

New York City South Asian youth:
critical mass, urgent needs

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South Asian Youth Action

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1 • OVERVIEW

There are now more than 100,000 South Asian youth in New York City. This milestone for the community was reached during the last decade and is confirmed by the 2010 Census. Today, more than 5% of the city's youth (defined as residents under the age of 20) are South Asian. In Queens, one in eight youth is South Asian.

For these youth—contrary to national stereotypes—success is by no means guaranteed. Poverty is a major obstacle on their path to achievement. More than one-quarter of South Asian youth (26%) live in households with incomes lower than the federal poverty level (FPL). Over half of South Asian youth live in families where income is below 200% of the FPL. In New York City, where the cost of living is much higher than the national average, this means real hardship.

Many New York City youth of all backgrounds are poor. But in Queens and Brooklyn, where the vast majority of South Asian youth live, they face poverty rates higher than the borough averages for their age group. In the Bronx, the South Asian youth poverty rate is not as high as the borough average, but it is still substantially worse than the citywide average.

High rates of youth poverty mean that South Asian families in New York face a high risk of falling into a poverty trap. Youth who grow up in poor households face disadvantages when it comes to accessing resources—at school, on the job market, in the community—that could lift them out of poverty. Over time, inter-generational poverty can set in. The fast growth of New York's South Asian youth population and the high prevalence of poverty make it urgent to take action to prevent this dynamic.

Besides poverty, South Asian youth face additional hurdles that are particular to their experience in New York City today. Many parents of South Asian youth confront language barriers, cultural obstacles and a lack of familiarity with the American school system. As a result, they are at a disadvantage



when it comes to understanding and helping their children navigate the city school system, which has become increasingly complex under recent reform efforts.¹

The schools themselves often lack cultural competence when it comes to appreciating the needs of South Asian youth and interacting constructively with their families. And both in school and in the broader community, the post-9/11 environment continues to exhibit suspicion, bias, and discrimination. The bullying of South Asian youth, Muslim youth, and youth who wear turbans and hijabs is a persistent issue. This discourages many youth, lowers their engagement with school and other programs, and can lead to detrimental internalized behaviors.²

This report by South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!) presents the new demographics of South Asian youth in New York City, details the issues they face, and offers an agenda for action. Drawing on 17 years of experience providing youth-development services to the city's South Asian community, SAYA! intends this report to inform policymakers, school officials, and all New Yorkers about the city's growing South Asian youth population, the unique pressures they face, and the ways to overcome these obstacles to opportunity.

In our view, school leaders, city officials, community organizations, and South Asian families can take immediate steps that will improve youth college and career readiness and benefit the community as a whole. These steps include:

- **Improving parental engagement in schools by**
 - developing a new one-on-one parent advocacy program
 - enhancing translation and interpretation support for parents
 - scaling up community organization resources for parental education
- **Making schools a safe and welcoming space for South Asian youth by**
 - improving school staff cultural competence
 - improving school staff diversity and language proficiency
 - enhancing curriculum focused on South Asian youth
 - creating a safe, bullying-free space for South Asian youth
- **Preventing South Asian youth from falling through the cracks by**
 - ensuring availability of preparation tools, particularly for new immigrant youth
 - enhancing the college readiness of public school students
 - enhancing local community-based organization support for South Asian youth

These steps make up a practical, feasible agenda to ensure that New York City's South Asian youth have the tools necessary to succeed in a knowledge- and skills-based economy and avoid falling into a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

2 • THE NUMBERS: CRITICAL MASS

Over 1 in 20 New York City youth is South Asian.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2008–10 American Community Survey (ACS), there are slightly fewer than 2 million New Yorkers between the ages of 0 and 19. Over 100,000 are South Asian, or 5.1% of the overall population between 0 and 19. With over 1 in 20 of the city’s combined infants; pre-schoolers; and elementary, middle, and high school-age youth, the city’s South Asian youth population has reached a critical mass.

South Asian youth are a growing proportion of the city’s overall youth population.

While New York City’s overall youth population is declining, its South Asian youth population is growing larger. Between 2000 and 2010 the city’s youth population decreased by nearly 8%. But during the same period, the number of South Asian youth grew by over 23%, from 82,967 to 102,224 young people.

Actual numbers are probably higher.

These census data represent a statistical baseline. In reality, the number of South Asian youth in New York City is probably higher, because census data generally under-count the population in urban immigrant communities. Mayor Bloomberg formally challenged the 2010 U.S. Census in 2011, citing a large number of housing units in fast-growing neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens that were erroneously recorded as “vacant.” The mayor estimated that “tens of thousands” of New Yorkers were missing from the census count,³ including from Astoria and Jackson Heights, communities with large South Asian populations.

Unless cited otherwise, this report uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2008–10 American Community Survey (ACS).

TABLE 1 • NYC South Asian youth, recent population changes

	2000	2010	change
<i>all youth</i>	2,134,612	1,995,187	-6.5%
non-SA youth	2,051,645	1,892,963	-7.7%
SA youth	82,967	102,224	+23.2%
SA percentage of total youth	3.9%	5.1%	

3 • NYC SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH: WHERE THEY COME FROM

Three-quarters of South Asian youth in the city are U.S.-born.

Of the city’s South Asian youth, 73% were born in the United States and 27% were foreign-born. The proportion of foreign-born youth is highest among the Bangladeshi community (31%). With a majority born in the U.S. but a sizable minority born overseas, both experiences are important to take into account when assessing the needs of South Asian youth in the city.

The national origins of NYC South Asian youth are diverse.

The South Asian youth population has changed over time. Until the early years of the twenty-first century the largest national origins of South Asian youth were India and Pakistan. Now, the largest proportion of South Asian youth in the city have origins in Bangladesh. Youth with Indo-Caribbean origins (principally Guyana and Trinidad) are a sizable share as well. When combined, these four

major groups account for 9 out of 10 of the city’s South Asian youth. The remainder is split among Afghan, Sri Lankan, Nepalese, and Bhutanese origins.

Who are South Asians?

In this report, South Asian youth are those youth who were born in, or come from families that have origins in, the countries of South Asia and the Indian communities of the Caribbean. This understanding reflects the ethnic, religious, language and cultural ties that exist among the global South Asian diaspora. In New York City, these ties appear in the mixtures and overlaps of South Asian groups in various neighborhoods.

