



“ALL OF THESE THINGS HOLDING US IN”

**PATTERNS OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT
IN THE TWIN CITIES, 1976-1996**

MELISSA BORJA, PH.D. AND AARON H. GILBREATH, PH.D.

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INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Refugee resettlement in the United States has long been described as an act of benevolent rescue and an opportunity for refugees to lead lives of prosperity and freedom. However, stories told by refugees themselves offer a more complicated portrait of the resettlement experience. For many refugees, resettlement in the United States began a new chapter of hardship.

Kao Kalia Yang, a Hmong American woman who resettled in St. Paul, Minnesota, as a child, recalled these experiences in her memoir *The Late Homecomer*. “I understood that the conditions in Thailand and the camps were hard for those who knew more than I did,” she wrote. “But for me, the hardness in life began in America. We are so lucky to be in this country, the adults all said. Watching them struggle belied this fact.”

In making this point, she drew parallels between Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, where she had lived in Thailand, and the John J. McDonough Housing Project, where she resided alongside many other Hmong refugees. McDonough’s cement and steel townhouses, intended for low-income families, contrasted sharply with the images of American abundance and opportunity that she and her family had seen on television. Even more, the American housing project resembled Ban Vinai in unsettling ways. In an oral history interview with Concordia University, Yang described the McDonough Housing Project as a place where “people that looked alike” were living together in a specific place--in other words, as a site of segregation. And while McDonough “wasn’t

bordered by a fence,” Yang experienced the housing project as a place where “there were all of these things holding us in”--in other words, as a site of confinement and unfreedom.

Yang’s reflections echo what Eric Tang wrote about another group of Southeast Asian refugees resettled in American cities during the same period. In his book, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*, Tang argued that Cambodian refugees were moved from war zones and refugee camps in Asia to another war zone, this time in the U.S.—urban neighborhoods that were in crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Tang, Cambodian refugees were relocated to sites of concentrated poverty, where “refuge is never found.” Noting the contrast between the rhetoric of benevolent resettlement and the lived experiences of Cambodian refugees, Tang argued that “discourses on rescue mask a more profound urban reality characterized by radicalized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life.”

INTRODUCTION

CENTRAL QUESTIONS AND SOURCES

Taking Yang's and other Hmong American stories as a starting point, we embarked on this interdisciplinary research project to understand the urban resettlement of Hmong refugees who were resettled in the Twin Cities in the 1970s and 1980s, with special attention to themes of segregation and confinement.

We centered our work on two sets of questions. The first focused on the geography of Hmong refugee resettlement. Where were Hmong refugees resettled in St. Paul and Minneapolis? What were the characteristics of the urban neighborhoods where they were initially placed? Were Hmong refugees in the Twin Cities resettled in sites of concentrated urban poverty, similar to the Cambodian refugees who were the focus of Tang's study?

The second set of questions concerned Hmong refugees' experiences of refugee resettlement in urban St. Paul and Minneapolis. How did resettlement in these urban neighborhoods shape Hmong refugees' lives, both in the immediate and long term? In particular, how did urban refugee resettlement relate to experiences of hardship, confinement, and segregation described by Yang and other Hmong Americans?

Although this project focused on a single group of refugees resettled at a specific time and in a particular place, we saw this research as offering a valuable opportunity to address several broader questions of scholarly and public policy importance:

- Was the refugee resettlement program successful in achieving its stated objectives? To what degree were refugees set up for lives of freedom and prosperity or, alternatively, lives of confinement and poverty?
- How have refugees experienced resettlement, especially in cities?
- How have different communities experienced life in segregated American cities during the last quarter of the twentieth century?

To answer these questions, we used several sources. First, in order to understand the geography of Hmong refugee resettlement, we drew on the case files of over 3,000 Hmong refugees resettled by the International Institute of Minnesota (IIM) between 1975 and 1991, as well as information from the U.S. Census. In addition, to understand the local administration of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, we used archival material from government sources (in particular, the records of the Minnesota State Refugee Program), as well as voluntary agencies and local congregations that sponsored refugees. Finally, to understand Hmong refugees' experiences of resettlement, we turned to memoirs and oral history interviews with Hmong refugees.

INTRODUCTION

ARGUMENTS

Hmong refugees in the Twin Cities were directly resettled in parts of the city that were poor and populated by racial minorities.

After completing the research for the first set of questions about the geography of Hmong refugee settlement, we found that, from the very beginning of their resettlement in the Twin Cities and throughout the entire two-decade period that we studied, the census tracts that received refugees were different from both those that did not receive refugees and the city as a whole in a statistically significant way on a variety of measures. Hmong refugees were settled in Census tracts that were poorer, less white, and characterized by higher vacancy rates and higher rates of female heads of household compared to Census tracts that did not receive refugees. We also found that, from the very beginning, Hmong refugees were resettled in or close to public housing. Put simply, Hmong refugees, who were not white and often poor, were consistently resettled in the neighborhoods where they would live alongside other non-white, poor people.

Hmong refugees had mixed experiences in these neighborhoods.

