

Hmong American Educational Attainment 2000-2020¹

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Hmong Studies Journal

Volume 26, Issue 1

16 Pages

Abstract

Using Census and American Community Survey data, this paper analyzes Hmong American educational attainment from 2000-2020. The analysis reveals substantial improvements in Hmong Americans' college attendance and college completion rates over the past three decades. In 2000, fewer than 25 percent of Hmong Americans had attended college, a figure that surpassed 50 percent by 2020. The percentage of Hmong Americans who completed a bachelor's degree was less than 8 percent in 2000 and rose to over 23 percent by 2020. Progress was particularly pronounced among Hmong American women and younger adults. From 2000 to 2020, the bachelor's degree completion rate for Hmong American women surged nearly fivefold, in contrast to a twofold increase observed among Hmong American men. In 2020, the bachelor's degree completion rate for Hmong American adults aged 25-34 stood at 56.6 percent, which was more than double the rate for those aged 35-44 and more than five times that of adults aged 45 and older. However, despite these strides, Hmong Americans were less likely than the general population to pursue higher education, and among those who enrolled in college, a smaller percentage attained a bachelor's degree. The findings underscore both the progress made and the existing disparities, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to bridge the educational gap between the Hmong American community and the general population.

Keywords: Hmong Americans, Educational Attainment, Higher Education

Introduction

2020 marked 45 years since the arrival of Hmong refugees in the United States starting in 1975. A crucial lens through which to gauge the progress of the Hmong American population

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Yang Sao Xiong for his assistance in helping me obtain the appropriate data for this article.

over these decades is to examine their educational attainment. This metric encompasses the various levels of schooling achieved, such as high school diplomas, partial college education, and bachelor's degrees. Educational attainment serves as a vital yardstick for assessing the advancement of the Hmong American community, as the level of education a person attains bears substantial implications for various facets of their life.

In the United States, educational attainment significantly influences an individual's economic, psychological, social, and physical well-being. As of 2021, the median earnings for full-time workers aged 25-34 with a bachelor's degree or higher stood at \$65,000, marking a 63% increase compared to those who completed just high school, earning a median income of \$39,700 (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). This disparity extends over a lifetime, with men holding a bachelor's degree earning approximately \$900,000 more than their counterparts with only a high school diploma, and for women, this difference amounts to \$630,000 (Social Security Administration 2023).

The advantages of a college education go beyond just income. Individuals with higher educational levels demonstrate greater civic engagement and increased involvement in their children's activities (Ma and Pender 2023). Notably, in the 2020 presidential election, 77% of adults aged 24-44 with a bachelor's degree or higher voted, in contrast to only 46% of high school graduates. Moreover, possessing a college degree is associated with adopting a healthier lifestyle, as evidenced by over 54% of adults aged 25-34 reporting vigorous weekly exercise, compared to 29% among high school graduates. Americans with higher education levels tend to enjoy longer, healthier lives than those with fewer years of schooling (Center for Society and Health 2023).

Given the impact of educational attainment on shaping various life experiences and outcomes, this study examines the educational attainment of Hmong Americans ages 25 and above. Drawing on data from the years 2000, 2010, and 2020, this study analyzes overall Hmong American educational attainment in the U.S. Additionally, it explores gender differences in Hmong American educational attainment, and Hmong American educational attainment across states with substantial Hmong American populations. Specifically, this paper seeks to address the following questions: What is the educational attainment of Hmong Americans? How does Hmong American educational attainment vary based on gender and geographic location? Furthermore, how does the educational attainment of Hmong Americans compare to that of the general population?

To analyze changes in Hmong Americans' educational attainment, I draw upon multiple data sources. The data for the year 2000 comes from the Census 2000 Summary File 4. For the years 2010 and 2020, I rely on the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates. What I refer to as the 2010 or 2020 data consists of information collected from the five years leading up to and including 2010 or 2020. As such, the 2010 and 2020 data should be interpreted as averages for the five years of annual data collection that ended in each of those decades. Unlike the Census, which seeks to collect data for every single individual in the U.S (Census typically undercounts immigrant and minority communities), the ACS data consists of weighted samples of the population. I utilize the ACS 5-year estimates rather than the ACS 1-year estimates because the 5-year estimates are more reliable and precise for small population groups such as Hmong Americans.

