Refugee Youth in the Twin Cities:
Aspirations of the Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese

by Michael Baizerman and Glenn Hendricks

During 1987 we talked with Southeast Asian refugee youth in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area about their life dreams and goals. Under contract with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, we were looking at the job and education aspirations of Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese youth. How do they view their future? What kinds of careers are they thinking about? Do they expect to take jobs similar to those their parents hold? What kind of education or training will they seek after high school? Do they expect to have the same difficulties their parents have had? How do they see their achievements in school? What role do they play in their family and community? And what are their financial expectations?

Story-Based Interviews
To explore these questions we designed an innovative group interviewing technique. We constructed life stories for each ethnic group, creating separate stories for men and women when we learned that gender was a crucial factor in understanding the community’s interpretation of success. The stories were based on interviews with adult
The study did not include students enrolled in vocational schools or community colleges. Youth in the sample were chosen through intermediaries in local ethnic associations, youth agencies, youth groups, and public schools. The use of homogenous groups created an environment in which the youth spoke to us in the presence of their peers. This may have elicited answers different from what we might have been told in private one-to-one meetings.

A theme analysis was done of the research findings and highlights from the findings for each ethnic group are presented here.

The Hmong

The Hmong people from Laos and Thailand are the largest of the Southeast Asian refugee communities in the Twin Cities. They are relatively well known to local human service agencies which have offered them a variety of kinds of assistance. Many Hmong have learned the client role in their interactions with these agencies. Some have become trapped in dependency. But not all Hmong are this way. There is an ambitious middle class, with educational and occupational aspirations in mainstream American life. It was expected that Hmong youth would express a wide variety of aspirations and expectations, reflecting the differences in the larger Hmong community.

To an extent, this was found. Most obvious were clear and deep differences between the young men and women. The women responded to the story of Mai (see Hmong Woman: Moderately Successful) saying that it was not uncommon for Hmong women to marry and bear children in early adolescence, beginning at age twelve. Although unmarried women thought of 18 or 19 as the ideal age for marriage, few seemed convinced that they would wait that long. Many heard a double message from their parents, who told them not to marry until high school graduation. Yet seemed to anticipate receiving a bride price for them. They interpreted the bride price, $1,500 or $2,000 for example, as their parents’ assessment of their worth. Many of the young women we interviewed were already married, were mothers, and high school students. They were carrying responsibilities at school along with child care and housework for their own family, and sometimes housework for their parents-in-law as well.

Early marriage has profound consequences on the personal aspirations of these young women and on their ability to achieve their goals in the larger community. Many young mothers graduate from high school, while others leave. School attendance and performance can suffer and leaving school increases dramatically the likelihood that welfare assistance will be needed, at least for the short term. High birth rates, resulting in part from good medical care, increase the likelihood that they will become long-term welfare recipients. In turn, this reduces their opportunities for more schooling and for occupational success.

The Hmong: Moderately Successful

Mai arrived in the United States with her family in 1983, when she was 12 years old. She and her family had lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for four years before that.

She was the fifth of nine children. Her father went to English school, but he didn’t get a job because he didn’t think he could make enough to support his big family. Her mother made a little extra money for the family by selling her pa ndau.

Mai was an average-looking girl who didn’t do that well in school. But she was very obedient to her mother and father, and had a sweet temper. She worked hard around the house helping her mother take care of the house and children.

When she was 13, boys started coming to visit her at her parents’ house. One of them was a young man who was just finishing his master’s degree in computer science. She wondered why such a smart man would be interested in her when she was neither smart nor beautiful, but he said he preferred to have a wife who was a little bit stupid because she would need her husband all her life, whereas an intelligent woman could take care of herself and might not be faithful.

Mai married the computer scientist when she was 15 years old and dropped out of the 9th grade a few months later after she got pregnant. Because her husband had a good job, they bought a nice house and were able to take vacations all over the country. She took good care of his house while he went to work and fixed delicious food for him to eat. She never had to go to work but stayed home and took care of their five children.

