

# Growing Up Hmong American: Truancy Policy and Girls

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## Introduction

[1]

In 1994, *60 Minutes* and the *Atlantic Monthly* portrayed Hmong and other Southeast Asian youth as gangsters, delinquents, and overall low achievers. Since then, the image of the Southeast Asian as gangster has proliferated. No information exists on whether media claims are substantiated because of the difficulty breaking down "Asians" by the many ethnic groups which constitute this category. Popular media portrayals of Southeast Asian youth as "losers" leaves Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese communities with little defense against this stereotype.

[2]

Of all the minority groups, we know the least about Asians in

terms of school failure and crime, mostly because of low national representation due to historical immigration restrictions and the stereotype of Asians as model minorities. As the "successful" immigrants, Asians are often overlooked in educational research. Educational and social policy justifies the exclusion of Southeast Asians, the newest of wave of Asian immigrants to the United States in four ways.

[3]

The first justification for the exclusion of Southeast Asians from public policies is based on language. Because Southeast Asian adults are usually not native English speakers, program officials, policy makers, and school workers contend that too many complications arise due to metaphorical non-equivalence of concepts which limits effective communication (Dunnigan, 1993). Policy makers are less willing to tackle a problem if the population does not speak English. Second, and following from the first point, Southeast Asians are often not registered voters, so there is little political accountability towards this population [{1}](#). Third, although Southeast Asians have settled in concentrated pockets such as the Twin Cities, overall low national representation and lack of information about Southeast Asians still serves to exclude them from social policy decisions at state and local levels. Potential reasons why national numbers are used to craft state and even local policies may be due to the more frequent use of national data sets in setting social policies and the lack of political representation of Southeast Asians in local and state government. While basing local and state policies on national representation may seem irrational, there is nonetheless a common perception among state and local public officials and policy makers that Asians are not a substantial group [{2}](#).

[4]

Lastly, cultural differences in family and social systems of Southeast Asian groups are often used as an excuse for public officials and policy makers to tell Southeast Asians to deal with the problem themselves because U.S. law cannot pass

judgment over cultural systems (Moua, 1996). Although policy makers might argue that this is an attempt to be culturally sensitive and not culturally negligent, once a case enters the courts, it is usually because Southeast Asian cultural systems have failed to resolve the problem. The re-direction of such court cases back into Southeast Asian communities may deny the responsibility of the judicial system to be held accountable to Southeast Asian communities. A distinction must be made between the incorporation of culture into court and policy solutions and a denial of the responsibility of finding a solution due to perceived cultural variations {3}.

[5]

In this article, I examine the impact of a general county-wide truancy policy in Ramsey County, Minnesota, on a significant subset of the school age population in the St. Paul Public Schools (Independent School District 625), Hmong students, who have been largely ignored by public policy makers. Specifically, I measure the extent of truancy among Hmong adolescents using descriptive statistics and interviews with Hmong girls. The combined approach of using descriptive statistics and then qualitative methods provides a more complete picture of what is happening in the lives of truant Hmong girls. My focus on Hmong girls as opposed to Hmong boys is due to a common perception among community workers and school officials that Hmong girls are truant at higher rates than Hmong boys.

[6]

I collected data on the extent of Hmong truancy in the St. Paul Public Schools through the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) to ascertain whether the claim that Hmong girls are skipping school at a higher rate is justified. Since I wanted to contribute to an understanding of adolescent Hmong girls who are chronically truant, I interviewed seven Hmong girls who were chronically truant {4}. The intent of this study is to provide policy makers and truancy intervention workers with research to inform public policies and program developers about Hmong girls, a subset of the student population in the St. Paul School District for whom school is

not working.

[7]

This article is organized into five sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the changing demographics of the St. Paul Public Schools. The second section is a brief literature review of truancy studies and studies on Hmong girls and education. The third section focuses on the methodology or research process and the fourth section shows the results of the study project. Finally, in the fifth and last section, I integrate some of the results and suggest five areas for policy and program development.

### **Changing Demographics in the St. Paul Schools**

[8]

Asian students are the fastest growing group of school age children in the St. Paul School District. In 1976, the entire St. Paul School District enrolled only 96 Asian students {5}. White students numbered 44, 328. Twenty-years later in 1996, there are 10, 530 Asian students enrolled and the White student population has dwindled to 19, 372. The 1990 Census, however, shows that the majority of residents living in St. Paul are still White. St. Paul might be experiencing what Palmer (1994) calls an "Asian Invasion" in the public schools (see Figure 1). However, declining White student populations may also reflect other changes such as the "baby bust" among Whites and general suburban drift. Today, Asian students are the largest minority group in the St. Paul Public Schools comprising 24.8% of the total number of students. African Americans are a close second at 21.3%, followed by Hispanic Americans, 6.7%, and American Indians, 1.5%. The combined number of students of color, 54.3%, exceeds the White population by 8.6%.

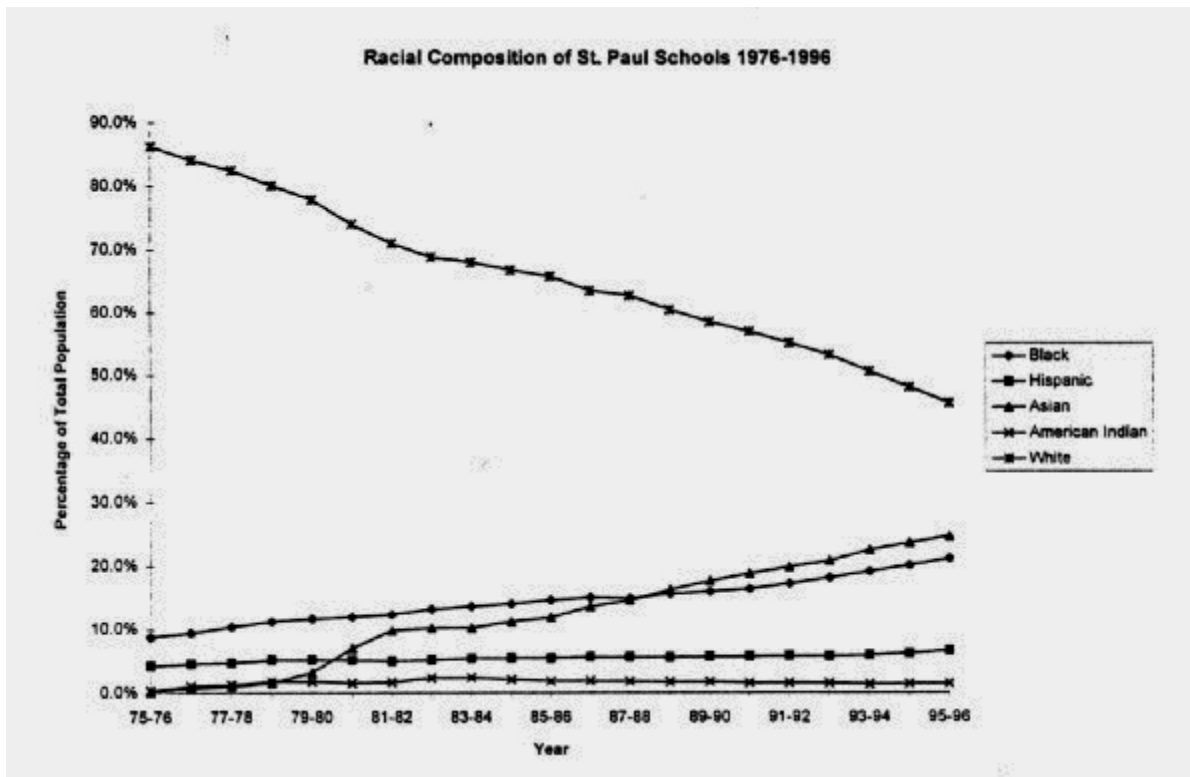


Figure 1 Population trends in the St. Paul Public Schools, District 625, in the past twenty years. The White student population has been gradually declining over the past twenty years.

[9]

A simple breakdown by home language of Asian students in the standard senior and junior high schools show that Hmong language speakers alone comprise 18.5% of the total secondary school population followed by Vietnamese, 1.8%, Khmer 1.2%. and Lao .24% speakers {6}. St. Paul Public Schools have been challenged in the past twenty years to educate Southeast Asian children, particularly Hmong children, in a satisfactory manner. Unfortunately, the St. Paul School District has failed to meet the challenge of educating many Hmong students. Moreover, the situation in St. Paul reflects the larger discontent with public school systems and the inability of public schools to manage and meet the challenge of social and economic changes.

[10]

An example of this failure is the lack of a coherent policy

that addresses Hmong truancy even though truancy is a problem which program officers and community workers see that the local ethnic mutual assistance programs cannot address alone (Saykao, 1996). Although strides have been made in the past year at a county wide level, there is still more work to be done. As the first generation of Hmong Americans born in the United States, the Hmong children who are becoming lost in the school system will set the stage for successive generations. Lack of information documenting the extent of the Hmong truancy problem can be cited as a justification for a lack of action. Thus, information documenting Hmong truancy is invaluable at local policy levels because of the high concentrations of Hmong children enrolled in the St. Paul Public Schools and in other areas with high concentrations of Hmong.

[11]

The Hmong population is currently skewed towards children because of adult deaths due to disease in Thai refugee camps in the late 1970's and early 1980's and higher birth rates in the United States. About 58% of the Hmong population was 17 or under in 1990. Children under 11 made up 42.5% of the total Hmong population {7}. These children are the first generation of Hmong to be born in the U.S. and 88% of the Hmong children under age 11 were born in the United States (Yang and Murphy 1993). Today, these children would be secondary school age, the age when most children start becoming actively truant. Many of these children's parents were teenagers when they arrived in the United States.