Hmong American Educational Attainment 2020

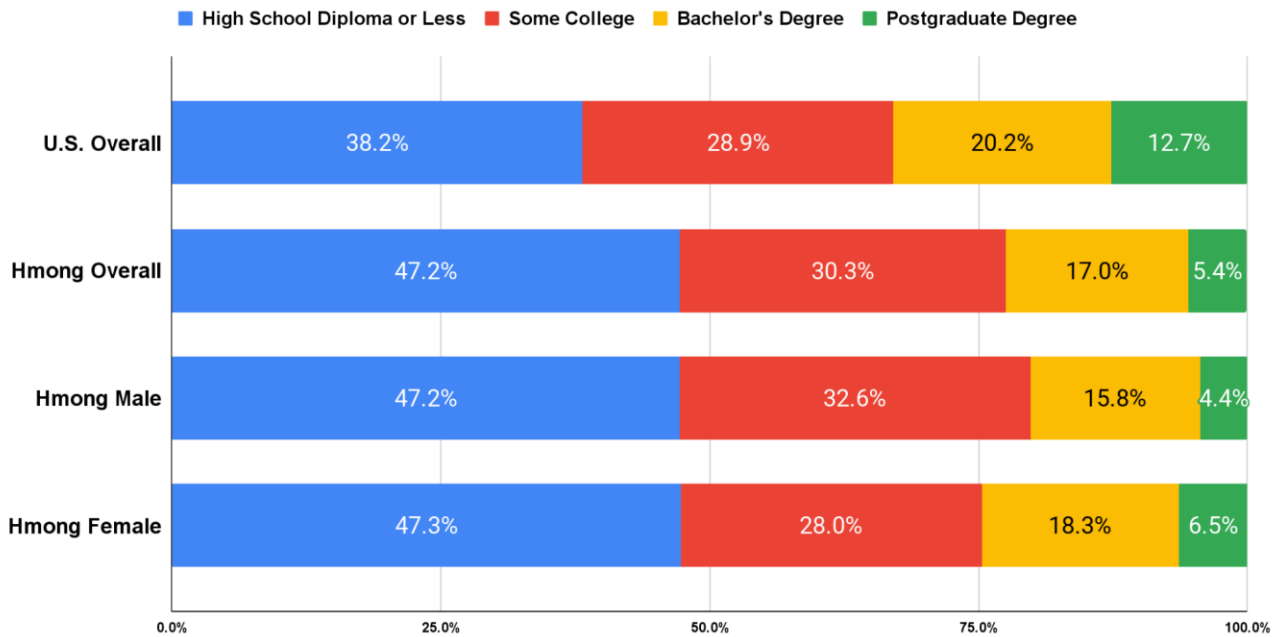
This paper begins with an analysis of Hmong American educational attainment from 2020. Figure 1 displays data for 2020 that compares overall Hmong educational attainment with that of the general U.S. population and gender differences within the Hmong American population. Compared to the general population, Hmong Americans have a higher percentage of individuals with a high school diploma or less (47.2 percent vs. 38.2 percent) and a higher percentage of individuals with some college (30.3 percent vs. 28.9 percent). The category of some college consists of individuals who received an Associate's degree as well as those who attended college but did not or have not received a degree. When it comes to completing at least a bachelor's degree, Hmong Americans lag behind the general population. Whereas 20.2 percent of the general population has received a bachelor's degree, only 17 percent of Hmong Americans have done so. The gap is much larger when comparing the postgraduate degree completion rate, which is a Master's degree or higher. Only 5.4 percent of Hmong Americans have a postgraduate degree compared to 12.7 percent of the general population. Overall, 32.9 percent of all Americans (about 1 in 3) have at least a bachelor's degree compared to just 22.4 percent of Hmong Americans (about 1 in 5).

The largest gaps in educational attainment between Hmong Americans and the general population is found at the lowest and highest levels of the educational attainment distribution. At the lowest level, almost 10 percent more Hmong Americans have a high school diploma or less. At the highest level, 7 percent fewer Hmong Americans have attained a postgraduate degree. The larger concentration of Hmong Americans at the lowest level of the educational attainment distribution could be due largely to the population of Hmong refugees who arrived in this country as adults and did not attend school or those who attended school but did not pursue

higher education. The analysis of Hmong educational attainment from 2000-2020 later in this article will show that Hmong Americans have made substantial progress throughout the years as an increasing percentage of the population have pursued and completed college. This is evidence that younger cohorts of Hmong Americans who are coming of age in this country are pursuing higher education.