The Refugee Youth

The youth we interviewed were a nonrepresentative sample—169 in all, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-four, but mostly fourteen to twenty-two year olds. They were divided by ethnic group and gender as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Kher</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
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These numbers are in proportion to the size of the adolescent population among these refugee groups in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

The initial plan to use translators proved unnecessary because all but the most recent refugees understood and spoke at least some English and because group members helped each other.

cover photo: Hmong youth in the Phillips neighborhood, Minneapolis.
In multiple ways, the lives of Hmong women are grounded in marriage and family status in the Hmong community. Only a few can go their own way and achieve goals that are at odds with their peers, their family, and their community. One eighteen-year-old in our group had other plans besides marriage for herself. She wrote:

"I want to married when I finish with everything that I had planning for my future. I still want to go to college because living in this country is a big chance and great experience to prove that you can do what you had dream—and work hard to build your future life to make it more easier for your family. If I were married I don’t want to have a lot of kids because it’s hard to take care your kid."

Most of the young women showed little conviction in their ability to plan their futures, and seemed less sure of their plans than women in the other ethnic communities. Marriage, motherhood, and family responsibilities seem to intervene. While most intend to work outside the home at some point, family responsibilities cause them to postpone or interrupt their education and training, increasing the likelihood that they will only qualify for low-wage jobs.

The young men of the Hmong community fare better. Some lineage groups pool money to support a man’s higher education, and see this as an investment. (Upon marriage, a woman becomes part of her husband’s clan, so investments in women’s education would be lost.) Most of the men in our discussion groups were from a small group within the Hmong community. They were the sons of community leaders, both military and civil, in Laos and the Twin Cities. Their skills were, most likely, better and their aspirations clearer and higher than most of the Hmong.

The story presented in our interviews was of moderately successful Xeng—educated with clan help through a private high school, college, and now law school. He was married, but still unable to find a job suitable to his ambition. The story was told to us by a Hmong man who is a prosperous, skilled blue-collar worker and who sees college education as a corrupting influence on some young people.

The men we interviewed found it natural that the larger family group would support their education. Their fathers wanted high scholastic performance from them but the youth did not expect that a degree, even a B.A., would guarantee a job. These youth saw themselves as trying to succeed in the mainstream life of America, but as not accepted there. They spoke of racism in this and in the failure to find employment appropriate to one’s education and experience. Some of the Hmong men had goals for their life upon returning “home,” to a democratic Laos. Yet, career planning for all of them included the expectation of living in the United States. The men, like the women, see their actions as Hmong and as American. In his heart, a youth may be Hmong, but even he can act like an American. The coexistence of elements of both cultures may be heard in their comments to the story.

Most boys thought Xeng made a poor marriage choice because his wife, at fourteen, was too young. "Why if she can’t cook or work? Who would help you support the family? It doesn’t matter how she looks. It matters is that she is also well-educated," one fourteen-year-old noted.
"I think he should marry an older girl. He's got to think first before doing it. It doesn't matter if she is kind and beautiful, the matter is that she should know how to cook, do housework, etc...", wrote another fourteen-year-old.

A third fourteen-year-old thought his peers were expressing the ideal, but in the young man's heart he is still Hmong and so it is realistic that he would marry the girl without considering other factors. Eighteen or nineteen was mentioned as a more suitable age for a girl to marry.

One high school student said that it would be "OK for a well-educated man to marry a fourteen-year-old." But a man who could not support a family by himself should marry a woman closer to his own age, who could help him. "Sounds good but I think she couldn't take care of the family. Because she too still young," wrote another.

These youth felt under pressure to do well in school. But, when they acted "more American," they did less well. Being American means having a good time and not caring as much about school. These men did not seem to mind postponing marriage until they finished their education, if they thought they were smart enough to get a good education.