The next stage of research - about Hmong refugees' experiences in these neighborhoods - is still underway, but preliminary work indicates that Hmong refugees encountered numerous problems in these neighborhoods. Hmong refugees complained of bad housing conditions, crime, poorly resourced schools, and tensions between Hmong refugees and their Black and Native American neighbors.

These conditions appear to have contributed to the experiences of confinement and frustration described by Kao Kalia Yang and many others.

Moreover, by placing this vulnerable population in parts of the city that were already racially segregated and socially and economically disadvantaged, the U.S. refugee resettlement program may have undercut its ability to fulfill its central aims—helping refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency and social integration. Although the decision by government and voluntary officials to resettle refugees in these neighborhoods might have allowed them to meet the most immediate goals - securing housing, minimizing use of public assistance - the first few months. However, in the long term, it meant that the refugee resettlement program may have extended refugees' experiences of poverty and suffering from which they were supposed to have been rescued.

And yet there were opportunities in living in these neighborhoods. Living in public housing was affordable and allowed Hmong families to sponsor their relatives, some of whom joined their family in public housing. The dense settlement in public housing and surrounding neighborhoods also facilitated targeted programming to aid Hmong refugees. Most importantly, over time, a vibrant ethnic enclave developed in these parts of the Twin Cities, which allowed for the Hmong community to establish valuable community institutions that met their specific political, economic, social, cultural, and educational needs and allowed them to thrive in the long term.

INTRODUCTION

SIGNIFICANCE

This project contributes to recent scholarship in immigration history and critical refugee studies and connects the history of U.S. refugee resettlement with scholarship on urban policy, racism, imperialism, and militarism. Moreover, it builds on scholarship in critical refugee studies, especially Tang's work in *Unsettled*, which has illuminated important patterns in refugee resettlement that would benefit from research using other tools and methods of analysis. By considering a larger set of refugee cases and by applying other methods, including Geographic Information systems (GIS) mapping and statistical analysis, we were able to confirm what Tang found and provide substantial evidence that the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in poor, non-white neighborhoods has been systematic, significant, and consistent over time and in other places.

This project builds on the rich urban history scholarship that investigates the experiences of people living in racially segregated American cities in the 1970s and 1980s. The problem of "the urban crisis" in the late twentieth century has received substantial attention from scholars, who have emphasized the important connections between racism, public policy, and urban poverty. Historians have explored these connections using a broad range of tools, including mapping.

However, the scholarship on urban life, poverty, and racial segregation has not engaged fully with the urban struggles of Asian Americans. When it has, it has tended to focus on East Asian immigrant groups in ethnic neighborhoods in coastal cities (Koreatown in Los Angeles, for example, and Chinatown in New York City). Less research has been conducted on the experience of other Asian American groups located in other regions of the country. Finally, there is a need for more scholarship that addresses the problems of urban poverty and racism as it relates to refugee resettlement.

BACKGROUND

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

The Hmong are an ethnic group originating from Southeast Asia. During the Laotian Civil War, they allied with the U.S. against the Pathet Lao Communists in the 1960s and 1970s. When the Pathet Lao came to power in 1975, thousands of Hmong refugees, facing persecution in Laos, fled to Thailand, at the same time that war and genocide displaced other people from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, tens of Hmong refugees lived in Thai refugee camps, the most prominent of which was Ban Vinai, the refugee camp where Kao Kalia Yang and her family lived.

Hmong refugees first arrived for resettlement in the U.S. in the winter of 1976 and were part of the approximately one million refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos who were resettled in the U.S. in the quarter century after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Although the effort to resettle Southeast Asian refugees was unprecedented in both size and complexity, the system deployed to facilitate their resettlement had been in place for decades, since the Second World War. Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees were resettled through a public-private resettlement system in which the U.S. government relies on a group of established voluntary agencies to handle both initial reception and placement and also long-term services to support integration. In Minnesota, organizations such as the IIM, a local affiliate of one of the national voluntary agencies, worked to resettle and aid refugees in collaboration with national, state, and local government, as well as with local charities and congregations, which often served as “sponsors” for refugees.

Although refugee resettlement in the U.S. required coordination among a dizzying array of public and private institutions, the U.S. government and the voluntary agencies approached refugee resettlement with a shared set of goals: that refugees would become economically self-sufficient and culturally assimilated. Refugee resettlement planners believed that they could achieve these ends more easily if they prevented the formation of ethnic enclaves and dispersed Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees evenly throughout the country.

Despite this scatter policy, several cities, including St. Paul and Minneapolis, developed large Hmong populations. The first Hmong families arrived in the Twin Cities in 1976, the first year of Hmong refugee resettlement in the U.S. The Hmong population in the Twin Cities grew as refugees continued to arrive, many of them sponsored by family members who had resettled in the U.S. earlier. The steady increase in the Twin Cities Hmong population also owed to secondary migration, a process in which refugees left their sites of initial resettlement and moved to locations that they deemed more desirable. As a result of both of these developments, the Twin Cities had emerged as one of the nation’s epicenters of Hmong American life by the 1980s.



