Wilder Research

Community Needs Assessment of Minnesota's Cambodian Population

A Summary of Findings from Key Informant Interviews

About the study

Minnesota 8 (hereafter: MN8) was selected for Wilder Research's (Wilder) culturally specific pro-bono research fund in winter 2021. With this funding, MN8 and Wilder partnered to conduct the first ever known community needs assessment of the Cambodian community in Minnesota. MN8 plans to use this community needs assessment to learn about community needs, challenges, and how MN8 can support these community members. Particularly, MN8 wanted to hear about the experiences and needs of Cambodian community members related to access to food, elections and voting, health care, and immigration.

The goal of this needs assessment is to ensure that MN8's current programming aligns with the needs of the community, improve existing programs to better meet the needs of community members, and inform the development of new programming that is culturally relevant.

Methods

First, Wilder staff conducted a field scan of the Cambodian population in Minnesota. Wilder used data available from the U.S. Census Bureau and Minnesota Compass to document the characteristics of, and areas of need for, the Cambodian population living in Minnesota. These included unemployment rates, transportation, health insurance coverage, housing data, and other data points.

Then, Wilder staff completed key informant interviews with Cambodians living in Minnesota to learn more about community members' experiences and needs. Informed by the field scan, Wilder developed an interview protocol in consultation with MN8 staff. The primary topics of interest included in this protocol were culturally specific food security and insecurity, health care coverage and access, language access and ability to speak Khmer/English, electoral knowledge and understanding, and immigration. A total of 18 interviews were completed in April and May 2022. Respondents received a $20 gift card to thank them for their time.

At the end of the interviews, respondents completed a short demographic questionnaire. Respondents ranged from age 25 to 55 and older; 12 out of 18 interview participants are age 55 and older. Fourteen out of 18 respondents identified as female. Twelve out of 18 respondents do not have a high school diploma. Nine out of 14 respondents have a total household income of $20,000 or less. Four respondents chose not to provide an answer about their household income.

Key findings

Food access and food (in)security

Interview respondents were asked how easy or difficult it is for them to go to the grocery stores that they like. Eleven out of 18 respondents said that it is not difficult for them. The most frequently mentioned reason was that they own a car and are able to drive or they have someone who is willing to help them either by driving them to the store or buying the grocery on their behalf. On the other hand, for those who said it was difficult to go to grocery stores that they like (7 out of 18 respondents), access to transportation was a significant barrier. Two interview respondents mentioned their work and class schedule made it challenging for them to get to their preferred grocery store. Below are some of their comments, edited for clarity and brevity:

> *It is easy. It is because I drive and I can speak the English pretty well. I know what I want and I have the ability to pick and choose the store that I [prefer]. We live nearby most of the stores.*
>
> *I take the train to go to grocery stores on University Avenue. It can be difficult because I have to carry the groceries from the store to the train and then from the train to the house. I sometimes get help from my children when they are not working. They would bring me to the store [if I needed to go].*
>
> *The public transportation is quite helpful. However, the hours I work and have class make it challenging to go get food during weekdays. It takes me about an hour to get to the store. So by the time I am done with work and get to the store, the store is either already closed or the food that I need has run out.*

All 18 interview respondents said they are able to find foods that are an important part of their culture or to their family at the stores where they shop. All of them are generally able to afford these foods. However, 13 out of 18 respondents live on a fixed income from their retirement or social security. Therefore, they are often limited by what is available in the store and by how much money they have to spend. Sometimes when grocery items get too expensive, such as rice, or they are unable to find specific herbs at the stores, they would change their meals for the week.

> *Yes, I go to the Dragon Store a lot. Sometimes it is hard to buy specific herbs. Sometimes they run out. So I would have to go to multiple stores, but that is fine. Sometimes I cook without it because I cannot find it. Also, I am able to afford those foods. I work and my income is enough that we can afford the foods. I feel very blessed.*
>
> *I am able to find the cultural food [I need] at the stores. I barely have enough [money] to cover the food I need. We have to spend on a lot of things. I never buy expensive clothing.*
>
> *Sometimes we can find it [the food we need]. When the cultural/Khmer grocery is too expensive, we change the meal for the week. Generally, we are able to afford it.*

Eleven out of 18 respondents mentioned that they have used food shelf to get the food they need. According to them, they were only able to find basic ingredients at the food shelf such as sugar or oil and things that have long shelf life such as onions, rice, or canned food. There are not many fresh vegetable or meat options at the food shelves they visit. When asked what foods they wish to find at the food shelf, a few of them mentioned culturally specific food items such as white rice, Asian sauces, and Asian vegetables or herbs.

> *There are many things we can choose from. They have free vegetables and the important ingredients such as sugar, oil, and other things.*
>
> *There are not a lot of fresh vegetables. Most of them are in a can.*
>
> *[I wish they would have] things like white rice, fish sauce, and some Asian spices.*

Health care access and coverage

Fourteen out of 16 respondents currently have health care coverage. Ten out of 14 get insurance through the state. Four out of 14 have their health care plan through their school or work.

