young and they did their time, they move on with their lives, marrying and having kids. As mature husbands and fathers, they are now being deported for something they thought was a part of their past and dealt with. (Check for understanding)

3. Expert Groups – Tell them they will be given a source to access online through their Chromebooks, or teachers can make hard copies and set up video watching stations and that while they are reading and watching to use critical literacy to think about the information they are learning. Questions they should think about while they are analyzing their sources are:
 - a. What is the legal basis for these deportations?
 - b. Are these deportations unfair? Why or why not?
 - c. What effect are these deportations having on the deportees and the families still living in the U.S?
 - d. What groups are doing something about the deportations and what are they doing?

Since they will be the only person reporting back to their homegroup on their source, they really need to pay attention and take good notes. (All of these directions are on the two page handout. Make hard copies for every student).

4. Home Groups – Tell students to return to their home groups and report to their groups their findings from their sources. They take turns from 1–4 presenting their facts, quotes, and evidence while the rest of the group takes notes from listening to the expert. At the end of the time period, all of their quadrants should be filled out completely.

Making Connections to the *History–Social Science Framework*:

Chapter 15 asks students to learn about how the Cold War impacted Southeast Asian countries and the emergence of human rights concerns for the United States. Chapter 16 goes further to ask students to analyze the impact and experiences of refugees who fled Southeast Asia after war. Guiding questions from these chapters include: In what directions is California growing in the twenty-first century? How does the life of a new immigrant to the United States today compare with what it was in 1900? How do policies from the second half of the twentieth century compare with those of the early twenty-first century?

5. Assessment –
 - a. Reflect on your learning:
 - What effects are these deportations having on the Cambodian American community?
 - Why are advocacy groups calling these deportations a human rights violation?

6. Action:

To show evidence of your learning from this lesson you can choose one of the two options below:

- Write a letter or essay explaining your understanding of these issues based on your own critical analysis.
- Create a public service announcement that educates others about this issue.

Materials and Resources:

Dunst, Charles, “Cambodian Deportees Return to a ‘Home’ They’ve Never Known”, The Atlantic, 16 Jan 2019. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link143>

Couture, Denise, “U.S. Deports Dozens More Cambodian Immigrants, Some For Decades-Old Crimes”, NPR, 18 Dec 2018. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link144>

“Deported from U.S., Cambodians fight immigration policy” PBS Newshour, 7 May 2017 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link145>

“Deported: Forced Family Separation (Part 2 of 5) | NBC Asian America”, NBC News, 16 Mar 2017 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link146>

“Cambodian Americans”, Asian Nation, Asian American History Demographics and Issues (This article is an edited chapter on the major historical events and contemporary characteristics of the Cambodian American community, excerpted from *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity, and Change in the 21st Century*, edited by Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles in conjunction with Asian Week Magazine and published by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.) <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link147>

Sullivan, Meg, “UCLA demographer produces best estimate yet of Cambodia’s death toll under Pol Pot”, UCLA Newsroom, 16 Apr 2016 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link148>

Cambodian Americans – Immigration and Experience in America

Using the source “Cambodian Americans” on the website Asian Nation: Asian American History, Demographics, and Issues (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link149>), students answer the questions on the handout provided below.

Handout: Cambodian Americans – Immigration and Experience in America

Background information:

- Key Terms and Concept Definitions:
 - Cambodia – Southeast Asian country that got caught in the Vietnam War due to the secret bombings
 - Immigration Naturalization Act – This law defines who can immigrate to the US and causes for deportation.
 - US involvement in the Vietnam War – During the Cold War era, the US became militarily involved in the Vietnam War to stop the spread of communism. The war spread to neighboring Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia and Laos, causing instability, chaos, death, destruction, and a refugee crisis.
 - US secret bombing of Cambodia – From 1969 to 1973, under the Nixon administration, the US Air Force secretly dropped bombs in Cambodia near the border of Vietnam to try to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail that the Viet Cong used to travel down to South Vietnam to attack.
 - Pol Pot – The communist leader who fought the US-backed Cambodian government. He took power and tried to weed out US or Western influence and any specific dissent. In this effort, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge carried out a genocide called the Killing Fields in which 10 to 30 percent of the population, or 1.2 million to 2.8 million people, were killed.
 - Killing Fields – Genocide in which the Cambodian government killed any person suspected of siding with the US, as well as ethnic minorities, dissenters, educated persons, and eventually many Khmer Rouge leaders and loyal supporters at all levels
 - Refugee – A person forced to leave their home country for fear of losing their lives, or of suffering
 - Khmer Rouge – Pol Pot’s political organization that was staffed with youth and child soldiers
 - Genocide – Mass murder of an entire group of people
 - Trauma – A deeply distressing or disturbing experience that causes negative psychological effects (e.g., depression, anxiety, etc.)