THE GEOGRAPHY OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

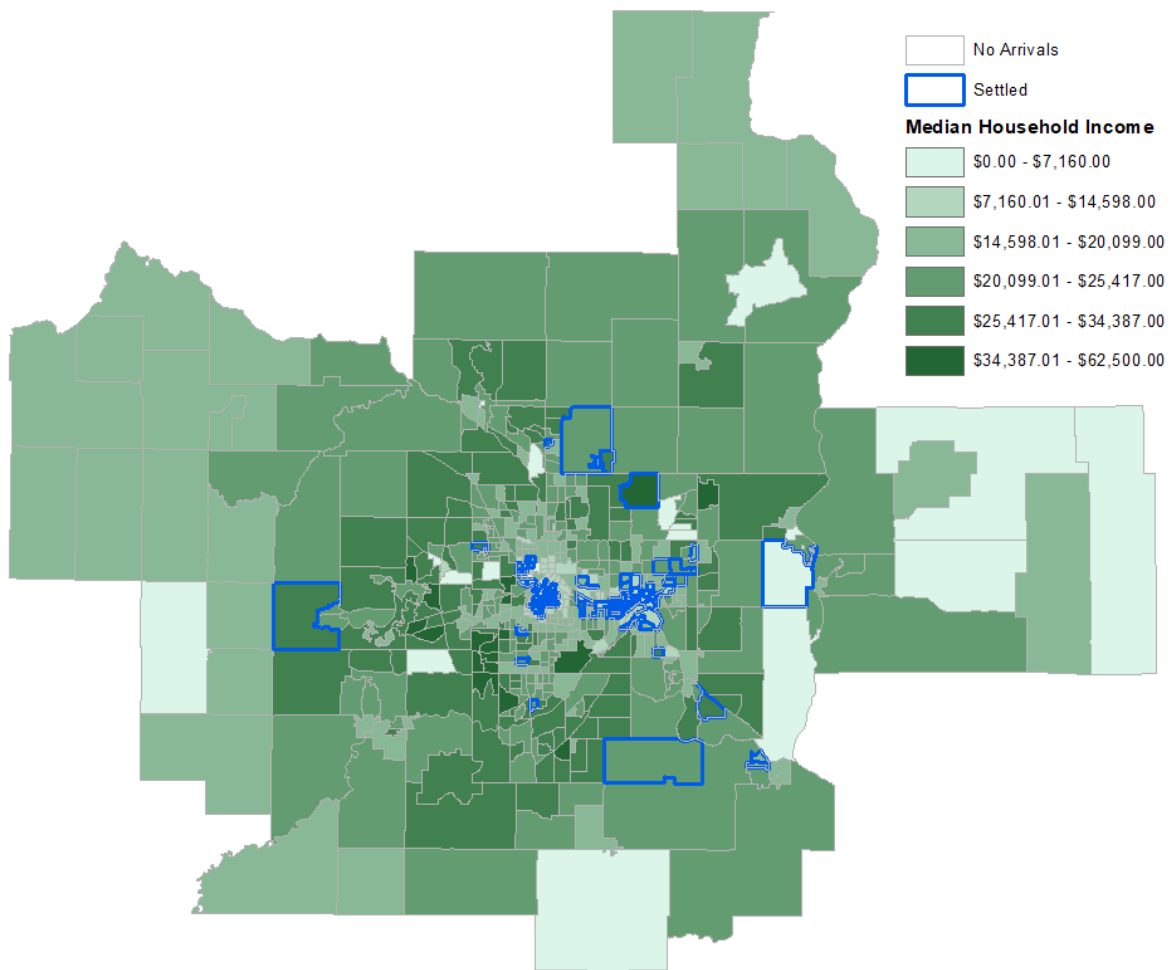
QUESTIONS AND METHODS

As Hmong refugees were resettled in St. Paul and Minneapolis, where did they live? What were the characteristics of the neighborhoods where they were initially placed? And were the sites of urban Hmong refugee resettlement similar to those of Cambodian refugees resettled in New York City?

To investigate these questions, we used the addresses listed in the IIM refugee case files of 3,000 Hmong refugees resettled in the first two decades of Hmong resettlement. We converted unique addresses to latitude and longitude using the census geocoder and GoogleMaps. We then placed these addresses in a Geographic Information System and checked for accuracy against a contemporary street map. Finally, we joined the cases to historic census data at the tract level and tested them statistically using R.

Between 1976 and 1985, Hmong refugees were resettled in 86 of the 607 census tracts in the metropolitan statistical area (MSA), with an average of 30 people resettled in those tracts. More significantly, we found that the census tracts that received refugees were different from those that did not receive refugees in a statistically significant way. This pattern was true for every era that we analyzed: 1976-1979, 1976-1985, and 1986-1991. All relationships were assessed with Wilcoxon signed-rank test to assess differences of means in non-normal data. Where samples were normal, traditional t-tests confirmed the results

Photo: Yong Vang Yang family on their first day in St. Paul, 1979. Minnesota Historical Society.

