



# Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

## STRADLING TWO SOCIAL WORLDS

# The Experience of Vietnamese Refugee Children in the United States

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## INTRODUCTION

Educators, counselors, school administrators, juvenile authorities, and others who work with young people today routinely come into contact with the children of Vietnamese refugees.

The story of Vietnamese Americans is one of very rapid growth. In the early 1970s, there were fewer than 15,000 Vietnamese in the United States. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (U.S. INS), the United States admitted only 4,561 Vietnam-born persons between 1961 and 1970; most were exchange students, trainees, or diplomats on nonimmigrant visas, along with a small number of wives of U.S. servicemen, while almost none were children (Skinner, 1980; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese Americans became members of one of America's largest refugee groups, and, thus, increasingly visible in the American ethnic mosaic. By 1990, the group numbered over 615,000, a 40-fold increase in just 15 years; and even this figure understates the true size of the Vietnamese-origin population, since it excludes no fewer than 200,000 Sino-Vietnamese (ethnic Chinese), who fled Vietnam and arrived in the United States as part of the larger refugee outflow from Southeast Asia (Rumbaut, 1995a).

At the turn of the new millennium, this refugee group is on the verge of becoming the third largest Asian American group, following the Chinese and Filipinos.<sup>1</sup>

There were virtually no Vietnamese students in American elementary or secondary schools before 1975. However, as this ethnic group has grown with startling rapidity in a short period of time, its younger generation has been rapidly coming of age.

As of 1990, 52 percent of all Vietnamese American children under 18 years of age were U.S. born, 27 percent arrived in the United States prior to the age of five, 17 percent arrived between the ages of five and 12, and only four percent arrived as adolescents. In areas of ethnic concentration, such as Orange County, San Jose, San Diego, and Houston, school enrollments of Vietnamese students at every grade level have grown substantially. A 1997 California Department of Education home language census reported that Vietnamese students were the second largest language minority group in the state's schools (Saito, 1999).

The sudden emergence of this new and sizeable ethnic group poses special challenges for those who work with American youth.

The Vietnamese come to the United States from a culture that is vastly different from most long-existing American cultures. The parents spent their formative years in Vietnam, holding a set of cultural values, norms,

beliefs, behavioral standards, and expectations that may seem at odds with those of the new land.

Their children, in contrast, have either diminishing memories of, or little contact with, the homeland and are instead eager to embrace American culture and strive to fit in. Often, they find themselves straddling two social worlds. At home or within their ethnic community, they hear that they must work hard and do well in school in order to move up; on the street they often learn a different lesson, that of rebellion against authority and rejection of the goals of achievement.

Today's popular culture, brought to the immigrants through the television screen, exposes children to the lifestyles and consumption standards of American society, raising their expectations well beyond those of their parents. Like other immigrant children, this bicultural conflict defines the experience of Vietnamese children in growing up in America.

Growing up in America has been difficult for the children of the refugees. Unlike most other immigrant groups in American history, the Vietnamese arrived as refugees, though some may hold the legal status of immigrants. As a group, they were uprooted from their homeland under frequently violent and traumatic circumstances. A great majority of them were resettled in the United States by U.S. government agencies and private organizations in cooperation with the government. This history has caused members of the parent generation to face special difficulties of adjustment to the new land.

These difficulties affect the children as well. The parents' low socioeconomic status makes it hard for the children to succeed, even though both parents and children desperately want to get ahead. The environment in which the children find themselves further limits their chances: too many live in neighborhoods that are poor and socially isolated, where local schools do not function well and the streets are beset by gang violence and drugs.

To all these difficulties are added the generic problems of second generation acculturation, aggravated by the troubles associated with coming of age in an era far more materialistic and individualistic than encountered by immigrant children in years gone by.

Despite the adversities surrounding Vietnamese immigration to the United States, however, Vietnamese children have developed a reputation for outstanding academic achievement. In many school districts around the country, even in schools where there are only a few Vietnamese, Vietnamese American students outperform their native-born peers by large margins and frequently become their school's valedictorians and salutatorians. The students' extraordinary performance in school has puzzled many scholars, educators, social workers, and others who work with youth.

At the same time, though, serious social problems plague many Vietnamese families and communities. Vietnamese youth gangs have emerged in many American cities and become notoriously threatening. Some Vietnamese children have frequent scrapes with the law, and even commit violent crimes.