The second comparison in Figure 1 is about gender differences in educational attainment within the Hmong American population. Almost identical percentages of Hmong American males and females have a high school diploma or less (47.2 percent for males and 47.3 percent for females), indicating that the majority of both Hmong American males (52.8 percent) and females (52.7 percent) have attended college. While a similar proportion of each group has pursued higher education, Hmong American females are much more likely to complete at least a bachelor's degree. 18.3 percent of Hmong American females have a bachelor's degree compared to 15.8 percent of Hmong American males. Hmong American females also have a higher rate of postgraduate degree completion than their male counterparts (6.5 percent to 4.4 percent). In contrast to their female peers, Hmong American males are more likely to be concentrated in the some college category (32.6 percent to 28 percent), signaling that Hmong American males attend college but are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree.

Figure 1: Hmong American and Overall U.S. Educational Attainment 2020



Source: American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2016-2020

The greater concentration of Hmong American males in the category of some college could be due to a number of reasons: Hmong American males who attend college are opting for an Associate’s degree, dropping out of college, or taking longer to complete their bachelor’s degrees. To determine whether one more of these scenarios is plausible, it is necessary to break down the category of some college into its constitutive components. The some college category is made of three separate categories: individuals who have attended college for less than a year, individuals with more than one year of college but no degree, and individuals with an Associate’s degree. The results in table 1 shows that across each of these categories, there is a greater percentage of Hmong American males than females.

Table 1: Distribution of Hmong Americans with Some College By Gender

	Hmong Male	Hmong Female
Less than 1 year of college	5.5%	5%
1 or more years of college credit, no degree	15.9%	12.8%
Associate’s degree	11.3%	10.2%
Total in the Some College Category	32.7%	28%

Source: American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2016-2020

While Table 1 provides insights into the various stages of the educational journey for individuals in the some college category, it does not tell us whether these individuals are still enrolled in college. If the attainment of a bachelor’s degree is an important milestone due to its social and economic significance, it is important to examine what percentage of individuals who have yet to earn their bachelor’s degree are still enrolled in college. For this, we turn to Table 2. Table 2 shows the percentage of individuals in each category who are enrolled in college and those who are not. To ascertain whether someone is currently enrolled in school, I utilize the responses to a question in the American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates that asks whether the respondent has attended school in the last three months. While this question provides insights into enrollment status, it does not tell us whether the respondents have dropped out of college or temporarily paused their education. Despite this limitation, the responses to this question still provides some insights into the enrollment status of those individuals who attended college but have yet to complete their bachelor’s degree.

Table 2 reveals that the vast majority of individuals who have attended college but have yet to earn a bachelor’s degree are no longer enrolled. In the some college category, 86.3 percent of Hmong American males and 80.4 percent of females are no longer enrolled in school. This

suggests that a significant portion of Hmong Americans who entered college ultimately discontinue before completing a bachelor’s degree. Across these subcategories, a higher percentage of Hmong American females remain enrolled in school compared to their male counterparts, indicating that females are more likely to persist in college. As we move down the three categories for both genders from less than one year of college to an Associate’s degree, there is an increasing percentage of individuals still in college, which suggests that individuals who have completed more years of college are more likely to stay enrolled in college.

