

The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States

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The summer of 2004 marked the beginning of the latest refugee wave from the U.S. Cold War involvement in Indochina. Over 15,000 Hmong refugees from Laos, who have spent years in Thailand, are being resettled in the U.S..

This Spotlight provides an overview of the political developments marking their experience as refugees over the last three decades, as well as statistics representing the Hmong's demographic impact in the United States.

Developments Shaping Policies Toward Hmong Refugees:

- The Hmong in the United States are mainly from Laos, where they are considered an ethnic minority group.
- The root of the Hmong refugee experience lies in an alliance with American Cold War efforts in Laos.
- Since 1975, more than 200,000 Hmong have fled Laos as refugees. Thailand has been the staging arena for the resettlement or repatriation of most Hmong refugees.
- Because of their role in the U.S.-led war in Laos, approximately 90 percent of Hmong refugees have been resettled to the United States.
- All official refugee camps in Thailand serving the Hmong were closed in the mid-1990s.
- The Hmong community at Wat Tham Krabok monastery, though not officially recognized as a refugee camp, was tolerated by Thai officials until a decision to close the complex in 2003. This led to the latest resettlement program for Hmong refugees to the U.S..

A Statistical Overview of Hmong Immigrants in the U.S.:

- There are approximately 103,000 foreign-born Hmong in the United States.
- The states with the largest number of Hmong immigrants are California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.
- While the foreign-born Hmong make up less than one-half of one percent of the foreign-born population in the United States, they account for approximately 10 percent of immigrants in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

- The metropolitan areas with the most Hmong immigrants are the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota-Wisconsin, area, and the Fresno, California, area.

Developments Shaping Policies Toward Hmong Refugees:

The Hmong in the United States are mainly from Laos, where they are considered an ethnic minority group. In Laos, the Hmong are one of several ethnic groups that have traditionally lived in the highland areas of the country. Approximately 315,000 are still in Laos. Several million Hmong also live in China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma.

Hmong foreign-born population for the United States

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The root of the Hmong refugee experience lies in an alliance with American Cold War efforts in Laos.

Concerned about a Communist takeover of Indochina, the United States engaged in a CIA-led ground operation in Laos from the early 1960s to 1975. The Hmong, who Americans believed had exceptional combat skills, made up most of the manpower in this effort. Not all Hmong, however, joined the U.S. effort.

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Since 1975, more than 200,000 Hmong have fled Laos as refugees. Thailand has been the staging arena for the resettlement or repatriation of most Hmong refugees. In May 1975, when communist takeover of Laos seemed imminent, the U.S. arranged to airlift between 1,000 and 3,000 Hmong into Thailand. By December 1975, when the Lao People's Democratic Republic was formed, an estimated 44,000 Hmong had fled to Thailand as refugees.

The earliest Hmong refugees who fled the country consisted mainly of soldiers in the U.S.-led army and their families. Later waves have fled because of a variety of post-war hardships, including declining economic conditions, crop failure due to ineffective communist farm collectivization schemes and drought, and repression of past and on-going resistance activities.

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Because of their role in the U.S.-led war in Laos, approximately 90 percent of Hmong refugees have been resettled to the United States. The first flow to the United States included approximately 3,500 Hmong by December 1975. The 2000 Census counted 102,773 foreign born who self-identified as Hmong.

Explanation of the Census data in this Spotlight

Numbers for this Spotlight are based on population counts based on racial grouping. Beginning with 2000 year data, the Census derived such groupings from responses to questions asking a person to list his or her race.

The Census 2000 questionnaire allowed people to self-identify one or more races they considered themselves to be. Census statistics for the "Hmong alone" group pertain to respondents who only identified themselves as Hmong in response to the question "What is this person's race?"

Census statistics for the "Hmong alone or in any combination" group pertain to both respondents only identified themselves as Hmong, and those who identified themselves as Hmong as well as some other race or ethnic group.