Between the valedictorians and the delinquents, ordinary Vietnamese children struggle in school with language problems and with limited knowledge of American society. These ordinary Vietnamese children find themselves in classes where teachers know little about Vietnamese social background and have access to only a few Vietnamese counselors.

The purpose of this monograph is to offer a general account of the current state of Vietnamese America and to summarize existing research findings on Vietnamese children, both those who are native-born and those born in Vietnam and raised in the United States.

Our goal is to provide insight into the unique experience of the young members of this ethnic group new to the U.S. in order to help educators, administrators, social workers, and others who work with them to deal effectively with their problems and to encourage their achievement.

We begin by placing the Vietnamese American population in the historical context of the displacement from Vietnam and resettlement in the United States.

The first section, therefore, offers a brief history of the Vietnam War, its resulting refugee exodus, and the arrival of the Vietnamese in the United States.

The second section discusses the American context that received Vietnamese refugees, focusing on how premigration characteristics of the parent generation and the resettlement process have affected the adaptation of children.

The following section looks at Vietnamese American families and communities. We pay special attention to

the ways in which the distinct social processes of Vietnamese family life create a unique form of social capital that can help overcome disadvantages associated with parents' low socioeconomic status and ghettoized conditions in inner-city neighborhoods.

The fourth section examines various aspects of the adaptation of Vietnamese children to American society, with a focus on their adaptation to school, since schools are the most central non-familial institution in the lives of these young people. The conclusion uses the information presented here to make practical suggestions, based on current research, for adults who have professional interests in the problems and strengths of Vietnamese American youth.

### **DISPLACEMENT: LEAVING VIETNAM AND ARRIVING IN AMERICA**

A brief recapitulation of the American involvement in Vietnam can provide a historical context for understanding today's Vietnamese American population. The sudden emergence of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians on the American scene was primarily the result of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. The United States originally had little economic interest in the region.

One ironic consequence of U.S. involvement in the region is that a sizeable part of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos is now in America (Rumbaut, 1995a). As of 1996, over 700,000 refugees from Vietnam, 135,000 from Cambodia, and 210,000 from Laos were admitted to the United States.

The development of the Communist bloc dominated by the former Soviet Union, the Communist takeover in China, the direct confrontation with Communist troops in the Korean War, and the threat of the Communist "domino" effect prompted a U.S. foreign policy to "contain" communism, pushing Americans into Southeast Asia.

### **THE VIETNAM WAR**

In 1954, the French army was defeated by Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh Front forces, and Vietnam was divided into two countries: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), headed by Ho Chi Minh, and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), headed by Ngo Dinh Diem.

In response, the United States, acting on the primary foreign policy objective of containing international Communism, became increasingly dedicated to the preservation of Diem's anti-Communist government in South Vietnam. The U.S. government hoped that its support for South Vietnam would deter the expansion of the power of communist North Vietnam and prevent communism from spreading to other Southeast Asian countries.

Meanwhile, many U.S.-based voluntary agencies, Catholic Relief Services (CARE) and Church World Services among them, were active in South Vietnam in response to the social disruption of war. Thus, the people of South Vietnam began to become better acquainted with Americans and American culture and better connected with Catholicism than their Northern compatriots.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy sent military advisors to South Vietnam to assist the beleaguered Diem government. However, Diem, born of a Catholic family and relying heavily upon Vietnamese Catholics and Catholic refugees from the North for his suppression of Communist infiltration in the South, began to lose his popularity.

In a country where Buddhism dominated, Diem's favoritism toward Catholics created strong resentment, which opened up opportunities for the North Vietnamese-supported insurgents. These insurgents organized themselves as the National Liberation Front, known as the Viet Cong (Vietnamese guerrilla fighters who opposed the South Vietnamese government). Diem also made enemies of other religious groups, such as the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and the Binh Xuyen, who opposed his Catholic favoritism (Bousquet, 1991).

In 1963, a military coup overthrew Diem. This coup apparently took place with the knowledge and consent of the American Embassy. The new leaders of South Vietnam proved less able to maintain control than Diem. By 1965, with the South Vietnamese government on the verge of collapse, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent ground troops to South Vietnam. American military and political leaders believed that they would win the war by the end of 1967.

