

HMONG GANGS GET MORE ORGANIZED , VIOLENT , EX-MEMBERS SAY JAILED YOUTHS CONDEMN CASES OF ALLEGED RAPE

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Gangs of **Hmong** teenagers are becoming increasingly **organized** and **violent** , former **gang** members say.

Nationwide, the **gangs** are moving beyond the loose groups of young males who banded for solidarity and protection in the 1980s and early 1990s.

"They are getting **more organized** and **violent** ," said Nhia Lee, 23, an ex- **gang** member from St. Paul, Minn. Lee is serving 12 years at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution, Wisconsin's largest prison, for attempted first-degree murder.

The state has one of the nation's biggest populations of **Hmong** , pronounced mung.

Hmong gangs have drawn national attention in the wake of several recent high-profile cases of alleged **gang** -rapes. One of those cases involves four teenage **Hmong** girls from Wisconsin who have said they were brought to Detroit in September and raped repeatedly by **gang** members. Twelve teenagers and men have been charged in the case; five have been ordered to stand trial.

Although ex- **gang** members at the prison agreed that the **gangs** are becoming **more** prone to **violent** crime, they condemned recent cases of alleged sexual assault by **gang** members. The inmates said rapes weren't a widespread activity when they were on the streets.

"We definitely condemn that," said Bee Lor, 27, of Fresno, Calif., who is serving a 25-year sentence for second-degree murder. "Any brother who does such things wrecks our dignity and pride as **Hmong** ."

The Wisconsin inmates said the **gangs** generally tend to be all **Hmong** , an ethnic group from Laos. But some **gangs** include members of Vietnamese or other Southeast Asian backgrounds.

The increasing violence is evident in Wisconsin, which has a **Hmong** population of 45,000. The number of **Hmong** inmates in the state has grown from two in 1985 to 103 now, said Wisconsin Department of Corrections spokesman Bill Clausius. Southeast Asian inmates still make up less than one percent of Wisconsin's 20,000 inmates.

Hmong gangs began developing in the early 1980s when **many** refugees were coming to the United States through Thai refugee camps after the Vietnam War. The **Hmong** people had to flee Laos because they sided with the United States during the war.

Many of them were poor and had limited job skills.

Gang experts and former members said there are hundreds of **Hmong gangs** . They have a variety of initiation rites, including beatings and secret oaths. The **gangs** have names such as Asian Bloods, True Mafia Crips, Asian Crips and Tiny Man Crew, and they have interstate connections.

Through the years, they began to organize and operate **much** like other **gangs** , experts said, and have increased at a time when others have decreased.

Xay Vang, 22, of Sacramento, Calif., who is serving a 20-year sentence in Wisconsin for armed robbery, said he was drawn to **gangs** because **many** of his cousins belonged.

"None of them pressured me," Vang said. " **Most** of it was my choice. I was **more** comfortable with my cousins. I wanted to do the stuff they did. I wanted to be like them."

Vang and the other Wisconsin inmates said they became **gang** members as teenagers to protect themselves, associate with people they felt at ease with and acquire things they couldn't afford.

"You look at other people and see the nice things they have, and you want the same things," Lee said.

Lor said the older, urban neighborhoods where **many Hmong** settled contained **many gangs** , and pushed some **Hmong** into them as well. "I had to be prepared to survive in such surroundings," he said. "I had to be strong."

The inmates described facing racial taunts and threats as they grew up, and the pressures of trying to adapt to American culture with tradition-bound parents.

"We don't go and ask our parents for anything," Lor said. "Our parents are conservative and uneducated and had a lot of expectations for us. But it's tough for us to adjust to society, especially because of our physical appearance."

Lee, who left school in the eighth grade, said: "I just started partying. I thought I knew enough to **get** my way around. When I was 6, 7, I had big plans, like being a doctor or lawyer. I guess I didn't make it."

Gang members tend to move a lot and know other **gang** members around the country, said Ray Hutchison, a sociologist with the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay and expert on **Hmong** culture and **gangs** .

Gang members, in some cases, hold jobs and have families, Hutchison said, but typically are outcasts in their communities.

The **Hmong** inmates said they had brought shame on their families. "In our society, status is highly respected," Lor said. "We have disgraced our parents and made them lose face."

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Caption: Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

Among the 103 **Hmong** inmates in Wisconsin are ex- **gang** members, clockwise from center, Xay Vang, Chue Moua, Nhia Lee and Bee Lor.

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