The Khmer

The Khmer youth from Cambodia must be understood as two distinct populations: those who arrived with no close family and those who came with some close or extended family. The former were part of the federal unaccompanied minors program.

The Khmer came to Minnesota after a horrific war and social revolution, known to many through the film "The Killing Fields." A society was murdered, and with it, its social institutions, its ways of everyday life, indeed the very ways of being Khmer. In Minnesota, the trauma of war continues for these refugees. A study of the future—aspirations and expectations—touches this trauma. These youth are without the personal, familial, and communal resources available to those in other refugee groups. In some ways, their situation is comparable to that of post-Holocaust European Jewish youth after World War II.

To be a victim does not necessarily mean to be helpless. They are somewhat immobilized and to some extent dependent on local human service agencies. They have hope and a rich cultural history to draw on. And they will need long term support, which they respond to, but rarely seek out.

Overall, these youth showed a pervasive lack of confidence in themselves and in the future. Both the young men and women seemed ungrounded in the possibilities for education and work in Minnesota. There are few Khmer adult role models. The women lacked a basic vocabulary about the world of work and their personal goals were general, not related to particular types of occupations. The men showed a variety of goals for school and work, but with little expectation of success. Both women and men are concentrating on the immediate needs of the present rather than their long-term prospects for the future. They take small steps; "What can I get?" is their question, not "What do I want to be or do?" At present, the closest barriers to their future are more personal than social. Not surprising, it is among these Khmer that we found the greatest interest in working to help others as human service workers.

Two groups of young women responded to our story about Wall won, who lost her family in Cambodia, lived in an American foster home, moved out on her own, got a job, and went to a junior college. Among those living in foster homes—Khmer or American—there was talk of the tension there, perhaps typical of youth-adult relations everywhere. The women all planned to work and delay marriage until they were eighteen to twenty-five. Career goals mentioned were registered nurse, nursing assistant, secretary, and law. They felt pressured to fill the traditional Cambodian woman's role of helping people. "Girls help people and boys can do what they want." And "Men have to be smarter than women to support a family." Career uncertainty was related to fiscal uncertainty and the necessity that they work.

The Khmer men interviewed were mostly without close family. All were in school, some at the University of Minnesota. The high school students linked their education and career plans, with school work that was seen as instrumental for getting a job. Occupations mentioned were: soldier, priest, police officer, welder, auto mechanic, lab technician, and computer programmer.

The University students were all young men who had clear occupational goals but who thought these would be deflected by racism. Compared to the other University refugee students, these youth spoke and reasoned in ways more hermeneutic than linear. This no doubt reflects deep cultural differences which, in this transitional generation, may show themselves by producing fewer engineers and more artists and human service professionals. To them, America truly is a foreign country.

The Lao

The Lao in Minnesota are the smallest and least recognized Southeast Asian refugee group. Many of the middle-aged male Lao refugees served with the Royal Lao Army in alliance with the United States and were imprisoned in reeducation camps after 1975, from which they escaped to bring their families to "freedom" in Thai refugee camps. In Minnesota they are often mistaken for Hmong, which disturbs them because of the sense they have of being from a superior, more civilized culture. In Laos the Hmong were a minority group; here they far outnumber the Lao.

Unlike the local Laotian Hmong, the ethnic Lao are not a tightly organized social community. They live in small groups throughout the state. Most of them come from the urban areas of Laos, where they received some education. Lao parents expect that their children will attend either vocational school or community college.

Education was a topic of interest and concern among the young Lao women that

Lao Man: Moderately Successful

Bouchanghan arrived in the United States with three younger brothers and two sisters in 1983 when he was 17. His parents were still in Laos, and his father had been in a reeducation camp for eight years.

Bouchanghan had attended a village school in Laos for three years. He helped his brothers and sisters escape to a Thai refugee camp in 1979. He studied there by paying a tutor.

