

# SPEAKING *for* OURSELVES



## The Immigrant Experience in the Twin Cities

Minnesota is home to more than 400,000 immigrants and refugees. The majority live in the Twin Cities. *Speaking for Ourselves: A Study with Immigrant and Refugee Communities in the Twin Cities* looks at the experiences of Hmong, Karen, Latino, Liberian, and Somali immigrants and refugees living in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

With the guidance of our advisory group (see a list on page 10), we interviewed 459 immigrants and adult children of immigrants about their lives – their families, education, jobs, health, and engagement in their communities to learn: What are the biggest needs of immigrant and refugee communities in the Twin Cities? What are the issues that are of greatest concerns? What assets are available to address them? For more information about the study methods and participants, see page 6.

This report summarizes key findings about the immigrant experience in the Twin Cities. Other *Speaking for Ourselves* summary reports focus on civic participation and social engagement; education; employment; health, mental health, and health care access; personal money management; and transportation, housing, and safety in the Twin Cities. All of these reports can be found at [wilderresearch.org](http://wilderresearch.org).



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## Cultural communities at-a-glance

The Latino population makes up the largest foreign-born population in Minnesota. About 7 percent of people living in the Twin Cities are Latino. The vast majority of these immigrants originate from Mexico, although Minnesota is also home to Latino immigrants from many other Central and South American countries. About 40 percent, or nearly 100,000, are foreign-born.

Hmong refugees began arriving in Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s following the Vietnam War, with a smaller second wave arriving in the early 2000s as a result of the closing of a refugee camp in Thailand. The Twin Cities metropolitan area is now home to over 64,000 Hmong residents, making it one of the largest Hmong populations in the country. Karen refugees have recently begun to settle in Minnesota fleeing the violence of the Burmese civil war. At least 3,000 refugees have settled in the Twin Cities; 85 percent came to the U.S. within the last 10 years.

Somali and Liberian refugees came to the United States following civil wars in their countries. Somali refugees first started arriving in the U.S. in large numbers during the 1990s. An estimated 32,000 or more Somalis reside in Minnesota, which makes it the largest Somali community in the United States. Over 10,000 foreign-born Liberian refugees have settled in the Twin Cities. About 80 percent have arrived within the last 15 years.

### What are some of the most important issues to remember when communicating the study results?

- Because each cultural community is unique, any and all comparisons made between or across communities should consider the unique historical, social, and economic contexts of these communities.
- Recognize the difference between perception data and incidence data. The *Speaking for Ourselves* study mainly focuses on perceptions of respondents from immigrant and refugee communities; this study does not provide representative incidence data.
- Because immigrant and refugee communities are smaller and close-knit (including, in some cases, the interviewers who worked on this study), and the questions may broach subjects that are sensitive, interpretation of findings must take social desirability bias into account.
- In order to ensure positive impact, data from *Speaking for Ourselves* should be used in conjunction with other data sources. Any policy or programming decisions should be made only in collaboration with affected immigrant and refugee communities.



## Health care, employment assistance, housing, and food support were identified as the most helpful resources for new immigrants.

We asked *Speaking for Ourselves* participants to tell us in their own words about the resources and supports that are most helpful to new immigrant families who are coming to Minnesota. Respondents most commonly named: housing (29%), employment assistance or training (24%), government agencies (20%), food assistance (SNAP, etc.) (20%), and health care coverage (20%). It is important to note that none of these resources was named by a majority of respondents; in other words, the resources and supports viewed as most helpful varied greatly both within and across cultural communities.

*“The most important support for new arrivals would be financial support such as health care, food, and shelter.” – Karen respondent*

*“A place to live, food, clothes, money—just like any other human being.” – Latino respondent*

*“Helping us with health care.” – Somali respondent*

*“Lots of assistance (like) food shelves, clothing, EBT food stamps, WIC, health care, medical assistance.” – Latino respondent*

## Basic needs (such as food, housing, and clothing) and jobs and employment training are the areas where more resources are needed to make the transition to Minnesota easier for immigrants and refugees.

When asked to tell us in their own words what service providers could do to make the transition easier for people from their cultural community as they move to Minnesota, *Speaking for Ourselves* participants most commonly mentioned basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing (21%). Jobs were the second most commonly mentioned need (14%). Again, the resources and supports viewed as most helpful varied greatly both within and across cultural communities.