In the past, some analysts have excluded Indo-Caribbeans from the South Asian realm. This is a mistake, as “Indian” self-identification and other ties (e.g. Hindu or Muslim faith, cultural practices, and associations) connect Indo-Caribbeans with other South Asians, and residential patterns overlap (e.g. Indo-Guyanese and Punjabis in Richmond Hill).

In this analysis, we provide a complete picture of New York City South Asian youth that captures these community dynamics while remaining methodologically rigorous. Using the 2008–10 ACS, we select those with national origins in the Indian subcontinent or the Caribbean who have self-identified as being of “Asian” race or ethnicity. By including South Asians from both the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean, this approach offers a more accurate estimate of the South Asian diaspora in New York City.

TABLE 2 • NYC South Asian youth, foreign-born and family origin

origin	youth	foreign-born
<i>all South Asia</i>	102,224	27.2%
Bangladesh	27,596	31.3%
India	23,972	23.1%
Indo-Caribbean	21,421	23.7%
Pakistan	19,565	30.1%
other SA	9,670	27.2%

FIGURE 3 • NYC South Asian youth, foreign-born

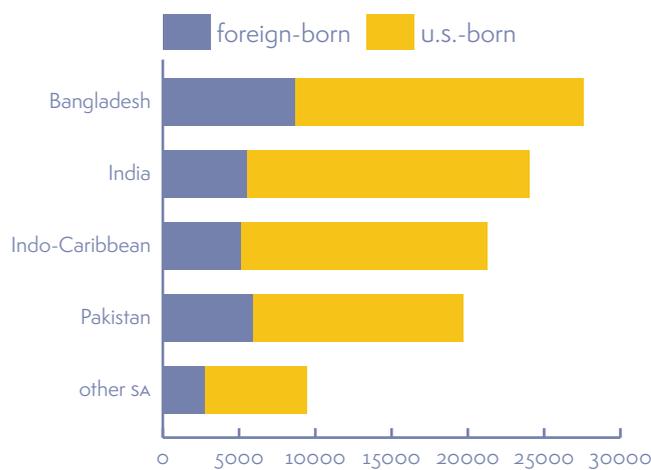
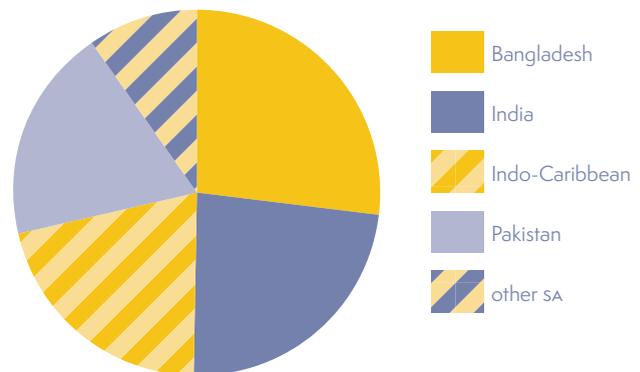


FIGURE 4 • NYC South Asian youth, family origin



4 • NYC SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH: WHERE THEY LIVE

South Asian youth are a citywide presence.

South Asian youth are dispersed across much of the city. Of the city's 59 community districts (CDs), 25 are home to at least 1,000 South Asian youth, of which 13 are home to at least 3,000 South Asian youth.

More than half the city's South Asian youth live in Queens, but there are large populations in Brooklyn and the Bronx as well. Policymakers should avoid an exclusive focus on Queens that marginalizes the significant numbers of South Asian youth elsewhere in the city.

In Queens, one in eight youth is South Asian.

Queens is the borough with the largest South Asian community and the most numerous South Asian-identified neighborhoods and commercial areas. The 64,446 South Asian youth in Queens make up over 12% of the borough's total youth population.

Of the city's 13 CDs in which more than 3,000 South Asian youth reside, 10 are in Queens. They encompass major areas that are commonly identified as being partly, and in some cases heavily, South Asian: Jackson Heights, Astoria, Long Island City, Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, Flushing, Jamaica, Hillcrest, Fresh Meadows, and Queens Village.

TABLE 5 • NYC South Asian youth, national origin and borough

	all SA youth	Bangladesh	India	Indo-Caribbean	Pakistan	other SA	all youth
all boroughs	102,224	27,596	23,972	21,421	19,565	9,670	1,995,187
Queens	64,446	14,839	17,838	17,895	7,846	6,028	516,480
Brooklyn	19,354	6,731	1,825	1,783	7,788	1,227	662,949
The Bronx	8,294	4,529	1,055	1,125	1,189	396	417,266
Manhattan	5,890	1,386	2,006	219	843	1,436	276,711
Staten Island	4,240	111	1,248	399	1,899	583	121,781

TABLE 6 • NYC South Asian youth, national origin and borough

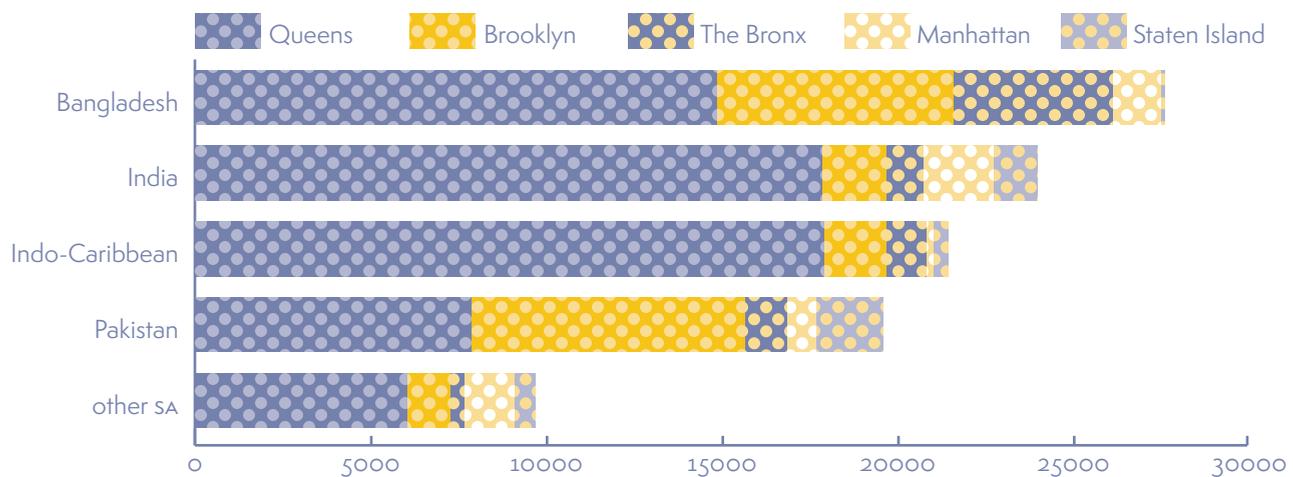


TABLE 7 • Community Districts (CDs) where more than 3,000 South Asian youth reside