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- Refugees from Cambodia were the last large group of refugees to arrive in the United States following the end of the US war in Southeast Asia. Most were not able to leave Cambodia until the overthrow of the Pol Pot dictatorship in 1979, and many had to spend years in Thai refugee camps before they were allowed to come to the US.
 - By the time Cambodian refugees finally arrived in the US, some local communities were facing economic challenges and were even less welcoming to the Cambodian refugees than they had been to earlier refugee groups. Government assistance programs were harder to qualify for. Cambodian refugees were often resettled in some of the most challenging American neighborhoods, with issues of poverty, crime, and violence.
 - Adults who dealt with post-traumatic stress issues from surviving the Khmer Rouge genocide, which killed 1.2 to 2.8 million people—10 to 30 percent of the Cambodian population—were not trained in the detailed steps they needed to take so that they and their children could become fully naturalized US citizens. Family members at times experienced discrimination and hatred.
 - Some young people growing up in rough neighborhoods got involved in youth gangs and crime. When a young Cambodian refugee was arrested, their parents did not know how to navigate the US justice system. The arrested youths were often advised to plead guilty and take a plea deal, sometimes in exchange for a reduced sentence. In the years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, these young refugees who had already completed their prison terms, sometimes decades earlier, faced deportation to Cambodia since they had not become naturalized US citizens.
 - Most of the young people who faced deportation did not remember Cambodia, as they had spent most of their lives in the United States. Some facing deportation to Cambodia had never been there—they were born in Thai refugee camps. Many had already moved on with their lives, gotten jobs, bought homes, formed families, and had children who were US citizens. Over 1,000 Cambodian refugees have been deported; the numbers of annual deportations have decreased and increased under different presidential administrations.

Essential Questions:

1. What is the history of Cambodian immigration to the US?
2. Why and how did Cambodians come to the US?

Leading questions from the reading:*Connecting to history*

1. What secret actions did the US do to Cambodia from 1969 to 1973?
2. What effect did these actions have on Cambodia politically?
3. Describe how the Khmer Rouge ruled over Vietnam from 1975 to 1979.
4. What effect did the Khmer Rouge have on the Cambodian population?
5. What year did the Khmer Rouge fall? And as a result, how many Cambodian refugees fled Cambodia?
6. How many Cambodian refugees were admitted to the US by 1980?

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7. Why does the Census data not reflect the true number of Cambodians living in the US?
 8. What is the poverty rate of Cambodian Americans? Compare this rate to the average US poverty rate of 13–15%.
 9. What is the average educational level among Cambodian Americans? Why is it so low?
 10. Why do you think there is such a high rate of incarceration of young Cambodian men? (Think of the conditions they faced in Cambodia and in the US.)

Write a paragraph describing the Cambodian American community. (Continue on the back of the page when you run out of room.)

Deporting Cambodian Americans—Jigsaw Expert/Home Groups Directions

Essential Question: What effect are the deportations having on Cambodian communities?

Break into groups of four, numbered 1–4. This is your home group. Each number represents an expert group.

Your task: Using evidence from the primary and secondary sources provided, become an expert on that source. It may be a video or an article with interviews of Cambodian Americans who have been deported or their families that are affected. You can work in your expert groups to help each other read, listen to, and analyze the source. Be ready to share out with your home group. Remember, you will be the only person in your group that is an expert on your source, so be thorough and detailed in your notes. If your source is a video, you can play the video several times or pause it to take notes.

As you analyze your source, think about these questions:

- What is the legal basis for the deportations?
- Why are these deportations unfair?
- What effect are the deportations having on the deportees and the families still living in the US?
- What groups are doing something about the deportations, and what are they doing?

