

Bridging Social Capital: Responsive Listening Project

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Conducted on behalf of
Harrison Neighborhood Association
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BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL:
Responsive Listening Project
The Harrison Neighborhood Association

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We are creating a prosperous and peaceful community that equitably benefits all of Harrison Neighborhood's diverse racial, cultural, and economic groups.

Harrison Neighborhood Association

The Harrison Neighborhood Association (HNA) is a geographically-based, resident driven, multi-cultural, multi-constituent, multi-issue organization. The organization was formed in 1984 by a group of community members in order to address hopes and concerns.

The organization's commitment to racial and economic justice is reflected in the following community-developed vision, approved by over 160 people, 70% of whom were persons of color:

We are creating a prosperous and peaceful community that equitably benefits all of Harrison neighborhoods diverse racial, cultural, and economic groups. We will combat racism and other forms of oppression by establishing an environment of stewardship where all individuals can participate through shared power and mutual accountability.

HNA is an active neighborhood group with a number of projects led by residents with staff support or entirely volunteer run. Some activities the organization has led or participated in: block club organizing, commercial corridor design charrette, the Northside Neighborhood Alliance, Northside Community Reinvestment Coalition, housing rehab programs, technical support to a Resident Union, addressing neighborhood foreclosure problems, Food Co-op exploratory committee, Glenwood Avenue Main Street Program, negotiating a Community Benefits Agreement, Environmental Justice campaign regarding a former Superfund Site, and coalition work with faith-based social justice groups ISAIAH/MICAH/JCA.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Background.....	2
Key Findings.....	4
Detailed Findings.....	6
Lao Participants.....	6
Hmong Participants.....	9
African American Participants.....	11
APPENDIX A: Demographic Profile of Focus Groups.....	13
APPENDIX B: Focus Group Guide.....	14
APPENDIX C: Notes on Methodology.....	16

Introduction

Together with the Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota (LACM), Southeast Asian Community Council (SEACC), and the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Harrison Neighborhood Association (HNA) is acting as the lead organization in a four organization partnership working in North Minneapolis. The multi-cultural partnership with an Undoing Racism framework has led to HNA's organizational focus on racial and economic justice.

This project, the Responsive Listening Project, is one portion of a multi-year effort to "bridge social capital" between diverse racial and cultural groups to affect change in Harrison and North Minneapolis. The long-term goal is to build a peaceful, prosperous, diverse and equitable community. HNA believes we can accomplish the following: (1) Build a critical mass of diverse leaders that have a common worldview, (2) Build a solid network of relationships between culturally diverse community members, (3) Build consensus around community identified issues of common cause that are relevant to lives of our members, (4) Build political power of the community to effectively represent/advocate for themselves and hold decision-makers accountable.

Specifically, the Responsive Listening Project assists cultural groups in identifying concerns and priorities in order to develop a collective agenda. The results of this project will be used to develop organizational priorities and focus organization staff time. HNA presents these findings from the focus groups not as a definitive measure of the community's opinions and priorities, but as one reading of the current community dynamic and individuals' concerns. This report identifies opinions and perceptions gathered during discussions among identified cultural groups. HNA has attempted to faithfully record and translate the community's views.

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Background

Within north Minneapolis, Harrison neighborhood is a community of roughly 4,200. The neighborhood is bordered by Olson Memorial Highway, the Minneapolis Farmers Market, Bassett Creek, and Theodore Wirth Park. Following the nature of most urban neighborhoods, the dynamics of Harrison neighborhood are constantly evolving. According to the 2000 census, 39% of residents identify themselves as African American, 27% identify as Asian, and 24% identify as white¹. Overall, the population of Harrison grew nearly 20% from 1990 to 2000, with the Asian population rising 92%. Accompanying this rise in population is a nearly 10% decline in the number of total housing units.

