

## **Til Divorce Do Us Part: Divorce, Sex, and State of Residence among Hmong Americans<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

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**Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 13(2),  
2010 Census Issue, 12 Pages**

### **Abstract**

Data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2008-2010 were used to analyze the relationship between current marital status (divorced versus married) and sex, and to examine how this relationship varies for the Hmong across states. Women, when adjusted for age group and state of residence, were not significantly more likely than men to report that they were divorced. Those in Minnesota were almost two times more likely than those in California to report being divorced even after controlling for sex and age group. There was no significant difference in divorce reporting between Wisconsin and California Hmong. The findings suggest that divorced Hmong women, like divorced women in the United States in general, tend to remain unmarried for a longer period of time than their men counterparts.

**Keywords:** Hmong Americans, marital status, divorce

### **Introduction**

Family dissolution as a result of divorce and separation has dramatically increased over the past century in the United States (Ruggles, 1997; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Despite the fact that the Hmong have relatively low divorce rates compared to the U.S. population in general (Pfeifer, 2008), researchers have observed that divorce is becoming more common among the Hmong, especially among younger generations (Yang, 2003; Lee and Pfeifer, 2009/2010). Unfortunately, very little is known about this topic beyond simple descriptive statistics. This article used nationally representative data from the 2008-2010 American Community Survey (ACS) to examine the relationship between reported divorce, sex, and states. Specifically, we

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the reviewers at *Hmong Studies Journal* for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. We especially thank Mark Pfeifer for his support and suggestions. We are also grateful to Yang Sao Xiong at UCLA for editing and comments.

investigated the prevalence of divorce between Hmong males and females, and analyzed how this relationship varies by state. For the purposes of this article, the variable “divorce” includes both those who reported either being divorced and those who reported being separated during the time of the survey. While it may be important to distinguish between divorce and separation for legal purposes, we combined these variables because our main concern was family dissolution. Divorce and separation are basically different forms of the same problem (family dissolution), and therefore, we did not distinguish between them. Additionally, by combining variables, the data provided sufficient cases for more power in statistical analysis.

Part of our study was motivated by two general perceptions within the Hmong community. These perceptions are that: (1) there are more divorced Hmong women than divorced Hmong men in general (*poj nrauj coob dua yawg nrauj*); and (2) the prevalence of divorce among Hmong is higher in Minnesota and Wisconsin (*sab qaum teb*) than in California (*sab qab teb*). We wondered if these perceptions had some validity or were simply stereotypes.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers agree that divorce is rare in traditional Hmong society (Donnelly, 1994). This may stem from a number of factors, including the social complexity required (e.g., input from key members of both sides of the family and/or community) in completing a divorce, as well as the tendency to treat divorce as deviant behavior. In his study of Hmong kinship, marriage and family system, Moua (2003) stated, “divorce is culturally taboo and inappropriate” (p. 14). While such a statement may seem a little extreme, it does reflect the observation that divorce is often strongly discouraged (Donnelly, 1994).

To get a better idea of how low the prevalence of divorce is among the Hmong in the United States, Pfeifer (2008) compares divorce rates for Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese,

and Americans overall. Using data from the 2005 ACS, Pfeifer (2008) shows that among persons 15 years and over, Hmong had the lowest percentage rate of divorce (3.3%), compared to Cambodian (4.0%), Lao (6.3%), Vietnamese (5.3%), and mainstream Americans (10.2%).

The prevalence of divorce among Hmong Americans has been changing, however. To illustrate, in 2000, the proportion of Hmong (ages 15 and older) who reported that they were divorced (at the time of the survey) was 0.7% for men and 1.6% for women (Xiong & Tuicomepee, 2004). In 2005, 3.3% of Hmong from the same age group reported that they were divorced (Pfeifer 2008), and 2.0% reported that they were separated (ACS, 2005). The latest data from the 2011 ACS show that the percentage of divorced and separated was 4.0% and 2.6%, respectively.

Studies have shown that reported rate of divorce in the U.S. varies by region, state, and sex (Elliot and Simmons, 2011; Furstenberg, 2004). For example, Elliot and Simmons show that in 2009, the average divorce rate (marital event per 1,000 females or males over age 15 during the past 12 months) was 9.7 for females compared to 9.2 for males (2011). They also show that some of the states with the lowest divorce rates (significantly below the national average) are states located in the northeastern region of the country such as New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Southern states such as Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi have some of the highest divorce rates in the nation.

A closer examination of descriptive data suggests that the increasing prevalence of divorce amongst Hmong might differ by sex and state as well. In general, the proportion of divorced women is higher than the proportion of divorced men. Specifically, the proportion of divorced individuals is 5.9% for females, compared to 3.3% for males (Table 1). At the same

time, it appears that Minnesota has a higher proportion of divorce compared to California and Wisconsin (Table 1).