CD	neighborhoods	SA youth	principal origins
Qn 10	Ozone Park, Howard Beach	10,222	Guyana, India
Qn 9	Woodhaven, Richmond Hill	9,641	Guyana, India, Bangladesh
Qn 13	Queens Village, Rosedale, Cambria Hts	6,810	India, Guyana
Qn 8	Fresh Meadows, Briarwood, Hillcrest	6,534	Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Guyana
Qn 12	Jamaica, St Albans	6,078	Guyana, Bangladesh
Qn 3	Jackson Heights, North Corona	5,056	India, Bangladesh, Pakistan
Qn 2	Sunnyside, Woodside	4,457	Bangladesh, India
Qn 7	Flushing, Murray Hill, Whitestone	4,113	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh
Qn 4	Elmhurst, South Corona	3,849	Bangladesh, India
Bk 12	Borough Park, Kensington	3,689	Bangladesh
Bk 14	Flatbush, Midwood	3,587	Pakistan
Qn 1	Astoria, Long Island City	3,167	Bangladesh, Pakistan, India
Bx 9	Soundview, Parkchester, Castle Hill	3,023	Bangladesh

Who qualifies as a “youth?”

In this report, SAYA! defines ‘youth’ as individuals below the age of 20.

Queens South Asian youth are internally diverse: they include large numbers of Indian, Indo-Caribbean, and Bangladeshi youth, and a smaller but sizable number of Pakistani youth. By

the same token, the largest proportion of youth of each national origin live in Queens. (Note, however, that almost as many Pakistani-origin youth live in Brooklyn as live in Queens.)

Brooklyn and the Bronx are major South Asian youth hubs as well.

Brooklyn is home to 19% of New York City South Asian youth, the majority of them of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins. Almost 40% percent of the city’s Pakistani-origin youth and almost 25% of the city’s Bangladeshi-origin youth live in Brooklyn; CDs 12 and 14, which include the Midwood and Kensington neighborhoods, are each home to more than 3,000 South Asian youth.

Central and northern Bronx are home to a significant South Asian youth population as well. Bronx CD 9, which includes Parkchester and Castle Hill, is home to more than 3,000 South Asian youth. Over half the South Asian youth in the Bronx are of Bangladeshi origin.



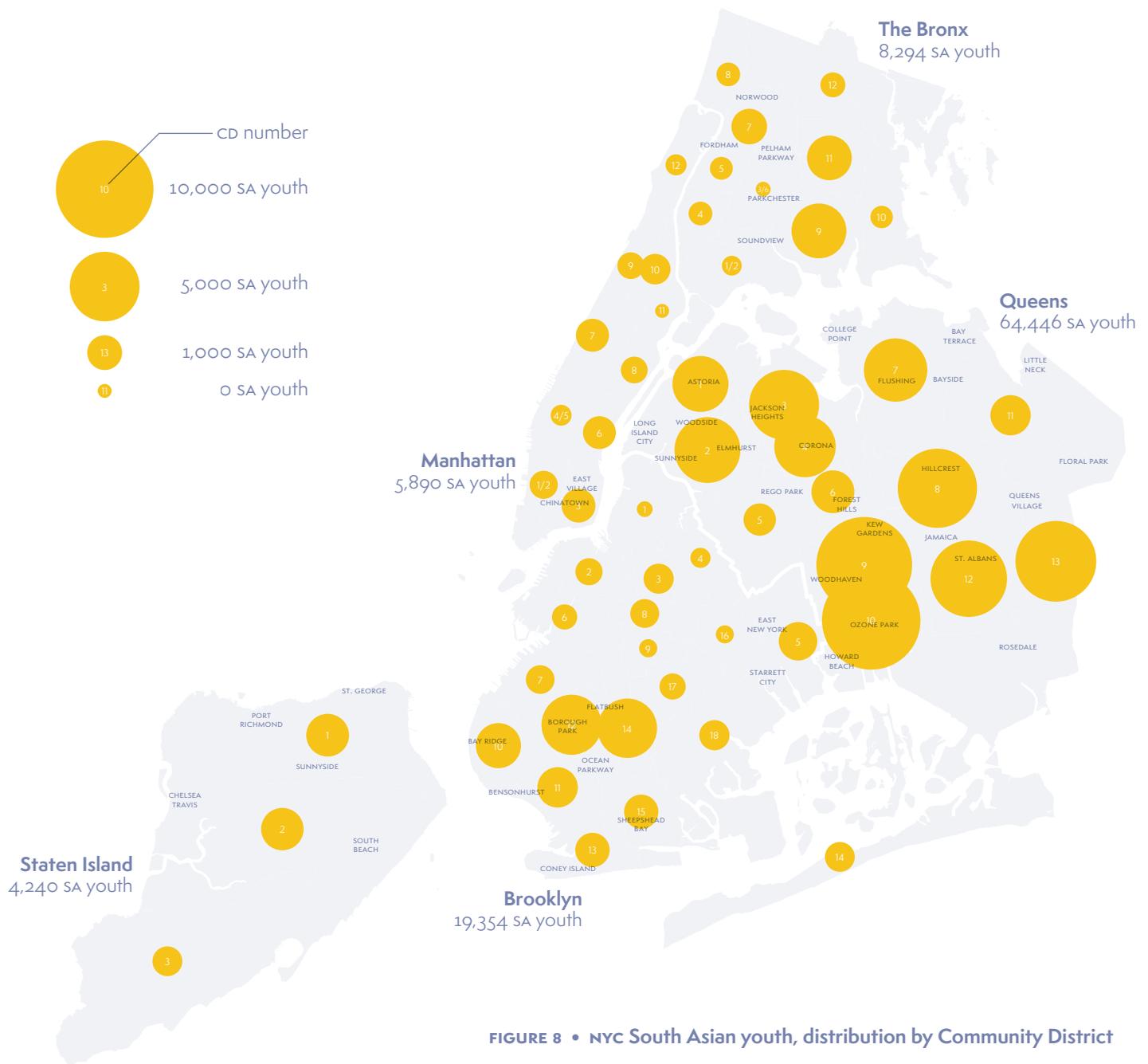


FIGURE 8 • NYC South Asian youth, distribution by Community District

What are Community Districts?