Historically, Harrison neighborhood has been home to a variety of ethnic groups and socially marginalized populations. As early as the late 1800s, Harrison and surrounding neighborhoods have been home to new immigrants, giving migrants a place to settle whilst climbing the socio-economic ladder, and then moving on.²

*The Harrison community came to include many of the poorest and least skilled people in Minneapolis, many of whom were African-American. To be sure it was a refuge of sorts where people learned to trust and to rely on one another but this residential pattern also concentrated some of the city's most disadvantaged by creating pockets of public housing units tended to collect many social problems in the Harrison area and exacerbate many of the problems associated with poverty.*³

In the summer of 1967, in response to racial discrimination and increasing disparities between African Americans in the north Minneapolis neighborhoods and the Caucasian community, race riots broke out, requiring a response from the National Guard.⁴

*This was a call to action for Harrison and surrounding communities, with African American leaders meeting with police and city officials to address the problem the following day. The local leaders shared their concerns about the lack of community facilities, the lack of parks, the decaying infrastructure, and the lack of jobs in the area. This broadened to a community-wide discussion of the problems and residents demonstrated their concerns about the lack of access to recreation, public assistance, employment, street maintenance, employment, and the like.*³

Most recently, Hmong, Lao, and Somali immigrants have migrated to Harrison neighborhood. While some immigrants are joining family or friends already living in the area, for many support systems are sparse. They face a number of obstacles: language barriers, adjusting to a culture vastly different from their own, and a number of stigmas. While it seems clear that *“the effective isolation of the population and the concentration of social problems experienced by the African American population in Harrison, has limited the possibility that the residents in Harrison can escape the cycle of poverty,”* we are unsure of whether Harrison's most recent immigrants will encounter the same challenges.³

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> and City of Minneapolis Planning Department, Research and Strategic Planning Division, October 2001, <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/citywork/planning/Census2000/index.asp>

² Edwards, R. & Jessen, P. 2002. *The Minneapolis Story through my Eyes*. Portland, OR: Beacon on the Hill Press.

³ Hansen, Toran. 2006. Harrison Neighborhood Association Anti-Racism Project Summary, For: The Harrison Neighborhood Association.

⁴ Black Relocation Association, Inc. 1996. *New Connections: African American Newcomers and Visitors Guide to the Twin Cities 1996-1997*. Black Relocation Association, Inc.

Key Findings

According to focus group participants, safety and security are the top concerns for individuals and their families. Many state being unaware of whom their neighbors are, noting the constant influx and outflow of tenants and homeowners within the neighborhood. For all participants, safety within the neighborhood parks is of utmost importance. Nearly 36% of Harrison's population is under the age of 18 years. Many wish to utilize the neighborhood parks and community center, but feel unsure about their safety and the safety of the youth.

Second to safety, participants desire an increase in available employment resources and business opportunities, citing a lack of community-owned and operated businesses as well as a lack of employment opportunities within the community. Since over 60% of Harrison's population lives in poverty, access to employment and employment resources is a key concern. Many participants are aware of employment and small-business development resources available through the city of Minneapolis, but are unaware if such resources are available within Harrison or nearby neighborhoods.

In addition to defining community priorities, focus group participants responded to a number of questions regarding community dynamics and racism. The findings varied greatly between ethnic groups. Overall, participants feel their culture and ethnic community are respected by other ethnic groups, but their culture and/or religion are not understood. Lao participants overwhelmingly agree that no culturally-motivated problems exist between the Lao community and other ethnic groups in Harrison. The Hmong participants, on the other hand, feel they are often the target of ethnically-motivated bullying and aggressive assault, usually at the hands of African American youth. The African American participants feel problems exist between themselves and Caucasian business, education, and organization leaders as well as within their own community.

Overall, most participants believe Harrison is a "better" place to live compared to other parts of North Minneapolis, but not "as good" as the suburbs. Most often community resources, safety, education, and employment were cited as the reasons for such feelings. The Lao participants agree that different cultural groups live peacefully within Harrison neighborhood. Both the Hmong and African American participants express a desire for the community to exist peacefully, but the Hmong are especially skeptical.