This Spotlight uses the numbers for foreign-born respondents who identified as "Hmong alone and in any combination." For a comparison of the "Hmong alone" and the "Hmong alone and in combination" numbers, please **click here**.

For more information on how the 2000 Census collected data pertaining to race, **click here**.

The largest wave of Hmong immigrants arrived in the United States during the 1980s. While 15 percent of Hmong immigrants arrived in the latter half of the 1970s, the 1980s saw a larger wave of entrants, representing 46 percent of Hmong foreign born currently in the U.S.. The flow of arrivals in the 1990s decreased, accounting for 39 percent of current Hmong immigrants. For more information on the U.S. refugee resettlement program, **[click here](#)**.

The Hmong have also been resettled in France, Canada, and Australia.

Many Hmong, however, have opted to stay in Thailand, waiting either for a return to Laos without fear of political reprisal, or until relatives can join them for settlement in a third country. Some have spent up to 10 years in Thai camps.

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All official refugee camps in Thailand serving the Hmong were closed in the mid-1990s. Because the Thai government has never officially allowed Hmong resettlement within its borders, Hmong remaining in camps at the time of their closure were sent to transit camps to await repatriation to Laos. Several thousand, however, fled to rural areas of Thailand or to Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery where a local religious leader organized shelter and services.

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The Hmong community at Wat Tham Krabok monastery, though not officially recognized as a refugee camp, was tolerated by Thai officials until a decision to close the complex in 2003. This led to the latest resettlement program for Hmong refugees to the U.S.. Due to the Laotian government's refusal to accept the repatriation of the Hmong because of their past resistance activities, the U.S. agreed to resettle those Hmong registered at the temple by September 2003. More than 15,000 Hmong have been approved. At present, approximately 7,800 have arrived in the U.S., with the remaining expected to arrive by late spring 2005. The majority are being resettled in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California, where many have relatives who arrived earlier.

A Statistical Overview of Hmong Immigrants in the U.S.:

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There are approximately 103,000 foreign-born Hmong in the United States. According to the 2000 Census, there were 102,773 foreign born in the United States who reported their race as either Hmong or Hmong in combination with some other racial category. (For an explanation of Census terms concerning ethnic and racial groupings, see sidebar.)

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The states with the largest number of Hmong immigrants are California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. According to Census 2000, 84 percent of Hmong immigrants are concentrated in three states: 41,133 (or 40 percent) live in California, 26,234 (or 26 percent) in Minnesota, and 19,349 (or 19 percent) in Wisconsin. The states with the next largest Hmong immigrant populations, North Carolina and Michigan, have significantly lower numbers

(3,923 and 3,785, respectively). Only 15 states are listed in the 2000 Census as destinations of Hmong immigrants.

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While the foreign-born Hmong make up less than one-half of one percent of the foreign-born population in the United States, they account for approximately 10 percent of immigrants in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Of the 31.1 million foreign born in the United States, only 0.304 percent identified themselves as Hmong in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In contrast, the Hmong represent approximately 10 percent of immigrants in Minnesota and Wisconsin. However, in the state with the largest Hmong immigrant population, California, they made up only 0.46 percent of the foreign-born population.

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The metropolitan areas with the most Hmong immigrants are the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota-Wisconsin, area, and the Fresno, California, area. For the 2000 Census, 25,300 of the foreign born in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area of Minnesota and Wisconsin identified themselves as Hmong, as did 13,182 in the Fresno, California, area. The other top five destinations included Sacramento-Yolo, California (10,941), Milwaukee-Racine, Wisconsin (4,917), and Merced, California (4,182).

Sources:

Census 2000, U.S. Census Bureau.

Ranard, Donald A. Ranard, Editor (2004). *The Hmong: An Introduction to their History and Culture*. Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

August 2004. "Special Report: Hmong Migration to Wisconsin," Gannett Wisconsin *Newspapers*. **Available online.**

Inquiry to State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

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