At the beginning of 1968, however, the Viet Cong forces of the South and the Viet Minh troops of the North launched the Tet Offensive, which undermined many Americans' confidence in winning the war. By the early 1970s, American political leaders began to realize that a quick military victory in Vietnam was extremely unlikely,

that the American public was divided over the Vietnam War, and that continuing a war that was increasingly unpopular would mean committing American soldiers to an indefinite future.

At the Paris Peace Talks in 1973, the United States agreed on a timetable for withdrawing American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and turned the war over to the South Vietnamese army with the support of American funding and continued training.

It turned out that the South Vietnamese government was no better prepared to defend itself than it had been in 1965. The U.S. Congress, reluctant to continue any backing at all for the domestically divisive war, cut off aid to South Vietnam, which seriously diminished the chances for survival of the disorganized and unprepared South Vietnamese government.

In contrast, the North Vietnamese military, battle-hardened through years of fighting against the Americans and aided by the Viet Cong, found few obstacles in their way. In April 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell to North Vietnamese troops. Vietnam was unified under the Hanoi government, and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

The war caused over 58,000 American and about three million Vietnamese casualties. It also left nightmares, depression, antisocial behavior, and posttraumatic stress disorders that continue to affect Americans and Vietnamese Americans, as well as hundreds and thousands of refugees.<sup>2</sup> In a 1987 study, Lynn R. August and Barbara Gianola (1987) found that many Vietnamese Americans suffered from war-related stress similar to that of American soldiers who had served in Vietnam.

Many American-born or -reared children of Vietnamese refugees find the anxieties and the homesickness that their parents have suffered hard to understand. The children's lack of understanding often exacerbates family tensions, widening the generation gap that exists between parents and children of all ethnic backgrounds.

### THE REFUGEE EXODUS

Vietnamese refugees fled their country in several significant waves, as shown on Figure 1. The first wave surged at the fall of Saigon in 1975. This group of refugees was made up primarily of South Vietnamese government officials, U.S. related personnel, and members of the Vietnamese elite.

The second wave, which became known as the crisis of the boat people, hit the American shore in the late 1970s. A large proportion of the boat people were Sino-Vietnamese.

The third wave occurred in the early 1980s. This group consisted of the boat people as well as those leaving Vietnam under the U.S. Orderly Departure program.

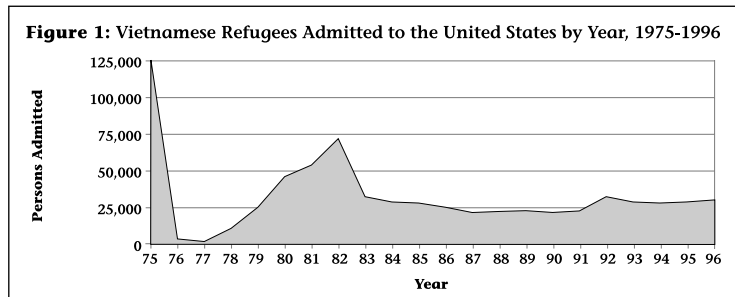
In late 1989, a distinct group – Amerasian children and their families – entered the United States in large numbers under the U.S. Homecoming Act.

Then, in the early 1990s, another large group of refugees reached the American shore under the U.S. Humanitarian Operation Program.

The Vietnamese refugee flight subsided in the mid-1990s. Since then, the arrival of the Vietnamese has become part of the regular family-sponsored immigration.

The initial flight from Vietnam was touched off by the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and by rumors and fears in the face of an uncertain future. [Fears stemmed from] the bitterness of the war in Vietnam, the suddenness of South Vietnam's defeat in the Spring of 1975, and rumors about the Hanoi government's intent to execute all former South Vietnamese civil servants, policemen, and other officials, as well as all those who had served the Americans in any capacity, many people left the country, by sea, land, and air.

Before 1977, 130,000 refugees who had fled Vietnam were allowed to settle in the United States on parole status granted by the U.S. government. Those in this initial wave of refugees were mostly members of the elite



and the middle class who either had access to the evacuation arranged by the American military or could afford their own means of flight.