There was some difficulty discussing racism specifically, as there is no clear translation for "racism" in either Hmong or Thai. Both the Lao and Hmong participants were able to explore and discuss the notion among themselves and with the culturally-based moderators to come to an agreed upon understanding of the term that closely matched the common definitions of "racism." The findings regarding race closely mirrored those pertaining to community dynamics, with the Lao feeling racism is not present in the community, the Hmong feeling racism clearly occurs toward the Hmong by African Americans, and the African Americans feeling that racism occurs within the community

and in the forms of institutionalized racism, racism by Caucasians, and self-imposed racism within the African American community.

Other general findings from this project include:

- Many participants desire an increase in educational resources within the neighborhood, noting the absence of local neighborhood schools and libraries and the transportation difficulties this imposes. While ultimately they desire a return of schools and libraries, many express they would be pleased to find small resource centers/libraries within community organizations' offices and well as basic computer and internet access available at little or no cost. Realizing the costs affiliated with such endeavors, they suggest daily or weekly transportation services between the community center and local libraries.
- Participants see transportation services lacking in the area, noting the bus service is mostly limited to travel along the bordering highway into downtown Minneapolis. They desire easier/quicker options to travel between North Minneapolis neighborhoods for employment, shopping and daily needs.
- Most participants feel the community as a whole is unaware of the services offered by organizations such as HNA and how to access such services.
- Overall, participants feel they and their cultural community would be willing to increase involvement in HNA and other local organizations but they are unaware of how they can do so. They also noted a feeling that they are kept unaware of progress and outcomes affiliated with projects they have supported or been involved with.

Detailed Findings

Lao Participants

Youth

Participants had a difficult time understanding the term “community.” However, after some discussion between participants, a high school male suggested,

Community is a group working together and helping one another.

The youth feel respected by other cultures, but feel their peers don’t truly understand Lao traditions. They feel they respect other cultures, but also admit not knowing much about them. The schools the participants attend do not discuss Lao and other minority cultures nor do they acknowledge cultural celebrations or traditions. Middle school youth feel,

Classmates don’t understand when you wear traditional clothing or have traditional ceremonies.

while high school youth wished their peers understood

Not all Asians are family.

The youth note a lack of public celebrations such as New Year’s parades either at schools or in the community. They would like to be able to publicly celebrate their cultural traditions and are also interested in learning and sharing those of their peers from different ethnic backgrounds.

The Lao youth feel secure and safe in Harrison and know of no complaints between ethnic groups. Compared to other parts of north Minneapolis, participants feel Harrison is safer. They are comfortable walking at night and with small children. The high school youth noted,

Our issues are really the same. At school I hear one neighborhood [is] better or worse, but complaints are usually common between areas.

The participants overwhelmingly agree that they live peacefully with the other ethnic groups in Harrison. They do not believe racism is present. When probed about possible racism within the schools they attend, the youth feel it is not an issue:

Not everyone “gets” each others culture and traditions, but no racism happens.

The community priorities listed by the youth were:

- Availability of retailers (pharmacy, gas stations, restaurants, markets, superstores)
- Banking facilities

- Safe, clean parks
- Employment opportunities
- Temples
- Greater police/security presence
- Green space (community gardens, parks)
- Ethnic restaurants and markets
- Subsidized housing

The youth feel the most important priorities are increased parks, culturally-based retailers, and fairly priced retailers.

Participants expressed a desire to volunteer and become involved at HNA but they feel there are not enough opportunities to participate. It was unclear whether they feel there are really few opportunities available or are unaware of opportunities for involvement. They wish to be involved in planning and organizing community projects as well as work on improvement projects. Suggestions were made to clean up the park and pool area as well as participate in a “lifeguard” program for the wading pool.

Ultimately, the participants feel their top need was an increase in available resources to open or develop small businesses. They feel there is real need to bring jobs into the community, in hopes of keeping people within Harrison.

Elders

Elder participants explain community as related to ethnicity, religion and geography. They define their personal community by a shared ethnicity and historical geography, specifically which area of Laos they originate from.

