Achievements of First-Generation Hmong Youth: Findings from the Youth Development Study

by Teresa Swartz, Jennifer C. Lee, and Jeylan T. Mortimer

Following the civil strife in Laos from 1960 to 1975, Hmong who supported the Royal Laotian government and aided the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in fighting against Pathet Lao forces fled their homeland for safety in the refugee camps of Thailand. Beginning in 1976, the United States began accepting Hmong refugees who had assisted the CIA in Laos. Since then, large numbers of refugees have settled in the Twin Cities through primary and secondary migration. Today, St. Paul is home to the largest urban Hmong population in the United States.

The transition to urban Minnesota has been challenging for Hmong adults who experienced a very different life as shifting subsistence farmers in the rural highlands of Laos. One of the poorest immigrant groups in the United States, the Hmong experience linguistic barriers and cultural differences and are characterized by an adult population with very little formal education; consequently, Hmong refugees have encountered difficult circumstances as they have settled into their new home. As with other immigrant groups, the Hmong hope for success in the United States, but because most adults lack experience in the postindustrial world, successful economic advancement may rest on the achievements of their children. The first generation of Hmong immigrant children have come of age in the United States, passing through American schools, beginning their work life, and starting their own families. The Youth Development Study, on which this article reports, has explored how these young Hmong people are faring as they embark on their adult lives. Findings indicate that family, community, and public resources have provided this generation of Hmong with a strong foundation for academic and potential career success.

We have been able to conduct the Youth Development Study due in part to the generosity of CURA, which provided financial support for this research starting in 1994 through its Faculty Interactive Research Program.

We received supplementary funding from the National Institute of Mental Health to conduct the survey of Hmong high school students and their parents, as well as funding from the MacArthur Foundation for interviews with these Hmong research participants as young adults.

Research Sample

The Youth Development Study is an ongoing longitudinal study of youth
development focused primarily on education, work, family, and mental health. Started in 1987, when the respondents were in the 9th grade, the study has followed these high school students as they have transitioned into adulthood. The sample consists of 1,105 respondents chosen randomly from a list of enrolled 9th-grade students in the St. Paul Public School District. Although there have been demographic shifts in Minnesota generally and the school district specifically during the past decade, the sample is representative of the cohort of students attending St. Paul public high schools during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A total of 9% of the students and 9% of the sample were Hmong. Of the non-Hmong respondents, 74% were White, 10% were Black, 5% were Latino/Latina, and 11% were from other ethnic backgrounds.

In spring 1988, 105 Hmong students (56 boys and 49 girls) completed the survey. The panel of students were surveyed each year from 9th through 12th grades, and follow-up surveys of students have been conducted by mail annually since high school graduation. In addition, parents were surveyed while the respondents were in high school and a subsample of participants was interviewed in adulthood. It is important to note that although all of the respondents were in the 9th grade when first surveyed in 1988, they were not necessarily the same age. Whereas 94% of non-Hmong students were 14 or 15 in the first wave of the study, only 58% of the Hmong were this age. Some 29% of the Hmong respondents were 16 or 17 and 10% were 18–21 years old when they first completed the questionnaire in the 9th grade. All of these Hmong youth are first-generation immigrants to the United States. A majority lived for a substantial portion of their childhood in Southeast Asia, many spending some of their adolescence there as well. Of the Hmong respondents, 61% moved to Minnesota after 1980 and one-third arrived after 1983. Although some relocated to Minnesota from other areas of the United States, most came directly from refugee camps in Thailand. Additionally, subsamples of Hmong respondents were interviewed in 1995, 1997, and 2002.

There was significant attrition among the Hmong respondents following high school, which makes it difficult to come to definitive conclusions based on the survey results. Although we have not found any consistent patterns of continued participation in the study by some Hmong youth and not others, the survey findings must be interpreted with caution. The annual surveys have been supplemented with a limited number of individual and focus group interviews to gain a better understanding of the young people’s current situations and their subjective understandings of their experiences. It is important to note that these respondents were in high school more than 10 years ago and their experiences may differ from that of Hmong high school students today. Few of the Hmong respondents in the Youth Development Study were born in the United States and many came to the country as older children. In contrast, most Hmong high school students today were born here or have spent most of their childhood in the United States.