Your assigned source:

#1s – Article: “Cambodian Deportees Return to a ‘Home’ They’ve Never Known,” The Atlantic, January 16, 2019. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link150>

#2s – Article: “U.S. Deports Dozens More Cambodian Immigrants, Some for Decades-Old Crimes,” NPR, December 18, 2018. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link151>

#3s – Video: “Deported from U.S., Cambodians Fight Immigration Policy,” PBS NewsHour, May 7, 2017. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link152>

#4s – Video: “Deported: Forced Family Separation” (Part 2 of 5), NBC News, March 16, 2017. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link153>

(Use your laptops, tablets, or resource stations to access the source.)

Expert Groups

Take notes in your quadrant on the **Deporting Cambodian Americans** notetaking sheet. Make sure to note down the author, title, and date of your source. Take down as many notes as you can, which should include names, quotes, and facts.

Home Groups

Return to your home groups. Each number takes turns reporting out what they learned from their source, citing evidence, facts, and quotes. As you are reporting out, the rest of your group is writing notes in the appropriate quadrants. After everyone has reported out, each person should have a wealth of notes on their sources.

Deporting Cambodian Americans – Jigsaw Expert/Home Groups – Notetaking Sheet

#1s Source Info: (Author, Title) Notes:	#2s Source Info: (Author, Title) Notes:
#3s Source Info: (Author, Title) Notes:	#4s Source Info: (Author, Title) Notes:

Quick Fact Sheet on Deportations of Cambodian Americans

After escaping the repressive regime of the Khmer Rouge and genocide, Cambodian refugees began immigrating into the US after 1979. They were dispersed into various cities and states throughout the US to encourage cultural assimilation. Many were resettled into underserved cities and neighborhoods that did not provide adequate educational, economic, and social support. Without an understanding of the circumstances these refugees had endured due to war and genocide trauma and their unique needs, American society treated Cambodians like voluntary migrants who were expected to achieve self-sufficiency and assimilate very quickly.

- Cambodian Americans experience disparate socioeconomic impacts and face issues of poverty, lack of education, poor mental and physical health, and, in more recent times, deportations to Cambodia. According to 2020 statistics:
 - 38% of Cambodians have limited English proficiency
 - 34% have less than a high school education
 - Only 17% have had any type of higher education
 - 23% fall under low income, with 20% living in poverty
 - The per capita income of Cambodians in California is \$16,249
- Cambodian refugees and immigrants after 1975 lawfully entered the United States and were legally resettled into this country. The Immigration and Naturalization Service adjusted their status to lawful permanent residents after they had lived in the US for more than one year, which also protected them from deportation.
- However, the United States criminal justice system went through many changes in the last few decades, pushing toward a system of mass incarceration. Specifically, in 1996 President Clinton signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which made Southeast Asian Americans and other immigrants who have certain criminal convictions subject to harsh mandatory detention and automatic deportation laws with very few opportunities for relief.
- Additionally, Cambodia signed a repatriation agreement with the US in 2002. Deportations increased during the fall of 2017 when the Trump administration started placing visa sanctions on certain high-level Cambodian government officials until they cooperated with US deportation policy. A nationwide temporary restraining order currently requires Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to send written notice to some Cambodians only two weeks before re-arresting them.
- Southeast Asian detentions and deportations cannot be understood without knowing how these communities are policed and sentenced. During the prison

boom of the 1990s, the Asian American and Pacific Islander prisoner population grew by 250 percent. During this time, Asian juveniles in California were more than twice as likely to be tried as adults as white juveniles who committed similar crimes. Arrests of AAPI youth in the United States increased 726 percent from 1977 to 1997. In cities such as Oakland, AAPI youth have had very high arrest rates: Cambodians with 63 per 1000 and Laotians with 52 per 1000. Many were advised to accept plea deals for shortened prison time without being made aware that this decision would make them eligible for deportation.

- With the 1996 laws, Southeast Asian Americans, which includes Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian Americans, are three to four times more likely to be deported based on past criminal convictions than any other immigrant group. Since 1998, at least 15,000 Southeast Asian Americans have received final orders of deportation, including over 2,000 orders for deportation to Cambodia, despite many arriving in the US with refugee status and obtaining a green card.
- Many times Cambodian Americans are deported for a crime they committed when they were young, even though they did their time and moved on with their lives, often marrying and having kids. As mature spouses and parents, they are now being deported for something they thought was dealt with and a part of their past.

Sources:

- 2011 US Census.
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. 2020. "Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities."
- National Education Association. 2015. "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Behind Bars: Exposing the School to Prison to Deportation Pipeline."