### **Data and Analysis**

We used data from the 2008-2010 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2008-2010 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). The PUMS is a subsample of the ACS. For descriptive statistics, we used estimates from the full sample ACS. For regression analysis, we used data from the PUMS. The combined three-year ACS data set is more current than the combined five-year while more reliable than one-year data when analyzing small populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Our Hmong sample data includes both the "Hmong alone" and "Hmong in any combination" categories from the Census form

Our dependent variable is marital status (married versus divorced). Divorce includes all of those who reported that they were divorced or separated during the time of the surveys. This variable includes those who were 15 years or over. Our main independent variables are state of residence and sex. We only analyzed California, Minnesota and Wisconsin, because the majority of the Hmong population (approximately 80%) resides in these three states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

We used SAS 9.2 to manage and analyze the data. Given the complexity of the sampling method of the ACS (multi-stage cluster sampling), we used PROC SURVEYLOGISTIC and employed the successive difference replication method (Fay & Train, 1995) as suggested by the ACS, with the complete set of replicate weights available in the data to generate results.

## Results

### *Household and Family Size*

Before presenting the data on marital status and divorce among Hmong Americans, which is the central focus of this study, data from the 2008-10 ACS related to Hmong household and family size will first be shared. Traditionally, the Hmong tend to have large households compared to the U.S. national average. For example, the average size of a Hmong household was 6.3 compared to 2.6 for that of the U.S, and the average size of a Hmong family household was 6.5 compared to 3.1 for that of the U.S. (Pfeifer & Lee, 2004). Data from the ACS 2008-2010 show that averages for both household (5.4) and family household (5.6) size decreased by almost one unit, or one less person, in the previous decade. Despite the rapid decline, the average size of Hmong households and families remained approximately twice as large as that of the U.S. and Asian Americans in general. In fact, the Hmong continue to possess larger household and family household sizes in the U.S. compared to most other ethnic groups.

### *Marital Status and Divorce*

According to estimates from the ACS 2008-2010, there were 256,430 Hmong individuals in the U.S. Those over the age of 15 comprised 65% (or 166,906) of the total Hmong population. Within this group, the percentages of those married were almost equal for both sexes (45.1% of females and 43.6% of males). However, the difference between the sexes in terms of those never married was almost nine percentage points (43.5% for female and 52.1% for male). Regarding divorce, 5.9% of females and 3.3% of males reported that they were divorced (Table 1). This trend is consistent with the literature, which shows that on average, the proportion of divorced males at any given time is smaller than that of females (Elliot & Simmons, 2011).

**Table 1. Marital Status by Sex and State: Hmong Age 15 and Over (in percentage), 2008-2010.**

Marital Status	Female				Male			
	U.S.	CA	MN	WI	U.S.	C.A.	M.N.	W.I.
Now Married	45.1	44.7	40.6	46.5	43.6	41.7	39.7	47.3
Widowed	5.5	6.2	5.7	5.4	1.0	1.2	1.3	0.5
Divorced	5.9	4.6	8.8	6.3	3.3	2.9	4.5	3.7
Never Married	43.5	44.5	44.9	41.7	52.1	54.2	54.5	48.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	83,657	30,741	20,633	15,457	83,249	31,379	19,853	15,476

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.

How does the proportion of divorced Hmong vary across states? For both sexes, the largest difference is between California and Minnesota. For females, the divorced population was 4.6 in California compared to 8.8% in Minnesota. For males, it was 2.9% in California compared to 4.5% in Minnesota. Combined, the proportions of divorced in Minnesota and Wisconsin were higher than that of the California for both sexes. From these estimates, it appears that the general perceptions mentioned at the beginning of this paper do have some truth.

Data from PUMS were utilized to see if the reported differences in divorce rates are statistically significant. Table 2 presents weighted data from PUMS 2008-2010 to show the proportion of married and divorced across categories of sex, age group, and state. Data from PUMS also suggest that there is variation by sex, state, and age group with regard to the proportion of divorce.

**Table 2. Proportion of Married and Divorced by Sex, Age and State: Hmong Aged 15 and Over (in percentage), 2008-2010.**

Marital Status	Sex		Age		State		
	Female	Male	15-35	36 +	CA	MN	WI
Married	88.8	91.5	94.4	86.3	91.9	85.6	90.7
Divorced	11.2	8.5	5.6	13.7	8.2	14.5	9.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
n (weighted)	37,246	44,252	36,297	40,825	26,650	18,507	15,785

Source: U.S. Bureau Census, PUMS (2008-2010), weighted estimates.

Table 3 shows the results from our regression analysis. In Model 1, we examined the relationship between divorce and sex, holding age constant. The results indicate that females are 1.5 times more likely than males to report being divorced. Although age is not a focus of our paper, it is worth noting that those 36 years old or older were almost three times (2.8) more likely than those between ages 15 and 35 to report being divorced, holding sex constant.