Participants find Harrison to be a peaceful and friendly place to live. They feel their neighbors are helpful and respectful. As a result, elder participants are comfortable practicing cultural traditions and wearing cultural dress within their community.

While minor problems do occur, participants feel these occurrences are not racially motivated.

Each [ethnic group] focuses on their own family, but [are] respectful of others.

While the elders noted they sometimes hear unsupervised children outdoors late at night, they do not feel that crime or violence are problems. One participant mentioned she often discovers vegetables have been stolen from her garden, but she did not find this to be a big problem.

The participants feel Harrison is better than other north Minneapolis neighborhoods. They cited availability of public assistance, low cost housing, proximity to the LACM and HNA, and a central location (access to major retailers, hospitals and clinics, and an economic assistance office) as the benefits of Harrison over other parts of Minneapolis.

Most participants feel Harrison is safe, with many noting they have left their doors open without incident. They believe they live peacefully with other ethnic groups.

[In neighborhood apartment complexes and town homes,] we share some foods and cooking. We would like more sharing events with the community...I like spicy Somali food!

Participants also feel they and their neighbors help one another when necessary.

All participants feel racism is not present within the community.

The elder Lao participants listed the following as their community priorities:

- Increased police/security presence (enforcement of curfews, noise ordinances, etc.)
- Increase in gardening space
- Availability of retailers (gas stations, large grocers, ethnic markets and restaurants, fast food, coffee shops, pharmacy)
- Postal services
- Transportation services to temples and ethnic events/festivals
- Laundromat
- Increased public housing
- Community-based businesses
- Increased economic development opportunities

Participants decided police/security presence and an increase in community-based businesses are their top concerns.

The elder Lao participants are willing to participate in and support programs at HNA. They see HNA as a positive and helpful organization. They expressed a desire to get involved in planning and organizing projects, but note that for some it is too far to walk, especially in the winter or late in the evening.

Participants suggested they would like to participate in annual meetings with elders within their and other ethnic communities. They also desire more events similar to “National Night Out” which may act as opportunities to get different cultural communities together.

As a final note, participants inquired about the possibility that more resources and informational handouts be translated into a variety of languages. One participant suggested they would like to have resources available to read and peruse while waiting within organizations such as HNA and LACM.

Hmong Participants

Youth

Most Hmong youth participants define their community as containing those who share a common ethnicity. Among Hmong, they further identify with those who have resided in the United States for a similar length of time.

The participants feel they are respected but not understood. They specifically choose to not wear traditional dress outside their homes, noting they feel their African American neighbors “make fun of” their traditions.

There are no opportunities to share [Hmong] culture but [I] would like to...but I am a little shy about my tradition.

The youth feel peers from other ethnic communities often mimic and laugh at the Hmong students’ native language. They also note some problems with safety within the neighborhood park as well as robberies occurring in alleys.

The participants attend a variety of schools located throughout Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs. Those that attend the local all-Hmong school noted there are issues between those who identify as Hmong-Thai and those who identify as Hmong-American. Within mixed-race suburban schools, participants feel their culture is not understood but is respected.

The youth feel Harrison is safer than the rest of north Minneapolis, but they prefer the suburbs or areas of Wisconsin, noting increased safety and security as the number one reason to move as well as closer proximity to the schools they attend. All participants express they do not want to remain within Harrison. Many wish to return to Thailand, while others want to join family in other parts of Minnesota or in other states.

Participants explain “racism” as the result of not understanding one another. The Hmong youth feel their African American neighbors pick fights by making fun of participants’ language. Such bullying also was noted to occur on school busses and is believed to be instigated or supported by both students and drivers. Participants also mentioned minor tensions have occurred between themselves and Hispanic neighbors.

The Hmong youth listed the following community priorities:

- Getting to know neighbors of different colors
- Learning languages other than English
- Employment opportunities
- Local sports teams (many traveled to other neighborhoods to participate on teams, but they often felt unsafe on the teams and in the other neighborhoods)
- Increased safety at parks and around homes
- Better housing and support to improve housing (assistance to avoid condemnation)

- More support within the schools

All participants would like to be involved at or currently participate in activities at HNA.