After the initial airlift of Vietnamese to the U.S. in 1975, thousands of additional refugees fled Vietnam by boat over the next three years. The phrase “boat people” came into common usage as a result of the flood of refugees casting off from Vietnam in overcrowded, leaky boats at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

By 1979, an estimated 400,000 refugees, known as the second wave of flight, escaped Vietnam in boats to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore (Caplan, Whitmore, & Choy, 1989; Tran, 1991).<sup>3</sup> This mass exodus was disproportionately made up of ethnic minorities, particularly the Sino-Vietnamese, who fled Vietnam after China became involved in Vietnam’s war with Cambodia (Chanda, 1986).<sup>4</sup>

According to most reports, almost half the boat people perished at sea. The remaining half ended up in camps in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and other countries in Southeast Asia (Caplan et al., 1989; Chan & Loveridge, 1987; Tran, 1991). Nevertheless, the refugee exodus continued throughout the 1980s.

It seems relatively easy for most Americans to understand why many South Vietnamese fled their country in the early days after the fall of Saigon. But it is more difficult to grasp why the refugees kept fleeing for so many years after the Vietnam War ended, especially considering that the Hanoi government did not plunge the South into a bloodbath as so many had once feared.

Several factors account for the lengthy flow of refugees from Vietnam. First, political repression continued to make life difficult for those individuals who were detained at or released from reeducation camps as well as for their family members. Second, economic hardships, exacerbated by natural disasters and poor harvests in the years following the war, created a widespread sense of hopelessness. Third, incessant warfare with neighboring countries further drained Vietnam’s resources for capital investment and development.

These severely adversarial conditions, triggering the second and third exodus of Vietnamese “boat people” in the late 1970s and early 1980s, continued to send thousands of refugees off on the rugged journey to a better life.

Once the early refugee waves established communities in the United States, the new informal and officially unrecognized ties between America and Vietnam provided an impetus for a continuing outward flow.

Upon resettlement in the United States and other Western countries, many Vietnamese refugees rebuilt overseas networks with families and friends. Letters frequently moved between the receiving countries and Vietnam, providing relatives in the homeland with an in-depth knowledge of the changing refugee policies and procedures of resettlement countries.

After peaking in 1982, the influx of refugees slowed somewhat, but it rose sharply between the years 1988 and 1992. From 1990 onward, political prisoners constituted the largest category of Vietnamese refugees admitted to the United States.

Some former South Vietnamese civilian and military officials had been imprisoned in reeducation camps in Vietnam since 1975, and many of those who had been released from camps into Vietnamese society were marginal members of a society that discriminated against them and their families in employment, housing, and education.

In 1989, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam agreed that current and former detainees in reeducation camps would be allowed to leave for the United States.

Since the mid-1990s, immigration from Vietnam has begun to assume a different shape. Though a substantial proportion continues to be admitted as refugees, an increasing number have been entering the United States as family-sponsored immigrants, a flow that will probably grow in years to come. As the refugee influx ebbs, family reunification can be expected to dominate Vietnamese immigration into the [21<sup>st</sup>] century.

Vietnamese Americans are a newly established ethnic population, but they are also a very fast growing population as a result of their continuing immigration. By 1996, over 700,000 refugees from Vietnam had arrived in the United States. The history of exile and hardship has left marks.

Many Vietnamese parents pressure their children to excel in school and to enter professional fields such as science, medicine, or engineering because these parents continue to feel the insecurities of the past and to view education as the only ticket to a better life. “My mom and dad have been through so much in their lives,” one young woman said, “that now they don’t want me to take any chances at all.”

There is also a significantly large number of Vietnamese children who do not experience similar parental pressures, because their mothers and fathers were left behind in Vietnam. Unaccompanied minors and children with relatives other than parents came to the U.S. without family direction. Even when the children later reunited with parents and family members, normative parent-child relations proved difficult because of the lengthy and severe family disruptions resulting from warfare and the chaotic situation in Vietnam.

C.J. Forsyth and Carl Bankston (1997), for example, discuss the case of a young Vietnamese man who had been separated from both parents for over a decade before being reunited with mother and father in the United States. Relations proved impossible to reconstruct and the young man began a career of juvenile delinquency that ultimately ended in a murder conviction. Along similar lines, R.B. McClements-Hammond (1993) found that unaccompanied Vietnamese minors suffered significantly more mental health problems than children living with their families.

