

# Up to Us: A Community-Led Needs Assessment of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Bay Area

By APIENC

*APIENC builds trans, nonbinary, and queer Asian and Pacific Islander (API) power to amplify our voices and increase the visibility of our communities. Through organizing in the Bay Area, APIENC inspires and trains grassroots leaders, transforms our values from scarcity to abundance, and partners with organizations to sustain a vibrant movement ecosystem. Since 2004, APIENC has organized to become a political home for our people to build community, unearth political histories, and reclaim trans and queer API power. Every year, APIENC supports hundreds of trans and queer API people to strengthen their organizing, invest in healing, address the root causes of injustice, and become lifelong contributors to movements for change.*

## Introduction

We are APIENC, an organization building power for and by trans, nonbinary, gender expansive, and gender abundant Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Bay Area, and this project is a love letter to our community. We know how hard it can be to be our full selves in this world. **We know how hard it can be to feel safe.** We are subject to violence in our homes and neighborhoods, silenced and invisibilized in society, and told time and time again that we simply don't exist.

As heartbreaking as our findings are, we believe our approach can help others engage in powerful, community-centered research, and we know our findings will **help us shape the future we deserve.** We have the power and responsibility to create real solutions to our needs for safety, connection, and care that serve all people. **Now, it's up to us.**

*Our peoples have always existed. We have always belonged.*

With love and belief in our power,  
APIENC

## I. Background

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) Asians and Pacific Islanders (APIs) deserve safety, support, and self-determination to thrive and contribute our unique power to all communities. However, for generations, the Model Minority Myth has spread the belief that Asians and Pacific Islanders are economically stable, upwardly mobile, and easily able to access resources. Years of colonialism have erased trans API people from history. At APIENC, an organization building power with trans, nonbinary, and queer APIs in the Bay Area, we know from personal experience that these stories are false. We exist, and many of our people struggle daily. Yet, we often didn't have data to counter this narrative and respond. Little research exists to unearth, support, and uplift our needs, and we know firsthand that the violence and transphobia TGNC APIs face is rarely recorded, much less addressed.

Our TGNC API Needs Assessment, summarized in this article and available in full online, begins to fill this gap, visibilizing the ways that systems of oppression impact TGNC APIs in the Bay Area.<sup>1</sup> We aim to bring our experiences to light and counter deep divisiveness with other queer, trans, Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) communities for the sake of a stronger movement. Given our lived experiences, we believe transgender and gender nonconforming APIs are the best equipped to connect, research, and uplift others like us.

The majority of this research took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted outreach between June 2019 and December 2019. In the crisis of health systems and social connection that has begun since then, it has only been harder for many of us to have our needs met.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: section II summarizes our methods, section III the demographics of our survey respondents, section IV our findings, and section V key recommendations based on our findings. Section VI concludes.

## II. Methods

*Through our entire process, we asked ourselves: How can this process empower both our survey takers AND participant researchers?*

In response, we turned to **community-based participatory action research (CBPAR)**. Inspired by groups like Chinese Progressive Association and Mujeres Unidas y Activas, we chose CBPAR as a political tool that challenges the roles of the researchers and participants.

CBPAR is an approach to research that involves the community members who are directly impacted throughout the process. It is a framework used to subvert the at-times predatory, voyeuristic methods of traditional research and address the practical concerns of people in a community.<sup>2</sup> Broken down, this is how CBPAR shaped our project:

- **Community-Based:** grounded in the needs, concerns, and strategies of TGNC APIs
- **Participatory:** led by and engaged TGNC API people and our knowledge in the process
- **Action Research:** supported the development of APIENC and TGNC API people's organizing skills and leadership to create transformation and social change

Using CBPAR as a model, we worked to **practice our values in our research**.

### Developing Research Skills

A crucial part of this project was developing the skills of the people who worked on it. The process was led by TGNC API members and APIENC staff. This involved writing the survey, outreaching to partners, leading trainings on in-person outreach and research methodology, analyzing data, writing the report, developing strategy, and even recruiting some survey takers to join our research team.