Table 2: Enrollment Status of Hmong Americans with Some College

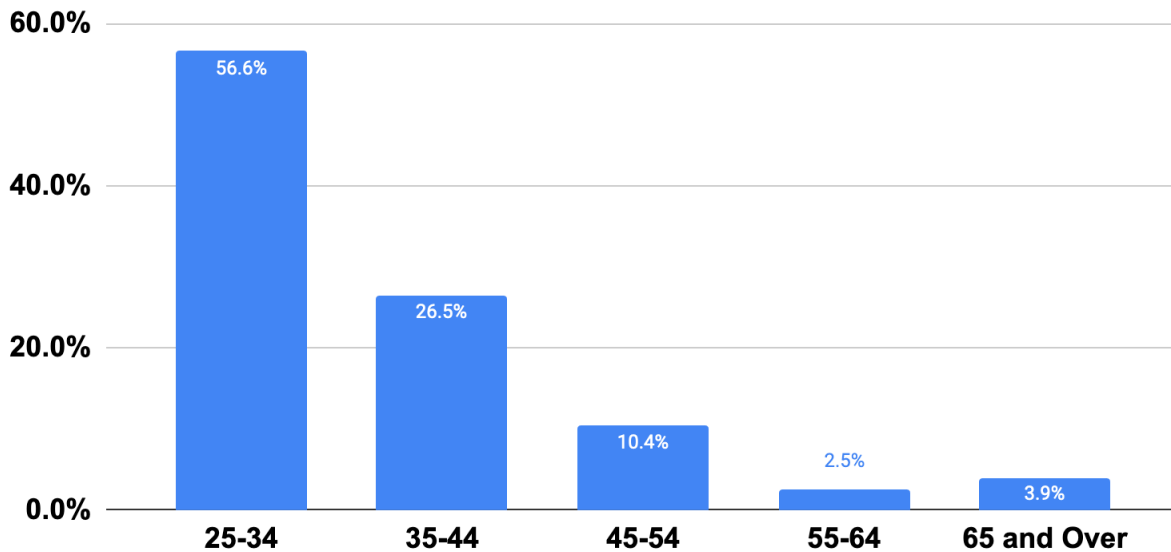
	Males		Females	
	Enrolled	No Longer Enrolled	Enrolled	No Longer Enrolled
Less than 1 year of college	7%	93%	13.7%	86.3%
1 or more years of college credit, no degree	14.6%	85.4%	18.6%	81.4%
Associate’s degree	15.8%	84.2%	23.9%	76.1%
Overall Enrollment Status of Individuals with Some College	13.7%	86.3%	19.6%	80.4%

Source: American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2016-2020

Figure 2 explores bachelor's degree completion rates among different age groups of Hmong Americans in 2020. The overarching trend indicates that younger age groups exhibit higher rates of bachelor's degree completion. Specifically, 56.6 percent of Hmong Americans aged 25-34, representing about one out of every two individuals in this age range, have completed a bachelor's degree. In the age group 35-44, the bachelor completion rate is 26.5 percent (approximately one out of every four individuals), nearly half of the rate observed in the

25-34 age group. For those aged 45-54, the bachelor completion rate is 10.4 percent (around one out of every ten individuals), and this rate further drops to less than 5 percent for all individuals aged 55 and above.