Disrupted family patterns, as a consequence of uprooting and resettlement rather than divorce, became a problem for many Vietnamese arriving in the United States.

### **TRANSITION: THE REFUGEE CAMPS**

Between exile from Vietnam and entry into American society, many Vietnamese refugees stayed in refugee camps. The earliest of these camps were actually on American soil. With the arrival of 125,000 Vietnamese in May 1975, the U.S. government set up five reception centers: Camp Pendleton, California; Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Guam (Rumbaut, 1995a).

Although U.S. authorities intended to disperse the refugees, as discussed below, these early camps helped to create the Vietnamese American communities that would emerge over the following two decades. By bringing Vietnamese together on American soil, the camps enabled them to establish or reestablish social ties and social networks. These reestablished ethnic networks were vital for the adjustment of the displaced Vietnamese in camps and especially critical in providing social support and promoting psychological well-being among the refugees (Harding & Looney, 1977; Liu, Lamanna, & Murata, 1979).

During the last four months of 1975, all of the camps on U.S. soil closed down, since Americans generally believed that the Southeast Asian refugee crisis had passed.

The outpouring of refugees from Vietnam and its neighboring countries in 1979 showed, however, that the American entwinement with Southeast Asia could not be so easily consigned to the pages of history books. In July 1979, the United States and other nations responded to the crisis of the “boat people” by pledging to accept more refugees. Rather than admit great numbers without any preparation, the U.S., in cooperation with the United Nations and other individual countries, began to set up overseas refugee camps to control the flow of people.

Refugee camps around Southeast Asia were set up in the early 1980s as holding places for the large numbers of Vietnamese entering other countries as illegal and frequently unwanted aliens. These major processing centers differed from other refugee camps in that they were intended to be temporary residences for individuals bound for third countries.

Centers on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, at Galang in Indonesia, and at Phanat Nikhom in Thailand channeled thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia to the United States from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. Most often, refugees would stay in a camp for six months before flying to the United States, although their stay could be extended because of disease or other problems.

Although some refugees did not pass through the camps, it was part of the refugee experience for most of those bound for America. Lynn Saito (1999) reported in a recent study of Vietnamese American students in Orange County, California, that 62 percent of the families of her respondents had spent time in a refugee camp. Thirty percent of the families had spent more than six months in a camp.

Life in refugee camps, characterized by transition and isolation from familiar surroundings, subjected refugees to feelings of disorientation and “ontological insecurity” (Chan & Loveridge, 1987). The refugee camps put strains on family relations in some respects, strengthened those relations in others, and began a process of changes in families that would continue in the United States (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Researchers observed that the camps often had a disintegrative effect on families (Williams, 1990), since family members were left behind or lost; thus, the process of fleeing Vietnam and staying in refugee camps broke up

many families. However, connections among family members also helped many Vietnamese endure the stresses of camp life.

In an important study of Vietnamese American family life, Nazli Kibria (1993) astutely observed that extended family ties were more important to Vietnamese in America than they had been in Vietnam. Much of the increase in interdependence of cousins, in-laws, and other extended family members, even unrelated countrypersons, began to strengthen in the camps.

The camps also saw changes in family roles that would continue in the United States. Children had to take on even greater responsibilities than they had in Vietnam, as they performed household tasks and cared for younger siblings. Those who learned English more quickly than their parents were placed in the position of “language brokers” in the camps, translating the words of English-speaking camp authorities. This new role set a pattern that would continue in the United States (Tse, 1996).

In the camps, refugees were required to attend classes in English, in cultural orientation, and in preparation for the American work environment. In all of these classes, instructors stressed the importance of economic independence. U.S. refugee resettlement officials were concerned that the refugee program would lose its popular support if it were seen as importing people who would become permanent dependents on public assistance. But critics such as James Tollefson (1989) argued that refugee education, by continually harping on the need to get off welfare, was pushing people into minimum wage jobs.

Despite the anti-welfare line so often promoted in the camps, public assistance has been available to refugees upon arrival in the United States, and it has proven indispensable for refugee resettlement.

Our own research with refugees, in the camps and afterwards, has led to the conclusion that this assistance left many new Vietnamese Americans emotionally conflicted. On the one hand, they had been repeatedly told, either explicitly or implicitly, that it was shameful to rely on welfare. On the other hand, as discussed below, most of them were placed on public assistance after arrival and had to depend on government funds until they could find other means of support.