[12]

Low representation of Asian students no longer justifies the exclusion of Asians from public policies. As the composition of the St. Paul Public Schools continues to change and new policy initiatives occur, solid information on Hmong students must be collected to aid effective decision making. We know little about how Hmong youth experience education in the United States even though there is now a large percentage of Hmong students in public schools.

[13]

Information is available on truancy on Whites, Blacks and Latinos, but whether the experiences of Hmong students parallel other minority groups is unknown. Currently, policy is formulated in the absence of such information and based on the experiences of other minority groups and the larger White population that may or may not be similar to the Hmong experience. Understanding truancy and the life experiences of Hmong students is crucial for policy formulation. Moreover, because Hmong girls are perceived to be more troublesome and chronic, it is particularly important to understand what is happening in the lives of these young adolescents. In localities such as the Twin Cities and Wausau, Wisconsin, where in some schools Hmong children now make up more than 50% of elementary age children, the information presented in this article will be particularly beneficial (Palmer, 1994).

### **Literature Review**

[14]

There is very little literature that deals specifically with truancy in terms of how students first start becoming truant. Rather, truancy problems are usually linked to individual behavior or to the family (Levine, Metzendorf & Van Borkirk, 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Tygert, 1991; Gove and Crutchfield, 1982). Family size and structure effects on delinquency have fascinated researchers for over four decades. Truancy is often studied as an indicator of subsequent delinquency. Still other researchers have focused on school-related factors such as school commitment, ability tracking, and organizational structure (Kelly and Pink, 1973; Nielson and Gerber, 1979; Calabrese, 1988; Enomoto, 1994). Researchers have found that ability grouping in the form of within school tracking may contribute significantly to the experiences of marginalized students, especially minorities, and may affect truancy and dropping out behavior (Calabrese 1988; Wiatrowski, 1982).

[15]

Truancy is a "status offense," or a crime resting solely on one's status as a minor. An adult who is truant from work risks other sanctions, such as dismissal. Encouraging students to stay in school ensures an educated populace. An educated populace holds civic benefits such as international competitiveness and social activism towards public good. Indeed, the State assumes that parents are not always able to provide necessary incentives for school attendance and enforces compulsory education through the juvenile justice system to make both parents and children obey attendance laws.

[16]

Girls, once arrested, are more likely than boys to be charged for status offenses, including truancy, "running away" and curfew violations (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 1992; FBI Uniform Crime Reports; Johnson, 1986). In concordance with this evidence, there is the perception among social workers and school workers that Hmong girls are truant at a much higher rate than Hmong boys. The general explanation offered for the higher rate of arrest for girls for status offenses is that the juvenile justice system is tailored for boys and that girls are more likely to be arrested because of gender role expectations (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 1992). The statistical component of this research project addresses the question of whether Hmong girls experience similar biases in the juvenile justice system. The qualitative component suggests reasons for a higher rate of court charges for truancy among girls if indeed court appearances are higher for Hmong girls.

[17]

Little empirical information exists on Hmong girls and how they experience school. Existing studies on Hmong girls and schooling focus on pregnancy, marriage, and subsequent drop-out behavior (Walker, 1989; Goldstein, 1987; Hutchinson and McNall 1994). No literature exists on Hmong girls who are



truant or delinquent. Worse, there is no coherent theory of female delinquency; due to a historical bias toward studying boys and delinquency in criminology at the exclusion of girls (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1992; Shoemaker, 1990). Furthermore, as successive Hmong refugee waves supplant older ones, new acculturation dynamics arise to further complicate the picture.

## **Methodology**

### **Statistical Data**

[18]

Truancy data from the St. Paul Public Schools were collected through the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP), a three-step warning process that leads to subsequent court action if the student and parents fail to comply {8}. If a student is absent without lawful excuse for three or more class periods on three days and is in middle school, junior high, or senior high, the student is referred to TIP. According to new legislation passed by the Minnesota Legislature in 1995, these youth aged 12-16 are legally defined as continuing truants.

[19]

Step 1 identifies the students through a school referral to TIP. Parents and students must then attend a meeting with the Assistant District Attorney of Ramsey County who informs them of the legal and social consequences of truancy if truancy behavior continues. If the student and parents do not attend this initial meeting, a second letter is sent out, and if the family still does not comply or if student attendance does not improve after the first meeting, a Student Attendance Review Team (SART) meeting date is set. According to the most current quarterly report, meeting attendance for St. Paul Schools was 60 % (Truancy Intervention Program Quarterly Report January 1, 1996). In the SART meeting, the Assistant

District Attorney General, a social worker, and a probation officer meet with the student and the parents to discuss the legal ramifications of truancy and to negotiate a contract to improve school attendance with the parent and student. Finally, if the student fails to comply with the SART contract and attendance fails to improve, a truancy petition is filed for an expedited hearing date at court.

[20]

I examined referrals from secondary schools in the St. Paul Public Schools to TIP, SART meetings, and court petitions for the period between September 1995 and March 1996 {9}. This is the first year of operation for TIP so comparison with previous years was impossible. Schools referred students to TIP with varying amounts of personal information, although all schools were encouraged to use a standard referral format. Consequently, it was hard to compare all students by race, sex, age, and grade. However, it was possible to compare Hmong students to non-Hmong students because Hmong names are easy to recognize {10}.

[21]

Due to variations in reporting, Step 1 referral records were the worst-maintained records and court records were the best-maintained. Because of the lack of information on initial referrals, however, comparisons of Hmong to any other racial group was impossible. When it was possible, Hmong truants were compared to non-Hmong. *Non-Hmong* is a composite of all other racial groups. Referral and SART lists were cross-checked with meeting attendance sheets to determine accuracy of counts. Descriptive statistics were used to provide percentage and proportional breakdowns of data collected by grade, sex, age, and ethnicity/race. I excluded from the analysis referrals that were "false alarms", i.e. the student had transferred without notifying the school, or the student was already on probation. False alarms accounted for about 5% of truancy referrals and there was no difference in the false alarm rate between Hmong and non-Hmong.

[22]

There were some other program pitfalls related to TIP in addition to false referrals. Hmong girls often take care of their own truancy violation letters because they are the ones who speak English. One of the girls noted that the only reason her mom knew she was truant was the color of the letter that was sent home. She also said her parents were never told she was truant because she deliberately kept her phone number a secret. When the attendance office asked her what her number was, she would answer, "I don't know." My brief investigation of TIP program also showed that although Hmong community agencies had been initially asked to give recommendations in the program implementation phase, recommendations were not considered until after the first TIP meeting in which Hmong parents failed to understand the proceedings that were conducted only in English.

### **Qualitative Data**

[23]

Intensive semi-structured one hour interviews, observations, and field notes were used to collect information regarding Hmong girls and their experiences of truancy [{11}](#). No theory of truancy exists and thus, no hypotheses are available to be tested. This approach is appropriate because naturalistic inquiry is theory-generating as opposed to theory-testing (Merriam 1988). As a Hmong woman interviewing Hmong girls who were truant, I held personal biases. Consequently, I felt that a qualitative case study approach was best since naturalistic inquiry assumes multiple realities and interactive development of meaning that is not value-neutral (Turner, personal communication, 1996). Intensive interviews were better than focus groups because of ethical issues that might have arisen when interviewing juveniles about sensitive issues regarding family and home life in a group format. Finally, interviews gave me the opportunity to ask more informal questions at the end without the distraction of others. The Hmong girls needed the time after the interview to debrief and talk more about the subject of truancy if they

chose to.

### **The Sites: Peem Tsheej and Project HOPE**

[24]

Although my study had no true "research site," I recruited subjects from two well-known Hmong mutual assistance agencies in St. Paul with programs that target delinquent Hmong girls. In the fall of last year, I started mentoring a young Hmong girl at Hmong American Partnership (HAP) and getting involved with the girls at Peem Tsheej ("Struggling for Success") and their mothers. Peem Tsheej has two components, but I drew girls from Peem Tsheej I, a prevention program for at-risk Hmong girls. The other program, Project HOPE (Hmong Opportunities Promoting Empowerment) at Lao Family, was my second research site. Project HOPE started last year as a program to support at-risk Hmong girls involved in gangs, truant behavior, or other delinquent activities. Both programs are well-respected and work closely with TIP to enforce truancy laws and work through cultural barriers. These community agencies have responded to a need unmet by larger institutional structures.

### **Subjects**

[25]

I chose chronic truants from a list of Hmong girls aged 12-18 that social workers at HAP and Lao Family thought would be good subjects. For the purpose of this study I defined chronic as one or more of the following: 1) at least one court appearance related to truancy; 2) at least 40 days absent without an excuse in one semester [{12}](#); or, 3) at least one referral to HAP or Lao Family for truancy via the school or some other institution. This definition is different from that of a *continuing truant*, a term Minnesota and TIP uses to identify truant behavior for intervention. Hmong girls were drawn from both Minneapolis and St. Paul,

under the assumption that their life experiences would be similar enough for comparison although truancy interventions might be different. However, this difference might shed light on how girls perceived the truancy intervention systems in Minneapolis and St. Paul. No effort was made to choose equal numbers from St. Paul and Minneapolis. The primary objective was to recruit Hmong girls who were willing to participate and share their experiences with the researcher.

[26]

I had no knowledge of the complete list of Hmong girls who were chronic truants {13}. The social workers contacted the parents of the girls to introduce the investigator's project and/or scheduled a home visit with the parents and girls to talk about the project. I went with the social worker for a home visit or made phone contact with the parents and girls to set up a time for a home visit by myself. In-person recruitment was crucial to the success of the project because most of the parents did not speak English fluently. This also gave me an opportunity to assess parents' opinions and perceptions of their daughters. Furthermore, with Hmong, it is appropriate to visit to establish credibility. Recruitment through the phone or contact on paper would have been ineffective; it would have been interpreted as disrespectful, particularly from a Hmong woman who is supposedly "educated" in the American sense but perhaps "unHmong." They would not have trusted me or my motives {14}. At the home visit, if the girl was present, I explained the purpose of the project and the consent process. If parents and girls were willing to participate, consent forms were thoroughly explained in Hmong and English and then signed. If the girl was not present but was willing to participate, the girl signed the consent form directly prior to the interview. All families were then mailed or given a copy of the consent form.