Each of New York City's 59 Community Districts comprises no more than 250,000 residents. Community Districts are New York City's most local political jurisdictions. These districts are managed by volunteer board members who make recommendations to the City Council and to the Borough President on matters such as local zoning, transportation, and public resource allocation.⁴

When referencing specific Community Districts, this report uses the system of abbreviation employed by the New York City Department of City Planning:

QN Queens • BK Brooklyn • BX The Bronx • MN Manhattan • SI Staten Island

5 • SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH POVERTY: A MAJOR ISSUE IN NEW YORK CITY

Over one-quarter of South Asian youth in New York City live in poor households, as defined by the federal poverty level (FPL). The FPL varies by family size; in 2013 the FPL is \$23,550 for a family of four.⁵ Many more South Asian youth live in near-poverty or low-income conditions: more than half of the city’s South Asian youth live in families at or below 200% of the FPL.

Poverty or low-income status is a major obstacle to achievement for South Asian youth in the city. It hinders their ability to access opportunities, prepare for good jobs and make successful lives.

Over one-quarter of NYC South Asian youth are poor.

Youth poverty is a chronic crisis that affects numerous communities and neighborhoods across New York City. South Asian youth are not immune to this crisis: 27% of South Asian youth live in poverty, close to the citywide average.

South Asian youth poverty is an issue across boroughs and origins.

In Queens and Brooklyn, where most of South Asian youth live, South Asian youth are more likely to be poor than the average youth in the borough. Thus in Queens, where 19% of all youth live in poverty, 23% of South Asian youth are poor. Likewise, in Brooklyn, 31% of all borough youth are poor, but 35% of South Asian youth are poor. In the Bronx, poverty rates are high for all youth (40%) and South Asian youth (37%).

Youth poverty affects South Asians of all origins. It is most acute among the city’s Bangladeshi-origin youth (38%) and Pakistani-origin youth (33%). In Queens, 20% of Indian-origin youth are poor.

Many more South Asian youth live in near-poverty or low-income settings.

A fuller picture of economic stress on South Asian youth emerges when one includes youth who live in families that are near poverty or low-income, defined as having incomes below 200% of FPL. In New York City many public assistance programs provide services to those families at or below 200% of FPL because of the comparatively high cost of living compared to the rest of the country. For a family of four, 200% of FPL is \$47,100.

Citywide, a combined 55% of South Asian youth, compared to 51% of all youth, live in poor or near-poor households. The numbers are highest for Pakistani-origin youth (72%) and Bangladeshi-origin youth (70%). South Asian youth live in poor or near-poor households at a higher rate than the borough average in every borough except Manhattan.



TABLE 9 • NYC South Asian youth, poverty by borough

	SA youth	all youth
citywide near poor (below 200% FPL)	54.8%	51.3%
citywide poor (below FPL)	26.7%	28.1%
Queens	23.1%	18.9%
Brooklyn	34.8%	31.3%
The Bronx	37.5%	40.3%
Manhattan	33.4%	24.5%
Staten Island	14.2%	16.5%

6 • OBSTACLES TO OPPORTUNITY: A FULLER PICTURE OF SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH LIFE

The census data illuminate the growth of New York City's South Asian youth community and the prevalence of poverty and near-poverty in these young people's life experience. But they do not tell the entire story. Other key facets of the South Asian youth experience in the city stem from characteristic social, cultural and educational factors. Adding these factors to the census-based analysis completes the picture, reveals the obstacles these youth face on the path to opportunity, and makes it possible to design appropriate and effective support strategies.

With 17 years of field experience working with South Asian youth in New York City, SAYA! has grown familiar with the particular pressures and obstacles these youth face at home, at school, and in the broader community. The perspectives of SAYA! staff members and the voices of current SAYA! youth program participants, whose names have been changed for privacy, inform this presentation of key issues.

6.1 • THE GENERATION GAP: CULTURE, LANGUAGE, INFORMATION ABOUT THE PATHS TO OPPORTUNITY

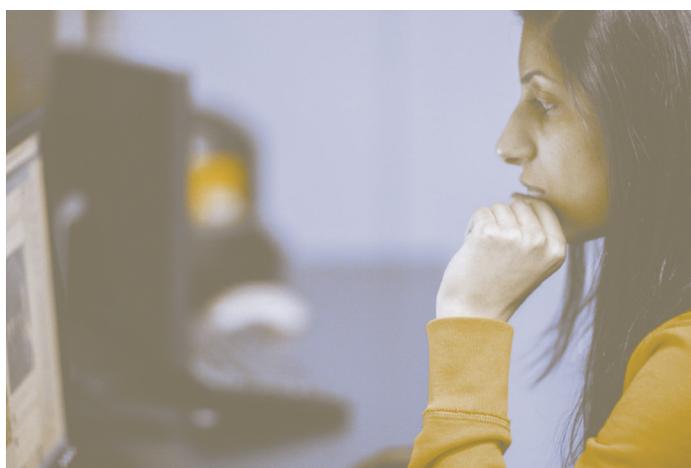
Mehdi (11th grade) does well on school tests and has high hopes for his future. His parents don't speak English well; his mother speaks almost no English at all. But Mehdi doesn't speak Urdu well enough to carry on conversations with them at the level of complexity where they can help him make good education and career decisions.

Mehdi's conundrum is a common one. South Asian youth are typically more adept in English than their parents, and less adept in the family's first language. Yet these youth must also serve as translators or cultural interpreters for their parents. It is a difficult position that puts the family as a whole at a disadvantage when it comes to learning and deciding on options for the young person's education and career.

The language gap exacerbates a cultural gap between youth, the majority of whom were born in the United States or arrived here as small children, and their parents. "The only thing parents are concerned about, as first generation immigrants, is getting a good job, making money, getting married, and retiring," says Kuldeep (12th grade). "I want to do more things with my life."