Characteristics of Hmong Youth

Family Background. The experience of civil war and the subsequent flight from Laos took a heavy toll on the Hmong families we studied. During recent interviews, these young Hmong people recalled memories of fleeing Laos as children, losing parents, siblings, or other relatives along the way, and remembered the impoverished living conditions in the refugee camps of Thailand. In large part because of casualties of war and postwar conditions, the majority of Hmong youth in our study come from households with one or more parent missing. Only 47% of the Hmong youths lived with their biological father. Most Hmong parental absence was due to death, whereas most parental absence among the non-Hmong respondents was due to divorce (58% of non-Hmong youths lived in households without their biological father, although many live with a stepfather).

It is clear that the Hmong young people faced many additional disadvantages once they arrived in the United States. In particular, their parents had lower levels of formal education and higher rates of unemployment than the parents of their non-Hmong peers, and were much more likely to live in poverty. As was typical in Laos, Hmong fathers received an average of only two years of formal education and most mothers had received no education in their homeland. Prior to emigrating to the United States, most of the parents of the Hmong youth in this study were rural farmers in Laos. Thus, they came to the Twin Cities area with knowledge and skills that were not easily transferable to
the urban Minnesota labor market. Only 28% of the Hmong fathers and 14% of Hmong mothers worked outside the home while their children were in high school (compared to 91% of non-Hmong fathers and 79% of non-Hmong mothers who were employed outside of the home). Those who were employed worked primarily in low-paying service and manufacturing jobs. Consequently, 62% of Hmong households had incomes under $10,000 (1988) and 87% of Hmong families lived in poverty based on federal poverty guidelines.

Given Hmong adults’ low employment rates and the lack of formal education needed for well-paying urban jobs, it appears that the economic situation of the Hmong rests on the success of the younger generation. Indeed, parental investment in and encouragement of their children’s academic achievement suggest that they have looked to the next generation’s educational attainment as the hope for future financial stability and mobility. However, low income, low levels of parental education, and cultural dissimilarity from educational institutions traditionally have been associated with lower levels of school success among children in the United States. One question we set out to address in this study is whether Hmong students in St. Paul have been able to overcome these serious disadvantages and to achieve academically. Future Youth Development Study efforts will examine whether educational attainment can be leveraged into economic success for these young Hmong people as they move from school to work in their transitions to adulthood.

### Educational Achievements

The Youth Development Study has found very positive educational outcomes for Hmong youth despite the difficulties they experienced as children in Southeast Asia and in the United States. Despite their low socioeconomic status and the absence of professional role models within their families, Hmong students had similar educational aspirations to their non-Hmong counterparts in high school, hoping that they would attain between a four-year bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree. Table 1 shows the educational aspirations and achievements of Hmong and non-Hmong youth.

To realize their aspirations in the face of challenging circumstances, Hmong high school seniors spent much more time on homework than non-Hmong seniors, studying an average of 21 hours per week versus the average 8 hours per week spent on homework by their non-Hmong classmates. This hard work seems to have paid off for these Hmong youth. Hmong high school students reported a grade point average of 3.05 during their senior year, which was significantly higher than the non-Hmong reported grade point average of 2.77. In addition, Hmong students graduated from high school on time at a similar rate as their non-Hmong peers. By 1998, the Hmong had higher levels of educational attainment than the non-Hmong, with more respondents having earned a bachelor’s degree. Because many respondents have continued to report that they were engaged in furthering their education, it remains to be seen how Hmong educational attainment will eventually compare with the non-Hmong in their cohort. Now that the respondents are entering their 30s, it may be possible to analyze educational outcomes in upcoming waves of this study.

Given the high degree of academic success of Hmong youth observed thus far, it appears that something else may be operating in Hmong households that compensates for the typically negative academic consequences of poverty, low parental education, single-parent households, and teen parenthood. Part of the educational success of Hmong students may be linked to the abundant support and high academic expectations of their parents. On average, Hmong 9th and 10th graders believed their parents wanted them to attain between a bachelor’s and master’s degree, whereas non-Hmong students thought their parents wanted them to achieve a bachelor’s degree on average. Additionally, 73% of Hmong parents did not want their children to work during the school week in high school, even if this meant reducing family funds, whereas the rest thought that their children could work as long as they continued to do well in school. Interviews with Hmong respondents conducted when they were young adults suggest that their parents were less supportive than the non-Hmong parents.

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**Table 1. Educational Achievement of Hmong and Non-Hmong Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Aspirations</th>
<th>Hmong (%)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Non-Hmong (%)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>83.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree or higher</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-time high school graduation</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

- None of these differences in outcomes are statistically significant.

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parents of after-school or extracurricular activities, sports, and socializing when they were in high school, in part because their parents were worried that these activities would interfere with academic performance.