*“If it's immigrants, organization should provide more translations and interpreters for better communication. We felt so lost. Everything was scary and to this day, language still remains a barrier.” – Hmong respondent*

*“They really need to help with jobs, finances, transportation, and professional training.” – Liberian respondent*

*“Provide education, employment, basic needs such as shelter, food.” – Karen respondent*

## Speaking for Ourselves participants want community leaders, organizations, and government agencies to learn more about their communities.

When asked to name **one thing** community leaders, organizations, and government agencies could do to support the quality of life for their cultural community, participants' responses were very mixed. The most common response was to learn about their community, which was mentioned by 1 out of 10 participants (10%). Providing more education was the next most common response (9%). Job opportunities especially for immigrants (6%), as well as general job assistance or more jobs (5%) were other commonly listed needs. Some participants also mentioned basic needs (6%). Five percent of all participants said that the currently available resources are good; nothing else is needed.

*"Get to know our culture, beliefs, and customs/families." – Latino respondent*

*"Network with Liberian associations and try to get to know what the needs are because the organizations know their people and their needs. Help tell them where the available resources and opportunities are located." – Liberian respondent*

*"Education. Karen people should be educated so they can establish a successful life in Minnesota." – Karen respondent*

## Over half of Speaking for Ourselves participants have felt they are not accepted at least once in Minnesota because of their race, culture, religion, or immigration status; 2 out of 10 participants says they feel this way once or twice a month or more often.

Almost one-third of Somali and Hmong participants indicated feeling not accepted because of their race, culture, religion, or immigration status once or twice a month or more often. Karen respondents were least likely to report that they had felt they were not accepted in Minnesota (Figure 1).

### 1. Regarding your experience in Minnesota, how often are you in situations where you feel you are not accepted because of your race, culture, religion, or immigration status?

|                           | All respondents (N=459) | Hmong (N=105) | Karen (N=101) | Latino (N=101) | Liberian (N=60) | Somali (N=69) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| At least once a day       | 3%                      | 1%            | 1%            | 3%             | 3%              | 9%            |
| At least once a week      | 5%                      | 6%            | 0%            | 6%             | 3%              | 10%           |
| Once or twice a month     | 13%                     | 25%           | 2%            | 13%            | 8%              | 12%           |
| A few times a year        | 22%                     | 32%           | 13%           | 25%            | 27%             | 10%           |
| Once a year or less often | 12%                     | 9%            | 11%           | 20%            | 15%             | 4%            |
| Never                     | 42%                     | 21%           | 65%           | 34%            | 38%             | 55%           |
| Don't know                | 4%                      | 7%            | 8%            | 0%             | 5%              | 0%            |



There was a variety in level of concern over how negative images and attitudes toward their cultural group or a lack of positive images affect their own self-image. Three-quarters of Karen respondents (76%) were “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned” about how their self-image is affected by images of their cultural group, whereas over half of Latino respondents (58%) felt only “a little” or “not at all concerned” about this issue.

### *Action steps and recommendations*

While presenting the preliminary results of this study to a variety of audiences and stakeholder groups – both service providers and cultural community members – a common suggestion that they requested we include in the recommendations from this report is to address the policy of only allowing newly arrived refugees to access their refugee resettlement support in the original state in which they arrive. This is problematic in Minnesota because many refugees who are initially placed in other states want to come to Minnesota, and to the Twin Cities in particular, because of our large and thriving immigrant communities and relative robust social service system. When a refugee moves to Minnesota from another state, they do not have access to any refugee resettlement funding once they arrive in Minnesota, and the funds from that original state do not follow them to Minnesota. These funds are a resource used to meet the basic needs that the immigrants and refugees who participated in this study say they need and appreciate. We should consider public policy solutions.

As a broader Twin Cities community, we should learn more about the needs, preferences, attributes, and assets of immigrant and refugee communities and the individuals and families that make up those groups, using studies like *Speaking for Ourselves* and other research and data, as well as by building relationships and working together in order to create a more welcoming environment and improve the quality of life for immigrants and refugees, and everyone, in our community.

