

Island Migrant Rights Initiative
United States
Vassar College
Project Leader: Christopher Unruh '23
Partner: Chase Engel '23
Date range of project implementation: 06/01/2022 - 08/11/2022

Problem:

In April of 2021, the immigrant community in Honolulu was rocked by two police shootings taking place just nine days apart. On April 9th, Iremamber Sykap, a 16-year-old Micronesian teenager was shot dead by a police officer who was firing into the back window of Sykap's car, which was stationary, hitting the teenager eight times. Then, on April 14th, Lindani Myeni, 29, a recent immigrant to Hawaii from South Africa got into an altercation with police, which Myeni's family claims failed to identify themselves, who then proceeded to tase and fatally shoot him (Broder Van Dyke). These two shootings took place at a tumultuous time when the national conversation around police brutality against people of color was high, due to the Derek Chauvin trial occurring that same month. These tragedies went largely undiscussed both nationally and in the state itself. In fact, the most prevalent calls for justice came from their respective home communities of South Africa and Guam, and the Federated States of Micronesia. At its core, these incidents reflect the presence of a larger system of inequality, oppression, and racism within the state of Hawaii which continues to disproportionately marginalize migrants, and especially migrants of color.

Despite the historical racialized narratives of Hawaii as a "melting pot," a post-racial state, or even a "racial paradise," Hawaii's gift of diversity does not erase the very evident structural harm imposed against migrants. In our present moment, these structures have affected the most recent - and the fastest-growing - immigrant communities to Hawaii which are those from the Pacific island nations including the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Samoa, and Tonga among other places. Many of these communities are able to come to Hawaii under the Compact of Free Association (COFA). This is a policy implemented after the nuclear bomb testing of the 20th century which left many of their homes irradiated, and as a result forcibly displacing them to islands that give them a poorer quality of life. The COFA allows them to live and work in the United States, and while they do pay taxes, they are not allowed to tap into social safety nets like food stamps and have extremely limited access to Medicaid. The effect of this is that a large number of Honolulu migrants from these regions live in abject poverty, the most prominent among them being the Marshallese with more than half of their population living below the poverty line (Hofschneider). In addition, there is rampant carceral inequality as a large degree of those arrested and in jail tend to be people of color, and from migrant communities - this is made glaringly clear by the shootings of Sykap and Myeni. These social and economic issues are only worsened by an alarming lack of resources made available to migrants on the rights afforded to them; when there are resources made available by the state there is a high degree of inaccessibility surrounding these materials due to bureaucratic complications, or even infrastructural issues such as only existing online or only made available in English. Moreover, these injustices are shrouded in a good degree of mystification as they are seldom discussed in popular media, in academia, or even in schools. We seek to respond to many of these issues through this project and hopefully begin the process of bringing greater social equality for migrants in Hawaii into our community and national discourse.

At its core, the inspiration for this project was born out of my, Christopher Unruh, own upbringing in Honolulu, Hawaii where my life was always intimately connected to immigrants and their struggles. Growing up I was embedded in a multitude of immigrant communities as many of my neighbors, classmates, and friends were the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. This granted me the immense privilege to get to take part in many cultural traditions and customs, beyond what I would ever experience at home with my family, and in the process gain a much broader perspective and appreciation of our global society. Due in part to these experiences in my formative years, I became acutely aware of the clear structural, interpersonal, and individualized racism in Hawaii which disproportionately harms migrant communities.

Project Outline:

Chase Engel and Christopher Unruh intend to execute this objective through four main components: a “Know Your Rights” campaign, a compendium of migrants’ stories, a mapping project, and an executive report. We believe these four approaches to our research will effectively work to uplift and educate a diverse variety of migrants, academics, and activists both in the state and nationally. The mapping project will consist of finding immigration offices, local law firms, government agencies, and on-the-ground non-profit organizations and subsequently compiling them into a map accessible to migrants of all socioeconomic backgrounds. This map will involve detailed notes about the services these organizations offer, as well as how to affordably and efficiently access their resources. Our “Know Your Rights” campaign serves a similar function, except it will involve a multimedia campaign of both print and digital resources outlining the legal provisions and protections - focused on economic hardships and social inequities - available to immigrants. Our compendium of migrants’ stories brings the human aspect of our research to non-immigrants, which can hopefully foster empathy and compassion as well as be a call to action for activists. Finally, our executive report detailing the various structural inequalities faced by migrants in Hawaii will be widely available online for students and academic professionals for general information about our findings and analysis in a concise, informative way. Our project will be distributed both through a website and social media page of our own design, in addition to pamphlets and print materials containing the most critical information for migrants - these resources will be distributed through community centers, migrant organizations, and in online forums.

Each of these elements provides an outlet through which different conclusions, intentions, and influences can be attained. Each serves as an educational resource, but to whom they are targeted is vastly diverse as to affect change in Hawaiian society across socioeconomic boundaries. In order to remain ethically-minded throughout the duration of our project, and conduct our project appropriately, we will consult with those individuals and organizations we work alongside, such as Aloha Immigration who assisted in developing this project, for guidance on remaining respectful of the immigrant communities of Honolulu. Everything will be accomplished within the summer. Before arrival, we intend to conduct a considerable amount of outreach to different organizations and individuals relevant to the project, as well as gather information and research the general on-the-ground situation for migrants, statistics on migrant populations, and additional necessary analysis.

Thank you for reading this proposal, and we hope you will consider funding this very important work.

Works Cited

Broder Van Dyke, Michelle. “‘We Say It’s a Racial Paradise’: How Two Police Killings Are Dividing Hawaii.” The Guardian, 5 July 2021, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/05/honolulu-police-killings-hawaii.

Hofschneider, Anita. “Racial Inequality in Hawaii Is a Lot Worse than You Think.” Honolulu Civil Beat, 27 Mar. 2018, www.civilbeat.org/2018/03/racial-inequality-in-hawaii-is-a-lot-worse-than-you-think/.

Island Migrant Rights Initiative Budget Sheet

Project costs: \$1,200

- Website management (hosting a domain, website upkeep, web design service)
- Printed materials (All components of project will have physical distributions)
- Hosting in-person event(s)
- Compensation for potential contributors (i.e. interviewees, speakers)

Food: \$2,000 = \$200 per week for 2 persons for ~10 weeks (Mainly designated for groceries)

Room/Board: \$4,200 (Market price at time of budget sheets creation [Christopher has acquaintances who may be able to sublet more affordable housing])

Transportation: \$1,800 (\$800 on-sight [bus tickets, gas expenses, other miscellaneous forms of transportation], Chase's \$1,000 flight, Christopher's will already have arrived)

Other (itemize): \$800 Unforeseen Costs

- Potential health costs
- Long-term project upkeep
- Potential buffer for unexpected expenses

*If there are funds leftover, they will be used for student tuition for the following school year

TOTAL COST: \$10,000