These interviews also revealed that Hmong young adults felt their parents’ expectations and support positively influenced their school success. For example, one respondent emphasized how his parents pressured him toward academic achievement.

My mom [was] always saying, “Son, you have to go off to college . . . and learn as much as you can.” And in a way I did not have a choice. They always keep pushing you and they always [say] education is really important and . . . they always question you, “Hey, how come you didn’t bring any homework today?” You know, they always ask you questions and they would push you and push you and push you, and I think that’s why I had the success that I did in high school.

Like this respondent, many others said that their parents impressed upon them the importance of education as a path toward success. This is especially striking given the fact that very few Hmong parents had received more than two years of formal education themselves. However, the understanding that education provides privilege, power, and upward mobility was most likely developed in Laos prior to arriving in the United States, because parents saw that education conferred high status to a few Hmong families.¹ Because virtually all Hmong parents had high educational expectations for their children, it is difficult to empirically discern the effect of parental educational expectations on actual Hmong educational achievement. However, it is apparent that many of the Hmong respondents believed parental support for education, whether expressed as encouragement or pressure, was important in motivating their academic efforts.

Furthermore, Hmong respondents found their peers to be important positive influences on their educational success. For example, when asked what aspect of high school was especially influential in achieving success, one respondent stated, “I had [Hmong] friends who were academically oriented, and of course if you are in that crowd,

you will aspire to be like others. . . . Because I wanted to do well, because of my social group, I took college prep classes.” Several others who had been particularly successful academically likewise cited their friends as encouraging their school achievement.

Special educational initiatives also promoted Hmong students’ educational attainment. In interviews conducted in 2002, Hmong respondents credited St. Paul Public School programs, such as those that assisted with their English language skills and supported them as teen mothers, as important to overcoming major obstacles and achieving academically. Interview findings suggest that Hmong respondents attribute their postsecondary educational attainment in part to college programs designed to serve underrepresented minorities such as Southeast Asians, as well as faculty members and school programming that attend to diversity issues. This was the case for those who attended vocational schools as well as those who attended four-year colleges and universities.

**Labor Force Participation.** Despite their greater involvement and success in the educational system, a lower proportion of Hmong respondents have participated in the labor force, both during and after high school. The lower likelihood of employment during high school may be explained by the Hmong emphasis on education and parental restrictions on adolescent work. However, even a year after graduating high school, fewer Hmong were employed than non-Hmong. The differences were greatest among men. Hmong males spent significantly less time working in a full-time job and more time unemployed than non-Hmong men. For those who were employed, the median annual income for Hmong respondents was significantly less than that of the non-Hmong.

Because Hmong youth were less likely to work while in high school, their lower levels of full-time employment and the relatively low incomes of those who do work could be attributable to their lack of previous work experience or connections to jobs. In addition, because their parents are much more likely to be unemployed, they may lack knowledge of the job market and connections to the kinds of networks that often aid people in securing employment. On the other hand, because a higher percentage of Hmong were enrolled in postsecondary education after finishing high school, their lower young-adult labor force participation rates could reflect their stronger emphasis on education. It remains to be seen whether the differences in employment will persist once they have completed their schooling.

**Adolescent Marriage and Childbearing.** Hmong family formation patterns and life course transitions differ from those of many of their non-Hmong peers. Traditional Hmong culture embraces relatively early marriage and childbearing, especially among females. Although attitudes about the timing of marriage and parenthood may be changing in younger cohorts, the cultural practice of early marriage appears to be resilient among the young Hmong people participating in this

*Despite their educational success, fewer Hmong respondents were employed during or after high school than their non-Hmong peers.*

Photo by Steve Schneider
study. By the time the respondents were in their senior year of high school, a significantly greater proportion of Hmong females were married. They were also much more likely than non-Hmong females to have at least one child. Among Hmong girls, 70% married by the end of high school and more than half reported they had at least one child at home (compared to the 0.7% percent of non-Hmong girls who were married in high school and 10% who had children). These numbers may actually underrepresent Hmong marriage and parenthood during high school because many Hmong become “culturally married” through a Hmong traditional ceremony but do not attain a marriage license, and thus may not report on a survey sponsored by a state university that they are married.

Although adolescent childbearing typically has been associated with poor educational performance and attainment outcomes, this same relationship does not exist for Hmong teen parents. Unlike other ethnic groups, Hmong girls who had children in high school did not perform poorly, nor did they have lower educational aspirations prior to getting married or becoming pregnant. The majority of Hmong females who were married in high school graduated along with the rest of their class, whereas the non-Hmong females who were married typically did not graduate on time. Indeed, several Hmong young women who were married and had children in high school pursued postsecondary education.