He wanted to get a good education in the U.S., but all he got out of studying during his first year at the University were a lot of headaches. He realized he wasn't cut out for college, so he transferred to technical school and learned to be a machinist.

He liked working with his hands, and he made enough money as a machinist to afford a modest three-bedroom house in the city.

When he had enough for a down payment for a house, he married his girlfriend, who had just managed to graduate from high school. She had a sewing job. Together they didn't have a lot of money for luxuries, but they had enough to live on. They had four children.

Bouchanghan worked a lot of overtime whenever his wife was on maternity leave so they could keep up the payments on their house. He hoped to move out to the suburbs someday so his children would not be tempted by the evil influences of city life and so they would be able to go to high-quality suburban schools.
Laotians (l. to r.) Pom Souvannasoth, Sai Manivong, and Noy Phetprachanh preparing for a dance at the Hiawatha YMCA in Minneapolis.

we interviewed at an urban and suburban high school. A goal for some was to graduate from a two- or four-year college, but this was held in tension with plans for work and marriage. These women had career goals in the areas of computers, banking, accounting, interpreting, and teaching. One was resisting her parents' wish that she be a nurse or a doctor because she felt her patients would speak English too fast and she wouldn't understand them. Some said their career goals depended on their parents' or husbands' wishes, and others that their goals depended on their own desires. "Sometimes I care about what my parents think, but it's up to me," said a seventeen-year-old. Their role model was a young Lao woman attending the University of Minnesota. But she had told them that the University was very difficult, so they were hesitant to give it a try.

The young men in the same schools and in a social agency group where we interviewed, did not show much confidence in their academic abilities or performance. They were concerned about the costs of schooling beyond high school. Vocational-technical school and the military were seen as ways to get job training. Their dreams were acknowledged as dreams and distinguished from their goals: machinist, soldier, photographer, electronic engineer, draftsman, janitor, mechanic, and electrician.

Like many other refugee youth, these Lao adolescents had almost no non-refugee friends outside of school. And because they are clustered in school, they continue to speak Lao, which retards their English language proficiency.

Both the women and men saw ideal marriage ages as beginning in their twenties. Both saw the ideal family size as two to four children. These ideals are close to those of the larger American community.

The young Lao men we interviewed had the most distinctive dress and hairstyles of any of the Southeast Asian youth. They had adopted a mild punk style, not aggressive but clearly asserting their identity as different from their parents. In spite of a rebellious look, the Lao youth were polite and cooperative. A teacher who works with the Lao believes that this punk look, characterized by torn jeans and leather, is an affordable way for the low-income youth to have style and set themselves apart. It is also a way for the youth to assert their freedom from the Communist regime in Laos, which strictly regulates dress and hairstyles. Their appearance may limit the types of jobs that will be offered to them in the short term.

While their style is imitative of American punks, the Lao youth do not appear to be in friendship groups with those Americans. Like the other Southeast Asians, they become Americanized by imitating American behavior and looks (as they understand them) within their own ethnic group, not by integrating into an American social group.

The men spoke about tensions with black students and their ability to control their tempers during confrontations:

"Those guys like to fight," said one teen.
"They treat us bad because we are aliens."
"They're jealous because we have a beautiful car."

Others said they got along OK with American students of all races. An ESL teacher observed that her Lao students, in spite of how a few of them talked, did not get into fights with other students.

Overall the interviewers had an unclear impression of the Lao youth. This may be a strategy in their presentation of self and of ethnic identity. The small size of this community and the rarity of visible adult role models contributed, too, to our hazy image of these people.

The Vietnamese

The Vietnamese are probably the most visible refugee community in the Twin Cities, largely because of their numbers, their commercial presence, and media reports of Vietnamese student success. The Vietnamese youth presented idealized American aspirations for school and work, and higher than American expectations of success. As students and workers, they are diligent over long hours, showing in their behavior how to become successful. The Vietnamese set the standard for other refugees, for American minority groups,
and for the native majority. Their position as a reference group brings rewards and re-
spect, but also envy and anger.

