**Diversity and Complexity in Hmong American Identities and Communities** 

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#### **Abstract**

This article uses the U.S. Census Bureau's 5-year (2016-2020) American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) to examine recent social and demographic characteristics of Hmong American society including sex and age distribution, marital status, divorce rate, ancestry, ethnic and racial backgrounds, nativity, citizenship status, voting age population and language spoken at home.

Keywords: Hmong Americans, 2020 U.S. Census, demographics

#### Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic which began in 2019 has resulted in unimaginable loss of lives, horrible illnesses, innumerable economic and material hardships, and extremely serious traumas for millions of Americans, including Hmong Americans. In spite of this ongoing pandemic and all of the concurrent pandemics that are endemic to U.S. society, especially racism (which is sustained in part by social homogenization and categorization), life and work must continue. Although outsiders have often cast Hmong communities as if they were one monolithic and static group (Fadiman 1997; Eastwood 2008), the truth is far from this. As ample social scientific research, including my own has shown, Hmong communities have undergone

significant social, demographic, economic, cultural and political changes since the arrival of the first major group of Hmong refugees to the U.S. in the spring of 1976 (Reder et al. 1984; Hendricks, Downing and Deinard 1986; Chan 1994; Yang 2001; Pfeifer 2008; Lee and Tapp 2010; Vang 2010; Her and Buley-Meissner 2012; Pfeifer et al. 2012; Vue 2012; Xiong 2012; Pfeifer, Chiu and Yang 2013; Xiong 2016; Xiong 2022; Xiong and Pfeifer 2023). In this paper, I use recent U.S. census data to examine Hmong Americans' social and demographic heterogeneity. One important way to think about how diverse and complex the Hmong American population is during this particular historical period is to examine how Hmong Americans identify themselves racially, linguistically, by ancestry, by age, by sex, by marital status, by nativity, and by citizenship. It is my hope that a fuller understanding of Hmong Americans' diversity will reduce the persistent tendency among some Americans to homogenize Hmong Americans and challenge the longstanding dominant narrative and one-dimensional view of them as simply a group of foreigners from Laos.

In this paper, I use primarily the U.S. Census Bureau's 5-year (2016-2020) American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) to examine recent social and demographic characteristics of Hmong American society. The 5-year ACS PUMS dataset, which represents approximately five percent of U.S. households (or 3.5 million addresses), is a subsample of the full ACS records (Klimek 2020). Covering over 40 social, demographic, and economic topics, the ACS PUMS remains the most detailed nationally representative dataset on Hmong American (and other American) households and individuals. The 2016-2020 ACS PUMS contains a sample of 15,441,673 cases, assumed to be representative of 326,569,309 Americans. It is from this sample of 15 million cases that I compiled the "Hmong American sample."

#### The Hmong American Sample

To compile the Hmong American sample, I selected cases based on three variables in the ACS PUMS: race, ancestry, and language. If an individual identified as "Hmong" on any of the race, ancestry, or language questions, I counted that person as "Hmong." Taking ancestry and language into account resulted in a larger sample (11,827 cases) than would have been possible with just the race variable (11,165 cases). Part of this discrepancy has to do with how individuals answered the race question on the ACS questionnaire (see Appendix).<sup>1</sup> If a person marked or wrote, "other Asian" or "Some other race" on the race question ("What is Person 1's race?") without also specifying that they are "Hmong" on the corresponding line of the ACS questionnaire, they would not be identifiable as "Hmong" under the race variable. As such, using race as the only selection criterion would entirely miss these kinds of individuals. However, if we take ancestry or language also into account, these same individuals would, instead of being "missing data," would be counted. Given the history of racial minorities and hard-to-reach populations being undercounted in the U.S. census, it is important to try to maximize our sample by taking account of other markers of identity besides "race" in the ACS PUMS.