Figure 2: Hmong Americans' Bachelor's Degree Completion by Age Group 2020

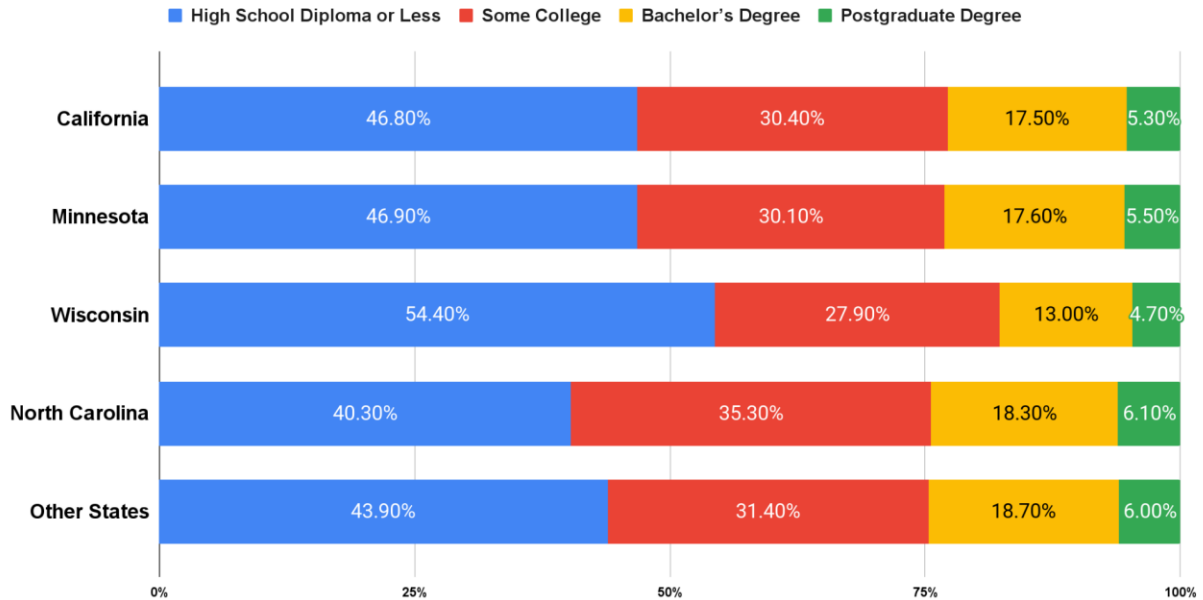


Source: American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2016-2020

Figure 3 displays data for Hmong educational attainment by respondents' state of residence. The graph shows data in the four states with the largest Hmong American populations and compares it to the rest of the other states. Each of the top four states have a population of at least 10,000 Hmong Americans. Among these 4 states, North Carolina has the highest percentage of individuals who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher (24.4 percent) followed by Minnesota (23.1 percent), California (22.8 percent), and Wisconsin (17.7 percent). Both Minnesota and California, the states with the top two largest Hmong populations, have similar percentages of Hmong Americans across the different levels of education attainment. Wisconsin

has the highest percentage of Hmong Americans who have a high school diploma or less (54.4 percent).

Figure 3: Hmong American Educational Attainment By States 2020



Source: American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2016-2020

Hmong American Educational Attainment 2000-2020

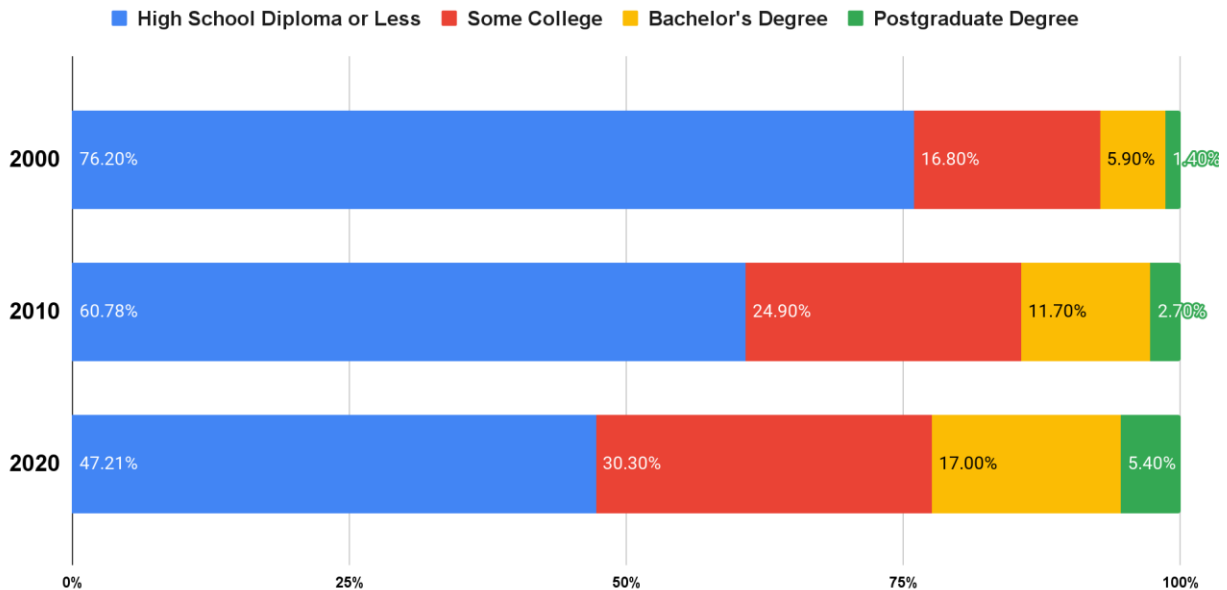
Moving on to changes in Hmong American educational attainment from 2000-2020, figure 4 shows substantial progress being made during this period. Since 2000, the percentage of Hmong Americans with a high school diploma or less has declined by at least 13 percent each decade. In 2000, over 76 percent of Hmong Americans had a high school diploma or less. This rate dropped down to about 61 percent in 2010 and less than 48 percent in 2020. As the percentage of Hmong Americans with a high school degree or less has declined, the percentage of Hmong Americans pursuing higher education has increased.