Vietnamese commercial enterprises provide models and jobs for students, al-
most all of whom want to exceed these oc-
cupations and achieve professional status in technical fields like engineering. Almost
every youth interviewed aspired to post-
secondary education and reported studying after school, evenings, and weekends to
achieve this. Both women and men told of
family pressure for and support of their
school achievement. “Making it” economi-
cally is the goal, and family support yields
later rewards for parents who invest in their
children. Only the recent refugees did not fit
into this pattern.

Many of the Vietnamese we interviewed
had essentially grown up in the United
States. To them, Vietnam is a state of mind,
not an experienced place. Yet all consid-
ered themselves Vietnamese who were liv-
ing in America. They expect few barriers to
educational or occupational success.

Social theory predicts that when aspira-
tions are high and the means to achieve
these are limited, social deviancy occurs.
So it may be with those Vietnamese youth
who hold high goals of personal success
but have limited school achievement. The
desire for the materialistic trappings of suc-
cess may lead some youth into juvenile de-
linquency and adult crime. Vietnamese
youth gangs (as in California and Canada)
and Vietnamese traffic in illegal drugs do
not appear to be problems in Minnesota.

The Vietnamese students we inter-
viewed at the University showed little dif-
ference in their expectations as men and
women. All aspired for graduate school and
professional work. They saw themselves as
able to make decisions about their lives
(such as career choice, marriage partner,
time of marriage and place of residence)
and as having the right to do so.

Among high school students, those with
university and graduate school aspirations
had a plan for achieving this: study, part-
time work, and scholarships. Their personal
goals and plans seemed realistic and re-
lected the influence of older siblings and
young adults who they emulated.

High school women without university aspirations envisioned themselves in the
trades or in commerce where they could
earn good incomes and meet their middle-
class dreams and goals. With the men, too,
those who saw themselves as being of av-
erage intelligence and school performance
expected personal success to follow hard
work.

The place of work in their lives was an is-
sue for some of the University students,
who were thinking about a more equitable
distribution of commitment between work,
homelife, and other concerns.

The Vietnamese, unlike other refugee
groups, compare themselves to the larger
American community. Their status among
the Southeast Asian refugee communities,
shows the power of long-term residence, a
stable commercial culture, clear values,
and the support of relatively intact families.

Comments on the Findings
Policy makers and service providers must
learn to recognize the distinct differences
among the several Southeast Asian ethnic
communities that live here—the four
groups studied here and the ethnic Chinese
refugees from Southeast Asia. Failure to do
this will result in poor policy and poor pro-
grams. Programs conceptualized for
“refugee youth” are based on an idea that is
too general. To be effective, focus must be
on the specific ethnic community.

Our interviews showed clear differ-
ences between the Hmong, Khmer, Lao,
and Vietnamese. These differences, how-
ever, should not deflect awareness from the
differences within each community as well.

Vietnamese youth at home in Brooklyn Park are (l. to r.) Thien, Quynh, and Vinh
Nguyen.
Most obvious within each community were the differences in individual aspirations for school and work depending on gender. These differences were fewer among men and women who had reached the university level in their schooling. Other differences were also apparent within the same culture group, depending on such factors as family background in the native country. Because of this, the reader is cautioned against interpreting our data as support for modifying policy or creating or closing programs.

Overall the Vietnamese youth interviewed were closer to ideal American norms about school and work than youth in the other groups. While we did not sample the entire youth population so as to be able to generalize about it, we can say that many Vietnamese youth are succeeding in their own terms and in the terms of our society as a whole. That many of them have been in the United States for more than ten years reminds us that refugee status covers a very long period of time, from literally weeks to more than a decade. Formalizing this distinction (recent, short-time, or long-time refugee) would be useful since behaviors seem to vary depending on length of stay.