The drive to establish themselves, already present as a result of the uprooting and transplantation, was intensified by their paradoxical experience of feeling shameful about receiving welfare while nevertheless having to accept it in order to survive. Achieving some measure of material success became a goal for many Vietnamese refugees, and they communicated this drive to their children.

### **GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND THE BEGINNING OF VIETNAMESE AMERICA**

U.S. refugee policies have something of an ad hoc character, developed as a series of responses to unforeseen and changing policies.

When President Gerald R. Ford authorized the entry of 130,000 refugees from the three countries of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), 125,000 of whom were Vietnamese, into the United States on April 18, 1975, he was reacting to the victory of Communist forces in those countries with a one-time action. But the refugee exodus showed no sign of slowing down.

The resettlement continued as a result of the lobbying of concerned American citizens and organizations, and the refugee crisis of 1979 and 1980 created pressure for a new refugee policy.

The Refugee Act of 1980 became the most comprehensive piece of refugee legislation in U.S. history. In place of the “seventh preference category” established in 1965, which admitted refugees as part of the total number of immigrants allowed into the United States, the Refugee Act provided for an annual number of admissions for refugees, which was designated independent of the number of immigrants admitted and was to be established each year by the President in consultation with Congress. This legislative Act, then, became a policy of refugee resettlement, reflecting a continuing process, rather than a mere reaction to specific emergency events.

Those who work with Vietnamese youth will frequently hear them say that their parents came to the United States as “ODPs.” Sometimes the young people themselves do not know the meaning of these initials. The Orderly Departure Program (ODP) was created in late May 1979 as an agreement between the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Hanoi government as a tentative solution to worldwide attention attracted by the boat people.

The ODP allowed those interviewed and approved for resettlement in America by U.S. officials in Vietnam

to leave by plane with their Vietnamese passports. This group was made up mostly of former South Vietnamese soldiers, who had been in prison or reeducation camps, and their families. By 1989, 165,000 Vietnamese had been admitted to the U.S. under the Orderly Departure Program and by the mid-1990s the number had grown to over 200,000.

In the late 1980s, the United States government, with the cooperation of the government of Vietnam, developed a program designed to bring the sons and daughters of former U.S. servicemen from Vietnam to America. One of the side effects of the American presence in Vietnam is the existence of thousands of Amerasian children, most of whom were born between the years 1965 and 1973, although a few were born as early as 1960 and some as late as 1975.

The physically distinct Amerasians lived in Vietnam as impoverished castaways, ostracized by a society that referred to them as *bui doi* (literally, children of the “dust of life”), which could be taken as the equivalent of calling someone “trash” in English. As early as 1975, the United States government admitted Amerasians to the United States as immigrants, but granted them eligibility for assistance benefits as refugees.

Before the Amerasian Homecoming Act, about 6,000 Amerasians and 11,000 of their relatives left Vietnam legally under the ODP provisions. It was difficult to pin down the actual number of Amerasians remaining in Vietnam because no official census was taken. U.S. officials estimated about 10,000 but Vietnamese officials put the number at 16,000.

In 1988, the U.S. Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act which lifted quotas on Amerasian immigration and directed the U.S. government to bring as many of the Vietnamese American children to the United States as possible. Under the Act, the United States cut to a minimum the documentary requirements for an Amerasian to leave Vietnam.

After Amerasians and their Vietnamese families were allowed a special status under the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1988, Amerasian children in Vietnam suddenly turned “golden children,” because they became an easy means to leave Vietnam; many Vietnamese families claimed them in order to emigrate. Approximately 17,000 Amerasians and about 65,000 of their accompanying family members have been resettled in the U.S. under this Act as of 1993.

As a consequence of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, many Vietnamese communities in the United States contain a visible minority of children with European American or African American ancestry. Although many Amerasians identified strongly with their absent American fathers before coming to the United States, as Steven DeBonis (1995) makes clear, they are also culturally Vietnamese.

Having been taught all of their lives that they are not really Vietnamese, they came to America only to find that they are not “American” either. Many of them, moreover, have lived lives of extreme hardship and deprivation (Bemak & Chung, 1998; McKelvey & Webb, 1995). Amerasian children and the children of Amerasians (many of whom have now been born in the United States) thus often encounter special problems of identity.

