

Project: How Many Liberians Live in Northwest Hennepin?

The overall goal of this research project was to determine how many Liberians live in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. The data collected was then to be analyzed and used to assist the Liberian Community of Minnesota Corporation (LCMC) in achieving its mission of assisting Liberian refugees by helping them integrate into society. More accurate data was needed in order to convince potential funders to help LCMC achieve its objectives and also to demonstrate to appropriate authorities the impact the Liberian population can and does have on the community. At the start of this project, estimates for the number of Liberians living in Northwest Hennepin County were as high as 10,000. The numbers seemed inflated at the time, and after some additional research, the estimates appear to be closer to 1000.

Data was collected through interviews, the Organization of Liberians of MN election for a new president, a survey attempt, and information on the internet. Some of the organizations that would seem obvious to turn to for this information, including the MN State Demographers Office and the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), provided useful qualitative information but had little to offer in terms of definitive numbers. The INS does, however, have a yearbook in progress, which will be ready in two years. The CENSUS for the year 2000 also was not helpful in determining the number of Liberians living in NW Hennepin County, for it does not divide the African-American population into sub-groups. A written survey was sent to Liberian owned businesses and organizations working with Liberians in the metro area asking questions ranging from "What is your business and would you be willing to be listed in a directory

of Liberian businesses?” to “What do you think are the greatest needs among the Liberian population?” Response to this survey was minimal, even after follow-up phone calls and an enclosed addressed and stamped return envelope.

Based on the numbers obtained from election results, the MN Department of Health and Human Services, Osseo and Robbinsdale school districts, and resettlement agencies (Catholic Charities, International Institute, Lutheran Social Services), the most accurate data apparently available at this time, point toward approximately 1000 Liberians in the area. An estimated 400 Liberian students are in Osseo and Robbinsdale school districts, and an estimated 600 Liberian adults live in NW Hennepin County. It is important to note, however, that these figures do not include the number of Liberians who may live in the area illegally.

The first documented numbers of Liberians immigrating to the area began in 1991. Trends show that the number of Liberian refugees in MN has increased dramatically from 1998 to 1999 but tapered off a bit in 2000. The main reason for the number of refugees is of course due to the Liberian Civil War. The war began in 1989 and lasted for seven years. Though the war has ended, the devastating effects of the war have left the economy and infrastructure of the Republic of Liberia in disarray and a population uprooted. Displaced Liberians living in the United States were granted another one-year extension, until September 29, 2002, on their deferred enforced departure. The myriad of legal complications and debate surrounding this issue are beyond the scope of this report, but the immediate concerns are clear: what to do with the Liberian population that is living here now and how to accommodate their needs in order to allow them to achieve successful integration.

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The school districts expressed some of the more pressing problems that need to be addressed that include:

- Interrupted education
- Gaps in cultural expectations between Americans and Liberians
- Parents frustrated over their children adopting American culture that does not conform to parental cultural expectations
- Different school environment than what Liberian students are used to
- Communication issues
- Mental health concerns-including post traumatic stress disorder
- Hostilities between ethnic groups
- Poor math and science skills
- Poor literacy skills

The two school districts, Osseo and Robbinsdale, also expressed the need for more intensive academic skills, including literary and basic math, instruction for the Liberian students, support groups for families and students to help them in making the transition to American society, and training for both students and parents on cultural expectations America and Liberia. Both school districts also face the challenge of keeping their Liberian students mainstreamed and ensuring the quality of their programs while at the same time focusing on their special needs but not segregating the students.

The Liberian Community of Minnesota Corporation (LCMC) began in 1999 to address some of these very needs. Many, if not most, Liberians living in the Northwest

Hennepin area agree that cooperation is necessary to overcome these seemingly inherent barriers to achieving full integration of their population into society in the U.S., but it is difficult, to say the least.

LCMC is changing the scope of its organization so that it will act more as a resource center for information. Its projects will continue, but they will become more focused, and more cooperation will be sought with other Liberian non-profit organizations with similar goals and projects. Perhaps key is that LCMC will form a closer partnership with the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota so that a more comprehensive database of Liberians and Liberian businesses in MN can be developed. LCMC is committed to helping the Liberian immigrants in the metro area and continuously seeks cooperation and resources to do so. If further cooperation with other organizations and municipal agencies, with the information the organization has already and is in the process of gathering, LCMC stands to make a powerful, positive impact in serving the Liberian community in the NW Hennepin area.