

A Longer, Harder Journey: The Economic Progress of Hmong Americans



University of Wisconsin
Eau Claire

CELEBRATION OF EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AND CREATIVE ACTIVITY | MAY 3-4, 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Hmong refugees first arrived in the U.S. forty years ago and since then, Hmong Americans have had significant economic progress, marked by increases in incomes, educational attainment, occupational status, ownership of homes and businesses, and numerous other measures.

However, disaggregated data shows that “Hmong Americans are less likely than the average American to have a household income over \$50,000, be employed, or be a college graduate” (Vaghul & Eldagan, 2016). Though assimilation and acculturation occur and impact economic progress of Hmong Americans, aggregated data on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders can put people at risk of being underserved.

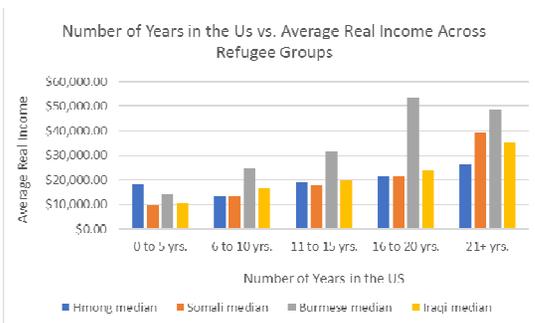
DATA

This study uses a huge, rich data set provided by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota. This is a sample of detailed U.S. Census data on individuals and households from the 1990 Census, the 2000 Census, and annual American Community Survey samples from 2001 through 2014. We have data on over 66 million individuals, including about 37,000 Hmong Americans. In our work, we define the Hmong American group broadly to include everybody who indicated that their race, ancestry, or language spoken at home was Hmong.

ECONOMIC PROGRESS OVER TIME

The Hmong American community is diverse, so we must use caution when we use means and medians to describe the community. Nevertheless, summary statistics tell an important story.

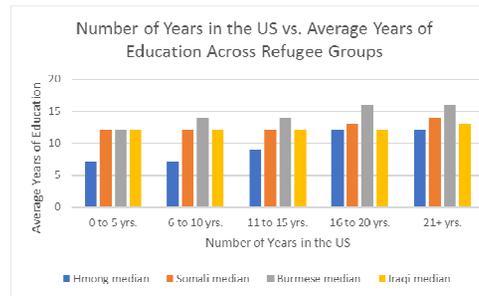
Our data show that adult Hmong refugees who have lived in the U.S. longer generally have higher real (inflation-adjusted) incomes, higher levels of education, and higher English skills.



COMPARISONS WITH OTHER REFUGEE GROUPS

We compared the economic progress of adult Hmong Americans with three other refugee groups: Somalis, Burmese, and Iraqis. These are some of the largest groups of refugee arrivals in the U.S. in recent decades.

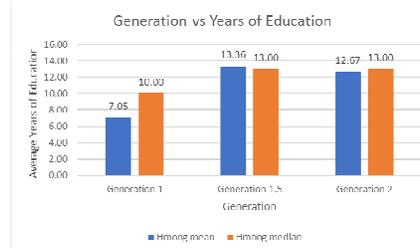
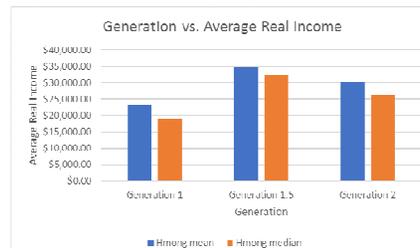
Hmong Americans have achieved considerable economic progress since their arrival in the U.S., but their progress has been slower than that of the other refugee groups in many respects.



PROGRESS ACROSS GENERATIONS

We identified three generations in our data, which we called Generation 1, Generation 1.5, and Generation 2.

- Generation 1.5 includes those who were born abroad, but arrived in the U.S. before age 12. These people, while foreign-born, had the advantage of schooling and greater exposure to the destination culture in the U.S.
- We defined Generation 1 to include those who were foreign-born, but not in Generation 1.5 – that is, refugees who were at least 12 years old when they arrived in the U.S.
- Generation 2 includes those who were born in the U.S. (Our data do not tell us where a person’s parents were born, so we include the second generation and all subsequent generations in our Generation 2.)



It is interesting to note that adults in Generation 1.5 consistently rank above those in Generation 2, on average, in income, education, and other important measures. This is one of many intriguing observations in this research that call for further study.



WHY HAS THE PROGRESS BEEN SLOWER? ~TWO HYPOTHESES

Why has the economic progress of Hmong refugees been slower than that of some other refugee groups, on average? We have considered two hypotheses that might explain this:

1. Assimilation vs Acculturation:

Perhaps many Hmong Americans have chosen not to assimilate quickly, preferring instead to retain traditional family roles, occupations, and language. This respect for tradition would have deep roots in Hmong history. Over hundreds of years, Hmong traditions were carried from Central Asia into China, and then into Southeast Asia, as the Hmong people fled earlier waves of persecution and resisted assimilation into dominant cultures.

2. Lower Levels of Western-style Human Capital:

Maybe assimilation into the U.S. labor market has been slower for Hmong refugees, on average, because they arrived in the U.S. with lower average levels of Western-style human capital, such as education, job skills, and English skills. This would reflect the fact that the agrarian lives of many Hmong families in the mountains of Laos were radically different from their new lives in the U.S., so their adjustment here would be more difficult.

FUTURE RESEARCH

How can we use our rich data set to distinguish between these two hypotheses? Unfortunately, while our data are remarkably broad, we do not have data on many cultural markers that might allow us to test these hypotheses, such as Hmong Americans’ religious beliefs, values, and reliance on traditional clan structures. This is another compelling topic that can be addressed in future research.