As top priorities, they desire more programs for summer and part-time employment, increased safety at the neighborhood park, and better housing available.

Elders

Hmong elder participants primarily identify with other Hmong. Many mentioned they came to Harrison for low-cost and availability of housing. They desire to go elsewhere if they had the means, noting the Hmong in Minnesota with jobs tend to move to the northern suburbs.

Participants feel that different cultural groups within Harrison do not understand one another, but they would like to learn more. They believe the majority of problems in the neighborhood occur between themselves and African Americans. Many participants noted:

[African American] teens throw rocks and chase women into their homes. They are doing nothing but walking on [the] sidewalk.

Many mentioned they found litter in their yards and are often visited by individuals claiming to be solicitors and knocking on doors around 10pm.

It was agreed that Harrison is better than other parts of Minneapolis, but worse than many suburbs. The Hmong elders express a desire to live peacefully with other cultural groups, but are somewhat skeptical, noting the Hmong don't like problems, often avoiding conflict. Ultimately, they feel the solution was simple and could be reduced to a Hmong saying:

You respect me, I respect you.

Racism is experienced by participants, most often by African American youth. Occurrences of racism seem to most often occur within the park where teens mock and imitate Hmong children.

Participants shared a number of stories involving violence and suspected racism. They feel the police "do nothing" in instances where Hmong are victims of armed robbery or assault, most often complaining the police state they "didn't know and couldn't find the one who did it." As a result, participants feel it is not worthwhile to report incidents to police. They feel frustrated and shared they are unaware of where else to turn for assistance.

The elders are concerned that the parents of African American teens seem to support their children's negative behaviors, often witnessing occurrences at that park and doing nothing to stop them.

Overall, the participants feel most instances of racism were actually the result of language barriers and misunderstanding. The elders cannot "fight back" with words or tell the teens to "go away."

Community priorities identified by the Hmong elders were:

- Increased supervision at the neighborhood park and pool
- Increased knowledge of where to go for support when incidents occur
- Education resources for new refugees (language support, assistance in seeking citizenship)
- Increased awareness of community resources
- Locally-owned businesses
- Local clinics or assistance in accessing regional health centers
- Elder transport services to/from community meetings and events
- Computer/internet access (necessary when trying to access government and immigrant services)
- Library services (bookmobile, etc.)

Participants are unaware of how they may become involved with community organizations and HNA, but they wish to do so if they could provide worthwhile assistance to the organizations.

African American Participants

African Americans participants feel that communities are defined by geography, ethnicity, common "ties," and religion. Specifically, participants identify with those of common race, but many noted this is an individual choice and may vary for other African Americans.

Participants feel their culture is respected within Harrison neighborhood. They do not feel this was necessarily the case outside of the neighborhood. They do, however, feel racism occurs in the forms of institutionalized racism, racism by Caucasian neighbors/community stakeholders, as well as racism within the African American community.

Institutionalized racism was noted to most obviously occur within the nearby schools which their children attended. Many feel African American students are often incorrectly labeled as "special needs" or "special education" students without proper assessment. Furthermore, they feel huge gaps exist within the schools between ethnicities. It was discussed that some of this may be "artificial" racism, since many Somali students at local schools were quite successful academically. Some suggested this may be an example of racism within the African American community:

Is it artificial? Is education a priority in our homes? Maybe parents believe students are “unable” to compete.

This led to discussion regarding inter-racial racism. Participants feel many in their community have adopted a defeatist attitude. Parents, with the help of schools, place too much focus on athletics over academics and feel the youth cannot “do better” academically.

The media was also noted as perpetuating racism. Participants feel their community, as well as other ethnic communities within Harrison and north Minneapolis, are often misrepresented by newspapers and print media outside the community.