Because many of the respondents have some type of health care coverage, they were also able to access and receive the health care services they need including doctor's visits, dental appointments, access to prescriptions, etc. They seem to pay little to no cost for their co-pay for their health care needs. Five out of 18 respondents work with their case managers or have their children to help with scheduling appointments or arranging transportation. One participant who doesn't have health care coverage reasoned that they are still young and health care plans are too expensive.

> *I have to pay a little bit more of co-pay for my medication through work as compared to through the government plan. I have been able to see my doctor whenever I need.*
>
> *I have a case manager and they help arrange transportation for me to go to doctor visits and other appointments. They help schedule my appointment for check-ups and stuff.*
>
> *No, I don't have [health insurance]. I know it is too expensive, so I do not bother. I am young enough for now.*

When it comes to barriers that might prevent them from accessing health care services, 2 out of 18 respondents mentioned language as one of them. Other barriers mentioned included a lack of culturally specific treatment for both physical and mental health, cost of treatment, and access to transportation.

> *I need interpretation help when I go see the doctor because I know limited English. The doctor always asks me if I need interpretation help.*
>
> *[Barriers for me] would be language, cultural relevance of the treatment, and lack of culturally specific mental health services.*
>
> *I also work [in the] health care [industry]. So most of the clients I work with, most of the barriers that I encounter [in my job] are cost-related.*

Ability to communicate in English and Khmer

Twelve out of 18 respondents who were born in Cambodia and moved to the U.S. in their early adulthood shared that they have limited knowledge and ability to read and write Khmer because they were forced to leave schools early due to family poverty and responsibilities. These respondents are capable of speaking Khmer fluently. Even though these respondents have lived in the U.S. for many years, their ability to read, write, and speak English is still very limited.

Conversely, when asked about their family members' ability to communicate in Khmer, many of them shared that their older children are proficient in speaking Khmer, but are limited in reading and writing Khmer. For their family members who were born in the U.S., their ability to understand Khmer is greatly reduced due to lack of exposure to the language and attending schools where they are only taught in English..

> *I do not know how to read and write, but I can speak Khmer very well. My children were born here and they barely know Khmer.*
>
> *I do not read and write Khmer, but can speak Khmer. My parents and grandparents speak Khmer. I grew up in a white suburb. It is one of those things where I did not feel the need to learn it.*
>
> *I cannot read and write English, but I can very little speak English. My children are able to speak English very well and they graduated from high school [in the U.S.].*
>
> *I do not know much English at all. Usually, I will ask people to call my children instead [if I need an interpreter]. My children can read, write and speak English. They all go to work [in the U.S.]*

Almost all of the respondents shared that they have varying degree of difficulties in communicating in English or Khmer among their family members given the reasons described previously. Generally, older respondents are able to communicate in Khmer with their family members, but at a limited capacity, particularly when they communicate with the younger members of their family (like grandchildren who were born in the U.S.). Additionally, one younger respondent mentioned that it is not just the ability to speak the language that makes it difficult to understand each other, but also the culture of communication. This respondent said that they would prefer to speak English because it is hard to express feelings in Khmer and English provides more freedom that makes it easier for them to use.

> *My grandchildren cannot speak Khmer and we do not understand each other. With some simple words, they can understand me.*
>
> *It is difficult when communicating with my grandchildren. They keep shaking their heads or nodding when they need something. We normally just hug when they come visit. That is all I do with them. That is why I decided to live alone.*
>
> *Definitely, it is not language itself but also the culture of communication. My parents went through the Khmer Rouge [era]. My [the younger] generation looks at the communication more freely. If we were given a choice, we would choose to speak English, not because we speak English well, but the freedom in English language that makes it easier for us to use. When speaking to my parents, I have to be selective with the words that I use with them. It is hard to express feelings in Khmer language. When it is about emotions, it is most of the time about anger or frustration [in Khmer]. It is a culture thing and not a language thing.*

Electoral knowledge and understanding

Eleven out of 18 respondents noted that they have participated in politics, mostly by voting. For those who do not vote, it is because they are not American citizens and therefore are not legally allowed to vote. For many of the participants who were able to vote, the last time they did so was in the presidential election in 2020.

When asked how important it is for them to be able to vote, 11 out of 17 respondents find voting to be very important. However, 2 out of 17 respondents felt that their vote does not mean much or that they have other priorities in life to take care of first.

> *[Voting] It is important. Now that I am a citizen, I feel obliged to vote. Now that I have been getting the benefits from the government, it is important that I vote.*
>
> *It would say it is a 6 or 7 out of 10 [on level of importance of voting]. Sometimes, it doesn't feel like it means much.*
>
> *For me, [voting] is not as important as graduating from school, but I know that it is important to stay on top of politics. For me, it can be mentally taxing.*

Interview respondents were asked to share some of the important issues for them when choosing candidates for elected positions in their community. Only 4 out of 16 respondents were able to mention specific issues that they care about when voting for a candidate. The issues mentioned included the economy, public safety, immigration, climate justice, public housing, and racial equality. The other 12 respondents appeared to choose candidates based on how they felt or secondary information shared by their family members.