### **Significant Demographic Facts on the Hmong Subjects**

[27]

I interviewed a total of seven Hmong girls. Two Hmong girls

from Minneapolis and five Hmong girls from St. Paul. The average age of the adolescent Hmong girls was 14 (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the demographic survey). On average, girls started skipping school in the 7th grade or at age 12. The subject who was a junior in high school had only attended 15 school days in the past semester and was not actively trying to go back to school. Although she had not officially dropped out, she did not see herself returning to school. Four of the seven girls had skipped school more than 13 times in the last month, appeared in court at least once, and been placed on probation for truancy. One Hmong girl had been to court three times. Three of the subjects had been caught actively "ditching" more than once in the month before the interview.

[28]

All subjects were born in the United States. Six of the seven families arrived in the United States between 1976-1980 when there were relatively few Hmong living in the Twin Cities. Hmong girls in the study who were chronically truant came from large families with about 7 siblings in each family. Two of the subjects were sisters. Furthermore, all had at least one or more siblings who were truant. In two of the subjects' families, four of six children were truant. Only one set of parents spoke English fluently. All other parents could understand some English but were not fluent.

### **Qualitative data collection process**

[29]

Interviews were conducted at a local women's organization or at the interviewer's home in Minneapolis. Interviewing Hmong girls at HAP and Lao Family would have been distracting since it was not a neutral atmosphere but a place subjects went to for delinquency "reform" activities. Upon arrival to the interview site, I explained the study purpose, interview, re-affirmed their consent to be taped (this was optional), and asked subjects to fill out a short demographics form. At the

completion of the demographics form, I started the interview.

[30]

My interview questions included areas relating to neighborhoods and background, schools, family, adults and peers, truancy, and the future. At the end of the interview, I thanked them for their participation and then turned off the tape recorder. Afterwards, subjects and I usually fell into conversation about issues we had touched upon in the interview. These discussions are documented in the field notes. To thank girls for participating in the study, I offered them either a gift certificate to a movie at General Cinema Theaters or a movie with me if they lacked available transportation [{15}](#).

### **Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures**

[31]

I transcribed the interviews *verbatim*, only editing areas that were clearly extraneous or irrelevant. Field notes from observations and post-interview discussions were kept as supplementary information but not added to the data analysis unless the conversation was relevant to truancy. Through field notes, observations, and transcribed interviews, eight broad categories emerged: neighborhoods, schools, family, peers, adults, relatives (as in extended kin), truancy policy alternatives, and a miscellaneous category that included self-reflections and violence. I coded the transcripts using a different color for each category, writing notes alongside a 2" margin on the side of each transcription. When I was finished, I cut sections of the transcripts and categorized them using large manila envelopes coded by the color. After this was completed, I took the fragments in each envelope out and subcategorized them further into smaller related ideas. During this process, I also cross-checked my first round of coding to ascertain whether or not particular data would fit better under another sub-category.

[32]

When I had sufficiently cross-checked with my coding scheme, including subcategories, I then pasted each sub-category onto 11" X 18" parchment paper so that I could see and read all dialogue and notes at one glance. Thus, my analysis was four-tiered. First, I cleaned up my transcripts and field notes for relevance. Second, I categorized data into eight broad areas. Third, I sub-categorized under the broader categories. Fourth, throughout the entire process, I cross-checked my accuracy of coding.

[33]

Because ethnic breakdowns were not available through TIP, I had to build a data set from scratch using TIP information. As noted earlier, I used the 18 Hmong Clan names to identify race for Hmong students. In cases where it was unclear whether a student was Hmong, I cross-checked the student's clan with parents' names [{16}](#). SPSS and Excel were used to sort and code quantitative data into appropriate race and gender categories. The qualitative research provided a useful supplement to the descriptive statistics by asking "why" questions that numbers cannot answer. The strength of using qualitative research is that it shows a snapshot of the lives of these Hmong girls that makes them into one of the statistics in the TIP process. In an adult world where children and other marginalized groups go unheard, the qualitative approach gives voice to these individuals who usually have no voice in tailoring policies and programs.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics and the Extent of Truancy**

[34]

I examined 1042 school truancy referrals on a case-by-case



basis, the total number of school truancy referrals since TIP started in September of 1995 to March 1996. Roughly 30% or 309 of the 1042 referrals were Asian. Hmong students comprised 92% of Asian referrals. Hmong students alone accounted for 27% of school truancy referrals. Equal percentages of Hmong girls and boys were referred in this initial TIP referral process. Hmong students who continued to SART meetings accounted for 24% of the total 169 SART meetings through March of the 1995-1996 school year. Again, approximately, equal numbers of Hmong girls and boys proceeded to this next stage. Finally, there were 19 Hmong students who went further in the TIP process to court, which comprises 23% of the 82 students charged in court with truancy. Almost 70% of Hmong students petitioned in court were Hmong girls (see Figure 2). This evidence confirms the perception of community workers that Hmong girls are more "chronic" truants than Hmong boys.

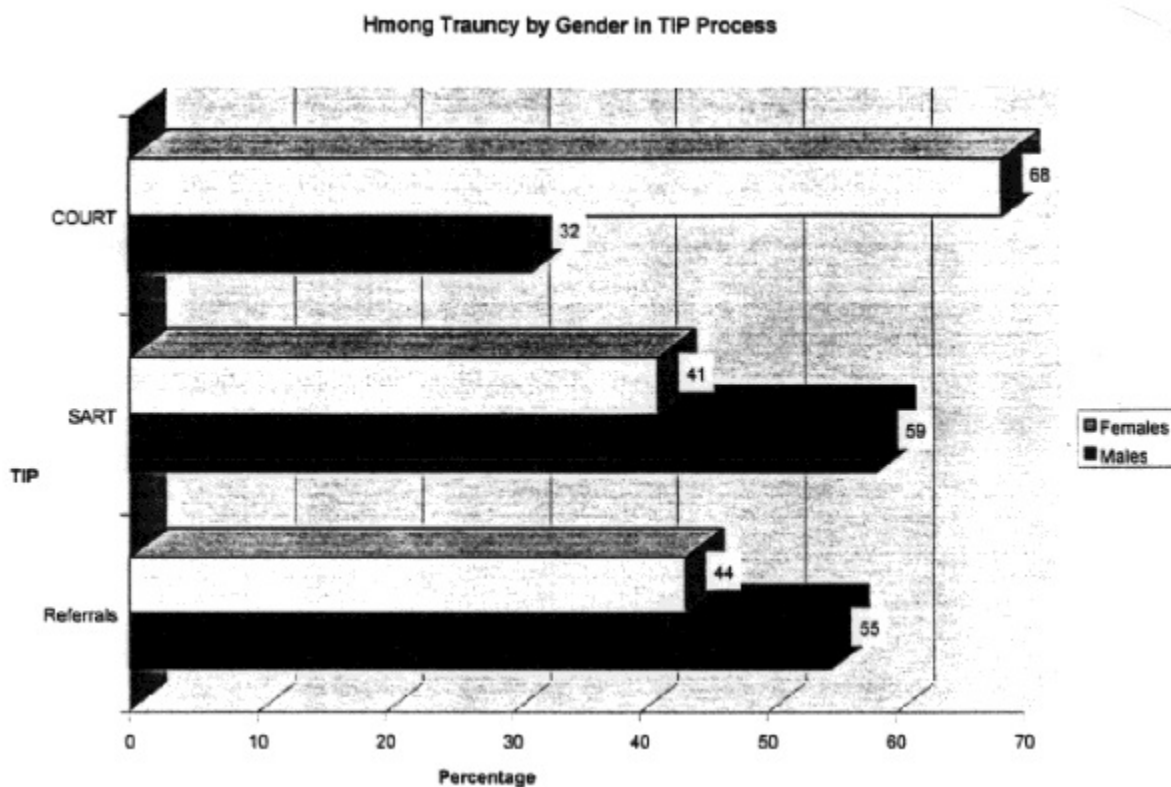


Figure 2 Hmong truancy rates by gender through the three-step TIP process.

[35]

Thirteen of the 19 Hmong truancy court cases were female. In other words, there were twice as many Hmong girls who appeared in court as Hmong boys in the 1995-96 school year. For non-Hmong, however, there were 43 males and 20 females charged with truancy, a reversal of the pattern for Hmong adolescents.

[36]

The reversed gender pattern for Hmong adolescents versus non-Hmong adolescents who are petitioned in court can be interpreted in two ways. First, since there is no way of comparing Hmong with other racial groups, it is premature to conjecture about possible gender effects. However, because official statistics also reflect school and juvenile justice practices, the result may be interpreted as the manifestation of people's expectation of Hmong girls to be more compliant and docile than Hmong boys. Probation officers and school social workers are less tolerant of contract violations for Hmong girls than for Hmong boys and so they file petitions against girls more frequently than boys. Perhaps because Asian females are usually expected to be quiet and subservient, officers are less likely to be tolerant of SART violations from Hmong girls. The Hmong pattern is similar to the normal pattern in the juvenile justice system for status crimes: girls are more likely to be referred to and charged in court with status crimes. If this interpretation is true, existing truancy policy could remain basically the same for Hmong and non-Hmong as a universal county wide policy [{17}](#).