African American participants listed the following as community priorities:

- A functional community
- Informed, independent and accountable churches (increased relationships with both the church and the “unchurch” as well as increased engagement between pastors and community organizations)
- Organizations as representative of the community at-large
- Increase public safety via participation with both neighbors and public officials
- Locally-owned businesses
- Greater community involvement and opportunities for sharing
- Culturally appropriate/specific youth services
- Employment services
- Adult education services/support
- Consistent sharing between community organizations, small groups and entire community
- Reduce social disparities
- Environmental programs
- Increased awareness of community services available within Harrison
- Lifeskills and gardening programs
- Increased access to public and private transportation services

Participants noted increased employment and business opportunities are their main priorities. They feel there is a need to bring businesses to Harrison as well as a need to encourage present businesses to engage in the community.

We [the community leaders and active community members] must act as the yeast.

APPENDIX A

Demographic profile of focus groups

6 August 2008

Lao youth aged 16-25, 4 women, 6 men

7 August 2008

Lao elders aged 35+, 6 women, 4 men

22 August 2008

Hmong elders aged 30+, 7 women, 1 man

5 September 2008

Hmong youth aged 14-25, 3 women, 12 men

5 September 2008

African Americans aged 25+, 7 women, 3 men

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Guide

Introduction

Moderator introductions

Purpose: We need your help to learn about common concerns and priorities among Harrison neighborhood in order to ensure HNA and other community organizations are providing appropriate services and addressing the community's concerns. A number of culturally-based focus groups are being held. Everyone is being asked the same questions.

Topic 1. *Community definitions*

1.1 What is "community?"

[What defines a community – religion, occupation, ethnicity, geography, economics, race, class, education, age, gender, history... - What is most important to your community? Can one person belong to only one or many communities?]

1.2 What defines your cultural community?

Topic 2. *Community dynamics.*

2.1 Within Harrison neighborhood, is your culture respected?

[What should people know about your community in order to increase tolerance and acceptance? What would you like other cultures to know about your culture? What would you like to know about other cultures?]

2.2 How do different cultural groups in Harrison Neighborhood work together?

[What problems exist between different cultural groups within Harrison Neighborhood? What is the result of these problems?]

2.3 How do you feel problems and issues in Harrison Neighborhood are the same or different than those faced in other parts of Minneapolis?

2.4 Do you believe different cultural groups may live peacefully together within Harrison Neighborhood?

Topic 3. *Racism*

3.1 What is racism?

[Why does racism occur? What is the aim of racism? What is the result of racism?]

3.2 Realizing racism occurs on many levels and many places, where in your community is racism most present?

[Who is it mainly directed at?]

Topic 4. *Priorities*

4.1 What are the greatest challenges facing you and your family?

[Challenge examples: safety, education, jobs, health, access to services...What is the number one thing you would change? What would you be willing to do to make that change?]

4.2 If you were given one minute to advice community leaders on how to combat racism and improve the lives of families in Harrison neighborhood and the surrounding communities, what would you say?

Conclusions

Review purpose: To help HNA and community organizations identify common concerns and prioritize these concerns to ensure you and your community's needs are being adequately met.

“After considering everything we have discussed this evening, what do you feel is the most important?”

Summary of main ideas/responses shared
Clarifications.

Thanks and appreciation of participation

APPENDIX C

Notes on Methodology

Focus group discussions occurred in a semi-structured interview format in which moderators guided the participants through a series of related topics. Participants were encouraged to discuss their opinions as well as the experiences and understandings that helped shape these opinions. The moderators worked through the guide (Appendix B) asking additional question in order to encourage discussion and clarify misunderstandings or confusions. Each focus group was ethnically specific and separate groups were held for youth and elders in the Hmong and Lao community. In total, five focus group discussions were held.

For focus groups including Hmong and Lao participants, two moderators were present: the author of this report and main investigator as well as a community representative who was a speaker of each specific community's native language. The second moderator was able to assist in explanation of concepts which were culturally abstract as well as translate the discussion for the main investigator. Responses were hand recorded within the discussion and recordings were summarized and clarified at the end of each session.