



# Hawai'i Scholars for Education and Social Justice

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HIGHLIGHTS of Research Brief #4

May 1, 2022

## Racism and Discrimination against Micronesians in Hawai'i: Issues of Educational Inequity

The 17,000 Micronesian residents in Hawai'i, including nearly 9,000 students in the Hawai'i Department of Education (HiDOE), regularly encounter racism and discrimination.

### Background

Micronesia is a geographic designation for a group of small island nations in the northwest Pacific Ocean. This research brief focuses on groups from three nations that are affiliated with the US by Compacts of Free Association (COFA)—the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of Palau (ROP), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

The Spanish, Germans, Japanese and Americans colonized the islands for more than 100 years.

The US tested 67 nuclear bombs on atolls of the Marshall Islands, making them uninhabitable and causing cancer and other illnesses.

After the COFA were signed in the 1980s, all citizens of the three COFA countries could travel, attend school and work in the US without visas. People relocated for health care, jobs and education.

Marshallese, the only group for which data are available, have

- The lowest median household income (\$32,700)
- The highest rate of civilian unemployment (17%)
- The highest poverty rate of all ethnic groups (51%)
- The lowest percentage of persons 25+ years with a college degree (2.6%), compared to 30.9% community-wide.

### Systemic Racism and Discrimination Against Micronesians in Hawai'i

- Three major dimensions of systemic racism against Micronesians include institutional discrimination, racist stereotypes and narratives, and maintenance of socioeconomic inequalities. Institutional discrimination occurs through established practices and policies, which collectively and unequally impact victims.
- In 2010, the State of Hawai'i adopted a policy to drop 7,500 COFA citizens from Med-QUEST, its health care program for low-income residents, and placed them in another program with significantly fewer services and benefits.
- Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders are considerably overrepresented among those subject to use of force by officers of the Honolulu Police Department.
- A principal source of the racist stereotypes and narratives about COFA citizens is joke telling about them or so-called "Micronesian jokes."

## Educational Inequities

Most students from Micronesia are in the HiDOE's English Learner Program, a program in need of more educators with backgrounds and qualifications to teach these students.

- Most schools do not have enough bilingual school-home assistants who are qualified interpreters, biliterate, and culturally competent in Micronesian languages and cultures.
- In 2013-2018, only 50% of students from Micronesia who entered Grade 9 four years earlier graduated from high school, compared to the 86% overall State graduation rate.
- In high school, only 11% of Micronesian students enrolled in college-level math or English courses in 2017, compared to more than 27% of all students.
- Micronesian students are subject to racial stereotyping and bullying by other students, school

officials, and staff. This includes teachers having low expectations of them.

- Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders, the federally identified group that includes Micronesian students, were twice as likely than other students to be "chronically absent."
- Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders constituted 28.6% of HiDOE students, but accounted for 47% of in-school suspensions, 51% of out-of-school suspensions, and 56.2% of school-based referrals to law enforcement.
- COFA students make up only 0.25% of UH Mānoa's 10,688 undergraduates; only 27 Micronesian undergraduates (not including Chamorro) were enrolled in fall 2020.

*Yet, students and their families from Micronesia demonstrate great strength and resilience.*

## HSESJ Provides the Following Policy Recommendations

- The Honolulu Police Department (HPD) must end its practice of racial profiling of COFA citizens.
  - The HPD must require their personnel to receive cultural education and training to improve their awareness and understanding of Micronesian cultures.
  - The Legislature must support improving language access in the State by providing training for interpreters and translators through the community colleges.
  - The Legislature and HiDOE need to allocate funds for hiring more bilingual school-home assistants to improve communication between teachers and COFA parents.
  - HiDOE needs to address the disparities among students who are subject to disciplinary actions, such as expulsions, suspensions, and referral to law enforcement.
  - High school teachers and counselors should recruit and encourage more COFA students to enroll in Early College courses offered at their schools.
  - HiDOE needs to reduce the high school dropout rate of COFA students.
- HiDOE needs to further develop and enforce a campus policy prohibiting race-based verbal and physical mistreatment of students.
  - HiDOE needs to expand the curriculum to include education on the history of Micronesia.
  - Student affairs offices at each University of Hawai'i campus should develop college recruitment activities that target HiDOE students from COFA nations.

Lastly, while not a policy recommendation, the HSESJ strongly encourages the people of Hawai'i to affirm their commitment to living in a multicultural society by extending the values of

**ALOHA,  
EQUALITY,  
INCLUSION, AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

to the COFA community. They can begin by not disseminating "Micronesian" jokes and racist slurs and by promoting aloha for COFA citizens in Hawai'i.