[37]

On the other hand, it may not really matter what is happening with other racial groups since something significant must be happening for Hmong girls between the SART meeting and the filing of a court petition if rates are twice that of Hmong boys. This statistic, in and of itself, is important to examine without comparison to other racial or ethnic groups. As a whole, non-Hmong and Hmong gender patterns are reversed, perhaps because there are different gender effects at work between a SART meeting and a petition at court. A possible

explanation is that Hmong girls tend to be more "hard-core" and rebellious once they start skipping and are less likely to follow through with SART contracts. A factor that may contribute to this non-compliant attitude is the restrictiveness of female roles in the Hmong community that provoke rebellion. In this case, a more targeted policy approach is appropriate because Hmong girls may have special complications due to other factors that influence truancy behavior. Of course, the explanation behind a higher rate of court appearances for Hmong girls might be a combination of both interpretations suggested. The finding that there are more Hmong girls petitioned at court for truancy confirms the perception that more girls are chronically truant, but not necessarily that more girls are continual truants.

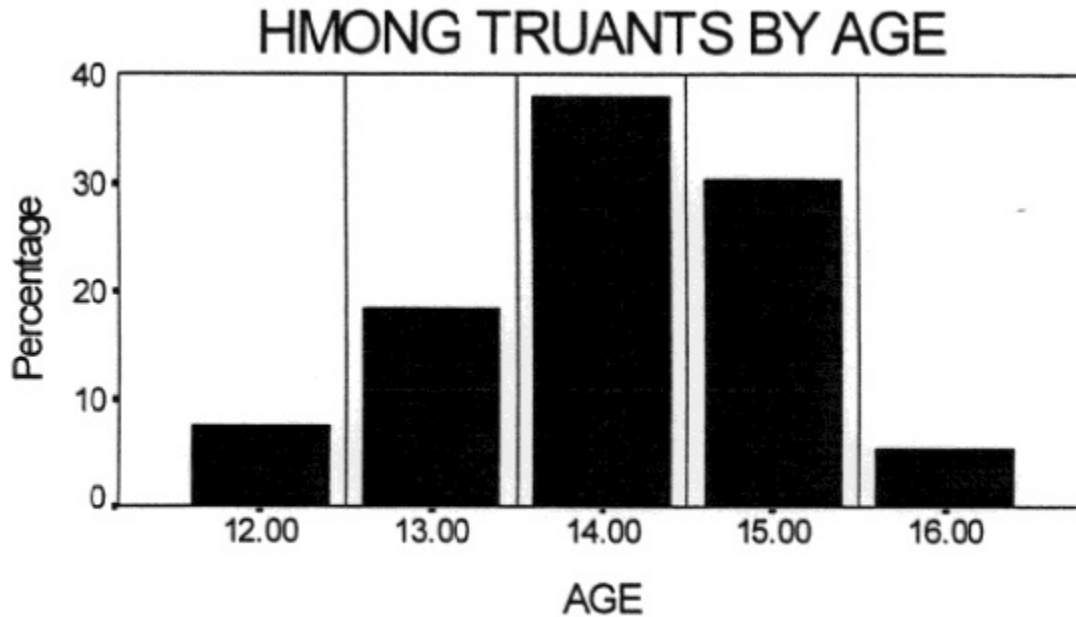
[38]

There were no surprising differences in age and grade for Hmong and non-Hmong truancy rates. The age at which there is the highest frequency of truancy is 14. The graph for non-Hmong looks almost the same for truants by age, peaking at 14 and tapering off immediately at 15 years of age. One potential reason for the tapering off at 15 years of age is that the juvenile justice system or TIP process does actually work to reduce those students who are marginally truant. Another related explanation might be that after age 14, youth are able to identify with other peers who are less likely to get them in trouble after an initial negative experience with truancy.

[39]

Most students who are 14 are in 9th grade, a transitional year from junior high to high school (see Figure 3). Court records also show a substantial number those charged with truancy are in 7th grade which is another transitional year from elementary school to junior high. For court petitions, there is actually a decline after 9th grade, perhaps because youth who are chronically truant have already been treated or have been incarcerated because of other non-status criminal activities. The peaking of truancy and court appearances during transitional years in school suggests that there is an

intersection of developmental and psychological needs in conjunction with school changes that may prompt youth to start skipping, regardless of ethnic or racial background starting in 7th grade.

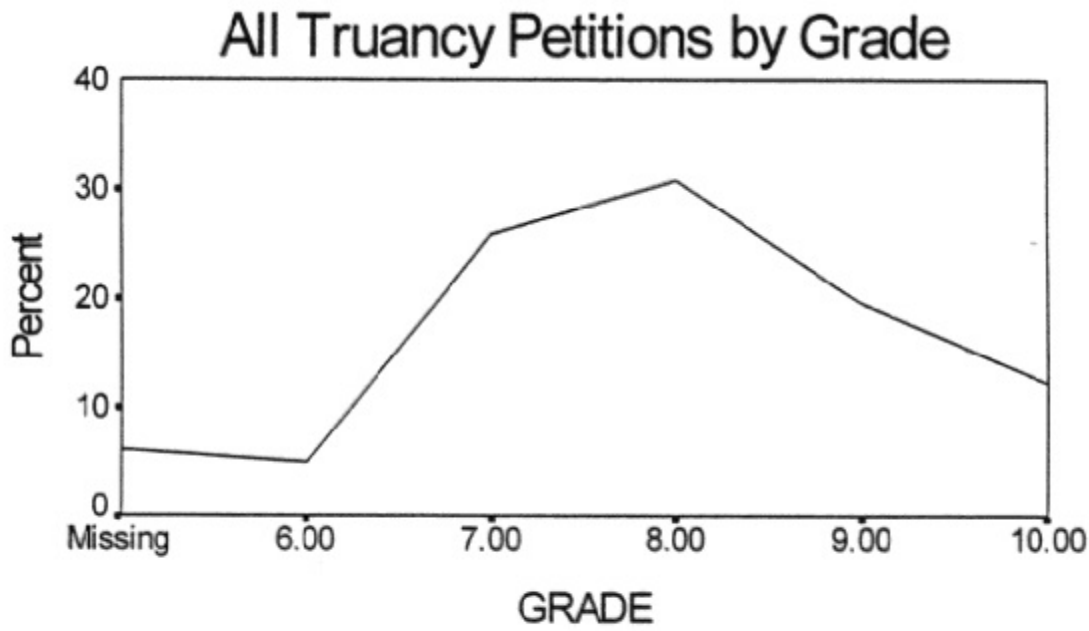


N=268 Hmong Continual Truants by Age

*Figure 3* Hmong adolescents who are continual truants referred to the Truancy Intervention Program from St. Paul Secondary Schools.

[40]

Unlike referrals for continuing truants, court cases peak in 8th grade and taper off in 9th grade. However, these trends probably reflect the same phenomenon of developmental and emotional needs intersecting with peer and school pressures that make adolescents susceptible to skipping (see Figure 4). Not surprisingly, results indicate that by the time teenagers are referred to court for truancy, they have already participated in criminal activities. Exactly 50% or 41 of the 82 truancy court petitions were simultaneously filed with petty offense charges, indicating that truancy as an indicator of participation in crime is at least accurate for about half of the youth considered to be chronic truants.



N= 82 Truancy Petitions in Court

*Figure 4* Court petitions in the St. Paul Public School District for all truancy petition cases, Fall 1995 - Spring 1996.

### Qualitative Results

[41]

Qualitative evidence allows a glimpse into the everyday life experiences of Hmong girls. In most instances, the researcher has interpreted the pooled results. Readers should be aware that the researcher is interpreting from every day lived experiences of Hmong girls who are chronically truant. Thus, where causal inferences are implied, they should be read with caution. Understanding what these girls think contributes to their truancy is invaluable because it is for these actors that truancy policies are tailored.

### Neighborhoods

[42]

The parents of Hmong girls who are chronically truant have lived in the United States since the early 1980's, but they have been unable to move out of public housing or into neighborhoods with a higher socio-economic status, unlike many of their fellow first-wave Hmong refugees. As with most other working poor, the concentration of poverty into distressed urban neighborhoods is linked to larger socioeconomic forces (Hoizer & Vroman, 1992). Parents' inability to move out of neighborhoods has shaped the life experiences of these Hmong girls and truancy that often lead to subsequent delinquency. In my conversations with Hmong parents in the home visits, parents expressed that they thought their children were delinquent simply because of living in *chaw phem*, a "bad area." The feeling that they were living in a "bad" area was not tied to race but to the violence in the neighborhood and the physical deterioration of the neighborhood.

[43]

Hmong girls in the study sample were acutely aware of the violence, quality of housing and environment, and racial divisions in the their neighborhoods. There is considerable urban stress in the neighborhoods where these girls live. All the girls said that "gang banging" between Bloods and Crips was common {18}. Pang {19} described how when she came home from the mall, an opposing gang opened fire at her friend's car in the parking lot because he was an "enemy." Her distress was evident during the discussion as was Kate's who told me that:

There was a shoot-out over two months ago and there was like little kids out there and they didn't care about the little kids getting shot. Back then there was so many shoot-outs in X-neighborhood that I couldn't even go outside, but I just didn't like the violence.

[44]

When I asked Xay, who was 14, to describe her neighborhood, she answered, "It's very junky." She also responded that if she could change anything about her neighborhood, it would be "clean with no gangs around." Likewise, another subject said she would like to "...fix up the houses cause our house is really messy looking down {20}." Contrary to the peaceful exterior of St. Paul neighborhoods when one drives around, neighborhoods are far from peaceful. A reason one of the girls said the neighborhood was so quiet was because people were afraid to be outside, especially at night.

[45]

Girls from areas with fewer Hmong families and where Blacks tended to be the majority, felt Blacks or *kej dub* messed around with the Hmong teenagers because Blacks "think they are bad," and exerted their authority over others in the neighborhoods through picking fights. Helen, a 15-year-old living in a predominantly Black neighborhood, switched to Hmong every time she started talking about Blacks during the interview. At one point she asked, "There's not much gang, but you know the Black people. I can say it in Hmong, right?" Afterwards she talked about how Blacks start fights with Hmong because they do not like Hmong in the neighborhood. However, a common experience was also that Hmong were fighting other Hmong too much. Nou notes that the authorities and adults think fighting is Bloods and Crips but "actually it's Hmong against Hmong."