The percentages of Hmong Americans with some college, a bachelor's degree, and a postgraduate degree have all increased in the past three decades. For example, in 2000, less than 8 percent of Hmong Americans had at least a bachelor's degree. By 2010, it rose to almost 14

percent, and in 2020, it climbed to over 23 percent. This progress has more to do with Hmong children who came of age during this period, choosing to pursue higher education, rather than Hmong American adults returning for further education. According to data from the year 2000, about 60 percent of the Hmong American population during this time was between the ages of 0 and 19 years old (Niedzwiecki and Duong 2004). In the same report, Hmong Americans were reported to have the lowest median age at 16.3 years old compared to the median age of 35.4 years old in the general population. In 2020, the Hmong American children and youth who were between 0 and 19 years old in 2000 would have been between 20 and 49 years old.

Consequently, many of them were old enough for their educational attainment to be considered in this study, which specifically examines individuals aged 25 years and older. As illustrated in the preceding figure 2, Hmong American adults aged 25-44 demonstrated the highest completion rate for bachelor's degrees among all age groups.

Figure 4: Hmong American Educational Attainment 2000-2020



Sources: Census 2000, Summary File 4, 100 Percent; American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2006-2010 & 2016-2020

Table 3 shifts focus from overall Hmong educational attainment to gender differences in educational attainment across the past three decades. The gap in the category of high school diploma or less between Hmong American males and females has narrowed considerably since the year 2000. In 2000, almost 85 percent of Hmong American females had a high school or less, compared to about 67 percent of Hmong American males, a difference of 18 percent. By 2010, this gap had shrunk to less than 10 percent (56 percent for males and 65.4 percent for females). In 2020, the same percentages of Hmong American males and females (47.2 percent) had a high school degree or less. This shows that over time, the rate at which Hmong American females pursue higher education increased much faster than the rate for Hmong American males. Whereas only 15.4 percent of Hmong American females in 2000 had more education than a high school diploma (some college or higher), by 2020 it was 52.8 percent, an increase of 37.4 percent. For Hmong American males, the increase in the percentage of individuals with some college or higher from 2000 to 2020 was 20.2 percent.

With an increasing proportion of Hmong American females pursuing higher education, they have not only narrowed the gap but also surpassed their male counterparts in completing bachelor's and postgraduate degrees by 2020. In the category of bachelor's degree completion, Hmong American males outpaced females in both 2000 and 2010. The gap was over 4 percent in 2000 and less than 2 percent in 2010. However, by 2020, the trend reversed, with Hmong American females now surpassing their male peers in bachelor's degree completion by 2.5 percent.

A similar pattern is observed in the postgraduate degree category. Hmong American females initially trailed their male counterparts in both 2000 and 2010. However, by 2020, Hmong American females had exceeded males in postgraduate degree completion. This trend

illustrates a significant shift in educational attainment, indicating a notable rise in achievements among Hmong American females over the past two decades.

The trend of females outpacing males in college enrollment and graduation extends beyond the Hmong American population and is evident in the broader United States context. College enrollment among young Americans aged 18-24 has been on the decline, primarily driven by a decrease in the number of men pursuing higher education (Fry 2023). From 2011 to 2022, there are 1 million fewer young men in college compared to 0.2 million fewer young women. As of 2022, 39 percent of men and 48 percent of women aged 18-24 are enrolled in college. When it comes to college completion, as of 2021, among adults aged 25 and over, 39 percent of females have a bachelor’s degree compared with 37 percent for males (Parker 2021). If we look more specifically at the younger cohorts, individuals between the ages of 25 and 34, the gap is much wider: 46 percent of females have a bachelor’s degree versus 36 percent of males. This broader context highlights a national trend where women are not only enrolling in college at higher rates but are also outpacing men in the completion of bachelor's degrees.