# Study methods

A community advisory board made up of individuals who are members of and/or work with one or more of the participating communities provided guidance throughout this study. Wilder Research designed the survey instrument, developed and implemented the data collection approach, and conducted the analysis and reporting after gathering input from the advisory board and directly from the community.

An innovative data collection approach called Respondent Driven Sampling was used to identify and recruit eligible community members to participate in the study. This approach involves randomly selecting a handful of “seed” respondents within each community and asking those respondents to refer up to three additional people from their community. Those respondents are then asked to refer other respondents, ultimately creating respondent referral “chains” that in some cases carried out as far as 11 “waves” (Figure 2).

Adults who were born outside of the U.S., or had a parent who was born outside of the U.S., who were from one of the cultural communities included in the study, and who live in Hennepin or Ramsey counties were eligible to participate. Respondents who were referred to the study could **not** be a biological family member or live at the same address as the person who made the referral.

## ***Speaking for Ourselves*** **Buy-A-Question Partners**

The following partner organizations contributed to this study by funding one or more study questions and by committing to using the results to improve service access or delivery:

- Hennepin County Public Health
- Metropolitan Library Service Agency
- Minnesota Children’s Museum
- Minnesota Historical Society
- Minnesota Humanities Center
- Minneapolis Institute of Arts
- Science Museum of Minnesota
- Family and Community Knowledge Systems Project, Wilder Research, and Training and Development, Inc., with funding from the Kellogg Foundation



## 2. Respondent Driven Sampling: Number of seeds, referrals, and waves in the referral chains

| Total number of:            | All respondents <sup>a</sup> | Hmong | Karen | Latino | Liberian | Somali |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|----------|--------|
| Seeds                       | 52                           | 11    | 7     | 11     | 3        | 9      |
| Referrals                   | 407                          | 94    | 94    | 90     | 57       | 60     |
| Maximum number of waves     | --                           | 11    | 7     | 8      | 9        | 6      |
| Total number of respondents | 459                          | 105   | 101   | 101    | 60       | 69     |

<sup>a</sup> In addition to the five main cultural communities listed in the table, the “all respondents” group also includes 6 Lao, 7 Oromo, and 10 Vietnamese respondents. We did not obtain enough completed surveys from members of these cultural communities to be able to report data for these communities separately.

Wilder Research hired bilingual staff from participating communities to help with data collection; interviews were conducted in the respondents’ preferred languages, either over the phone or in-person. Respondents received \$20 for completing the survey and \$5 for each referral they made, up to three.

By using Respondent Driven Sampling, we were able to survey a group of study participants who are more representative of these cultural communities in the Twin Cities than if we had used convenience sampling methods (i.e., survey people who are all affiliated with one program, religious organization, housing site, neighborhood group, etc.) However, study participants are **not** statistically representative of their broader cultural communities because scientific random sampling was not used, and the full Respondent Driven Sampling method for weighting and analyzing data was not appropriate given these data.

Therefore, the data presented here should be interpreted with caution; we do not claim that the results exactly mirror the overall experiences of the broader community. Rather, we suggest that in many cases the data produced by this study are better than any other existing source of data about these immigrant and refugee communities in the Twin Cities. The key findings included in this report have been endorsed strongly enough by a wide enough range of study participants and community stakeholders to be considered valid and actionable for all practical purposes.

