



A SUMMARY REPORT



# Meeting the educational needs of Hmong in Wisconsin

**H**mong citizens prefer hands-on learning in a traditional classroom setting with well-trained, enthusiastic, culturally sensitive teachers, preferably from the Hmong community.

That's one finding of a UW-Extension survey that sought to answer two questions: What are the educational needs of Wisconsin's growing Hmong population and how can UW-Extension best meet those needs?

The study, conducted January through March of 2002, included 384 participants in 10 of the top 11 Wisconsin counties with the highest Hmong populations: Brown, Dane, Eau Claire, La Crosse, Marathon, Milwaukee, Outagamie, Portage, Sheboygan and Winnebago.

Language barriers and intergenerational issues emerged as the dominant concerns affecting Hmong life in Wisconsin.

A UW-Extension cross divisional grant funded the initiative, called the *Hmong Educational Needs Assessment Project*. The project relied on focus groups, separated by age and gender, to generate answers to a series of questions. This report summarizes those answers. Demographics on Wisconsin's Hmong community from UW-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory complement this project.

We hope you will use this report as a tool to build educational programs tailored to the specific needs of Hmong citizens in your community.

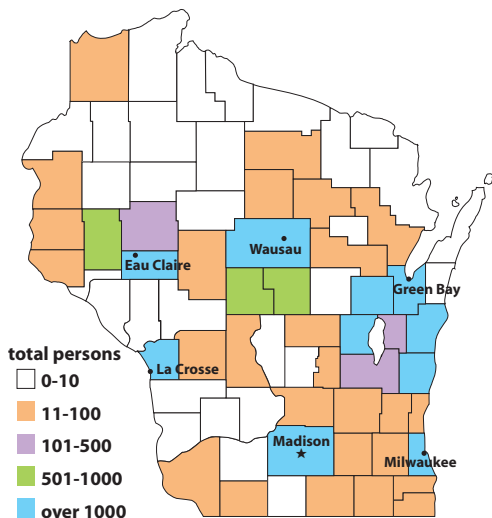
## Midwest is home to largest Hmong population

Originally from Laos, Hmong worked with the U.S. government as allies during the Vietnam War. In the years after the war, displaced Hmong citizens from Thai refugee camps began immigrating to North America. Some came from Laos as well.

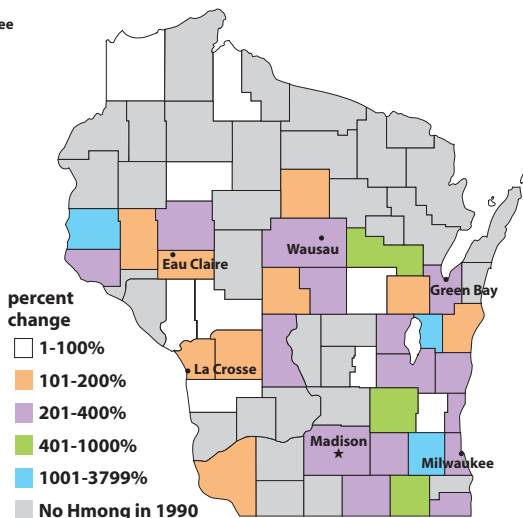
The latest Census figures show that Minnesota and Wisconsin are home to about 45 percent of this country's Hmong population. Wisconsin's Hmong population more than doubled from 1990 to 2000, from 16,373 to 33,791.

Many Hmong come from an agrarian, patriarchal society with strictly defined gender roles, with girls taking on marriage and motherhood, often in their teens. Many older Hmong do not read or speak English. (In this report, we define "youth" as high school age through the early 20s and "adult" and "older Hmong" as 25 and older.)

**Hmong population in Wisconsin counties, 2000**



**Hmong population percent change by Wisconsin county, 1990-2000**



Not surprisingly, our survey found that culture shock and language barriers — between Hmong parents and children and Hmong citizens and other community members — are the key issues affecting Hmong life in Wisconsin.

## Cultural challenges

We found that communication, or the lack of it, affects every aspect of Hmong life, including family relationships, education, health care, child care, transportation and housing.

An older Hmong with limited English skills, sums up the feelings of many: “Language is an issue that impacts us because we can’t be normal ... We can’t be involved in the community.”

Intergenerational issues stood out in all focus groups. For example, older Hmong tend to hold traditional views concerning gender roles while the younger generation takes a broader view that encompasses women having careers, marrying later in life and sharing family responsibilities.

Both old and young say they lack respect within their families, partly due to language barriers; older Hmong often don’t speak English, with younger Hmong unable to speak their native language. Second- and third-generation Hmong worry about losing their heritage

and express a desire to learn the Hmong language as well as Hmong culture and history.