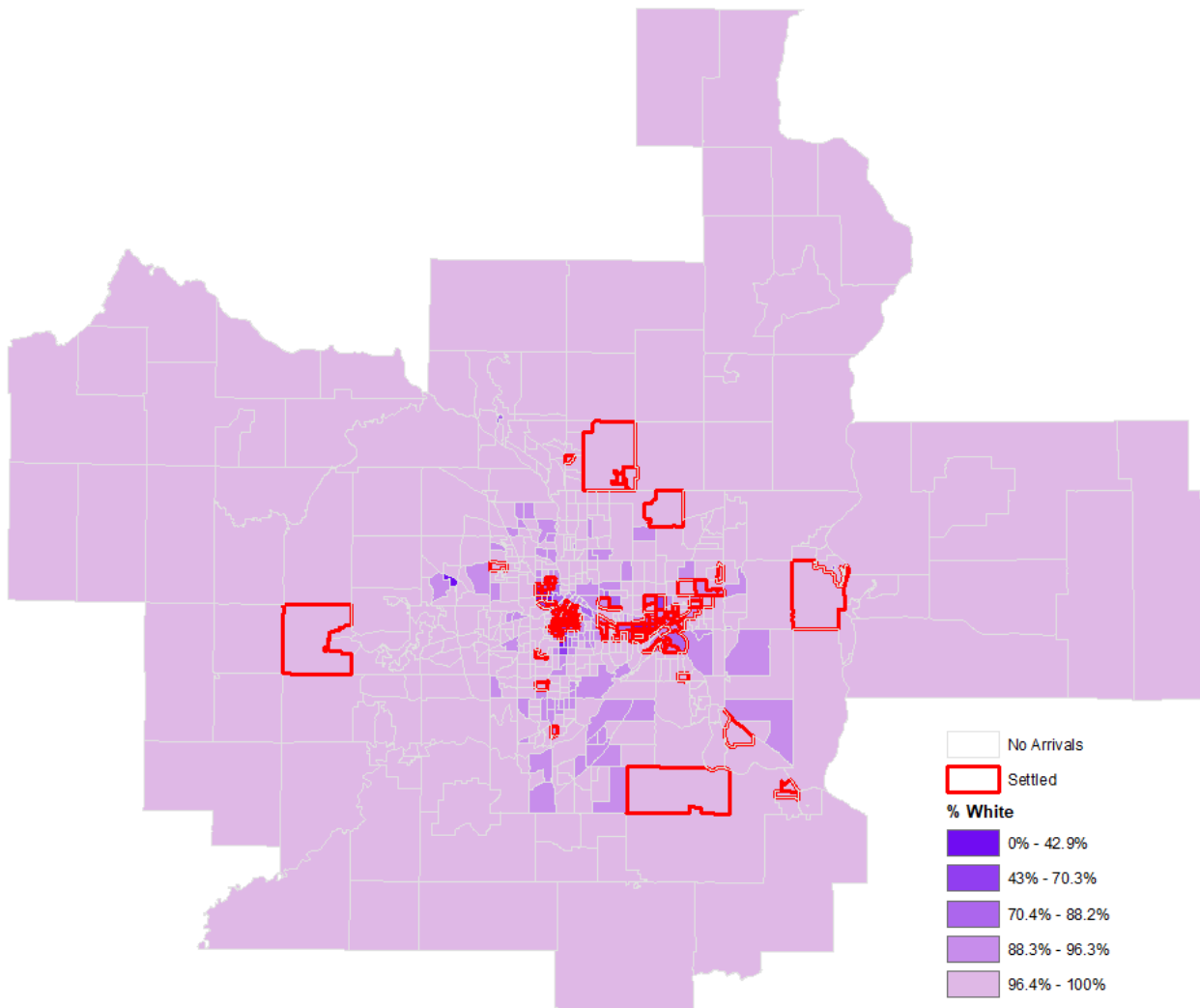


THE GEOGRAPHY OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

In every case, census tracts where Hmong refugees were resettled shared a few key characteristics. First, they were poorer, with an average median household income well below those of census tracts that did not receive Hmong refugees and of the MSA overall. Households in tracts that received refugees between 1976 and 1985 made only 60% of the average median income for the entire MSA. Those settled between 1986 and 1991 were in tracts where households made only 55% of the average median income for the entire MSA.