[46]

Although they are aware of the urban stress, they feel powerless to change anything about it. Kate expressed considerable weariness when talking about her neighborhood. She said, that "...it's just that I'm so tired of it...I grew up there." One Hmong girl said about Black gangs in her neighborhood, "Well, they always come by so you can't tell them to go away." Xia says passionately that she was tired of being at home all the time, "24-7" in her neighborhood, never seeing anything new {21}. For them, immobility was a fact of life, they felt they would never go anywhere or get anywhere. Since the perception of girls is that there is no where to

go, truancy is one option to go to different places and see different people. Xia says she skips school because she wants to see what's out there, something new from the neighborhood scene and home.

### **Schools and Teachers**

[47]

When I asked one Hmong girl to tell me about her school life, she laughed and answered, "Actually, I really don't have a school life." School was just not as high on the list of priorities to have fun with friends and going out "to play." Weak school attachment contributed to "playing" or "ditching." The word "play" has become an all encompassing term that means smoking, shopping, talking with friends, and especially "ditching" school or home duties. To "play" is to be away from both home and school and be with peers outside of adult authority.

[48]

The girls' perceived negative teacher attitudes seemed to be a primary contributor to their truancy behavior. Girls saw most teachers as untrustworthy. They felt teachers would snitch to social workers about their personal problems and get them in trouble. Descriptions of negative teacher attitudes included teacher's "ugly looks" and "meanness" and "the way they talk, like they don't respect you or something." A teacher told one of the girls, she couldn't join badminton because she wasn't a smart kid. She says, "That's why I hate going to X-school so bad. If I could, I would transfer out." Her inability to leave or change schools was a source of continual frustration so she opted out by becoming truant. She also said she was tired of attending school because teachers kept putting her in basic math when she should really be in Algebra. Also, the teachers would not let her take the math book home and she had to copy problem sets on paper. She said she was bored because she knew everything so there was no need to attend classes.



[49]

An insensitive teacher was the sole reason Xay started skipping. Xay was in a technology class after she was mainstreamed {22}. She kept receiving zeros for "clean up" because she could not identify the names of the machines. Whenever she asked her teacher which machine it was, he would just point in a general direction and she would never know which machine it was:

Interviewer: Oh, so he wouldn't tell you the number?

Xay: Yeah. He tells me the number and then I don't know where it is and then he would just tell me the names of the machine and I don't know the name of the machine either. And when he points to it, there's a lots of machines and I don't know which one it is. So I just forget about it.

[50]

Most importantly, none of the girls felt they had anyone in school they could talk to or trust with problems. Two of the girls said they talked to a Hmong teacher at school, but only because the teacher made it a point to ask how they were doing.

[51]

Most of the girls I interviewed were in classes that had many Hmong students, indicating that tracking within school has resulted in some classes with large numbers of Hmong students. Although all the Hmong girls were born in the United States, all attended classes in ESL or remedial education. As with Xay, when girls are moved up tracks, they lose Hmong peer support in classrooms. Tracking also facilitated ditching because if Hmong friends in one class all skip school that day, there was additional pressure to ditch. Kate said if "your friends ditch right in front of your face" because she is left behind in a classroom empty of Hmong friends.

[52]

Within-school tracking has led to social isolation of racial groups from each other. Racial segregation within schools has made Hmong students self-conscious if they are moved to higher level classes with more non-Hmong students and may be an impetus for skipping. When Xay was mainstreamed, she lost all of her Hmong friends and did not want to go to school anymore. Tracking for these girls influenced them to skip in two different ways: 1) if mainstreamed, they lost their Hmong friends; and, 2) if Hmong friends in a class all skipped, it added pressure for them to skip also. In both situations, Hmong girls are reacting to an absence of other Hmong students in the classroom because they feel uncomfortable because there are no other Hmong students. This indicates that these Hmong children have not been fully integrated into the school's social life and that they have relatively little interaction with other non-Hmong students.

[53]

Tracking has increased social isolation of these Hmong girls from their non-Hmong peers. Given that these girls were born in the United States, they had to have been tracked early in their school years if the effects of social isolation from non-Hmong make them uncomfortable to the degree that they feel the need to skip classes. The policy implication becomes how to expose Hmong and non-Hmong students to each other in a systematic and constructive way. Hmong children, although probably tracked for 'their own good' might be mistracked early in their school years because of certain characteristics, i.e. teachers' perception of lack of English language ability, that may cause a natural segregation to occur for certain Hmong students if they continue in the same track. Thus, the integrity of tracking systems must be further examined.

### **Peer-Kinship Groups**

[54]

Hmong girls who are chronically truant see school more as a meeting place with free bus transportation to be with friends, not as a place to learn. Girls leave on the bus and come back home on the bus to hide truant behavior from parents. When the school bus is not utilized, Hmong girls are picked up by a friend, usually an older Hmong male [{23}](#). Mobility is an issue here because most Hmong parents will not allow girls to learn how to drive until much later than boys, and if they do, they rarely allow their daughters to own cars. Thus, the dynamic of gathering at school and then dispersing may be a gender based truancy behavior for Hmong girls unlike Hmong boys.

[55]

Ditching alone was considered "risky," something girls rarely did. Planning is crucial and Hmong girls usually skipped in groups of 3-5. They met up with other groups of girl friends who had skipped to go someone's house. The parents are not present during daytime hours because of work and are usually unaware that their house was a gathering place for truants. The most frequent activities that girls participated in when they skipped was hanging out at someone's house until 2:00 p.m., talking, cruising, watching TV, smoking, drinking, and playing cards. Girls cannot go hang out at the mall until after school hours because, "there's lots of security there."

[56]

There is evidence that Hmong girls and boys who are truant know each other very well because they hang out in the same places. Hmong girls skip school to join groups of Hmong boys, who skip that in turn join other groups of truants from other schools. In a "cop bust" at Pang's house when both her parents were at work, police found Hmong adolescents from most of the St. Paul schools.

[57]

Considerable peer pressure exists to ditch. To not ditch is to be a "mamma's girl" or someone who is a "goody" -- both signs of weakness. When I asked Yer how her parents could have prevented her from starting to skip in the first place, she said, "keep me away from my bad friends." At her new school she says "...there's not a lot of pressuring Asian people. There's not a lot of pressure to skip class. Where I was going to school before, there was a lot of pressure to do that and that which you didn't wanna you know..." An important aspect of these girls' skipping behavior is that they were not just truant from school, they are also rarely at their own homes after they appeared at 2:30 p.m. to prove (or lie) to their parents that they were in school. There is a desire to not only stay away from school, but home as well.

[58]

More often than not, a peer was also kin -- a cousin or sister who were ditch buddies at the same school. All the Hmong girls I interviewed had at least one other sibling who also frequently skipped classes or school altogether. The subjects usually admired an older sister or friend who skipped skillfully but also had characteristics that were desirable in a friend: trustworthiness, a good sense of humor, compassion, a good listener. Of all the qualities girls liked about their best friend, it was someone who had "been through it all" who could best support them. None of the girls admired any adult older than 30. Nou said it was because she thought these Hmong adults were "old-fashioned" and snitched to all her Hmong relatives about her personal problems. They would then come and lecture her about how to be a "good Hmong girl". The negative feelings associated with older Hmong may reflect a natural distrust of adults during teen years and the fact that older Hmong tend to be less Americanized.

[59]

While it is unclear whether school effects precede peer effects or vice versa, it is clear that when girls first skip school, it is to join someone who is of similar age and a relative who is also skipping. Pang and Kate, who were

sisters, said their cousin was the one who introduced them to skipping school. Although Xay says that school was the major reason she started skipping, her older brother supported her truant behavior by taking her places with him when he skipped.

[60]

The significance of peer-kinship links in truancy is crucial for any type of truancy intervention in the Hmong community. Hmong kinship networks are broad and cross-clan in nature because relatives from both immediate mother and father clans are considered "close" enough to hang out with {24}. While it is unacceptable for Hmong girls to go out with friends who are not kin, it is usually acceptable for Hmong parents to allow girls to go out if they are with older siblings or with kin. This may be the primary reason why Hmong parents do not suspect that their children are skipping school until it is too late.

[61]

There were several reasons why girls said they continued to skip. Pang, since she turned 17, did not try to go to school anymore because she felt she was just too far behind and the workload would be too much. She was also past the legal age of enforcement for truancy intervention. Helen and Xia felt school could be "easy" if they wanted, but they were just "lazy" and didn't want to go to school. Helen says she skips because she's just lazy. However, it is to be with her friends and siblings since she never skips alone. For Helen, it was a "habit" that she couldn't kick. Yer started skipping school because her brother and his girlfriend told her to skip if she wanted to "hang out with them." She thinks girls skip because they just "want their freedom." Nou says she skips because school is too early in the morning. Xia also said school was too early and also that she didn't want to miss out on life and a chance to "be young." The theme of wanting freedom and being young indicates that girls feel they cannot be young if they stay in school and accept responsibilities at home. They have opted out of both school and home to be what they perceive as being "young and free"

like other American teenagers.

### **Truancy Effects in the Family and the Hmong Community**

[62]

The worst impact of truancy on their lives, according to the Hmong girls, is the loss of parental trust. The re-establishment of trust is an obstacle to behavioral reform for girls, especially because there is tremendous social stigma attached to being 'laib' or "gangster" {25}. They are already "bad" so what's the use of trying to be good again because you can't stay good or be good anymore? This attitude was a common one. All the girls said they had manipulated parents and other adults at one time in order to go have fun (skipping school and going out with friends without parental permission) and it was too late to rebuild trust once it had been broken. Parents I spoke with felt similarly and were at a loss as to how to rebuild trust. Ironically, because Hmong girls no longer feel they have family support, there is increased reliance on peer support and only reinforces their commitment to friends who are a "bad influence." During the interview, one teary eyed Hmong girl said, "...my mom just gave up. Whenever somebody asks about me, they'll be like 'Oh well, she's dead.'"