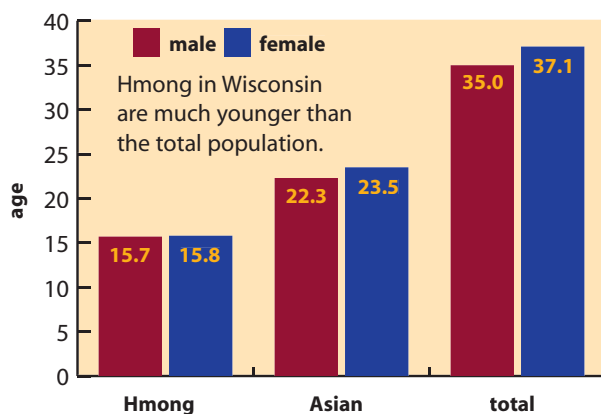
Caught between two cultures, both young and older Hmong face an identity crisis. The study found that Hmong of all ages struggle to adapt to a new life in America while maintaining a sense of who they are and where they came from. “(We are) facing the question: ‘What is Hmong? every day,’” says one young person. “(We) struggle to define ourselves and fit in.”

### Other issues Hmong focus group members consider important:

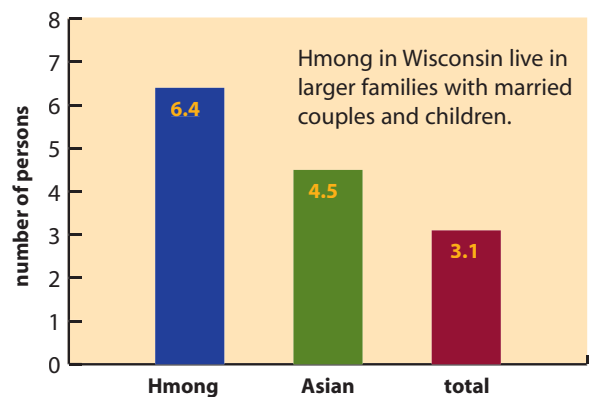
- **Leadership development.** Hmong of all ages say they want training in leadership skills and abilities, particularly facilitation or negotiation skills that would foster cooperation within the Hmong community, and between Hmong clans.
- **Respecting diversity.** Racism and discrimination come up as issues for all. Young people talk about being ignored, teased and hired only for low-level jobs while adults discuss being ignored and facing discrimination in housing, health care and other U.S. systems.

- **Partnerships.** A majority of participants agree that Hmong citizens and Hmong community groups need more partnerships and better relationships with non-Hmong community groups.
- **Understanding Hmong culture.** Service providers should learn more about Hmong culture, focus groups say, either by hiring Hmong as interpreters and service providers, or by teaching Hmong language skills to service providers. Both young and older Hmong say U.S. citizens need a better understanding of Hmong culture.
- **Loss of respect.** Respect is a major issue for older Hmong, who say young people lack respect for their elders. Confusion over U.S. social and political systems, cultural and language barriers, plus worries about personal safety and health, adds to a sense of isolation and loss of identity among older Hmong.
- **Gangs.** Both adult and youth focus groups worry about the safety of youth and about young people getting tangled in the U.S. legal system.

Median age of Hmong, Asian and total population in Wisconsin, 2000



Average family size in Wisconsin, 2000



# “We want a good teacher in the classroom”

Hmong citizens say they prefer in-person education over “high-tech” learning. A classroom setting with a well-trained, motivated, culturally sensitive teacher ranks high on the list of a majority of those surveyed. Ideally, such teachers could come from the Hmong community.

Others prefer learning methods that include Hmong educational programs on radio and cable access TV, as well as educational videotapes that could be checked out for free at video rental stores or through libraries.

Most say they prefer early evening rather than daytime or weekend classes, with classes during school breaks for Hmong youth. Several groups named child care and transportation as potential barriers to attendance.

Adults say they prefer learning through demonstrations, workshops, modeling, outreach programs, support groups, clan meetings, home visits and workplace classes. Youth say they prefer learning through classes or conferences, oral histories from elders, class projects, support groups, newsletters in both Hmong and English, Hmong mentors, audiotapes, high school clubs and entertainment or plays.

**Asian population composition, Wisconsin 2000**



Marathon County’s five focus groups offer a summary that speaks for many. “An overwhelming majority of students and adults prefer a teacher instead of ‘high-tech’ forms of learning, including seminars, conferences, videotapes and audiotapes.”

“We want a good teacher in the classroom,” one participant says.

Focus group participants also say they want teachers who can tailor education to different learning styles. In general, adults want basic how-to English-language instruction. Young people want homework help.

## What Hmong want to learn

Hmong adults and youth say they want specific educational programs on the following topics:

**Business issues:** Understanding government, marketing, finances, finding start-up and operating funds, customer service, legal issues, competing with larger businesses, child-care for employees and preventing vandalism are some of the business topics Hmong want to learn more about. Several focus groups say they want technical gardening skills that would help them raise produce to sell at farmers’ markets.

Group	population	%
Hmong	33,791	40.0
Asian Indian	12,665	15.0
Chinese	11,184	13.2
Korean	6,800	8.1
Filipino	5,158	6.1
Laotian	4,469	5.3
Vietnamese	3,891	4.6
Japanese	2,868	3.4
Pakistani	1,061	1.3
Thai	953	1.1
Cambodian	726	.9
Indonesian	397	.5
Other Asian	162	.2
Sri Lankan	183	.2
Malaysian	144	.2
Total	84,452	100

Sources: 2000 Census of Population and Housing; U.S. Census Bureau

**Elderly issues:** Older adults want classes that teach English, nutrition and food safety, food preservation, child care and understanding youth. Adults also express interest in a host of health-related topics, including insurance, health education, understanding nursing homes, funeral costs and end-of-life issues. Transportation and funding for elder programs, depression and isolation are other critical issues.