However, maximizing the size of the Hmong sample was not my only goal. I am fully aware that not all persons who speak Hmong will self-identify as "Hmong" ethnically or racially. I am also aware that not everyone who self identifies as "Hmong" on the race question will always be of "Hmong" ancestry or know how to speak Hmong (more on this below). However, to gain greater insights into the diverse backgrounds of households and persons who may identify as or be associated with Hmong in one way or another, it is important to take account of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For the 2020 ACS questionnaire, see: <a href="https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaires/2020/quest20.pdf">https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaires/2020/quest20.pdf</a>

other important markers of identity besides race, such as language and ancestry. We know that Hmong American families and households are not all alike in terms of their composition. Some are "bi-racial," "bi-ancestry" or bilingual owing to inter-marriages, births and/or adoptions. Some households may be multi-racial, multi-ancestry, or multilingual. Unless we take ancestry and language (and other markers of identity) into account, we may fail to recognize this diversity and complexity. I will return to the topic of Hmong Americans' biracial and multiracial identities below.

Once statistical person weights (provided by ACS) have been applied, the 11,827 cases in my Hmong American sample are representative of 321,818 persons who identify as Hmong in terms of race, ancestry, or language. Most of the analyses below are based on this entire weighted sample. In a few instances when I want to demonstrate a unique point, I will reduce the size of the sample by selecting cases based only on the race variable, the ancestry variable, or the language variable; however, I will make this clear when I do employ such parameters on the sample. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics 26 (IBM, New York).

#### **Hmong Americans' Demographic and Social Characteristics**

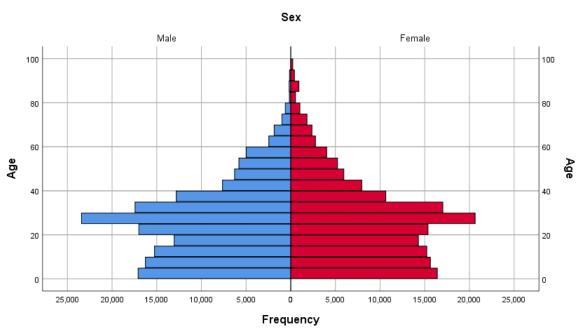
Sex and Age Distribution

Hmong American males make up 50.8 percent of the Hmong American population (or 163,402 of 321,818 persons), while Hmong American females make up 49.2 percent (or 158,416) of the same population. In other words, there are approximately 103 Hmong American males for every 100 Hmong American females.

Although the Hmong American population is not as young as it used to be, it is still fairly young compared to the general U.S. population. The mean age of Hmong American males was 25.81 years while the mean age of Hmong American females was 26.73 years. The median age

for either of Hmong American males or females was 25 years. However, three-fourths of all Hmong Americans were 36 years or younger. In comparison, the median age for the U.S. general population was 36.7 years. Figures 1 and 2 show the population pyramids for the Hmong American and U.S. general population, respectively.

Figure 1. Population Pyramid of the Hmong American Population, 2016-2020 ACS



Case weight by Person weight

Sex Male Female 100 100 80 80 Age Age 40 40 20 20 0 2,000,000 6,000,000 12,000,000 10,000,000 8,000,000 6,000,000 4,000,000 2,000,000 4,000,000 8,000,000 10,000,000 12,000,000 Frequency Case weight by Person weight

Figure 2. Population Pyramid of the U.S. General Population, 2016-2020 ACS

Table 1 shows the distribution of Hmong Americans by select age groups and sex. Although both Hmong American males and females are similar in terms of the younger age groups (0-4, 5-17, and 18-24), they differ in terms of the older age groups (25-44, 45-64, 65-80, and 81 and older). Noticeably, there are more Hmong American female older adults (65 and older) (4.6 percent) compared to Hmong American male older adults (2.3 percent).

Table 1. The Age Distribution of Hmong Americans by Sex

				Cumulative
Sex	Age Group	Frequency	Percent	Percent
Male	0-4	17,085	10.5	10.5
	5-17	39,833	24.4	34.8
	18-24	21,734	13.3	48.1
	25-44	61,290	37.5	85.6
	45-64	19,529	12.0	97.6
	65-80	3,506	2.1	99.7
	81 and older	425	0.3	100.0
	Total	163,402	100.0	
Female	0-4	16,406	10.4	10.4
	5-17	39,489	24.9	35.3
	18-24	21,017	13.3	48.6
	25-44	56,261	35.5	84.1
	45-64	17,966	11.3	95.4
	65-80	5,365	3.4	98.8
	81 and older	1,912	1.2	100.0
	Total	158,416	100.0	