This study hovered between looking at individuals and small groups. We learned about personal aspirations which were, to some degree, group aspirations (or aspirations of the majority of group members), and the aspirations of each ethnic community. For indigenous Americans, personal aspirations are individual statements, but for many Southeast Asian youth aspirations are family, friendship group, or community statements. Thus one may interpret the data as indicators of individual or group acculturation, although one must be very conservative in doing this because the data were not collected for this purpose.

Personal success in America is attributed to individual hard work with familial support. But for many Southeast Asian youth success is seen differently. This is true for the Vietnamese youth as well. With the Hmong, for instance, the ethnic community plays a large role in individual success and personal success is actually seen as family success.

Factors that seem to be associated with the likelihood of economic self-sufficiency for these youth are English language proficiency, length of time in the United States, age upon entry to the United States, ethnic group membership, gender, family stability, sibling order, and effective use of support systems. Our study was not expected to find, measure, or assess the relative contributions of such factors. They emerged in the interviews, but their relative potency as predictors of the future is unknown.

Michael Baizerman, a professor in the Center for Youth Development and Research, holds degrees in social work and public health. Interested in how adolescents live their adolescence, he has worked on a variety of youth issues, including fire-setting and female prostitution. He is continuing the study reported here. Glenn Hendricks, coordinator of the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies program and administrator in the Office of International Education, holds a degree in anthropology. He was editor (with Downing and Deinard) of The Hmong In Transition (1986) and has recently returned to Minnesota from a stint as visiting scholar at Oxford University’s Refugee Studies Program.

The study reported here was conducted by Baizerman and Hendricks with research assistants Ruth Hammond, Phuc Nguyen, and Norah Neale. The project report (A Study of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota) will be in print by mid-March. Single copies are available free-of-charge from: Office of Refugee Resettlement; Family Support Administration; Room 1229 Switzer Building; 330 C Street; Washington, D.C. 20201; attention: Toyo Biddle.

Photos on pages 1, 3, 5, and 6 by Robert Friedman. The Asian youth pictured here were not interviewed in this study.

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Student Housing Survey

by Christopher J. Klyza

To the casual observer driving or strolling through Dinkytown, Stadium Village, or the West Bank areas adjacent to the University of Minnesota’s Minneapolis campus, it might appear that housing available to students is in fair to poor shape, and that there is a lack of quality housing. From the perspective of the student, however, this housing is just fine.

CURA, in cooperation with the University of Minnesota Housing Office, conducted a survey on housing issues among students at the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses of the University of Minnesota during the spring of 1987. The results surprised those involved with the study: over 85 percent of the students surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with their housing situations.

The mail survey, conducted by the Minnesota Center for Survey Research, drew responses from 1,872 current University of Minnesota students, 80 percent of the sample who received questionnaires. The sample was determined through a stratified random selection process. Students living in dorms were not included in the survey.

Student Satisfaction

The most surprising result of the survey was the overall high level of students’ satisfaction with their housing situations: 50 percent reported being “satisfied” and 35 percent “very satisfied.” No specific explanation for the high level of satisfaction is contained in the survey, but at least three explanations are possible. First, the satisfaction level may be related to the tremendous mobility of the students, a mobility that is confirmed by the survey. Students tend to move often, even when they are satisfied with their housing. The survey found that 75 percent of the students reporting they were “very likely to move,” were also satisfied with their housing, and 91 percent of those that were “somewhat likely to move,” were also satisfied with their housing. Even among students who reported they were very satisfied with their housing, 40 percent were “likely to move.” Questions about location reflected the same element of mobility: 87 percent of those who were “very likely to move” were also satisfied with their present location.

This suggests that housing decisions are based on factors unrelated to the quality of the housing unit or its location. These factors might include the break-up of a housing group due to a roommate graduating or getting married or moving in with other friends, for example. Or a decision to take a quarter off or move back home for a while. Such events would necessitate someone moving, even though they were satisfied with their housing. Student mobility may also mean that students are not as concerned