### Writing the Survey

Before we wrote the survey, we reflected on the ways TGNC communities are often asked about their experiences in voyeuristic, presumptuous ways. It was important to us to not replicate that

dynamic. We wrote open-ended questions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, rather than providing a dropdown list or checkboxes. We gave content warnings before each section and asked for participants' consent to proceed. If respondents were not comfortable answering, they were able to skip to the next section. We included video introductions from the survey writers to visibilize that these questions were being asked by a group of other TGNC APIs, eager to learn more about our community. Lastly, we did not want to focus the survey just on harmful or difficult experiences, so we included questions at the end that involved visioning for the future.

### **Outreach & Participant Compensation**

As an organization centered on trans and nonbinary APIs, we held our first outreach among APIENC members and networks. From there, we partnered with community groups to ensure we could reach as many TGNC APIs in the Bay Area as possible. Nineteen partners serving TGNC API people signed on to review the survey, share it with their members, and support us in our research. Partners included the San Francisco Community Health Center, Trans Lifeline, Parivar Bay Area, Lyon-Martin Health Services, and other valuable partners listed in our full report. To address geographic diversity, our team deepened connections with organizations in the North and South Bay, such as LGBTQ Connection in Napa and Sonoma Counties and the LGBTQ Youth Space in San Jose. Finally, we held in-person outreach, including at Ricebreakers, an intergenerational TGNC API gathering, and the 2019 San Francisco Trans March. We know a survey that asks about vulnerable experiences can feel hard; at in-person opportunities, we paired survey takers with buddies to help navigate the internet and provide emotional support.

We know our community's time should be held with care, and we wanted to honor participants' time by providing compensation. Through support from funders and grassroots fundraising, we provided \$25 Visa gift cards to all survey takers who requested them. We provided \$25 gift cards to TGNC APIs who participated in community roundtables to review our initial findings, as well as \$50 gift cards to TGNC API artists who contributed art.

### **Roundtables**

Once our initial outreach ended, we wanted to ensure our findings reflected the priorities of our community. In July 2020, we organized two roundtables: one for TGNC APIs in the Bay Area and a second for partners. At these roundtables, participants gave feedback on our initial findings and asked questions to improve our analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Although our community is constantly creating knowledge, none of us are traditionally trained researchers. We spent time together learning about data analysis and making collective decisions about how to organize, sort, and code the data. Our first challenge was how to categorize the data.

While some identities (such as region-of-residence) had clear definitions, others—such as gender and ethnicity—were more complex. For example, questions about gender identities and ethnicities were open response, allowing respondents to self-determine. This meant we received more than 100 different variations of gender identities. These gender identities included: “agender, nonbinary,” “male,” “nonbinary woman,” “transfemme,” “fa’afafine,” people who refused to label their genders, and more. This is *significant*. When we are not asked to flatten ourselves, our complexities and cultures can emerge. However, this also meant **our team needed**

**to spend ample time grouping participants' identities in order to draw meaningful conclusions and trends.**

With gender, our priority was to preserve the ways people self-identified. Thus, we decided on four groupings: **feminine, masculine, gender nonconforming, and other gender identities.** Rather than limit each participant to a single group, we categorized them into whichever groups reflected the language they used. Someone who wrote “nonbinary” would be categorized *once* into the “gender nonconforming” category. Someone who wrote “nonbinary transwoman” would be coded into *both* the “gender nonconforming” and “feminine” categories.

Similarly, our respondents named 26 different ethnicities. To explore findings where groupings of ethnicities would be meaningful, we settled on four categories: **East Asian** (including Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese people, and others); **South Asian** (including people who identified as Bengali, Tamil, Indian, and others); **Pacific Islander** (including native Hawaiians, Chamorro people, Okinawans, and people who identified solely as Pacific Islanders), and **Southeast Asian** (which included Laotian, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Filipino, and others). A breakdown of each grouping can be found in the “Demographics” section of this report. Of course, these categories and definitions are limiting and impermanent, shaped by changing politics and histories. However, we hope they can provide meaningful, disaggregated insight when we do reference them.