Since 1990, political prisoners and their families have constituted the largest category of Vietnamese refugees admitted to the United States. Some former South Vietnamese civilian and military officials had been imprisoned in reeducation camps in Vietnam since 1975, and many of those who had been released from camps into Vietnamese society were marginal members of a society that discriminated against them and their families in employment, housing, and education.

In 1989, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam agreed that current and former detainees in reeducation camps would be allowed to leave for the United States under the Humanitarian Operation (HO) Program. More than 70,000 people have arrived in the United States as a result.<sup>5</sup>

Former political prisoners are often referred to in Vietnamese American communities as “HOs,” and they have formed mutual assistance organizations with names such as the “HO Union.” The HOs and their families have been arriving in the United States in a context that is vastly different from the early Vietnamese refugees. Vietnamese American communities have been fully established in many parts of the United States, and the former political prisoners often have relatives in these communities who can provide support networks.

The arrival of the political prisoners contributed to the continuing importance of home country politics in many Vietnamese American communities. Although younger generations are beginning to question the ideological conformity of their elders, many first generation Vietnamese are deeply anti-Communist in their attitudes.

The result of the “circle the wagons” mentality fostered by this history is that older Vietnamese can be suspicious of



rebels or unconventional individuals within their own ethnic group. In March 1999, for example, a Vietnamese video shop owner in the Little Saigon community of Westminster, California, was threatened by thousands of angry protestors when the shop owner hung a flag of unified Vietnam and a portrait of Ho Chi Minh on his wall (Foote, 1999).

The heightened pressure for conformity tends to subject Vietnamese American children to more intense social controls than those experienced by other American children. At the same time, these social controls can drive rebellious children into intense reactions against adult expectations.

### **EXILE, LIMBO, AND NEW LIFE IN AMERICA**

The fact that the Vietnamese generally arrived in the United States as refugees means that they came under the guidance of government or voluntary agencies. Unlike most immigrants, who are sponsored either by close families or by U.S. employers and can make decisions about where to settle in the United States, refugees are often sponsored by the government or by voluntary agencies of the receiving country and cannot choose their places of resettlement.

In the case of the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees who did not have established ethnic communities in the United States to assist them, the U.S. government-sponsored resettlement agencies, known as VOLAGs, usually made the decision about their settlement location (Lanphier, 1983; Montero, 1979).

The VOLAGs, or volunteer agencies, were private charitable organizations under contract to the United States government. Although the government set the general outline of refugee policy, the volunteer agencies were largely charged with implementing that policy. Therefore, although refugees were sent to states around the U.S. as a result of the policy of dispersion, VOLAGs frequently helped create small concentrations within those states. For example, a study of a Vietnamese community in New Orleans found that private agency officials fostered its ethnic concentration (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Many VOLAG officials who worked for Vietnamese refugees gradually came to believe that new arrivals would do better if they could rely on one another for mutual support and assistance, and therefore helped the refugees organize themselves into Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs). The MAAs are private, nonprofit organizations dedicated to assisting the adjustment of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees to American society.

About 1,000 MAAs were organized between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. They receive annual funding from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide such services as job training, cultural preservation programs, language classes, and a variety of social services.

Scattering Southeast Asian refugees around the country to minimize the impact of resettlement on local communities was an initial policy goal. Indeed, the Vietnamese have established a presence even in those Midwest and Mountain states least populated by recent immigrants. However, many volunteer agencies have actually helped create ethnic residential neighborhoods and Vietnamese organizations.

As time went by, distinctive Vietnamese communities emerged, through secondary migration, in large metropolitan areas that are the most popular destinations for many recent immigrants of varying nationalities. The early dispersion followed by substantial regrouping created Vietnamese American populations in many locations around the U.S., with a few large concentrations functioning as ethnic centers.

Vietnamese refugees have endured severe exit conditions (e.g., the traumatic flight combined with poor human capital and economic resources) and unfavorable contexts of reception (e.g., a lack of preexisting community ties, high levels of dependency, and an ambivalent and sometimes hostile public). However, over the course of a decade or so of adjustment, they have made progress in assimilating into American society.

Even with a continuously large refugee influx, 1990 Census data show a number of quite striking improvements over the pattern observed ten years earlier.