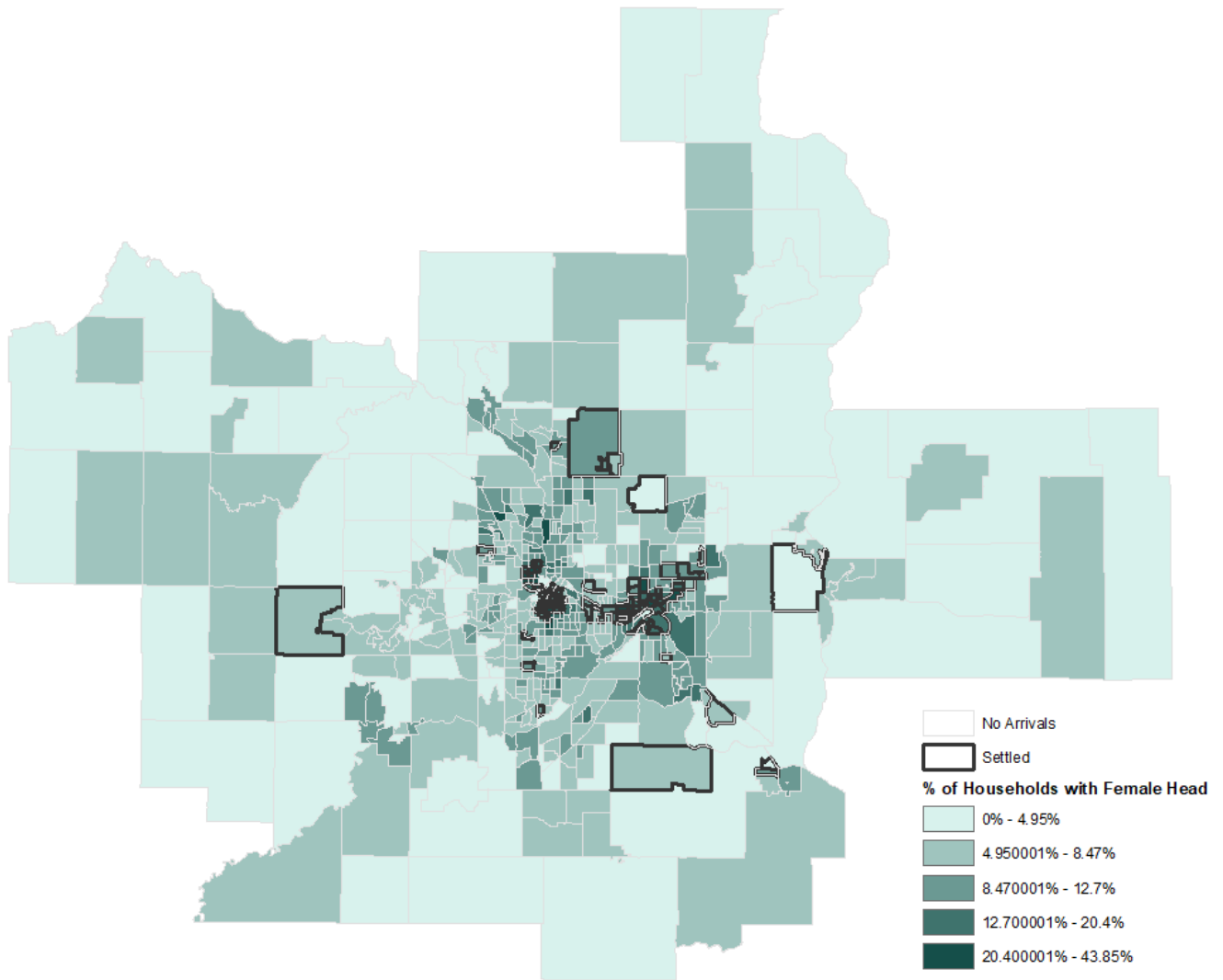
From the very beginning, Hmong refugees were resettled close to, or even in, public housing. Between 1976 and 1979, Hmong refugees were resettled within 600 meters of public housing on average. 213 of the 923 Hmong refugees who arrived during that period were resettled within 300 meters of public housing.



THE GEOGRAPHY OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

RACE

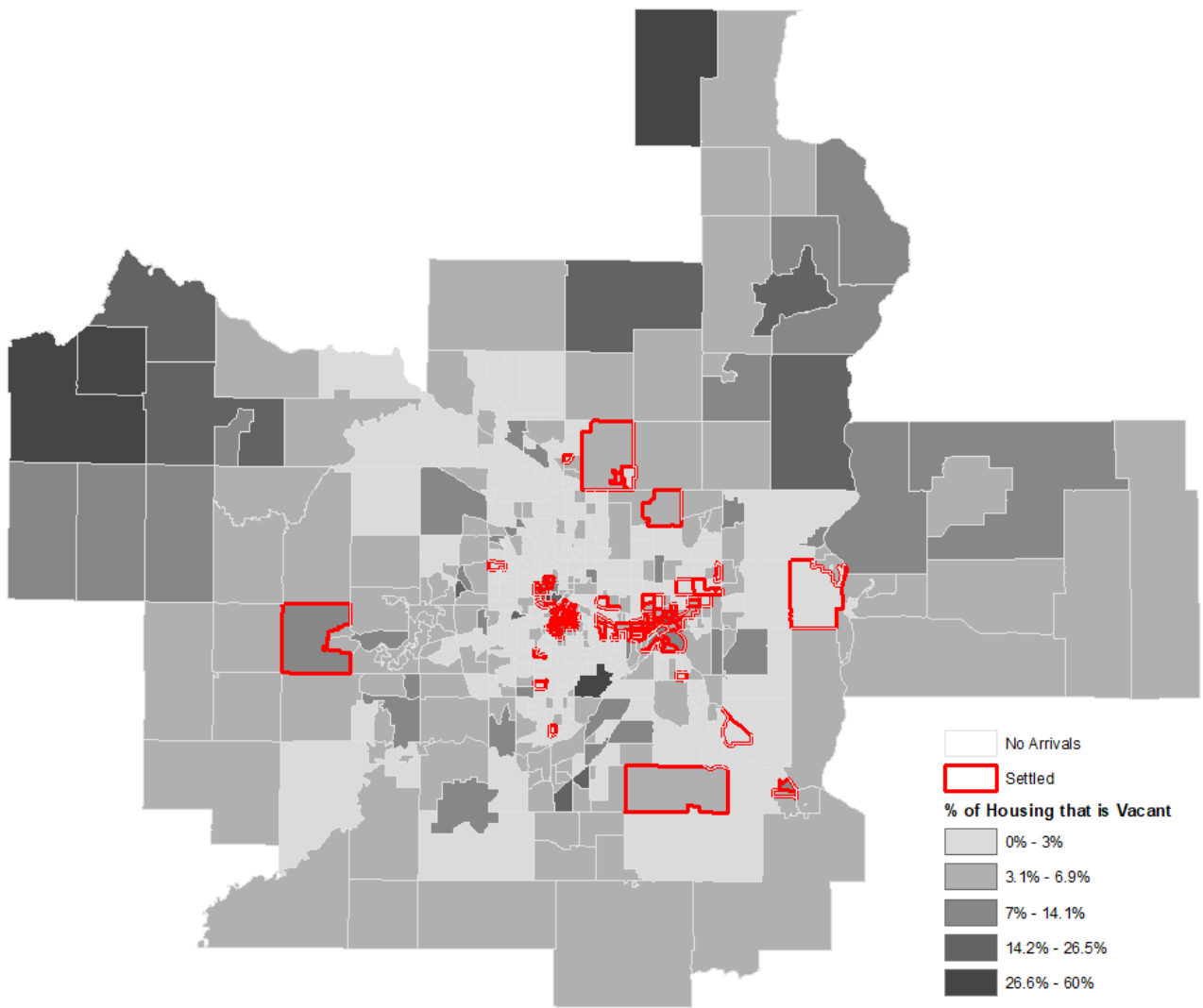
In addition, the census tracts where Hmong refugees were resettled had fewer white residents and more Black residents than those that did not receive refugees and the MSA overall. Census tracts that received Hmong refugees between 1976 and 1985 were 24% less white and 5 times more Black than the city average. Hmong refugees resettled between 1986 and 1991 were placed in tracts that were 35% less white and 4.5 times more Black than the city average.