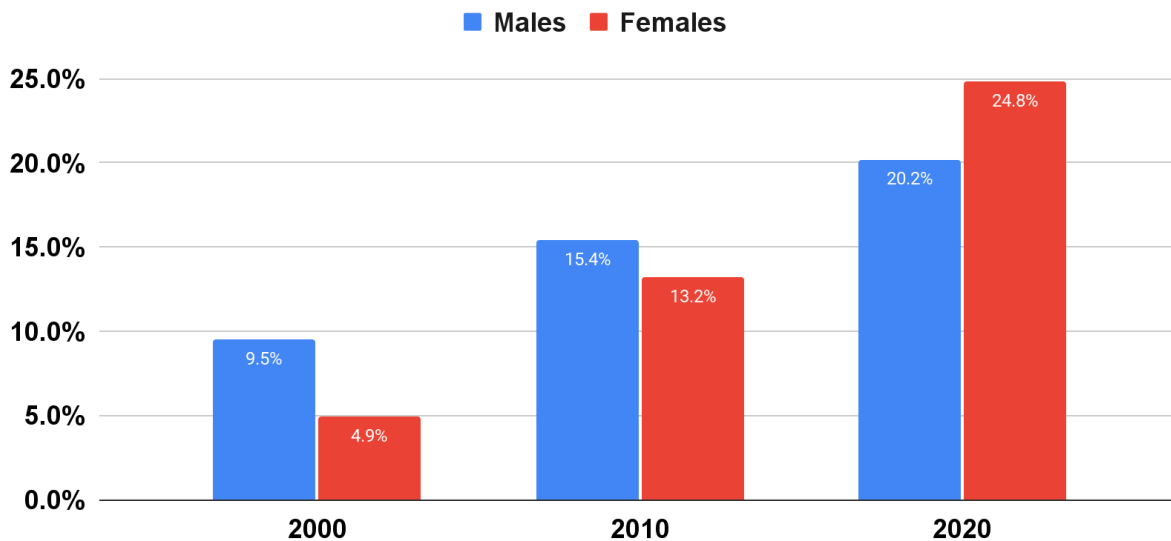
Table 3: Gender Differences in Hmong Americans’ Educational Attainment 2000-2022

	2000		2010		2020	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
High School Diploma or Less	67.4%	84.6%	56.0%	65.4%	47.2%	47.2%
Some College	23.3%	10.4%	28.6%	21.4%	32.6%	28.0%
Bachelor’s Degree	8.0%	3.8%	12.3%	11.0%	15.8%	18.3%
Postgraduate Degree	1.5%	1.0%	3.1%	2.2%	4.4%	6.5%

Sources: Census 2000, Summary File 4, 100 Percent; American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2006-2010 & 2016-2020

To further illustrate the educational attainment trend among Hmong American males and females, figure 5 presents a bar graph depicting gender differences in college completion (bachelor's degree or higher) from 2000 to 2020. The graph shows a narrowing of the gender gap from 2000 to 2010, followed by a reversal in 2020.

Figure 5: Gender Differences in Hmong Americans' Bachelor Degree Completion 2000-2020



Sources: Census 2000, Summary File 4, 100 Percent; American Community Survey Multiyear Estimates, 2006-2010 & 2016-2020

Conclusion

While Hmong refugees initially arrived in the United States with limited education, and most were unable to pursue education beyond a high school diploma, many of their children are now reaching adulthood and pursuing higher education. Over the past three decades, the Hmong American population has experienced significant advancements in obtaining higher education degrees. In 2000, less than 8 percent of Hmong Americans had at least a bachelor's degree, and by 2020, this percentage had increased to over 22 percent. Additionally, in 2000, only 23.3

percent of Hmong Americans had pursued higher education after completing high school, while by 2020, over half of the Hmong American population (52.4 percent) had attended college.

The overall improvement in the educational attainment of Hmong Americans is attributable, in large part, to the remarkable progress made by Hmong American females and young adults. In 2000, less than 5 percent of Hmong American females held a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2020, this figure had increased nearly fivefold, with almost 25 percent of Hmong American females achieving a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2020, Hmong Americans aged 25-44 had a bachelor's completion rate of over 50 percent. This rate more than doubled that of the age group 45-54 and exceeded more than five times the rate for adults aged 55 and over.

While celebrating the notable progress made, it is essential to acknowledge the remaining challenges within the Hmong American community. Whereas Hmong American females have increased their bachelor's degree attainment rate by almost 5 times from 2000 to 2020, males have only doubled their rate during this time. The percentage of Hmong Americans with at least a bachelor's degree, which stood at 22.4 percent in 2020, is still 11 percent less than the rate for the general U.S. population, which was 32.7 percent. Compared to 61.2 percent of all Americans, only 52.6 of Hmong Americans have attended college as of 2020. Of all Americans who attended college, 53.4 percent received at least a bachelor's degree. The rate of bachelor's degree completion for Hmong Americans among those who attended college was 42.5 percent. In essence, fewer percentages of Hmong Americans have attended college compared to the general population, and among those who do, Hmong Americans are less likely than the general population to complete a bachelor's degree. These disparities highlight the need for continued efforts to address and overcome educational challenges within the Hmong American community.

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