Yet many actions and unconscious behaviors of parents stand in the way of their children achieving even basic goals. "If I ever ask them about finances, about money for college, they never answer my questions," says Mohammed (12th grade). "They just say I need to focus on my grades, and they don't understand that jobs and internships show I can be responsible."

Poor information about the school system and after-school resources combines with unconscious negative parental attitudes, some youth report. "I feel like they don't know anything about school," Simran says. "If I stay late after school for anything, I have to deal with crazy accusations about being on drugs or doing something wrong," says Usman (12th grade).



One consequence is **disengaged parents**. Increasingly, paths to success in education start with early preparation and awareness on the part of parents—be it selecting the right school in an increasingly choice-based environment, preparing for tests, navigating the landscape of colleges and vocational programs, or understanding and applying for financial aid. South Asian parents in New York City are typically at a disadvantage on all these fronts.

“Parents simply don’t have the information in terms of school choice or getting ready for the workforce,” says a SAYA! staff member, “so the advice they give their children is limited, or even sometimes false.”

The absence of good information reinforces the limiting preconceptions that parents might have about appropriate school or career choices. “The only thing they think is worth it is going into the medical field— otherwise they think I am better off just getting married early,” says Shazia (11th grade).

Pavitra’s story

Pavitra arrived in the United States and settled in Richmond Hill, Queens, with her family while she was in elementary school. Like many South Asian immigrant fathers, Pavitra’s father is a non-union mechanic at an auto repair shop in Queens. Her mother, like many others, is a nanny.

While Pavitra and her brother were growing up, the New York City school system became more complex, and their parents had trouble navigating it. They were also never fully clear on the range of higher education options for their children. The guidance system at their children’s schools was largely opaque to them, but they put their trust in it to steer them well.

Pavitra’s brother dropped out of high school and became a barber in the neighborhood. Pavitra, however, graduated from Richmond Hill High School with a 3.5 GPA. Her record, bolstered by extra-curricular activities, was more than sufficient to earn her acceptance to a solid four-year college. But her guidance counselor instead steered her to a two-year college. Trusting the system, Pavitra’s parents did not argue. They looked at the list of two-year colleges in the city, and told Pavitra to attend the Borough of Manhattan Community College—not because of any particular academic offering, but because it was located near the A train, a direct commute from their Queens neighborhood, and because Pavitra had an aunt who worked nearby.

It took luck and persistence on Pavitra’s part to overcome misdirection from her school and lack of information on the part of her parents, and eventually find her way to a four-year college where she is finishing her degree. In the meantime she watched her brother and others slip off the tracks. Her story illustrates how both the schools and the family and community support system fail to adequately address the needs of South Asian youth and are in fact often counter-productive. In the absence of a level playing field, these youth are left to rely on luck and grit.

“They don’t really understand the different career paths,” Usman says. SAYA! staff report that some parents prohibit children from pursuing arts and public service opportunities that their children have a genuine passion for in favor of test preparation programs, which alone may not be sufficient to guarantee college acceptance.

Parents who lack information about the school milieu and pressures are also less likely to notice and act when children are struggling. “Parents don’t see how stressed we are about SATs and grades and college,” says Akbar (12th grade). “They don’t check on us to make sure everything is okay. They think it’s good that we are struggling, like, ‘Oh, he should be working hard.’”

In many segments of the community young women face the additional burden of **different, narrow expectations based on gender**. “Girls are treated differently; parents gossip about girls,” says Zainab (11th grade). “It looks like they only really worry about my reputation,” says Shazia. “They say I have to marry a doctor, he has to be religious and he has to be wealthy.” Shabana (11th grade)

adds: "I can't go away for college and I definitely can't dorm, because I'm not married." SAYA! youth and staff report instances of young women being taken out of school and sent away to their parents' native country, for arranged marriages.



The cost of poor information and/or misdirected pressure can be **incomprehension and resentment** that if not addressed can lead to depression, bad decisions, and disengagement at school. In cases of learning disabilities or mental health issues, lack of understanding or willingness to discuss such issues for fear of community pressures limits opportunities for youth in a starker manner. Strengthening parents' understanding of these issues is crucial to youth success.

6.2 • SCHOOLS THAT FALL SHORT OF BEING SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE

Schools as an unsafe space

Schools should be a safe and supportive space for all youth. But South Asian youth report to SAYA! staff that too often their schools are places of discomfort, misunderstanding, and, in some cases, harassment. These concerns stem from poor cultural competence on part of school officials, as well as an unchecked culture of bullying.

At a basic level students are often made to feel unwelcome. Akbar tells this story: "I came in late one day

because I had to go to the mosque in the morning for something, and my teacher yelled at me, so I brought a note from home. She didn't yell at me again, but then she also never called on me again to answer questions when I raised my hand."

Students experience the differential treatment of religious observances as unwelcoming and alienating. "We never get off on any of our holidays but other religions do, even if there aren't as many of them in our schools," Akbar says.

Bullying and prejudice remain major problems that make South Asian youth uncomfortable and feel unsafe in the schools. "I was called a terrorist many times, just because of my hijab," says Fara (11th grade). "During Muslim Students Association meetings people walk by and make comments like, 'Look at them, they're planning something,' like we're terrorists," Akbar adds.

"South Asian boys often have their turbans ripped off," says a SAYA! staff member. "There is an issue with the culture being recognized by other youth." These problems are compounded in areas where the number of South Asian youth, or youth who wear the targeted garment, is relatively small, breeding isolation and misunderstanding.

One perverse consequence is that **bullying is often internalized**. "Another youth got bullied so much, he started to announce that he couldn't wait until the time when he could cut off his jura [hair knot]," says a SAYA! staff member. The culture of bullying can lead youth to turn on each other. "There's internal bullying," says a SAYA! staff member. "We have cases of non-hijabi Muslim girls picking on hijabi girls. Or vice versa, when hijabis pick on non-hijabis for not being Muslim enough. The same with Sikhs."

Poor preparation for college and career

SAYA! youth and staff report significant dissatisfaction with the performance of neighborhood schools in providing education resources appropriate to youth needs. This underscores a citywide pattern, as studies report that only one-quarter of NYC high school entrants become ready for college after four years.⁶



Problems with counseling come up frequently. “Guidance counselors never have time because the schools are over-populated, and then when I do meet with them, they don’t know my name,” says Akbar. “I feel like it’s all on me.”