THE GEOGRAPHY OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADS

The census tracts where Hmong refugees were resettled had higher rates of female heads of household than those that did not receive Hmong refugees and the MSA overall. Census tracts that received Hmong refugees between 1976 and 1985 had a rate of female heads of household that was 1.5 times the city average. Hmong refugees resettled between 1986 and 1991 were placed in tracts that had a rate of female heads of household that was double the city average.



THE GEOGRAPHY OF Hmong REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

VACANCY RATES

Finally, the census tracts where Hmong refugees were resettled had higher vacancy rates than those that did not receive Hmong refugees and the MSA overall. Census tracts that received Hmong refugees between 1976 and 1985 had a vacancy rate that was 1.4 times the city average. Hmong refugees resettled between 1986 and 1991 were placed in tracts that had a rate of female heads of household that was 1.55 times the city average.

EXPERIENCES OF HMONG REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

As these findings make clear, Hmong refugees resettled in the Twin Cities in the 1970s and 1980s were placed in areas that were poor and more populated by racial minorities and households with female household heads. But how did resettlement in these urban neighborhoods shape Hmong refugees' lives, both in the immediate and long term? In particular, how did urban refugee resettlement relate to the experiences of hardship, confinement, and segregation described by Yang and other Southeast Asian refugees? Here, we turn to the preliminary research we conducted with archival and oral history sources.

First, we should explore the question of why Hmong refugees were resettled in these neighborhoods in the first place. Church records indicate that institutional arrangements between sponsoring congregations and public housing facilitated the resettlement of refugees in public housing in St. Paul. Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, which worked through IIM to become one of the first churches to sponsor a Hmong refugee family, had a pastor who was an administrator with Liberty Plaza, a low-income housing development with 173 units. In 1976, the first year of Hmong refugee resettlement, congregational

documents indicate that Liberty Plaza set aside 12 housing units specifically for refugee families.

Throughout the coming decade, thousands of Hmong refugees would find homes in St. Paul's public housing. By 1981, five years after the first arrival of Hmong refugees, the St. Paul Public Housing Agency reported that "public housing has been a primary housing resource for this [Hmong] minority group." That year, the agency counted a total of 1463 individuals--about 282 Indochinese refugee families, most of whom were Hmong--living in four congregate housing developments in St. Paul. The Hmong Resettlement Study, prepared by the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, reported that by 1982, 90% of the Asian families in public housing in Saint Paul were Hmong and that 3,000 of the 7,000 Hmong residents in Ramsey County lived in public housing.

The aims of the U.S. refugee resettlement program also contributed to these resettlement patterns. Both government and voluntary agencies emphasized that refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency and minimize use of public assistance. They encouraged refugees to pay their own rent and live on their own as soon as possible, and as a result, they placed refugees in the parts of the city where housing was both available and affordable, which were also the areas that had lower income levels and larger populations of racial minorities.