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## Marital Status

In terms of marital status, 39.4 percent of Hmong Americans 15 years and older were married, 52.3 percent of Hmong Americans 15 years and older had never been married, 2.8 percent were widowed, 4 percent were divorced, and 1.8 percent were separated. However, there are some differences between males and females. A larger proportion of Hmong American females are widowed (4.7 percent) compared to Hmong American males (0.9 percent). A larger proportion of Hmong American females are divorced (4.9 percent) compared to Hmong American males (3.2 percent). A larger proportion of Hmong American males 15 years and older had never been married (56.7 percent) compared to Hmong American females 15 years and older (47.1 percent).

Table 2. The Marital Status of Hmong Americans (15 Years and Older Only) by Sex

	Combined	Males Only	<b>Females Only</b>
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Married	39.4	37.5	41.4
Widowed	2.8	0.9	4.7
Divorced	4.0	3.2	4.9
Separated	1.8	1.7	1.9
Never Married	52.0	56.7	47.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

#### Race and Ethnicity

On average, about 95 percent of Hmong Americans identified as "Hmong" alone on the race question. However, at least 1.3 percent of Hmong Americans identified as having two or more races. While this figure is lower than the 7.9 percent for the U.S. general population who identified as having two or more races, it is not insignificant. It suggests that Hmong Americans of bi- or multi-racial or ethnic background live and work among the social communities we call Hmong American communities.

Table 3 gives us a glimpse into the diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds of "Hmong Americans." Historically, Hmong identity has always been complex and dynamic. But in the contexts of the U.S., this complexity appears even more obvious. Readers are encouraged to explore the data in Table 3 and, with further in-depth research and critical reflection, to make their own inferences about the state and politics of Hmong American identities.

Table 3. Ethnic and/or Racial Backgrounds of Hmong Americans

	Frequency	Percent
White	1,118	0.3
Black	94	0.0
Chippewa	26	0.0
American Indian	5	0.0
Asian Indian	623	0.2
Bangladeshi	72	0.0
Burmese	674	0.2
Cambodian	150	0.0
Chinese	292	0.1
Filipino	372	0.1
Hmong	304,172	94.5
Indonesian	158	0.0
Japanese	30	0.0
Korean	18	0.0
Laotian	2,038	0.6
Pakistani	42	0.0
Thai	383	0.1
Vietnamese	488	0.2
Other Asian	3,612	1.1
All combinations of Asian	3,145	1.0
Fijian	49	0.0
Some other race	189	0.1
Two or more races	4,068	1.3
Total	321,818	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## Ancestry or Ethnic Origin

Interestingly, even when we limit the sample to only those individuals who self-identified as "Hmong" alone on the race question, we get the following results: 81.7 percent reported that they have a single ancestry, 3.9 percent reported that they have multiple ancestries, and 14.1 percent did not report their ancestry. Less than one half of one percent could not be classified (see Table 4).

Table 4. Types of Ancestry among Persons Who Identify as Being of Hmong Race

	Frequency	Percent
Single ancestry	248,509	81.7
Multiple ancestry	11,882	3.9
Unclassified	802	0.3
Not Reported	42,979	14.1
Total	304,172	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

Things become even more perplexing when we break down the category of Hmong "race" into ancestral backgrounds or ethnic origins (see Table 5). Although 14 percent of the people who identified themselves as Hmong on the race question did not report their ancestry, the vast majority did. More than three quarters (78 percent) of the people reported their ancestry as "Hmong." About three percent reported their ancestry as "Asian," two percent reported their ancestry as "Laotian," and nearly one percent (0.7) reported their ancestry as "Chinese." What is interesting is the wide range of ancestries that were reported, which ranged from German to Mexican American to Cambodian to Thai to Polynesian to Appalachian. The data here suggest that it is possible that some people who self-identify as Hmong racially have non-Hmong ancestry. That some people identified their ancestry (or had their ancestry identified for them) as "United States" or "American" is also interesting and perplexing. One possible explanation is that some respondents may have (mis)read the ancestry question (see Appendix) on the census questionnaire as asking about their place of birth.