Youth report that counselors fail to recognize the student’s potential and interests, the cultural context they inhabit, or both. Combined with social promotion, the impact is to under-prepare students who are then shunted away without any guidance about what measures of success are valued by colleges and businesses.

“The schools are pushing-through kids who aren’t ready,” a SAYA! staff member says. “Those youth are then directed to two-year schools instead of four-year schools.”

The issues extend beyond counseling. SAYA! staff report cases of placement in ESL classes of students who are in fact English-proficient. Schools also appear unable to fully address the needs of students who miss significant amounts of school (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) and/or frequently travel back to their parents’ country of origin.

These problems are endemic to many city schools and affect youth of numerous communities. Because the South

Asian community is relatively new to the city, with parents typically under-informed and unable to make up for guidance deficiencies at school, these youth are particularly vulnerable—especially ones who are recent arrivals.

6.3 • LIMITED COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND THE RISK OF FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

There is a general lack of both formal and informal community infrastructure to support South Asian youth in the city.

“Youth negotiating between city culture and family background come to us all the time,” says a SAYA! staff member. “They want to come to SAYA! to do their essays or college applications, or they go to the library, but parents want to know exactly where they are and why.” Youth report frustration with a culture of gossip among “aunties” and elders in the community that reinforces, rather than attenuates, the generation gap at home. Further, in some segments of the community, older people are dubious of the intentions of perceived outsiders—even ones who share their ethnic or religious background—who propose to work with local youth.

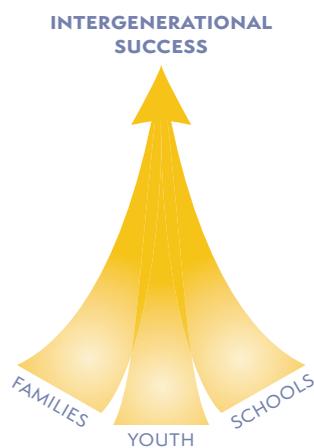
Absent stronger, supportive community resources, the wellbeing of South Asian youth is jeopardized. It is not uncommon for South Asian youth to become alienated, disengaged and ultimately fall through the cracks.

“Some youth self-identify with being a minority and what they think that should mean in terms of achievement,” says a SAYA! staff member. In one Brooklyn neighborhood, a SAYA! staff member

reports that “drug use is big—smoking, weed, alcohol. When looking for parking near the school, I see the South Asian boys hanging out, smoking, not going to class. Talk to them and it’s all about what they’re wearing.”

In a Queens neighborhood, another staff member says that “a lot of South Asian kids cut school, hung out, and ended up in gangs or arrested. They’d cut classes everyday. I keep up with some of them: they’re working in retail for seven dollars an hour now, whereas they ought to be graduating college.”

7 • RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH IN NEW YORK CITY



Over one-quarter of the more than 100,000 South Asian youth in New York City live in poverty, and another one-quarter live in near-poverty or low-income conditions. As the testimonials in this report show, South Asian youth experience significant challenges navigating the New York City school system and American culture, which impedes their ability to enter and succeed in today’s knowledge- and skill-based economy. These include a lack of school support systems that address cultural and linguistic needs, home cultures in conflict with American culture, and limited access to safe spaces during non-school hours.

The combined effect of youth poverty and school-based, family-based, and community-based obstacles is to hold New York City’s South Asian youth back from opportunity. Policymakers and partners in the community have the responsibility and the opportunity to take steps to level the playing field and lift these obstacles for this large and growing youth population. Doing so now will stop the onset of intergenerational poverty.

To avoid intergenerational poverty and to instead create long-term community success, SAYA! recommends a focused and targeted approach. The overall focus should be on the key factors that support intergenerational success—the families, schools and youth themselves. The immediate target should be the 13 New York City community districts that are each home to over 3,000 South Asian youth, followed by the other 12 districts that are each home to over 1,000 South Asian youth.

Successful initiatives will be ones that develop institutional competence, build community capacity, include youth input, and create accountability and responsibility for all stakeholders.

SAYA! believes these efforts will ultimately ensure a city in which:

- co-ordinated and comprehensive anti-poverty and acculturation programs support immigrant youth and their parents
- communities have a greater voice to ensure appropriate and effective interventions for all youth in neighborhood schools, and
- youth are empowered to envision pathways to success for themselves and their families.

The following eleven recommendations seek to lead toward this vision.

7.1 • IMPROVING PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Studies demonstrate that parental engagement in public school education improves student achievement.⁷ SAYA! urges New York City public school leaders to recognize that engaging parents as partners in their child's success will not work with a one-size-fits-all approach. Immigrant parents are unfamiliar with public school processes in the United States and need enhanced engagement approaches. SAYA! recommends that the New York City Department of Education (DOE) partner with community-based organizations to implement two distinct proposals:

Recommendation 1 • Develop a one-on-one parent advocacy pilot program

Immigrant parents often need regular, meaningful interaction with their children's schools to successfully guide their children through the system. The current model of one-off meetings with parents does not lead to a sustainable increase in immigrant parents' engagement in schools, particularly because parental engagement is diffused across several parties. For example, parents interact with administrative staff for enrollment and/or potential discipline issues, a range of individual teachers for student performance or classroom issues, and may interact with other organizations that partner with schools to provide social services. SAYA! encourages the DOE to pilot a new program that provides parents with more consistent direction and more routine intervention points with school officials.

This pilot program should partner immigrant parents with counselors/advocates who regularly interact with the parents and co-ordinate interaction with teachers and administrators on issues of concern. These counselors/advocates should be proficient in the language spoken by immigrant parents and familiar with the cultural backgrounds of the parents they interact with.

Recommendation 2 • Integrate comprehensive use of translation and interpreters

SAYA! recommends that the DOE provide parents who are not proficient in English a one-stop, accessible resource of translated materials written in basic language, instead of the current patchwork of often incomplete individual documents. This resource would include information about the New York City school system, goals for K–12 achievement, school enrollment processes, school evaluations, and contact information for key local administrators. SAYA! recommends that the DOE work with community-based organizations to distribute these materials, and not just rely on posting such materials on the DOE website. In addition, the DOE should enhance outreach to immigrant parents who are not print-literate through the production of translated video and audio support materials.