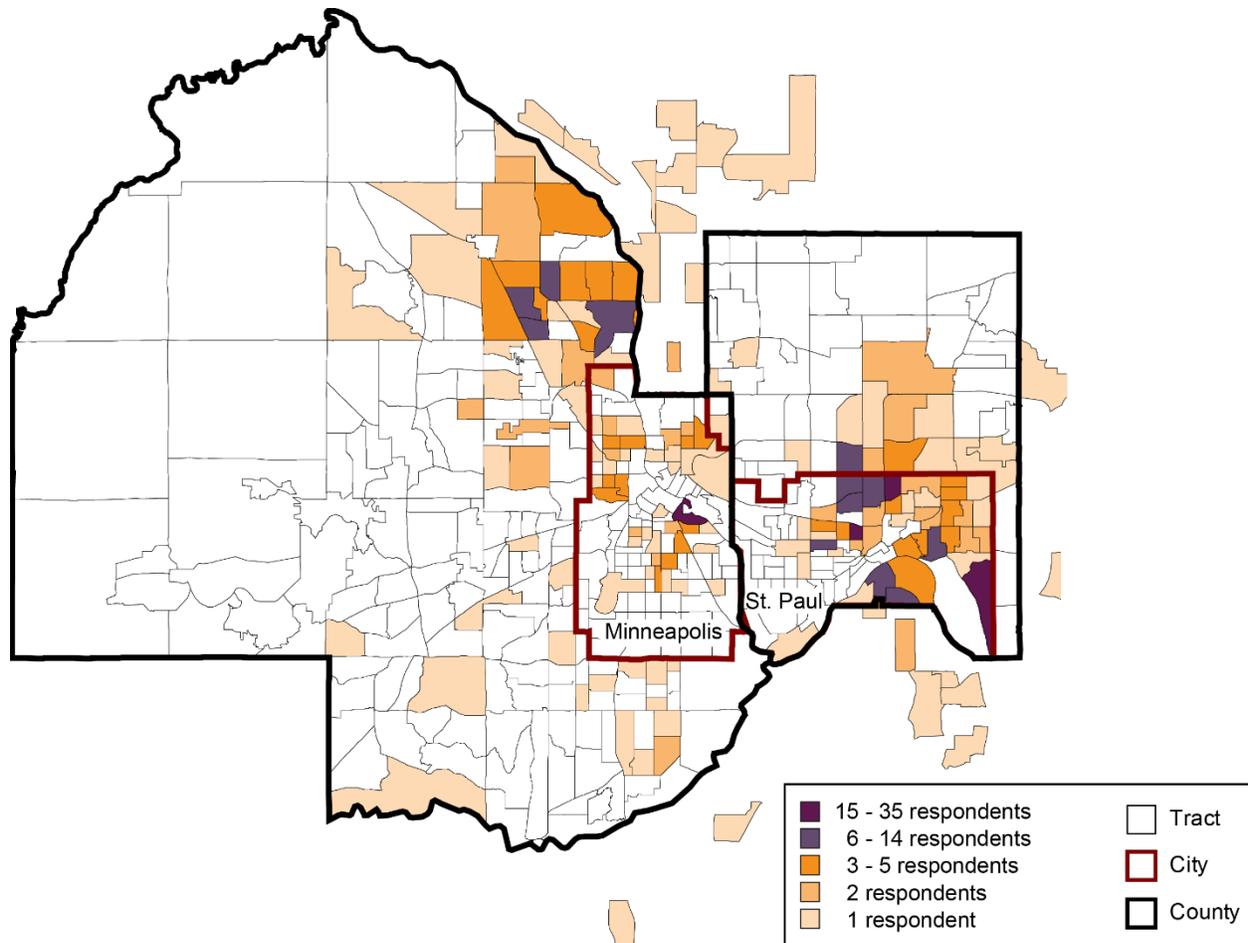
Differences among groups may be attributable to actual differences in their experiences, but may also be due to differences in survey responding patterns (e.g., some groups are more likely to give moderate responses, other groups are more likely to give extreme responses, regardless of the type of question). Therefore, as noted previously, comparison across communities should be done with caution and only with consideration of the unique contextual factors that influence these and any research findings.

See the detailed study methodology report and data book for more information about the study methods and limitations ([\*Speaking for Ourselves: A Study with Immigrant and Refugee Communities in the Twin Cities Data Book\*](#)).

# Study participants

A total of 459 immigrant and refugee community members participated in the study. Participants' locations (home address) generally reflect the geographical spread of these cultural communities in Hennepin and Ramsey counties (Figure 3). A few respondents live outside of the target counties.

### 3. Participants' locations in Hennepin and Ramsey counties



Most participants were born outside of the U.S. They are split nearly evenly between Hennepin and Ramsey counties, although some specific cultural communities are concentrated in one county or the other. Two-thirds of respondents are female; they are split fairly evenly across the age spectrum from younger adults to older adults. Although participants fall into all education levels, most have a high school diploma or less. Similarly, although all income ranges are reflected, over half have household incomes below \$30,000 annually (Figure 4).