### **Challenges & Limitations**

Despite our efforts, **there are limitations to our research process** that are important to keep in mind. In terms of the experiences and voices represented in this research, there are far fewer responses from TGNC Pacific Islanders (11 in total, 6 percent) and South Asians (24 in total, 13 percent) than Southeast Asians (55 in total, 30 percent) and East Asians (95 in total, 52 percent). Among South Asian respondents, the majority who responded to the question about caste described themselves as having caste privilege. Moreover, there were few non-citizens who responded to this survey, with only four respondents identifying as refugees, holding DACA status, or undocumented. Finally, though we partnered to share the assessment with a number of organizations based in the North Bay, we received no responses from TGNC APIs currently living in the North Bay.

There were also **limitations to the thoroughness of certain questions asked.** For example, while we asked people to self-identify their genders by writing them in, we did not ask for our respondents to describe their gender presentations, which may be significant information when considering respondents' experiences with policing and profiling, safety in the workplace, and more. While we asked participants to share their annual income, we did not ask questions about supplemental support. While we shared some paper copies of the survey, the majority of surveys were administered online, which may lead our survey population to skew younger.

Moreover, because **very little research exists on TGNC API community needs in general,** much less specific to the Bay Area, we were often unable to compare our data to larger trends. To the extent comparisons are possible, this report draws from the 2019 Horizons Foundation SF Bay Area LGBTQ+ Needs Assessment, as well as the 2016 National Center for Trans Equality US Transgender Survey.

### **III. Respondent Demographics**

We received responses from people with a variety of racial, ethnic, caste, and gender identities. *API* and *TGNC* are both umbrella terms that include a vast range of experiences and histories. Responses we received, while diverse, do not cover the full range of identities represented by these terms. We share the demographics of our respondents to contextualize our findings. While we received over 200 responses, we decided to include in our research the findings from the sample of 181 respondents who responded to almost all of the introductory questions.

#### **Gender & Sexuality**

The majority of our respondents (69 percent, or 125 respondents) identify as gender nonconforming or nonbinary. Nineteen percent (35 respondents) used feminine gender identifiers. Twenty-three percent (41 respondents) used masculine gender identifiers. Some participants used identifiers in multiple categories (i.e., masculine and nonbinary) and were counted in both. The majority of respondents (68 percent, 119 people) use *they/them* pronouns, while an equal number (18 percent, 32 people each) use *he/him* or *she/her* pronouns. More than 29 percent use a combination of multiple pronouns.

Respondents most often describe their sexual orientations as queer (45 percent, 82 respondents), followed by pansexual (19 percent). Other sexual orientations include bisexual (14 percent), gay (12 percent), straight (8 percent), lesbian (6 percent), and asexual (4 percent).

#### **Ethnicity & Immigration**

Our respondents identify with 26 different ethnicities. When we grouped our respondents, the majority are East Asian (53 percent, 95 respondents); 30 percent (55 respondents) are Southeast Asian; 13 percent (24 respondents) are South Asian; and 6 percent (11 respondents) are Pacific Islanders. Twenty-five percent of participants identify as having a mixed ethnic or racial background. Of the 18 who shared a caste experience, almost all respondents are savarna, or caste privileged.

Our respondents are mostly US citizens, with 84 percent being US citizens by birth and another 9 percent being naturalized US citizens. About 5 percent identify as permanent residents or visa-holders, with 1 respondent identifying as an undocumented resident, 2 respondents identifying as DACA recipients, and 1 respondent identifying as a refugee. Two of our respondents have experienced immigration detention, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention.

#### **Disability**

Thirty-one percent (56) of our respondents are disabled. When invited to share more about their disabilities, respondents named autism, ADHD, scoliosis, neurodivergence, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and other identities and experiences.