SAYA! recommends that the DOE work with principals to certify core language needs for schools with significant South Asian populations, scale-up translation and interpretation resources in those schools to ensure parents can speak to administrators in their native language during school hours, and ensure that schools are actually deploying the resources currently available to them.

In addition, DOE should also classify speakers of Patois languages as English Language Learners (ELLs) to ensure that students speaking Patois languages receive the language support they need to succeed.

To focus these efforts, the DOE should conduct a survey to assess the reach and effectiveness of existing interpretation and translation services for students and parents. The survey results should then be used to strategically target funding.



7.2 • ADDRESSING INFORMATIONAL AND CULTURAL GAPS

Recommendation 3 • Scale-up community organization resources for parental education

SAYA!’s experience shows that South Asian community organizations can serve as an important bridge between parents and local government and civic entities. For example, the South Asian Council for Social Services (SACSS) has launched the Parent Engagement Program (PEP), a school-based workshop series that engages and informs parents on the U.S. education system.⁸ We recommend that community organizations, including cultural affinity and faith-based groups, develop similar programs to educate parents about the school system and the pressures facing South Asian youth.

Programs could include seminars on high school admissions, sensitization to the need to avoid long absences in schools caused by extended trips to countries of origin, and education on the responsibilities that the DOE and U.S. schooling system at large implicitly place on parents, rather than on the school or youth.

In addition, businesses in the South Asian community can help inform parents about the income and security benefits of pursuing higher education, to discourage parents from allowing students to miss school to work in family businesses.

Community organizations should consider working directly with school officials to build project-based partnerships on tutoring, host cultural festivals at schools, and hold specialized school information sessions during after-work or weekend hours for parents and community members.

These partnerships will support existing school services, streamline delivery of wraparound services to youth, and help build sustainable capacity within the schools themselves to address South Asian youth needs.



Recommendation 4 • Strengthen intergenerational cultural understanding and improve student performance

We need a stronger understanding of the information, culture, generation, and language gaps that distance South Asian youth from their parents. SAYA! recommends more research to determine methods of strengthening immigrant parent–youth relationships. SAYA! recommends a pilot program with the aim to improve trust and strengthen youth self-esteem and performance, based on the research findings.

SAYA! also recommends that the DOE expand training for school administrators and teachers on issues related to the generational gap between immigrant parents and their children. South Asian community organizations can support this work by developing training materials and participating as appropriate in the programs.

7.3 • MAKING THE SCHOOLS A SAFE AND WELCOMING SPACE FOR SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH

Recommendation 5 • Enhance existing school staff cultural competence

SAYA! recommends that the DOE implement a multi-pronged strategy to ensure that school staff recognize the particular needs of South Asian youth.

In schools with concentrated South Asian youth populations, the DOE should implement a training program for administrators, guidance counselors and teachers, in partnership with South Asian community organizations, on the cultural context of South Asian youth. This training program should commence before the start of every school year and continue at two additional points during the school year—once in mid-fall and once in spring.

Every school that has a significant South Asian youth population should develop a plan to ensure that teachers and administrative staff have regular access to supportive resources within the South Asian community. These plans will be specific to each school, as circumstances and cultural pressures will vary across South Asian ethnic and religious subgroups. Schools should detail their goals and plans to improve cultural competency in the Comprehensive Educational Plans that school leadership teams must submit each year.



This program can draw from best practice models for improving the cultural competence of public officials. One example is the Sikh Coalition’s recent partnership with the New York City Police Department to train new police academy graduates on interacting with the city’s Sikh community.

Recommendation 6 • Enhance curriculum focused on South Asian youth

SAYA! supports the efforts of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) advocacy organizations to implement in New York City public schools an AAPI curriculum inclusive of South Asians. A curriculum that addresses the perspectives and history of South Asian and other AAPI immigrants in the United States will help South Asian students feel a stronger connection to the academic material and to their schools.

SAYA! also encourages the DOE to review its current instructional materials related to South Asian history, cultures, and religions. This effort should ensure that teachers convey correct information about the backgrounds of South Asian youth.

In schools with significant South Asian populations, teachers should consider building curricular units that engage South Asian youth in educating their peers about South Asian cultures.

Recommendation 7 • Improve school staff diversity

South Asian youth and parents frequently cite the absence of South Asian administrators and teachers as a barrier to greater engagement in New York City schools. Fourteen percent of New York City public school students are of AAPI descent.⁹ However, limited public data suggests that the number of teachers of AAPI descent are a far smaller proportion of the New York City teaching workforce. For example, 5.5% of middle school teachers were identified as “other,” which includes AAPI descent, in a 2011 report on New York City middle school teacher turnover.¹⁰

SAYA! recommends that the DOE launch a targeted outreach plan to increase the number of South Asian professionals in the schools. In particular, we recommend recruiting teachers and administrators with South Asian language competency, and encouraging teachers to pursue bilingual certification in South Asian languages.

These efforts should also encourage Americans of South Asian descent to pursue careers in education. We encourage principals to hire qualified South Asian candidates, and we urge the DOE to create alternative pathways for non-traditional candidates to apply to programs such as the NYC Teaching Fellows program.

At the same time, we encourage South Asian community-based organizations to become more active in promoting the value of community members becoming certified teachers.

Recommendation 8 • Create a safe, bullying-free space for South Asian youth

The DOE must recognize and address the particular effects of bullying on South Asian youth in New York City. We appreciate the DOE's efforts to implement the New York State Dignity for All Students Act and its own Respect for All initiative. In this context, we encourage the DOE to take steps against the racial-, ethnic-, and religious-based bullying that affects South Asian youth.

SAYA! recommends that administrators and teachers create a respect-based learning environment that honors student diversity and take steps to identify and address bullying of South Asian youth. This process should include administrator and teacher training about how South Asian students are bullied, the effects of bullying on immigrant and minority youth who may already feel disengaged from their school communities, and evaluation of the effectiveness of current options available to students who want to report bullying. As part of these efforts, we recommend the DOE utilize a recent anti-bullying curriculum by Dr. Monisha Bajaj (Teachers College, Columbia University), Dr. Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher (Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania), and Karishma Desai (Teachers College), published by South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) that provides practical lessons for educators to combat prejudice, harassment, and bullying.¹¹

To ensure that South Asian students feel that their schools respect their cultural heritage, SAYA! recommends the DOE study the feasibility of providing halal, vegetarian, and other religiously required dietary selections through the cafeteria system in schools with concentrated South Asian populations. SAYA! also supports efforts to formally recognize Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha on the DOE school calendar.