[63]

Hmong girls who no longer attend school regularly are not considered "good" Hmong girls in the eyes parents and other Hmong adults. The stigma attached to being a "bad girl" in good Hmong society was a "reputation burden" that is hard to overcome because it shames not only the girls but their families as well. According to the Hmong girls who were truant, a "good Hmong girl" is someone who goes to school, stays at home all the time, listens to her parents, watches the "little kids", cooks and feeds younger brothers and sisters when parents are not home, and does whatever mom says to do. In Hmong, to listen, or *mloog* carries a different meaning than in English. *Mloog* means to listen and actively carry out the tasks that an authority figure has established

as necessary. Because most of the Hmong girls did not carry out homemaker duties, they did not "listen" and were therefore, bad.

[64]

Regardless of whether the girls actively carried out these home duties, they felt this was what their parents wanted and needed for them in order to be considered "good." In other words, being good was closely tied to staying home most of the time and doing home duties. There was almost no way to redeem themselves since the girls did not feel they could return to school even though all expressed remorse at their behavior. All were "tainted" so reform would do little to salvage their reputations for the sake of Hmong relatives and other community members. The initial social threat of no longer having a good reputation was not a deterrent for these girls to start skipping.

[65]

According to Hmong girls, parents asked for more than they could deliver. Girls wanted to have fun because "I'm still young." Being young and wanting to be young and have fun was a primary reason for skipping out on school and home duties. This attitude suggests the Hmong girls feel the burden of responsibilities early and do not want these burdens placed on them because of their understanding of what it means to be an American teenager. They felt they had to be "angels" in order to be good and this was impossible if they wanted to go play. During one of my meetings with TIP, an officer of the program expressed that children play, not teenagers. However, he misunderstood that the translation from Hmong to English fails to capture the full meaning of play or *ua sis*. *Ua sis* is used for hanging out, attending specific events, or being out with friends. The desire to "go play and have fun" girls expressed over and over again was a way of stating that they needed a "social time-out" from life and responsibilities. Girls were not just skipping out on school, but on their home lives as well. All the Hmong girls I interviewed had been gone overnight with out parental permission at least twice.

[66]

However, family relationships were not always good before truancy started. In at least two of the homes, the father was addicted to opium and the mother was ineffectual at disciplining her children {26}. One girl labeled her dad as "abusive" telling me she ran away for a week once because she was scared he would beat her. Although she did not state explicitly that her father was an opium addict during the interview, she said so afterwards. In addition, she said that her father had two wives and her mother was the first wife {27}. She did not seem to know how to explain this fact outside of Hmong society and it created considerable stress for her.

[67]

Most striking in the analysis is that although most of the Hmong girls in the study realized "ditching" led to intensified familial discord, poor school achievement, and stigma in the Hmong community, they did not see truancy or skipping behavior as under their control. Some felt powerless to stop skipping because the burden of catching up on missed work as well as home duties would overwhelm them. They all recognized that peers were more important to them than their families, but expressed confusion as to why they valued friendship above family. In Hmong society where family ties are emphasized above friendship and may explain the confusion at their greater affiliation to friends instead of family. As ostracized "bad girls," this was a natural inclination because they all felt they had lost family and Hmong community support. They want to change, but are afraid to change because their friends might leave. Ironically, the five who were still chronically truant perceived skipping as "their choice," and that if they wanted to really change it, they probably could. In American society where individual choice is emphasized, these girls have internalized this value and taken personal responsibility for their skipping behavior.

[68]



Hmong girls' inability to actively change or change fast enough to be "good" again was related to their sense of self worth. Five of the seven girls could not think of a quality about themselves they liked, although all of them could think of qualities about themselves they didn't like. Their primary dislike of themselves was related to truancy and what they have done to their parents. For instance, two of the Hmong girls thought they deserved to be unloved because of what they had put her parents through. Only one girl said that she wanted to improve something about herself and was actively doing so; she was reading more to improve her vocabulary.

[69]

On a positive note, however, two of the seven girls interviewed were beginning to attend school regularly this year. Yer had been placed in foster care and was going to a school in the suburbs. Being in a different environment, she felt she was better able to resist the temptation of skipping. She also said she was happy she was going to school now and expressed that school is a lot easier than it used to be. Xay started attending school regularly because she was on "probation" at Lao Family, not for truancy but for shoplifting. Xay made the B honor roll last semester, unlike last year when she rarely attended school. The key to her success was the presence of a Lao family social worker who had helped her re-establish trust with her mother. Thus, truancy intervention through the courts did work for one girl. For the majority of Hmong girls, however, probation and shelter treatment were not enough to keep them in school.

### **Surprising Findings**

[70]

Unlike my generation, all the Hmong girls were born in the United States, and therefore have no recollection of Laos or even Thailand [29]. Most of my cohort group remembers pieces of the flight out of Laos and life in the Thai refugee camps.

The teenagers today have no tangible connection to the experience of their parents or older brothers and sisters as refugees. I falsely assumed Hmong children in the Nineties would feel as close to the refugee experience as my generation because of parental influence. The Hmong girls I interviewed used "Asian" more frequently to refer to Hmong than using "Hmong" itself. This suggests that identification with being Hmong is slowly being supplanted by an identification with the larger, more recognized, racial umbrella term of "Asian."

[71]

Five out of the seven girls had been runaways. Hmong girls reported that they would go "on the run" together. The act of running away for Hmong girls is a social act and not a single act of desperation as is often cited in the literature. Girls stay at well known hide-outs for runaways with adults who support large groups of Hmong girls on the run. As Sullivan (1989) notes in his study of youth crime and work in the inner city, adults sustain delinquent activities and without adult support and shelter, these Hmong girls would not be able to sustain criminal activities. One subject told me one of these houses is owned by a young Hmong man in his twenties who allows large groups of Hmong girls to stay there when he wants "company." Kate said she and a sister went on the run with a 39-year-old Korean prostitute who forced them to shoplift for her. She stated this woman frequently takes Hmong girls on the run. The latest news of this prostitute was that she had taken a group of Hmong girls from North Minneapolis on the run. Although these stories are not unusual in and of themselves, what is unusual is that same-gender peer kinship groups are doing this together. More specifically, girls are running away in groups with other girls and not with a boy or brothers although groups of girls may run away with groups of boys.

[72]

Within-race and cross-race tensions and violence are a part of these girls' everyday lives in their neighborhoods. All expressed that they wanted the Hmong community to change and

have "Asians stop fighting Asians." One of my subjects had experienced three deaths of close friends in the past year. All had been accidentally caught in the line of fire. All the girls had experienced at least the death of one person they knew. These girls go home to violent scary neighborhoods, to school in an unfriendly learning environment where they feel they aren't valued, and cut out of school and home to get away from it all only to find they have become part of the structure of delinquency and violence themselves.

***How have Hmong girls experiences with truancy affected their lives?***

[73]

The most adverse effects on Hmong girls' lives seems to be the loss of parental support in terms of trust. This is also one of the biggest barriers to reform. Contact with peers increases in relation to loss of parental support. Self-worth declines. Although girls are remorseful, they cannot become "good" again without one huge sacrifice, their friends, the only people who love and accept them as they are and share some understanding of the acculturation process. Thus, they are caught in a self-deprecating situation where they feel they deserve the negative treatment they receive.

***What do Hmong girls perceive as their reasons for being truant?***

[74]

Peers who are also kin seem to play a major role in getting Hmong girls initially involved in truancy behavior. This is particularly important for Hmong parents to know since they perceive the problem of truancy to be non-kin related. Thereafter, reasons girls cited for continued ditching included reasons such as wanting to be "young" "free" and "lazy" along with being unable to kick truancy as a habit and falling too far behind in school to make up the work.

***What do Hmong girls think their parents, schools, the truancy system could have done differently to keep them in school?***

[75]

All but one of the girls thought that their parents had done enough to help keep them in school. Hmong girls suggested schools should be more welcoming to Hmong students and less prejudiced. The hall monitor system was thought to be ineffective as it was too easy to get out and hall monitor slips were easy to forge as a token of mandatory attendance. All thought that peer advice from those who had been through the truancy system would not have prevented them from ditching. They felt that it didn't matter how much you tried to warn other girls who were just starting to skip, they had to learn through experience.

[76]

Truancy intervention worked for one girl out of the sample of seven Hmong girls because she was placed in a different school context through the court. Perhaps because she was no longer being tracked or in classes where her friends pressured her to skip, she was able to maintain her attendance record. The other girl on the way to reform was doing so not because the truancy system had caught her but because she was caught shoplifting, although she had skipped numerous times during the previous school year. However, this girl was from Minneapolis which is subject to different truancy laws and enforcement procedures than St. Paul. There was no consensus from subjects about how they thought the truancy system could be made more effective. Most thought the system was too strict, especially starting this last fall when the Truancy Intervention Program started coordinating efforts to decrease truancy in Ramsey County.

[77]

When I asked Nou what she thought of the new system, she

expressed a wish for another chance to prove herself. She violated her SART contract because she left class for two hours; she was in the nurse's office due to the onset of her period that month. Her probation officer, however, did not believe her reason for violating the SART contract. She must now appear before the court again. Increased compliance meant increased anxiety and a sense of hopelessness that she would never be able to meet all the terms of the contract. Nou's testimony provides an explanation of how being an adolescent girl is different from being an adolescent male and may affect how truancy petitions are filed more frequently for all girls not just Hmong girls.

### **Discussion of Areas for Policy and Program Development**

[78]

The issues explored in this case study analysis contain two large processes that have intersected to impact the lives of these girls in a negative way. First, increases in concentrated poverty because of urban labor market changes have clearly affected the physical environment and urban stressors explicated in the neighborhood effects section (Holzer & Vroman, 1992). The bulk of the Hmong refugees arrived in the United States when the country was in a recession and resettlement programs had been cut drastically (Haines, 1985). In a technologically advanced economy where job growth is in the service sector, Hmong adults (parents) have little chance of landing good jobs that pay a livable wage primarily because of language barriers (Westermeyer et. al., 1989; Southeast Asian Task Force, 1987).