#### **Age**

Two-thirds of respondents are between ages 20 and 29 (119 people), with 23 percent (41 people) between 30 and 39. Smaller groups are younger than 20 (3 percent, 5 people), between 40 and 49 (4 percent, 8 people), between ages 50 and 59 (2 percent, 4 people), and older than 60 (2 percent, 4 people).

#### **Income**

Two-thirds of respondents have an annual income under \$50,000, while one-third have an income of under \$10,000. Sixteen percent have an income between \$50,000 and \$70,000, 7 percent have an income between \$70,000 and \$100,000, and 9 percent have an income above \$100,000. As previously mentioned, we did not ask participants about other sources of financial support, so it's possible these statistics do not fully reflect the financial circumstances of respondents.

### **Location**

The highest percentage of respondents have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for more than 20 years (41 percent, 75), with the next highest group (31 percent, 56) living in the Bay less than 5 years. Eleven percent have lived in the Bay Area between 6 and 10 years, and 17 percent have lived in the Bay Area for 11 to 20.

We outreached to individuals and groups across the Bay Area, including 19 co-sponsors, to ensure we could reach people in areas (such as the South and North Bay) where resources for TGNC APIs may be less common. While we received a balanced set of responses from San Francisco (20 percent, 37 respondents), counties south of San Francisco (32 percent, 57 respondents), and the East Bay (46 percent, 84 respondents), we did not receive any responses from the North Bay. South Bay respondents included residents of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties and East Bay participants included residents of Contra Costa and Alameda counties; we considered North Bay respondents to reside in Marin, Sonoma, Napa, or Solano counties.

## **IV. Findings**

Seven key findings emerged from our survey.

- 1. Housing and Homelessness:** We need safe and sustainable housing. TGNC APIs in the Bay Area are highly vulnerable to housing discrimination and insecurity. One in five respondents (19 percent) experienced housing discrimination. More than one in five respondents have experienced homelessness, including almost half of respondents (40 percent) who live in San Francisco and almost half of feminine respondents (41 percent). From frequent gender-based harassment by landlords, roommates, and given families to the difficulty of finding housing while transitioning gender identification, these responses underline the need to find safe and affordable homes for TGNC APIs in the Bay Area.
- 2. Employment and Work:** We need affirming workplaces and abundant access to the resources that come with it. Our participants face regular harassment in government agencies, public spaces, and their own workplaces. Nineteen percent of respondents were unemployed at the time of the survey, and 15 percent of respondents have exchanged sex for pay and other items of value. One in six respondents said coworkers do not support their gender identity. Almost one quarter of respondents (23 percent) were fired from a job, treated unfairly, or not hired because of their gender identities. This inability to find safe and sustainable places of work impacts our ability to find affordable housing, feel safety and security, access healthcare, afford basic necessities, and more.
- 3. Safety & Policing:** We need strategies to address violence that rely on community, not police. More than two-thirds of participants (68 percent) experienced verbal harassment, and one in every six (17 percent) were physically attacked. Unsurprisingly, more than 80 percent of participants alter their appearance regularly to avoid harassment. Nearly two-thirds of

respondents (58 percent) experienced sexual assault, and more than 40 percent of respondents experienced domestic abuse. However, while we experience high levels of violence, police do not support our safety and often make us *more* unsafe. A vast majority (79 percent) felt uncomfortable asking the police for help. More than half of respondents (52 percent) were only at times or never treated with respect by police. Only a single respondent felt “very comfortable” with the police. **Clearly, police do not address our fundamental needs for safety.**