Table 5. Distribution of Ancestry/Ethnic Origins among Persons Who Identify as Being of Hmong Race

	Frequency	Percent
German	97	0.0
Scottish	16	0.0
Eastern European	7	0.0
Mexican American	211	0.1
Paraguayan	105	0.0
Burmese	155	0.1
Cambodian	268	0.1
Chinese	1,994	0.7
Mongolian	34	0.0
Filipino	118	0.0
Laotian	7,182	2.4
Hmong	236,798	77.9
Thai	969	0.3
Vietnamese	450	0.1
Asian	10,280	3.4
Polynesian	546	0.2
Somoan	15	0.0
White	110	0.0
Appalachian	30	0.0
American	573	0.2
United States	433	0.1
Mixture	3	0.0
Uncodable entries	799	0.3
Not reported	42,979	14.1
Total	304,172	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## Nativity and Citizenship

Approximately two-third of Hmong Americans were native-born—that is, they were born in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or the Northern Marianas, or born abroad to U.S. parents. One-third of Hmong were foreign-born (Table 6). In terms of birthplace, 65.2 percent of Hmong Americans were born in the U.S. (Table 7). About one percent of Hmong Americans were born abroad of American parents.

**Table 6. Nativity of Hmong Americans** 

	Frequency	Percent
Native	213,877	66.5
Foreign Born	107,941	33.5
Total	321,818	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

During the 2016-2020 period, about 93.7 percent of Hmong Americans were U.S. citizens by birth or by naturalization (table 7). The proportion of Hmong American females who are U.S. citizens is slightly larger (94.4 percent) compared to their male counterparts (93.3 percent).

Table 7. Citizenship Status of Hmong Americans (All Ages)

	Combined	Males Only	<b>Females Only</b>
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Born in the U.S.	65.2	65.4	65.1
Born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin			
Islands, or the Northern Marianas	0.0	0.0	0.0
Born abroad of American parents	1.2	1.2	1.3
U.S. citizenship by naturalization	27.3	26.7	28.0
Not a citizen of the U.S.	6.2	6.7	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## Voting-Age Population

About 90.9 percent of Hmong American adults are U.S. citizens of voting age (18 years or older) (see Table 8). Numerically, this is approximately 190,000 persons who are U.S. citizens of voting age. Of these 190,000 persons, about 59,000 reside in the state California, 53,000 reside in Minnesota, and 33,000 reside in Wisconsin.

**Table 8. Hmong Americans' Voting-Age Population** 

	Number	Total Adult Population*	Percent of Total Adult Population
U.S. citizen and 18 years or older	190,019	209,005	90.9
Female	93,944	102,521	91.6
Male	96,075	106,484	90.2

<sup>\*</sup>Total adult population includes Hmong U.S. citizens and non-citizens who are 18 years or older. Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## Language

At least 237,460 Hmong Americans ages 5 and older speak a language other than English at home. This represents 82.4 percent of all Hmong Americans 5 years and older. What kinds of languages do they speak at home? Table 9 shows a rich multiplicity of languages. While the vast majority (98.7 percent) speak Hmong, many others also speak other languages, including Spanish, Lao, Tagalog, Chin languages, Chinese, Khmer, Vietnamese, Korean, French, Thai and other languages of Asia.

Table 9. Types of Languages Other Than English that Hmong Americans Speak at Home

	Frequency	Percent
French	79	0.0
Spanish	828	0.3
Khmer	141	0.1
Vietnamese	75	0.0
Chinese	92	0.0
Mandarin	41	0.0
Chin languages	192	0.1
Thai	57	0.0
Lao	694	0.3
Iu Mien	50	0.0
Hmong	234,438	98.7
Japanese	22	0.0
Korean	97	0.0
Other languages of Asia	556	0.2
Filipino	14	0.0
Tagalog	70	0.0
Swahili	14	0.0
Total	237,460	100.0

Source: 2016-2020 American Community Survey. Weighted Sample.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