[79]

Secondly, the Hmong community itself is in upheaval because of dramatic changes in its social system since the displacement from Laos. The parents of the children today were mostly children themselves when they came to the United States and were profoundly affected by the refugee experience. Their children, on the other hand, have no tangible connections to Laos or to being "refugees." In

addition to the typical factors that contribute to high risk behavior among girls in larger American society, acculturation stress may influence Hmong girls decision to start skipping school.

[80]

One of these stressors is the unattainable role of the "good Hmong girl." The description of a "good Hmong girl" reveals a distinctive gender role expectation for what one might consider traditional women's work (Yang, 1994). In the media and in American society, however, Hmong girls are sent the message that they can be anything they want to be and do anything they want to do. Unfortunately, strict gender role expectations in the Hmong community still constrain their actions even though girls want to be "free" and "young" like other American teenagers. The only way they can become free and young is to take social time out from school outside of the censure of their parents. However, this brings them into the waiting arms of the law.

[81]

The data collected in this research suggests that secondary schools refer Hmong girls at similar rates to Hmong boys in initial identification of truancy. However, Hmong girls are disproportionately represented in truancy court cases, compared to Hmong boys. An explanation the interviews offer for higher Hmong female cases is that of a narrowly defined social role as a "good Hmong girl" which may contribute to why girls are more "hard-core" truants than boys. Being a "good Hmong girl" is unattainable once they start skipping, so there is no incentive to return to an impossible role. Hmong girls do not see themselves as able to change back into good Hmong girls, unlike in earlier years when infractions were minor. However, it is also well documented that the juvenile justice system was tailored for males and official statistics reflect practices that are not gender neutral (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 1992). Intensified gender role expectations of Hmong girls may exacerbate such biases in practice and play a larger role in the higher rates of chronic truancy among girls than boys.

[82]

Economics and acculturation are two big processes exacerbating developmental pathways and intersect to impact Hmong adolescents in a negative way, there are other ways to improve the way in which policy makers and others can work to cope with the quickly growing Hmong student population and especially Hmong girls who experience considerable stress related to gender role expectations. I offer five suggestions of areas for policy and program development to reduce truancy and mitigate the stressors related to truancy based on this research project.

***1: Examine the accuracy and integrity of tracking systems within schools.***

[83]

Hmong girls experience acute distress in school in the absence of other Hmong students in class. This indicates that Hmong girls and perhaps Hmong students who skip are being tracked into lower tracks with more non-native English speakers. However, most of these girls were born in the United States. Perhaps as Walker (1989) and Calabrese (1988) both suggest, minority students, especially groups such as the Hmong, are tracked into lower level classes despite controlling for IQ and language ability due to discriminatory practices that are unintentional but hurt Hmong children in the long run emotionally and academically. Further research is necessary to see whether within-school tracking systems according to ability are biased or discriminatory and put Hmong students at a disadvantage.

[84]

In this study, Hmong girls in lower tracks receive little positive interaction with students from other races and backgrounds. The result is an increasing social isolation of racial peer groups because of cultural misunderstandings and a reinforced fear of others who are different when no interactions occur except for negative interactions. Hmong girls are less exposed to mainstream teachers and other

teachers because ESL and special education classes are often taught by the same group of teachers for all grades. Hmong students lose out if they are mistracked early in their academic careers, because they are less likely to learn as much as their peers who are tracked correctly.

***2: More training for teachers and administrators about Hmong students and acculturation issues as they relate to education.***

[85]

At a local policy level, the St. Paul School District, needs to provide more training to teachers about Hmong students, who they are, and where they are coming from to sensitize teachers to potential intercultural communication patterns. For example, one of the officers at TIP was not aware that there were many different Southeast Asian groups, of which Hmong are only one. The officer did not know that these groups spoke different languages or that they were culturally separate. Patterns of communication are also different in Hmong and American society. For example, Xay started skipping school because she thought her technology teacher was "mean" to not show her the right machines for clean up. Although she was a competent English speaker, her teacher did not make it a point to take the time to show her to the correct machines. Although Xay spoke English, cultural communication patterns made Xay expect her teacher to point out the machine directly while the teacher expected Xay to speak up if she really didn't know what machine she had to clean up after class.

***3. Tailor truancy policy to attack peer and kinship groups not individual students.***

[86]

Attacking peer groups that are truant -- not just individual students -- requires a radical shift from the way we conceptualize personhood and individual responsibility in the



U.S. While individual responsibility and punishment must be meted out, peer group-oriented reform is crucial for the success of any truancy program. Peer socialization plays an integral part in getting into crime. A new policy paradigm would be required to reconfigure social relationships that reinforce informal social controls for Hmong girls as well as other groups to stay in school.

[87]

A policy suggestion is to allot a lump sum for group incentives for identified continuing truants who are "ditch buddies" or part of a larger social network of girls. The group is then provided with an incentive to stay in class together if attendance improves. For example, if four Hmong girls usually ditch together, you can provide an incentive worth working for (free access to volleyball courts at the YMCA during winter months in Minnesota) as long as none of the girls skip. However, if even one of the girls in the group skips, then the reward is taken away or modified. This program borrows from behavioral psychology and the incentive offered has to be greater than the desire or need to skip. One way to assure that girls think the incentive is worth working for is to have them tailor the incentive structure to fit their needs and desires. This also gives them a personal investment in staying in school.

***4: Greater inclusion of Hmong parents, community workers, and leaders in educational policy making***

[88]

For too long policy makers and local politicians have asked for input but disregarded the Hmong community when making decisions about education. Increasing Hmong representation through more progressive hiring policies in local areas such as St. Paul would be one way to build Hmong into public decision making. The Twin Cities has the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the nation and the Hmong are here to stay. Furthermore, there are many qualified individuals

who can be recruited to work on a managerial level.

[89]

Language barriers are an impediment to Hmong parental involvement and must always be kept in mind when developing policy but should not be used as an excuse for exclusion. The St. Paul Public Schools need to accommodate Hmong parents to establish a better future for Hmong children so that society does not have to pay the consequences of an educational system gone awry. For example, having a night of conferences where several Hmong interpreters are available to answer questions and help Hmong parents get oriented to what conferences are about would help Hmong parents get involved. Another example might be to have open forums for Hmong parents to address their concerns to the school staff in Hmong as a group with an interpreter who is competent in both English and Hmong.

***5. Create more acceptable spaces for Hmong girls to relax and have a "social time out" without censure from the Hmong community.***

[90]

There is a stark dichotomy between "good Hmong girls" and "bad Hmong girls." To be a "good Hmong girl" is nearly unattainable. For whatever reason, the girls I interviewed did not see themselves as good because they could not find a space to be "normal" like American teenagers who date with little censure and hang out with friends at the movies. Many of the reasons that Hmong girls perceived as contributing to truancy were related to a need to take time out for themselves and a desire to be more American. Because Hmong girls live with restrictive gender roles, they feel pressured to skip and take a social time out. Creating and replicating more programs such as *Peem Tsheej* that targets Hmong girls and gives them a social time out is critical to prevention. Prevention programs should target 6th and 8th graders since these are critical years before transition occurs.

[91]

The stereotype of the perfect Asian student is not a reality for many Hmong students in St. Paul. Education must be a community effort and must include targeted as well as universal policies. When the needs of Asian students are largely ignored in a school district that has Asians as the largest percentage of minority students, it is unforgivable. Asian students are the fastest growing group in St. Paul, and the issues surrounding the growth and change of the school age population must be managed constructively through thoughtful policy guidance. The St. Paul School District needs to acknowledge, react, and implement policies to address the needs of Hmong and other Southeast Asians. The school age population is no longer as homogeneous as it was once twenty years ago and the time for change is now.

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## NOTES

{1} This second argument regarding citizenship follows from the first point. [Return to text.](#)

{2} An example of this is when the Minnesota Department of Human Services failed to include Asian children in the Children of Color Symposium in the spring of 1995, even though over 50% of Asians are under the age of 18 and Asian children have one of the highest poverty rates in Minnesota. African American and Chicano/Latino children were represented at the symposium with only token representation from the Native American Community. [Return to text.](#)

{3} I say "perceived cultural variation" because it is unclear as to how the court deems a cultural defense is appropriate, especially when using one "cultural expert" who may or may not be Hmong to testify on behalf of a client. [Return](#)

[to text.](#)

{4} Originally the intent was to interview 10 girls, not just 7. However, because of time limitations, I was unable to do so. [Return to text.](#)

{5} Raw school district data was obtained from the St. Paul School District, although most of the statistical breakdowns are this researcher's. [Return to text.](#)

{6} School populations used to calculate these statistics include Central Senior, Como Park Senior, Harding Senior, Highland Park Senior, Humboldt Senior, Johnson Senior, Battle Creek Junior, Cleveland Junior, Hazel Park Junior, Humboldt Junior, Murray Junior, Ramsey Junior, Washington Junior, and Expo for Excellence Junior. Together these schools represent the "standard" secondary schools. Special program schools are not included. [Return to text.](#)

{7} The low number of children aged 11-17 in 1990 might be due to adolescents born overseas either in flight or in the refugee camps. Few of them must have survived because of disease, war, and famine. [Return to text.](#)

{8} TIP provides intervention only for children aged 12-16 because the burden of absence is placed on the student not the parent. If a child is between 7-12, unexcused absences is considered educational neglect. In the latter case, the burden of the unexcused absence is placed on the parent. [Return to text.](#)