In comparison to other ethnic groups in the United States, graduation rates and educational attainment for married Hmong young women and teen mothers are remarkably high. We have found that their continued school success is likely due to family and community support mechanisms that enabled them to achieve academically. Focus groups and individual interviews revealed that many young Hmong mothers believe their parents and in-laws to be invaluable sources of support as they complete their studies and launch careers. Although they certainly relay feelings of stress from gaining new family responsibilities—including cleaning, cooking, childrearing, and obligations to extended kin—they also say that family members help them out. Most notably, many young mothers discuss how their nonworking parents or in-laws are available to take care of their children while they study or work. Government assistance to Hmong refugees enabled Hmong parents to remain home to care for their grandchildren while their adult children continued to pursue their education and, eventually, their careers. One Hmong woman, currently an elementary school teacher who had her first child when she was a sophomore in high school, explained why she thinks she was able to complete high school and eventually earn a master’s degree, whereas other teen mothers dropped out of school.

With me I have the support at home. A lot of women, once they have kids they don’t have someone to babysit. I was fortunate that my mom watched the kids while I went to school. That helped a lot.

Because marriage and childbearing during adolescence and early adulthood
were normative within the Hmong culture (although this may be changing), young Hmong women received continued support once they became mothers and did not experience education and parenting as incompatible roles.

Additionally, because the financial stability of the entire extended family is often understood to rest on the educational and subsequent occupational attainment of the younger generation, there is a shared investment in the children’s education and early work careers. For example, one Hmong woman whose mother babysat while she began working stated, “I think most Hmong parents lack the financial resources, so they tend to help out with childcare so the younger couple can work and be economically successful.” Despite this, some young Hmong mothers indicated pressures from husbands and in-laws to refrain from pursuing educational interests to focus primarily on their family responsibilities. However, on the whole, young Hmong mothers in this study have experienced a cushion of practical and emotional support that has enabled them to achieve academically and develop career paths. From these Hmong women’s experiences we learn that adequate support systems can promote positive life transitions and outcomes even when they are outside of the “mainstream” normative model.

Because Hmong marriage patterns often involve an older male and younger female, fewer Hmong boys were married or became parents while still in high school. However, Hmong male life-course patterns differ from those of their non-Hmong peers as well. Young Hmong men’s lives are not characterized by lack of direction or drift. Instead, Hmong men in our study engage in postsecondary education at higher rates than other youth. In future years we will assess whether the investment in education by Hmong men will result in successful careers and upward mobility.

Conclusions and Policy Implications
The Hmong refugee population in the Twin Cities has demonstrated tremendous resilience in adapting to a very different life in urban Minnesota. Hmong refugees came to the United States with few economic resources, a different language, a unique culture, and carrying the harsh memories of war and loss. Yet in spite of this, the investment of nuclear and extended family resources on the young within the context of a strong Hmong community, and the support of institutions such as schools and social welfare systems, have promoted the academic achievement of Hmong children.

Reflecting upon their educational experiences, Hmong young adults interviewed in 2002 credited St. Paul Public School English language instruction and programs aimed to support teen mothers as instrumental to their academic achievement. Several Hmong young adults attributed their educational attainment in vocational and four-year colleges to formal and informal programs and assistance for underrepresented minorities, such as recruiting, financial aid, and academic and social support. Such educational programs should continue in order to advance the academic and occupational success of Hmong young people, as well as other immigrant youth and students of color. In interviews, young Hmong adults expressed a feeling of economic and cultural obligation to the wider kin group that could enhance their motivation for educational and career success and the advancement of the Hmong community as a whole. Future Youth Development Study efforts will explore whether their educational attainment will ultimately advance the work lives and economic success of Hmong individuals, as well as the Hmong community more broadly.

From this study, it is also evident that Hmong adolescence and the transition to adulthood take distinct forms. For example, early marriage and teen childbearing have not had the same negative educational consequences for Hmong young women as they have for non-Hmong young people, in part because of the family and community supports that Hmong youth experience. From this, we learn that successful outcomes for youth do not necessarily derive from the same sources and life paths. In the case of the Hmong, family, community, institutional, and public social supports can collaborate to promote positive results for young people. Given the growing prevalence of immigration and the increasing diversity of the American population, it is imperative that investigators continue to study the experiences and adaptation of each new immigrant group. Each immigrant group’s adolescence and transition to adulthood may have its own distinctive features and implications for the institutions and policies designed to enhance the well-being of all Americans.

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