As these data show, the Hmong American population is anything but monolithic or one-dimensional. Instead, the available data suggest that there is immense diversity and complexity within Hmong American communities. The ACS data reveal that, on average, Hmong Americans are much younger than people in the U.S. general population, but this will probably change in the future. Hmong American women appear to be living longer than Hmong American men as indicated by both the data on age and marital status. When it comes to Hmong American ethnic and racial identity, the U.S. census data reveal a complex picture. "Hmong" is not the only identity that the people in our "Hmong American" sample choose to identify with. Even when we, as social analysts, count only those persons who identify as "Hmong" on the race

question of the ACS questionnaire, the data show that many in this group reported belonging to ancestries other than Hmong. Some have multiple ancestries. The Hmong American community is not only diverse in terms of age, sex (and gender identity and sexual orientation), nativity, and racial and ethnic background, but also in terms of language. More than 82 percent of Hmong Americans speak a language other than English at home—a remarkable achievement considering all of the past and current pressures of one-way assimilation! Future research ought to explore language ability as well.

As we might expect based on past data, the proportion of Hmong American adults who are U.S. citizens remains remarkably high at over 93 percent. The proportion of Hmong Americans who are U.S. citizens of voting age is also quite high at over 90 percent. It is promising to see many Hmong American individuals and non-profit organizations who recognize this as a political opportunity for mobilizing Hmong American collective action. Unfortunately, it remains to be seen whether future representatives of major U.S. political parties will recognize this as a political opportunity and make a much more concerted and sustained effort to outreach to and include Hmong American communities in the political process than they have done in the past (Xiong 2020). I hope they do.

Lately, some people and students have been curious about or preoccupied with the debate about the "most appropriate" or "most inclusive" spelling of "Hmong." Although I will save that debate/discussion for another paper, I think that the topic of Hmong American identity(ies) and, more importantly, what Hmong American identity(ies) could mean or do for individuals' behaviors and groups' collective actions deserves a great deal more research and intellectual discussion. I hope that future research will consider some of the issues raised in this paper, including the diversity and complexity of Hmong's ethnic and racial identity during this

particular period of human history. For instance, what, if anything, can Hmong Americans' self-reported labels reveal about how Hmong Americans are positioning themselves ethnically or racially in the U.S. racial hierarchy? How are other people or institutions positioning Hmong Americans within the same racial hierarchy?

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# Appendix

The 2020 American Community Survey Questionnaire. The "race" question is question 6 below:

(Person 1 is the person living or staying here in whose name this house or apartment is owned, being bought, or rented. If there is no such person, start with the name of any adult living or staying here.)  Please print today's date.  Month Day Year  What is Person 1's name?	No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano Yes, Puerto Rican Yes, Cuban Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – <i>Print</i> ,
First Name MI  How is this person related to Person 1?  X Person 1  What is Person 1's sex? Mark (X) ONE box.  Male Female  What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth? For babies less than 1 year old, do not write the age in months. Write 0 as the age.  Print numbers in boxes.  Age (in years) Month Day Year of birth	for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.   What is Person 1's race?  Mark (X) one or more boxes AND print origins.  White - Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.   Black or African Am Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopia Somali, etc.   American Indian or Alaska Native - Print name of enrolled or principal tribels), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfee Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.   Chinese
	Asian Indian  Japanese  Chamorro  Other Asian –  Print, for example,  Pakistani,  Cambodian,  Hmong, etc.   Some other race – Print race or origin.

The 2020 American Community Survey Questionnaire. The "ancestry/ethnic origin" question is question 13 below:

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tion focuses on this DR'S DEGREE. Please najor(s) of any BACH on has received. (For green that is person's ancestry one: Italian, Jamaican, n. Cape Verdean, Norvadian, Haitian, Korean Mexican, Taiwanese, Unis person speak a langlish at home?  SHIP to question 15a this language?	P to question 13.  person's perint below the ELOR'S DEGREES example: chemical education,  or ethnic origin?  African Am., vegian, Dominican, n, Lebanese, Polish, krainian, and so on.)  inguage other	to the second of	Person is under 1 year old -  Yes, this house → SKIP to a print name of foreign county. S. Virgin Islands, Guam, to question 16  No, different house in the Upurto Rico  No, different house in the Upurto Rico  Where did this person live 1  Address (Number and street results of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the person or another family members of the property of the prop	SKIP to questinuestion 16 es and Puerto Ritry, or etc., below; then dinited States or year ago? name)  Tipe Code  ZIP Code  ZIP Code  Yered by any or rance or healt! No" for EACH ty Yes sorr)  m or, cc care	Rico
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