{9} The schools I examined were the following: Agape Alternative Program, ALC Fresh Start, Capital Hill Magnet, Monroe Community School, Saturn School of Technology, Central Senior High, Como Park Senior High, Harding Senior High, Highland Park Senior High, Humboldt Senior High, Johnson Senior High, St. Paul Open School, Battle Creek Middle School, Cleveland Middle School, Expo for Excellence Middle School, Hazel Park Academy, Washington Technology Middle School, Highland Park Junior High, Humboldt Junior High, Murray Junior High, Ramsey Junior High. [Return to text.](#)

{10} There are 22 Hmong clans, 18 of them are represented in Minnesota. See Appendix 3 for the list of 18 Hmong clans. [Return to text.](#)

{11} The interview protocol is available in Appendix 2.[Return to text.](#)

{12} I chose 40 days because this is roughly 2/3rds or 75% of the school semester.[Return to text.](#)

{13} I use "researcher" and "I" interchangeably because there is no need to try to be objective in a qualitative study except in methodology.[Return to text.](#)

{14} I am a young unmarried Hmong woman in her early twenties. I am what most Hmong people would consider a "good Hmong girl" interviewing "bad Hmong girls." In a sense, I was the anti-thesis of these girls. However, I felt no tension from parents or girls regarding this matter.[Return to text.](#)

{15} Four of the seven girls opted to come with me to the movies.[Return to text.](#)

{16} Please see [Appendix 3](#) for a more thorough explanation of the Hmong clan system, the 18 Clans, and explanations of possible error.[Return to text.](#)

{17} However, I am not arguing here that the juvenile justice system should not be retailored to accommodate gender disparities in the treatment of girls and boys with regard to crimes.[Return to text.](#)

{18} Bloods and Crips are identifiable by the red and blue colors, respectively, they wear. Hmong youth have formed their own "sets" or groups within these two larger opposing gangs. It is unclear how many sets exist, or if there are more Blood sets than there are Crip sets. What is commonly known is that these "sets" are not interracial.[Return to text.](#)

{19} All names are pseudonyms and I do not use last names because last names are really "clan" names. I did not want to alienate any Hmong person who reads this article with any suggestion that I may be disrespecting their clan(s).[Return to text.](#)

{20} I transcribed tapes *verbatim* because I wanted the reader to hear the voices of the girls even though I provided the interpretation of their lives.[Return to text.](#)

{21} "24-7" means 24 hours a day, seven days a week.[Return to text.](#)

{22} Prior to this quarter where she was taken from lower ability track classes, Xay attended school regularly and was a good student.[Return to text.](#)

{23} Sexual dynamics in the Hmong community is beyond the scope of this paper but deserves further study in and of itself.[Return to text.](#)

{24} Hmong society is patrilineal and clan lineage is traced three generations for the father's clan and usually one generation back for the mother's clan. In the United States, however, immediate or current generations from both clans play a more important role because of organizational changes due to geography and war.[Return to text.](#)

{25} The word "*laib*" has been overextended and become a buzz word for anyone who dresses in hip-hop clothes -- baggy low slung pants and big plaid shirts.[Return to text.](#)

{26} Hmong who lived in Laos grew poppies and cultivated opium as a form of currency for trade. Although opium was used mostly for medicinal purposes, sometimes individuals would become addicted to opium. Refugees addicted to opium were not allowed asylum in the United States so those who were able stopped using opium. However, there is some evidence that once addicted individuals arrive in the United States, they relapse.[Return to text.](#)

{27} Polygamy in Hmong society still exists although it is quickly diminishing due to social and legal pressures from both the Hmong community and the larger community.[Return to text.](#)

{28} I was born in Laos and fled to the United States with my family in 1976 when I was four.[Return to text.](#)

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## APPENDICES

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### Appendix 1: Demographic Survey (form)

Subject # \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### Growing Up Hmong-American: Truancy Policy and Girls DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

*Please circle your answer:*

Year your family arrived in the U.S.: 1976-1980      1981-1985  
1986-1990      1991-1996

Sisters:    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Brothers:    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Your Age:    11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Your Grade:    4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Were you born in the United States? Yes                      No

Your Sex: Male                      Female

Your Marital Status: Married                      Single

Religion: Hmong/Spirits                      Christian

*Please fill in the blank:*

Of the children in your family, how many (including you) have been truant? \_\_\_\_\_

How old were you when you first started skipping school?  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the age of the oldest child in your family?  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the age of the youngest child in your family?

\_\_\_\_\_

*Please circle your answer:*

How many times in the last month have you intentionally skipped, ditched, or been truant from school?

- a) 1-3                      b) 4-6                      c) 7-9                      d) 7-9  
e) 13 or more

Of the times you skipped school in the last month, how many times were you caught?

- a) never                      b) Once                      c) 2-6 times                      d) 7-9  
e) 10 or more

How many times have you had to go to court for truancy?

- a) never                      b) once                      c) twice                      d) three times  
e) four or more times

Of the times you had to go to court, how many times were you placed on probation?

- a) once                      b) twice                      c) three times                      d) four  
or more times

***THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY***

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## **Appendix 2: Interview Protocol**

### **Growing Up Hmong-American: Truancy Policy and Girls Interview Protocol**

Thank you for taking time out and volunteering to be part of this study. Before we start, I would like to go over again why I asked you to be part of the study. I am doing a study on Hmong girls and their experiences in school and out of



school. Specifically, I am interested in talking to girls who have been truant to try to understand how Hmong girls experience school, home and other activities. There is very little information available to people who run programs for girls who are truant, and I believe that your perspective as a Hmong girl is very important to the success of this study.

This is a confidential interview. Your name, the name of your family or clan, and the name of your school will not be used in any publications. I will use a number to code the information you give me today. I will be asking you some questions that you might feel uncomfortable answering. You are free not to answer any question if you feel uncomfortable with it. Also, if I see that you are clearly upset or distressed, I will discontinue the interview. you should also know that you can stop the interview at any time. I will be audio-taping our interview today, but again rest assured that your name will not appear on my notes, the tape, or transcripts. The information you give me today will be identified only by a number. No one else besides me will have access to the information. However, you may decline to be audio-taped.

Do you have any questions regarding the study purpose or the survey before we begin?

Do you have any other questions about the study that are unclear to you?

Is there anything about the study that is unclear to you?

Do you agree to be audio-taped? *If yes, turn on the tape recorder.*

**For the record on tape, I will ask you again before we start. Do you consent to this interview on Hmong girls and truancy?**

***The first set of questions are background questions about where you live.***

Tell me about your neighborhood. Probe: What things do you like about it? What things don't you like?

If you could change your neighborhood, what would it be?

What do you consider your community?

If you could change anything about your community, what would it be?

***The next few questions are about school.***

Tell me about your school life. What types of obstacles or barriers do you face in school?

Think of a teacher or administrator at your school that you can trust the most. Why do you trust them?

What types of extra-curricular activities interest you at school? Are you involved in them?

If you could change anything about your school, what would it be?

***The next four questions are about your relationship to your family.***

If I asked your parents to describe you, what would they say?

Who cares most about you in your family, and why do you think they care the most?

What do you think your parents really want from you?

What do you really want from your parents?

Can you describe what you would consider a "good Hmong girl?"

***The next questions are about relationships with adults and peers.***

What kind of adult do you respect and trust?

Can you think of one adult that you respect and trust. What is it about that person that you like and admire?

Out of all your close friends, who do you respect, trust and admire the most? What do you admire and respect about him/her?

***The next set of questions are about truancy.***

Why did you start skipping school at first? Have the reasons changed?

Do you skip school alone or with friends?

Tell me about yourself or another Hmong girlfriend about one time when you skipped school and you got caught? Probe: How did it start? What was the situation? How did it end?

What do you or other girl friends typically do when you skip school? When do you leave? When do you come back?

If you could do anything to change your past behavior, would you? If so, what?

What could your school do better to help you?

What could your parents do better to help you?

What would you do to help other girls who are truant? Would you do anything?

If you could give another girl who is just starting to skip school advice, what would it be?

What do you think of the truancy system? Has it worked for you, or for your friends?

If you could change the truancy system to make it work better for you and your friends who also skip school, what would it be?

***The last set of questions are about your future.***

What do you want to be when you grow up? How will you get there?

What qualities do you like most about yourself? What qualities do you like least about yourself?

If you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?

**Thank you very much for your cooperation and your participation in this project.**

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### **Appendix 3: The 18 Hmong Clans Represented in Minnesota**

The Hmong do not have last names, although Hmong clan names are used as "surrogate" last names in the United States. Clan affiliation is traced through males or are patrilineal. Usually, *ib tsev neeg*, or a lineage, is traced three generations. Although there are 22 known Hmong clans, the 18 listed below have the most members. The researcher used this list of Hmong clans to determine whether or not a Truancy Intervention Program case was Hmong. However, the use of this list to cross-reference Hmong names in other research should be used with care since some of these clan names are similar to other Asian names. To ensure accuracy of counts, the researcher cross-referenced student names with parents' first and last names if names were ambiguous.

The error rate due to false classification is small. Unlike other Asian immigrants such as Korean or Chinese Americans, Hmong have only been in the United States for 20 years. The Hmong community is still very much a closed community. Adoption outside of Hmong families is rare. Clans like to keep Hmong children within the same family or at least within the same clan, especially if they are boys. However, even with Hmong girls, Hmong rarely allow children to be placed in cross-cultural adoption. There has also been relatively little marriage outside of the Hmong community. Moreover, to marry within Hmong society, one must have explicit clan affiliation. In essence, if an individual does not identify with a clan, the individual cannot function socially as a member of Hmong society.

#### **The 18 Hmong Clans:**

*(Variations of clan spellings are in parentheses)*

Yang  
Lee  
Thao  
Cha (Chang)  
Vue  
Xiong (Soueng)  
Vang  
Her  
Phang  
Fang  
Moua  
Hang  
Kong  
Chue  
Khang  
Lo (Lor)  
Kue (Khue)  
Cheng

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