Finally, these enclaves developed because of Hmong refugees' desire to sponsor and support one another, reunite with relatives,

and live with kin and ethnic community. Eager to help their Hmong friends and family, they shared information about cheap housing, and sometimes they even shared their housing, opening their homes to new arrivals. Thus, as more Hmong refugees arrived in the Twin Cities and were increasingly sponsored by relatives, rather than by churches and voluntary agencies, the concentration of Hmong people in poor, minority neighborhoods intensified. Shoua Vang, a Hmong refugee who eventually worked with IIM, recalled, "In mid-1978, we took the chance and moved to Saint Paul, Minnesota. There were only around ten or twelve Hmong families already there. None were close relatives. But a distant cousin introduced me to a subsidized housing project, where I registered for an apartment." He was one of many Hmong people who relocated to the Twin Cities during that time and hoped to find a more comfortable and prosperous life. But the arrival of so many Hmong people in a short amount of time introduced some challenges. "More Hmong began arriving in the Twin Cities," he recalled. "There wasn't an adequate social-services system to handle the large influx."

Shoua Vang's observation about an overtapped social services system raises an important point: how did Hmong people experience living in these neighborhoods? Specifically, what happened when a group of refugees, who were traumatized by war and forced migration and who struggled with poverty and lack of resources, arrived in neighborhoods that were already home to populations that were also struggling

with poverty and their own experiences of oppression and trauma? Although this part of the project is still in process, preliminary archival research and oral history interviews reveal that Hmong refugees experienced a variety of hardships directly related to living in neighborhoods.

For one, the housing in the parts of the city where Hmong refugees were resettled was often substandard and unsafe. IIM caseworkers who visited Hmong families noted the dangerous conditions in which they lived. In 1982, for example, one caseworker wrote that one family's apartment had lead paint, which required them to leave "as soon as possible." Another Hmong family found themselves in a desperate situation because "the present house they living now are condemn [sic] by the city of St. Paul," which meant that "they must move this place as soon as they can." And another family had a long list of troubles: in June 1982, the caseworker wrote that "water flood the whole house." The next month, the same caseworker noted that "Electric [was] out again" and that the "City inspector made home visit regarding to the condemn of bldg." Hmong refugees faced troubles not only in their buildings, but also in the broader neighborhood. Complaints of crime were frequent. One IIM caseworker wrote that his Hmong client had been robbed "so he lost his food stamp [and] he need some food."

There were also reports of social tensions as different groups viewed each other as competition for scarce resources. For example, documents from a Hmong group proposing a community garden in

Minneapolis remarked on the tensions between Hmong refugees and Native American populations. "Philips Neighborhood has gradually become home for many economically disadvantaged and culturally divergent people," the group wrote. "A recent influx of approximately four thousand Indochinese refugees added to the neighborhood Indian population (largest urban Indian group in US outside a major reservation) has compounded the impact on the already strained resources of the neighborhood." Access to affordable housing was a particular flashpoint. "Even without priority status, resentment of the Indochinese competition for housing units has created ill feeling among other applications for public housing," reported the St. Paul Public Housing Agency in 1981.

Like many of their neighbors, Hmong refugees often struggled with poverty during this period. The 1984 Hmong Resettlement Study detailed the degree and scope of the economic dislocation experienced by the Hmong in the Twin Cities. The authors of the report found that unemployment was very high: only 15% of adult Hmong were working, and only 21% of Hmong household heads were employed. 38% of those who were unemployed were actively seeking a job, but the remainder was not, for several reasons: lack of English proficiency, educational commitments, lack of skills, family responsibilities, health difficulties, and old age. Those who did have jobs were underemployed. Half of the employed group worked less than thirty hours each week. They often held unskilled minimum wage jobs in food service, maintenance

work, factory assembly, and in refugee services—jobs that did not provide sufficient income for supporting a large Hmong family. As a result, many Hmong refugees relied on some form of public assistance. 68% of Hmong in the Twin Cities received AFDC and 16% received General Assistance (GA). Many also received Refugee Cash Assistance, for which refugees were eligible for the first thirty-six (and, later, eighteen) months after arrival.

Hmong refugees were clearly frustrated, not only with their economic struggles, but also with the scrutiny--even hostility--that they received from American people. Yer Moua, for example, highlighted the contradictions in how Americans treated Hmong refugees:

"[At the welfare office] he told me that how come you did not go to work and why are you just keep coming to us to ask for money...That is what he told me. But he did not know how much struggling we had been through. He did not know how lucky we are to stay alive so we could come to this country. Maybe he would still say all those things about us. The only reason we are having this problem is because of the Americans who came to our country and caused all these problems. That is the reason why we came to this country, but he does not know about that and all he sees is that we are here to use his money and take his country and his home...They really hate the people who are on welfare like us. For those who went to work to support their own families then the Americans said that now they are taking away our jobs."

In Yer Moua's view, Americans had put Hmong people in an impossible position. The U.S. had drawn Hmong people into a war, then told Hmong people to be thankful to be in America when the war was lost. At the same time, U.S. policies put tremendous pressure on Hmong people to become economically self-sufficient but did not necessarily give Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees adequate support or time to do so. Finally, Yer Moua's story revealed the contradictory criticisms and the underlying antipathy toward Hmong and other racial minorities—people who were viewed as both a threat and a burden. As she pointed out, Americans complained that Hmong people were not working, then complained that Hmong people were stealing Americans' jobs. "It seems like we do not have any peace at all," she declared.