7.4 • PREVENTING SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH FROM FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Recommendation 9 • Ensure availability of preparation tools, particularly for new immigrant youth and families

South Asian students include new immigrants who have limited proficiency in English and little familiarity with U.S. curriculum models. SAYA! encourages the DOE to ensure adequate programs, funding and support for ELLs of South Asian descent. In particular, SAYA! encourages the DOE to expand ELL programs and to integrate these programs in a manner more consistent with Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) programs.

The New York Immigration Coalition reports that over half of ELLs in New York City drop out of high school.¹² A wraparound support model should include language-appropriate early education, after-school and tutoring resources, and targeted resources for new immigrants to learn about admissions processes and unique features of the New York City school system.

In addition, SAYA! recommends that the DOE and New York State Education Department study the relative effectiveness of portfolio assessments of ELLs in order to avoid gaps in supporting students with limited English proficiency to satisfy high school graduation requirements.

Recommendation 10 • Disaggregate data for AAPI students

The DOE currently reports data for AAPI communities as a whole and does not break-down data by specific ethnic group. The lack of information about the distribution and performance of South Asian students prevents the development of interventions targeted to the needs of South Asian youth or—for that matter—any other major subset of AAPI youth.

SAYA! supports legislative actions to allow disaggregation of AAPI student data by national origin background. These include New York City Council Member Daniel Dromm’s Intro 937, New York State Assembly Member Ron Kim’s A1186a, and New York State Senator Toby Ann Stavinsky’s S2348.

Recommendation 11 • Enhance local community-based organization support for South Asian youth

SAYA! urges local South Asian community groups to recognize that the lack of safe and enriching environments for many South Asian youth undermines our community’s aspiration for success for all of our youth. The issues raised in this report cannot be addressed solely by governmental and philanthropic parties. The South Asian community itself has an indispensable role to play in supporting our youth.

SAYA! recommends that South Asian community and religious organizations open their spaces to South Asian youth after school and on weekends, and build internal capacity or partner with youth development organizations to give students access to high-quality after-school programs that can improve school achievement, self-esteem, and leadership skills.

These efforts should include a drive to engage new South Asian mentors and tutors who will build academic and leadership skills through a focused support and guidance regime.

Through these partnerships South Asian communities can avoid gang- and drug-related issues that often confront students who lack these spaces during evenings and weekends.



8 • CONCLUSION

Based on new research and nearly two decades of experience working with South Asian youth, this report proposes an immediate agenda that will make a positive difference in the lives of NYC South Asian youth. Beyond this, we still need more research and better data that will allow us to refine the interventions necessary to support youth and determine how these programs can be scaled-up to meeting the growing community needs.

Ramping-up this agenda in both the short- and long-term requires a commitment of all parties to increase funding of successful programs that serve South Asian youth in the city. Asian American–focused organizations—a large category of which South Asian organizations are just one part—receive only 0.24% of New York City government contract dollars¹³ and only 0.4% of national philanthropic funding, according to the most current published data.¹⁴ All stakeholders should recognize the need for a major expansion of resources if the horizons of South Asian youth in New York City are to expand.

9 • APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 • 25 Community Districts where more than 1,000 South Asian youth reside

CD	neighborhoods	sa youth	principal origins
QN 10	Ozone Park, Howard Beach	10,222	Guyana, India
QN 9	Woodhaven, Richmond Hill	9,641	Guyana, India, Bangladesh
QN 13	Queens Village, Rosedale, Cambria Hts	6,810	India, Guyana
QN 8	Fresh Meadows, Briarwood, Hillcrest	6,534	Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Guyana
QN 12	Jamaica, St Albans	6,078	Guyana, Bangladesh
QN 3	Jackson Heights, North Corona	5,056	India, Bangladesh, Pakistan
QN 2	Sunnyside, Woodside	4,457	Bangladesh, India
QN 7	Flushing, Murray Hill, Whitestone	4,113	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh
QN 4	Elmhurst, South Corona	3,849	Bangladesh, India
BK 12	Borough Park, Kensington	3,689	Bangladesh
BK 14	Flatbush, Midwood	3,587	Pakistan
QN 1	Astoria, Long Island City	3,167	Bangladesh, Pakistan, India
BX 9	Soundview, Parkchester, Castle Hill	3,023	Bangladesh
BK 10	Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights	1,984	Pakistan
BX 11	Pelham Parkway, Morris Park	1,945	Bangladesh, Pakistan
QN 6	Forest Hills, Rego Park	1,767	India
SI 1	North Shore	1,757	Pakistan
SI 2	Central Staten Island	1,732	India
BK 11	Bensonhurst, Bath Beach	1,545	Pakistan
QN 11	Bayside, Douglaston, Oakland Gardens	1,537	Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan
BK 5	East New York, Starrett City	1,378	Bangladesh, Guyana
BX 7	Bedford Park, Norwood	1,155	Bangladesh
BK 13	Coney Island, Brighton Beach	1,063	Pakistan
BK 15	Sheepshead Bay, Gerritson Beach, Manhattan Beach	1,053	Pakistan
MN 3	Lower East Side, Chinatown	1,020	India, Bangladesh

APPENDIX 2 • NYC South Asian youth, recent population changes by borough

	2000	2010	change
all youth	2,134,612	1,995,187	-6.5%
non-SA youth	2,051,645	1,892,963	-7.7%
SA youth	82,967	102,224	+23.2%
Queens	51,969	64,446	+24.0%
Brooklyn	16,856	19,354	+14.8%
Bronx	7,511	8,294	+10.4%
Manhattan	3,565	5,890	+65.2%
Staten Island	3,066	4,240	+38.3%

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11 • ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH ACTION

Founded in 1996, South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!) creates opportunities for South Asian youth to realize their full potential. It is the only organization in the United States dedicated to providing secular comprehensive youth development services to the South Asian community—one of the fastest growing minority groups in New York City. To equip low-income South Asians, ages 5 to 19, for healthy and successful lives in the United States, SAYA! provides academic support, leadership development and enrichment programs at 14 program sites. SAYA! has served over 8,500 youth—often the first in their families to pursue college in the U.S. Please visit saya.org to learn more about SAYA!

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