4. **Healthcare:** We need affordable healing resources that address our gender and cultural needs. Almost half of respondents (43 percent) were uncomfortable going to the doctor. Almost one third (28 percent) needed to see a doctor but could not afford to. Moreover, while 71 percent of respondents seriously considered suicide and almost a third (29 percent) attempted suicide, 74 percent of respondents face barriers accessing mental healthcare, and half (49 percent) reported mental healthcare is generally culturally inaccessible. This is unacceptable; TGNC API people deserve culturally competent, affordable, and holistic care.
5. **Disaggregated Data:** We experience different needs along lines of ethnicity, gender, ability, and more. When we disaggregate the data, we see specific groups within the TGNC API umbrella experience harm and violence disproportionately. For example, feminine respondents are more likely to experience verbal harassment than people of other genders. South Asians and Pacific Islanders are far less likely to be treated with respect by police than East and Southeast Asians. Disabled respondents, as well as those who have been unhoused, were more likely to experience unwanted sexual contact, verbal harassment, and domestic violence. Participants who have traded sex experience higher rates of housing discrimination, homelessness, suicidal ideation, and police interactions.
6. **Focusing Our Power:** Though we believe TGNC APIs have great power to confront and transform our challenges, not all our participants feel the same way. Half (48 percent) believe TGNC APIs cannot influence government decisions. However, when asked to rank the issues APIENC should focus our collective power on, our participants responded. Across all demographics, issues of **housing justice, health access, and immigration justice** stood out as the highest priorities for our participants.
7. **Community Spaces:** We need well-resourced spaces where we are seen and accepted in all of our identities. Despite the breadth of violence we face, TGNC APIs are building the spaces we need to thrive. More than half of participants (52 percent) said community spaces allow them to feel most supported as both TGNC and API people. However, many still cannot access affirming spaces, with 14 percent of participants reporting *no* space allowed them to feel seen in both their TGNC and API identities. Building organizations that center genuine relationships and care allows us to confront violence and transform our lives.

## **V. Recommendations: A Roadmap to Trans Justice for All of Us**

The road to safety, justice, and recognition for all TGNC people will take far more than APIENC. As we continue to invest in healing, mental health support, housing justice, storytelling, and community-led safety, we also call on our allies and accomplices to enact justice. We developed key recommendations in six primary venues impacting TGNC APIs.

1. **Close Circles (Families, Parents, Friends):** For many TGNC APIs, navigating different cultural expectations, language barriers, and our complex histories of migration can make finding comfort and safety as trans people in our homes even harder. We need the concrete

and ongoing support of people around us. We ask families (both chosen and given), parents, and friends of TGNC APIs to educate yourselves on TGNC issues and start conversations with each other on how to respect and support the TGNC API people in your lives. Speak up for us when we are not in the room, make it clear to us that you love and appreciate us, and be willing to learn.

- 2. Public Spaces (Schools/Colleges, Workplaces, Local Businesses):** TGNC APIs face challenges in public spaces—from heavy harassment when using the bathroom to verbal assault and abuse to workplace discrimination—that make us unsafe and deepen mental and physical distress. *All of these spaces can help.* Start by making your bathrooms gender inclusive while being explicit about why and educating patrons and staff. Create spaces where TGNC API people can receive care and mentorship, such as a support group. Make it easy for all people to choose the names and pronouns they want to use by asking for and respecting pronouns as an expected part of your culture. Hire TGNC API people and make workplaces safe for them by training staff on respecting gender identity and providing active mentorship and support.
- 3. Community Spaces (API Groups, LGBTQIA+ Spaces, Religious Institutions):** TGNC APIs are members of all these spaces, yet our needs are often ignored. Many shared experiences of being rejected from API, LGBTQIA, and TGNC spaces they wanted to call home. We need API groups to recognize trans people are likely already part of your spaces and may not feel safe sharing their identities. We need you to support trans leaders of all ages, normalize advocating for trans issues, and include gender trainings for staff and members. We need LGBTQIA+ groups to create space in multiple languages and for specific communities, such as nonbinary people, Pacific Islanders, South Asians, and more. We need trans spaces to understand the experiences of API people, including our histories of trauma and oppression, beyond the Model Minority myth. We need religious institutions to listen to the needs of TGNC people, actively affirm trans and queer people as part of your communities, and support the people who are already organizing at the intersections of religion, gender, and sexuality.
- 4. Health Providers (Doctors, Nurses, Mental Health Workers, Insurance Providers):** An overwhelming share of respondents are unable to afford the care they need, are matched with non-affirming providers, or are barred from learning about available resources. We need doctors, nurses, and mental health providers to receive training specifically about caring for TGNC and API patients, ideally by paying trans API people to provide this education. We also need providers to make health information and care available in many languages, so TGNC APIs and our communities feel empowered to communicate our needs. We need more insurance programs to include gender-affirming care for trans people, so that the lifesaving medical attention we need is easily accessible. We need to fight for the creation of alternatives to calling the police in crisis situations and support campaigns, such as Medicare for All, that seek to make healthcare easy to access for all people.
- 5. Funders (Progressive Funders & Donors):** Community spaces are lifesaving, and building relationships is a survival skill for TGNC APIs. At the same time, we are often forced to compete for limited resources and shape our work to be more understandable to funders who are not members of our communities. Instead, we need progressive funders to resource relationship building as a fundamental tool of organizing. We need those in philanthropy to fund abundantly, learn about the intersectional experiences of TGNC APIs, center healing, and prioritize the long-term perspective of our own people.