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Expressing the Odds of Divorce among Hmong, 2008-2010.**

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			
	O.R.	95% C.I.	P-value	O.R.	95% C.I.	P-value	
Sex	Ref = Male						
	Female	1.51	1.03-2.20	0.03	1.41	0.90-2.19	0.13
Age	Ref = 15-35						
	36+	2.79	1.81-4.29	0.00	2.85	1.68-4.82	0.00
State	Ref = CA						
	MN				1.84	1.14-2.97	0.01
	WI				1.23	0.64-2.35	0.53
Weighted n	77,122			60,942			

Source: U.S. Bureau Census, PUMS (2008-2010), weighted estimates.

When state was added into the equation, the effect of sex on divorce weakened, as seen in Model 2. Specifically, the ratio for females decreased from 1.5 to 1.4, and the relationship became statistically insignificant. This suggests that state could potentially act as a mediating variable between sex and divorce. More research is required to untangle this link, however.

What is clear is that state of residence is a significant predictor of divorce. For example, compared to those living in California, Minnesota residents were almost two times (1.8) more likely to be divorced, holding sex and age constant. This relationship was statistically significant, but there was no significant difference between California and Wisconsin in terms of the odds of divorce.

## Discussion

Given that within the Hmong population, marriage almost always involves one male and one female, how it is possible to have a larger proportion of divorced females than divorced males? What could this discrepancy potentially tell us about marriage and divorce patterns among Hmong men and women? We think both of these questions may be linked to one explanation: divorced Hmong females are more likely to remain unmarried for a longer period of time compared to their male counterparts.

Statistically, the difference between females and males in terms of the proportion of divorce can be explained by the design of the data. The marital status question that we used does not distinguish between the number of times a person has been married or divorced. It simply asks whether a respondent was divorced at the time of the survey. Therefore, it is possible for a previously divorced individual, who had remarried during the time of the survey, to respond that he or she was "married" in the survey. The result is that a larger proportion of women or men would end up meeting the condition of being currently divorced. We believe this is the best explanation for the trends seen in the data. In fact, studies have shown that U.S. divorced women in general tend to remain unmarried for a longer period of time compared to divorced U.S. men (Elliott & Simmons, 2011; Furstenberg, 1994). Our findings suggest that this pattern is also true among Hmong women.

The next question is, why do divorced Hmong women remain unmarried for a longer time compared to divorced Hmong men? We suspect that gender roles and the stigmatization of divorced women are important factors. For example, given the norm that it is usually men who initiate a marriage, divorced men are more likely to remarry at a faster rate than divorced women. At the same time, divorced women are more likely to be stigmatized than their male



counterparts, which would decrease the rate at which they remarry. These speculations require further research in order to provide more specific and thorough explanations.

How do we explain the finding that Hmong residents in Minnesota are twice as likely to be divorced than Hmong residents in California? There are two factors to be considered with this question: (1) the proportion of divorces that occurred in Minnesota (and reported in Minnesota) and (2) the proportion of divorces that occurred outside of Minnesota (but were reported in Minnesota). Unfortunately, the data does not allow for such distinctions. Therefore, it is difficult to address whether Minnesota “caused” more divorces, or if Minnesota “drew in” divorced individuals from other states. Nonetheless, it is probably not unreasonable to suspect that there were larger social and economic conditions in Minnesota that did a little of both.

In general, we suspect that the higher divorce rate in Minnesota may be due to changes in attitude (an emphasis on individual thoughts, wills, and expression), and facilitated by changes in economic opportunities. As Ruggles (1997) observed, “The decline of patriarchal authority within the home and the increase of individualistic values stressing self-fulfillment may have resulted in a decline of social sanctions against both marital breakup and female work” (p. 494). There is reason to suspect that there might be better economic conditions or means in Minnesota when compared to California for individuals to materialize their attitudinal changes.

According to a comparative study conducted by Lor (2009) of Hmong in St. Paul, Minnesota and Hmong in Fresno, California, the Hmong in Minnesota were found to have a higher socioeconomic status than in California. Using data from the 2000 Census, Lor showed that Hmong in St. Paul had a higher homeownership rate and median household income compared to those in Fresno (p. 23). At the same time, the proportion of households on public assistance and those in poverty were much lower in St. Paul compared to Fresno. Could factors

such as these and others provide the conditions necessary for the materialization of more individualistic expressions?

To some extent, our results suggest that the perceptions mentioned at the beginning of this study are not completely flawed. However, given the ambiguity of the perceptions and the limitation of the data, caution should be taken in interpreting these perceptions and our results. We do know one thing for sure. The links between divorce rates, sex, and residence are a lot more complicated than these general perceptions, and they will require more precise quantitative data and qualitative field work to better understand them.

### *Limitations*

As mentioned above, the marital status question we used does not distinguish between the number of times that a person has been divorced, or the place and time of the divorce. Given this, it would be misleading to treat any particular state as the cause of divorce. At the same time, it would be misleading to treat any particular state as the magnet of divorced individuals. The size of the data also does not allow us to account for other potentially important factors such as employment and education. Despite these limitations, we hope our results have laid some groundwork for further research on this important and growing issue.

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