**Language issues:** Communication between young and older family members — and the community at large — is a major problem for all ages. Adult focus groups say lack of language skills keeps individuals over 55 from getting jobs.

**Family issues:** Young people want up-to-date parenting resources to help families learn communication techniques, understand family dynamics and build strong families, as well as resources or counselors who can help parents understand their children’s career choices and changing gender roles. Peer pressure and a communication gap between parents and children are other issues youth mention.

Adults also identify family relationships and communication as an issue — between spouses as well as parents and kids. Adults want education that teaches young people about not marrying too early, parent/child communication, consequences of major decisions, family planning, parenting education, nutrition, child care, youth “prevention” programs and budgeting. Most young people and adults want parent education that is culturally sensitive.

**Child care issues:** Hmong citizens want classes on how to become child-care providers as well as child-care training for all family members. Both youth and adults would like to see more licensed Hmong child-care workers and affordable child care. On the other hand, some Hmong live together in extended families, sharing child care,

so they don't see a need for child care outside the home.

**Health care issues:** Overall health education, including information on how the U.S. medical system works, medical terminology, prescription drugs, insurance, exercise, disease prevention, family planning and nursing careers are some of the topics Hmong of all ages would like to learn more about.

Hmong participants note that high prescription drug and insurance costs keep some families from seeking health care. Others urge the health care community to consider traditional Hmong medical practices, including herbal remedies, when addressing Hmong health issues. Some Hmong see a need for health care providers from the Hmong community.

**Top 20 Wisconsin counties in Hmong population, 1990 and 2000**

Rank*	County	1990	2000	% increase
1	Milwaukee	3,354	7,883	135%
2	Marathon	1,968	4,453	126%
3	Brown	1,410	2,957	110%
4	Sheboygan	1,255	2,706	116%
5	Outagamie	1,254	2,504	100%
6	LaCrosse	1,933	2,282	18%
7	Dane	561	2,235	298%
8	Winnebago	877	1,825	108%
9	Eau Claire	1,485	1,599	8%
10	Manitowoc	647	1,157	79%
11	Portage	232	861	271%
12	Wood	380	689	81%
13	Dunn	344	551	60%
14	Calumet	26	412	1485%
15	Fond du Lac	140	388	177%
16	Chippewa	116	321	177%
17	St. Croix	5	81	1520%
18	Waukesha	2	76	3700%
19	Douglas	80	75	-6%
20	Racine	0	53	—

\*Ranking based on 2000 census figures

Sources: 1990 Census of Population and Housing, 2000 Census of Population and Housing; U.S. Census Bureau

**Housing issues:** Landlord-tenant rights, home-buying and renting processes, housing codes, house-cleaning and home safety interest Hmong families. For many, lack of large rental units and affordable homes for sale is a problem. High taxes, few accessible loan programs, and discrimination in renting and buying homes are other concerns.

**Educational issues:** Adult and youth focus groups all say they want more teachers of color, preferably Hmong teachers. Youth say they want guidance counselors or bilingual counselors of color who understand the Hmong culture. Young people want more scholarships for low-income families. Adults want more ESL classes, additional funding for citizenship classes, and programs that help keep young people away from drugs, smoking and gangs.

Both youth and adults point to a need for English classes for all ages and tutoring programs for kindergarten through high school students, as well as a need for vocational and college prep classes and career skills. Adults would like to see more character-building classes and extracurricular activities. Young people, on the other hand, say they want motivational workshops.

A Marathon County summary states: "These parents shared a lot of concern for school-family issues related to language and cultural barriers and differences. Parents fear the worst when they don't understand and cannot communicate with their children and teachers. They question if some information may be lost in the communication and translation."

## Insights from project planners

When building educational programs for Hmong in your community, we offer the following suggestions:

- Every community is unique. You'll need to do your own local "needs assessment" to discover the specific needs of your area's Hmong citizens.
- Effective educational programs hinge on respectful, trusting relationships with the Hmong community.
- Consider hiring bilingual Hmong faculty and staff or find ways to incorporate Hmong interpreters.
- Adapt and tailor your current educational programs to fit the special content and delivery needs of Hmong in your community.
- Encourage sharing of successful educational programs between communities with Hmong populations.
- Tap existing resources, partnerships and relationships. Join forces with Interagency councils or committees and other agencies, community organizations and nonprofits to share ideas, skills and talents.

Working together, we can build exceptional educational programs that meet the needs of Hmong in our communities.

To learn more about the Hmong needs assessment planning process, the focus groups and the participants, visit the UW-Extension Hmong Task Force website:

[www.uwex.edu/ces/hmong/index.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/hmong/index.html) or

UW-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory website:

[www.ssc.wisc.edu/poplab/](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/poplab/)