#### 4. Demographic characteristics of study participants

|  | All respondents<br>(N=459) | Hmong<br>(N=105) | Karen<br>(N=101) | Latino<br>(N=101) | Liberian<br>(N=60) | Somali<br>(N=69) |
|--|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| <b>County of residence</b>                         |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| Hennepin   | 47%                        | 40%              | 0%               | 58%               | 85%                | 57%              |
| Ramsey   | 49%                        | 51%              | 100%             | 40%               | 10%                | 35%              |
| Other  | 4%                         | 9%               | 0%               | 2%                | 5%                 | 9%               |
| <b>Generational status</b>                         |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> generation – born outside the U.S. | 95%                        | 87%              | 100%             | 92%               | 98%                | 100%             |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation – born in U.S.          | 5%                         | 13%              | 0%               | 8%                | 2%                 | 0%               |
| <b>Gender</b>                                      |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| Female   | 65%                        | 61%              | 77%              | 81%               | 42%                | 55%              |
| Male   | 35%                        | 39%              | 23%              | 19%               | 58%                | 45%              |
| <b>Age</b>   |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| 18-29  | 25%                        | 26%              | 24%              | 20%               | 37%                | 18%              |
| 30-49  | 54%                        | 32%              | 68%              | 66%               | 48%                | 65%              |
| 50+ years  | 21%                        | 42%              | 8%               | 14%               | 15%                | 18%              |
| <b>Education</b>                                   |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| No formal education                                | 17%                        | 46%              | 21%              | 1%                | 0%                 | 10%              |
| Elementary/some high school<br>(no diploma)        | 27%                        | 21%              | 57%              | 30%               | 0%                 | 33%              |
| High school diploma or GED                         | 27%                        | 1%               | 20%              | 43%               | 17%                | 39%              |
| Some college/Associate degree                      | 21%                        | 0%               | 2%               | 19%               | 62%                | 15%              |
| Bachelor's degree or higher                        | 9%                         | 10%              | 0%               | 7%                | 22%                | 3%               |
| <b>Household income</b>                            |                            |                  |                  |                   |                    |                  |
| Under \$10,000                                     | 17%                        | 10%              | 26%              | 7%                | 7%                 | 33%              |
| \$10,000 to under \$20,000                         | 16%                        | 5%               | 24%              | 22%               | 12%                | 17%              |
| \$20,000 to under \$30,000                         | 22%                        | 8%               | 31%              | 28%               | 24%                | 22%              |
| \$30,000 to under \$50,000                         | 23%                        | 20%              | 12%              | 31%               | 34%                | 26%              |
| \$50,000 or more                                   | 9%                         | 21%              | 1%               | 7%                | 9%                 | 1%               |
| Don't know or refused                              | 13%                        | 37%              | 6%               | 4%                | 15%                | 0%               |

## Acknowledgements

Wilder Research would like to thank the study participants and their communities who entrusted us with their perspectives and shared with us their time. The participation of the *Speaking for Ourselves* advisory board members, our partners, and the community members through each phase of the project, made this study possible and made its findings more meaningful. We would also like to thank our Wilder Research and Wilder Foundation staff who contributed to the completion of this study.



### **Speaking for Ourselves Advisory Board**

**Sunny Chanthanouvong**, Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota  
**Angelique Cooper-Liberty**, Angel Eyes Foundation  
**Kim Dettmer**, Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota  
**Hsajune Dyan**, Saint Paul Public Schools  
**MayKao Fredericks**, Wells Fargo Foundation  
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**Thang Le**, Vietnamese Science & Cultural Center-Minnesota  
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**MyLou Moua**, Minneapolis Public Schools  
**Ahmed Muhumud**, City of Minneapolis (former)  
**Mimi Oo**, African & American Friendship Association for Cooperation and Development  
**Chanida Phaengdara Potter**, The SEAD Project  
**Francisco Segovia**, Pillsbury United Community – Waite House  
**Pablo Tapia**, La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles  
**Danushka Wanduragala**, ECHO  
**Pahoua Yang**, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation  
**Tony Yang**, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (former)  
**Ladan Yusuf**, CrossingBarriers

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451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700  
[www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)



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#### For more information

For more information about this report or the *Speaking for Ourselves* study, contact Nicole MartinRogers at Wilder Research, 651-280-2682.

Authors: Nicole MartinRogers and Anna Bartholomay

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