Hmong refugees like Yer Moua were acutely aware of how U.S. policies contributed to their problems, though in the eyes of the broader public, the struggles of Hmong refugees owed to Hmong culture. Popular portrayals of Hmong refugees presented them as a culturally primitive group that was "lost" in America and that owed their troubles to an experience of "a collision of cultures." Although they were only one of several Southeast Asian ethnic groups resettled in the U.S. under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, the Hmong developed the reputation as the most exotic and adrift in American society. "No other newcomers to the United States suffered greater culture shock than these primitive tribesmen who suddenly crash-landed

in a society light years away from their own," the *Associated Press* reported in 1984. The Hmong journey to the United States was "an odyssey through time as well as through miles, from thatched roofs to skyscrapers, from pre-literacy to computers, from the Stone Age to the Space Age." These media accounts further reinforced the view of government officials that Hmong refugees were a uniquely difficult group to assist. Philip Habib, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, declared before Congress that the Hmong were "not as easily resettlable." All of these stories of Hmong American struggle stood in sharp contrast with the narrative of Asian American model minority success. But if Asian American model minority success was falsely attributed to "culture," so, too, was Hmong Americans' supposed failure. American news media often attributed Hmong poverty to Hmong backwardness, rather than the circumstances in which they were forced to migrate and begin life anew in the U.S.

However, while the concentrated resettlement of Hmong refugees in poor urban neighborhoods brought important challenges, it may have also come with some important benefits. First, living in public housing projects alongside many other Hmong people, including extended family, gave Hmong refugees access to arguably their most valuable resource for survival: each other. The close proximity of extended family and ethnic community provided opportunities to share resources and offer mutual support. As officials from the St. Paul Public Housing Agency observed, "The Indochinese emphasis on extended families results in the practice of having other family

members move in after a family has been admitted to public housing.” While “Management problems” sometimes arose in these instances, city housing officials acknowledged the wisdom in Hmong refugees’ approach. “[I]t is reliance upon the extended family that allows the Indochinese to weather the shocks of rapid cultural change,” they noted.

The concentration of Hmong refugees in specific parts of the city also facilitated targeted programming and outreach. For example, in 1984, the Women's Association of Hmong & Lao, Inc. organized the Elderly Hmong Women's Project, which provided cross-cultural English language instruction, classes in nutrition and health, and field trips for female Hmong senior citizens. They offered services at five St. Paul locations, all of which were sites of public housing and dense Hmong refugee populations: Liberty Plaza Community Center,

McDonough Community Center, Mt. Airy Community Center, Neighborhood House Community Center, Roosevelt Home Community Center. Similarly, Neal Holtan, a physician who researched Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS), took care to visit McDonough homes when he wanted to speak to members of the Hmong community who were worried about the impact of SUNDS on young Hmong men.

Over time, these neighborhoods would develop into thriving ethnic enclaves that would become home to a wide range of community institutions that met the various needs of Hmong Americans. In these areas of the Twin Cities emerged Hmong language schools, Hmong funeral homes, Hmong markets, and Hmong cultural organizations, all of which served to help Hmong people create a life on their terms in the U.S.



Hmong young people playing volleyball, playground at Western and I-94, St. Paul. Michael Krieger. Minnesota Historical Society.

CONCLUSION

As this project shows, Hmong refugees were resettled in neighborhoods in St. Paul and Minneapolis that were characterized by a high rate of poverty, racial minority presence, vacancy, and female household heads. Already reeling from years of suffering in Laos and Thailand, war-weary Hmong refugees found themselves facing new forms of struggle in the U.S. Resettlement proved to be not merely an experience of freedom and prosperity, but confinement and poverty. In housing projects in the middle of the city, Hmong refugees like Kao Kalia Yang discovered that though they were no longer trapped in refugee camps, in the urban neighborhoods where they were resettled, there were still “all of these things holding us in.”

Southeast Asian refugees were not set up for success in a resettlement program that expected them to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

That Hmong refugees were resettled in sites of concentrated urban poverty is important for two reasons. First, it shows that Southeast Asian refugees--both Hmong refugees in the Twin Cities or Cambodian refugees in New York City--were hardly set up for success in a resettlement program that expected them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Refugees were underresourced from the very beginning and were placed in circumstances that made the economic mobility that was expected of them

extremely difficult, especially if the conditions on their urban neighborhoods worsened throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The experiences of Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees thus complicates some of the central claims of the refugee resettlement program: first, that the U.S. rescued refugees, and second, that the refugee program both required and facilitated refugees' upward mobility and success. In fact, as Tang and other critical refugee scholars have argued and as this project further shows, refugee resettlement was just as much an experience of *unsettlement*. The U.S. resettlement program often failed refugees by setting them up for lives of urban poverty, rather than upward social mobility.

The U.S. resettlement program often failed refugees by setting them up for lives of urban poverty, rather than upward social mobility.

This story not only complicates our picture of refugee resettlement in the U.S., but also our understanding of American cities at the end of the twentieth century. Hmong refugees arrived and were resettled in the U.S. at a moment when the poverty and racial segregation of the nation's inner cities had garnered substantial public attention. It was in these troubled urban settings that Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees were resettled, and their presence needs deeper understanding. Cities, the Hmong experiences shows us, were sites of Asian American struggle, too.

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