**6. Media (Newspapers, Radio Stations, Media Sites):** Diverse stories of TGNC APIs are invisibilized in the media. When we are highlighted, the focus is our trauma and pain, and the wrong pronouns and names are used to define us. Publishing sources can empower TGNC API people's self-determination by asking us to tell our own stories and supporting us to do so. Embrace our complexities and do not pick single people to represent us. Ask for people's names and pronouns and use them. Report a variety of our stories, including joy, healing, and transformation. For API media in particular, amplify our stories among immigrant and monolingual API people to help initiate education that makes us safer in our homes, neighborhoods, and cultures.

## **VI. Conclusion**

For too long, TGNC API people have been told that our identities are too complicated and that our experiences are too specific to matter. **More than 200 TGNC API voices in this report tell us otherwise.** They confirm that TGNC APIs in the Bay Area live at the intersections of housing instability, mental and emotional distress, workplace insecurity, and violence in our homes and society. They remind us that institutions like police, schools, and workplaces fail us, harm us, and neglect our needs. And they emphasize that the resources meant to serve us, such as care providers and community groups, often fall short of embracing all of who we are and leave us to choose between our genders, sexualities, and ethnicities.

The experiences in this report should not matter only to us because, ultimately, **the systems that target us hurt everybody.** The findings in this report result from centuries of xenophobia, colonization, war, and attempts to erase transgender people from Pacific Islander and Asian histories. Decades of the Model Minority myth have justified violence against Black and Indigenous people and made the challenges APIs face imperceptible to the world around us. Constant disinvestment from schools and healthcare—critical parts of our social fabric—makes it easier for TGNC APIs and others at the margins of our communities to fall into patterns of systemic neglect and violence.

**Yet, all of this harm is a chance to transform our lives.** When we can see clearly the ways systems fail us, we can respond. We can invest in our relationships to counter isolation, grow leadership skills to determine our own futures, and create real solutions for our needs. At APIENC, we will continue to root in healing, culturally competent care, housing justice, and community safety. We will continue organizing to develop an abundance of trans API leaders.

**We cannot do this alone.** We will need everyone—families, friends, workplaces, organizations, healthcare providers, schools, faith communities, and more—to do this work alongside us. Learn from TGNC API people, examine your own relationships to gender, resource our self-determination, and support us to not only meet our basic needs but to thrive. Another world is possible. A world of belonging and interdependence, where we are all seen, respected, and cared for, is possible. **Now, it's up to us.**

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<sup>1</sup> Up to Us, APIENC, [apienc.org/uptous](http://apienc.org/uptous)

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Burns, D. Y. Cooke, and C. Schweidler, *A Short Guide to Community Based Participatory Action Research: A Community Research Lab Guide*, Advancement Project-Healthy City Community Research Lab (2011).