> *[Those issues include] women's rights, income inequality, immigration reform- a way to get citizenship, economy, affordable housing, and access to Khmer arts for the community.*
>
> *I do not know a lot about who is good or bad. When it is closer to the election, I will ask my children for their thoughts and opinions.*
>
> *Whatever the popular opinion is, I will go with them. It is because I do not know much and am not educated enough. Whenever I go to vote, someone has to help me fill out the paper.*

Immigration

When it comes to immigration-related services such as access to an attorney for legal counsel, language support, or sponsorship of a family member, all respondents shared that they currently do not need this type of support. Fourteen out of 18 respondents further alluded during the interviews that they or their family have used some immigration-related services in the past when they first arrived in the U.S. The immigration-related services they used include language translation, assistance to help fill out paperwork to sponsor family members, or to apply for citizenship. They mainly received these supports through family members, friends, or churches that they are affiliated with.

> *I do not think we need anything. We are either already naturalized or here in the U.S. now.*
>
> *When I first arrived in the U.S., I used to get help with sponsorship and finding ways to get settled from the government.*
>
> *It was a while ago so I do not quite remember. I remember that I got help from the local churches with sponsorship. When I first got here, I was placed in a small town in New York and I got help from a French man. Then eventually I moved to Saint Paul. I got help from the local church to sponsor my family.*

For respondents who have used immigration-related services in the past, Wilder staff asked them about their experiences accessing those services. Seven respondents mentioned a few barriers that they encountered throughout the process. Those barriers included lack of resources, information and knowledge about the process, cost of services, and language barriers. One participant shared that they were nervous before their interview because they do not speak English. They were so appreciative that they received some language assistance during the interview.

> *It is difficult because we have to make sure that we understand the [immigration] process. And this helps a lot when I have done it multiple times like after changing many jobs.*
>
> *[It is about] getting information and how to access them. The cost and languages were some big barriers. I do not know about the lawyer stuff.*
>
> *In the [immigration] process, I was scared because I don't speak the language. I was very nervous before the interview.*

Without sharing the person's information, respondents were asked whether they know of any Khmer community members who the U.S. is trying to deport to Cambodia or who are in ICE detention or already deported. Eight out of 18 respondents have heard of a Khmer community member who the U.S. is trying to deport and about 6 out of 18 heard of a Khmer community member who has already been deported. Only a few of the respondents know them personally.

> *Yes, I have heard of but [have] never met [any] of those people. I don't know the story either.*
>
> *We don't really know much about it. We don't really follow it and don't have Facebook accounts. We heard about it, but we do not really know them well.*
>
> *I know of two people who got deported, but I don't know the reason. I know because their parents used to live next to me.*

Wilder then asked the respondents to share their thoughts about the impacts that ICE detention or deportation has on the individuals and their family members. Eight respondents agreed that it is a difficult situation for those families to navigate. It can have negative impacts on family relationships because of the inability to connect with family members after the deportation. It is particularly hard for their children when one of the parents is deported. It is also about a matter of survival for the deported individuals. According to the respondents, many of these individuals were born in the U.S. and only know English. Hence, life in Cambodia can be challenging when they don't speak the language and they have to build new relationships and find jobs.

> *It must be so difficult for them to survive. If this were to happen to my family, I will cry every day. I don't know how they will survive in Cambodia without any knowledge and income. I think that I would feel the same for my children as other family's children.*
>
> *It is difficult when they used to live here in the U.S. We do not know if they will have any relatives there [in Cambodia]. It is a pity because we do not know what it will be like for them even though they are not our relatives.*
>
> *It is pity because when they get to Cambodia, they do not speak Khmer. Once it happens, it is very sad.*

Considerations for next steps

Based on the interviews with the Khmer community members, Wilder Research staff developed the following recommendations for MN8 to consider while planning next steps:

- **Create a new food shelf program** that is culturally specific to the Asian community in Minnesota, particularly the Cambodian community. According to the interview respondents, there are not many culturally specific Khmer food items available at food shelves that the community members need.
- **Provide culturally specific treatment or services, especially mental health services.** If this is not possible, MN8 should consider partnering with local organizations that provide culturally specific mental health services. MN8 can serve as a bridge between the community members and service providers.
  - Educate community members about mental health to help reduce stigma and provide resources on how and where to seek culturally specific mental health services.
- **Provide an education or resources to community members,** and partner with other community organizations around immigration and deportation.
- **Host events or activities where elders could teach younger generation about the importance of writing and reading Khmer and other cultural practices.** Given the generational divide on reading/writing/speaking the Khmer language, this could help connect families and community. This can potentially be very beneficial for the elders and the younger generations.
- **Educate and involve community members in politics.** MN8 and its partners should work together to help engage and increase awareness amongst Cambodian community members around political engagement, voting, and participation. It appears that many members understand the importance and value of voting but they seem to have limited knowledge about the voting process and how to evaluate candidates for elected positions in their community.
  - Educate community members about voting rights and steps on how to vote.
  - Create opportunities or platforms such as community events where members can participate to learn more about candidates who are running for elected positions.

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For more information

This summary presents key findings from interviews of Cambodian community members who live in Minnesota. For more information about this report, contact Bunchung Ly at Wilder Research, 651-280-2725.

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JUNE 2022