- In the ten-year period between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of Vietnamese who did not speak English very well had decreased from 42 percent to 34 percent.
- The proportion of college graduates among adults age 25 and over was 17 percent, up from 13 percent.
- The labor force participation rate of Vietnamese age 16 and over had grown from 57 percent to 65 percent, equaling that of the American population in general.
- Ethnic entrepreneurship burgeoned to 7 percent as compared to 3 percent in 1980.

As their human capital and labor force status steadily improved, so too did their economic well-being. By

1990, the median household income of the Vietnamese stood at \$29,772, more than double what it had been the previous decade and almost equal to the median income of all American households. Home ownership was 49 percent, up from 27 percent in 1980. The poverty rate stood at 24 percent, down from 35 percent in 1980.

Despite significant improvements, the Vietnamese still lagged behind their American counterparts economically; substantially more Vietnamese families than average American families are still struggling below the poverty line. Their economic gains have come by virtue of hard work and cooperation. The 1990 Census reported that more than one out of every five Vietnamese families contained three or more workers.<sup>6</sup>

The epic narrative of flight from Vietnam and resettlement in America has become a central shared memory of the Vietnamese American population. Those who personally survived these events and who are old enough to remember them continue to be haunted by them. Paul J. Rutledge (1992) recounted the stories of a young teenaged girl raped by pirates at sea and of a young man who, escaping from Vietnam across Cambodia at the age of nine, was captured and beaten by Vietnamese soldiers.

Those who arrived under the auspices of the Orderly Departure Program or the Humanitarian Operation may be free of these kinds of horrific experiences, but they must still deal with memories of loved ones left behind and with the loss of the world of early childhood.

Those who stayed in refugee camps experienced the extreme anxiety and insecurity of their families. Stays in camps were especially difficult for young people who were separated from their families (Harding & Looney, 1977). Children in refugee camps had to assume adult tasks and responsibilities and they suffered from the general disruption of their lives (Williams, 1990).

U.S.-born Vietnamese children and those who arrived in the United States as infants have no clear personal memory of life in Vietnam, of the flight from the ancestral land, or of life in refugee camps. But they are still deeply affected by family histories and quasi-mythical accounts of life in the host country. Older generations pass on stories of the struggle to reach the new country. Even when the children dismiss these stories as remnants of a bygone era, the trials of the parents continue to influence their understanding of family history.

The question of conformity to parental cultures or rebellion against them is faced by most young people with immigrant parents. But for Vietnamese youth, the fact that their parents are not simply immigrants, but refugees, adds a unique dimension to their outlook on life.

Hardship in Vietnam and the process of exile have become a central family narrative, a shared story that shapes understanding and behaviors. Since they are political refugees, as well as people struggling to make lives in a new and unfamiliar society, adult Vietnamese Americans can be deeply suspicious of nonconformity within their own ethnic group. This contributes to a tendency, discussed below, to place children into categories of “good kids” and “bad kids,” with approval and support given almost exclusively to the former.

The disruptions of warfare and flight meant that Vietnamese families were not simply transferred from Southeast Asia to the United States. As Kibria (1993) has argued, Vietnamese families were reconstructed on American soil, with numerous changes. Sometimes the reconstruction has been inadequate and this has resulted in many of the problems faced by Vietnamese American children. However, family life has taken on an added importance as a source of support and comfort.

Vietnamese communities in the United States are also reconstructions and not simply importations from the former country. Exile, uncertain transition, and arrival in an alien world have in some ways actually strengthened ethnic ties among the Vietnamese.

Since the Vietnamese did not initially come into existing ethnic neighborhoods, they have had to build ethnic communities rather than simply settle in them.<sup>7</sup> This has given Vietnamese American social groups and organizations a dynamic quality and an energy that have been communicated to many of their children. At the same time, the children who fail to fit in with the efforts at reconstruction can find themselves utterly rejected.

*Editor's Note: The remaining sections of this monograph discuss a comprehensive range of topics, including the formation and social capital of Vietnamese American families and communities and the adaptation of Vietnamese children to American society. For a free copy of the entire monograph, visit [jume.tc.columbia.edu/eric\\_archive.asp?show=2&nm=urban](http://jume.tc.columbia.edu/eric_archive.asp?show=2&nm=urban); click on Straddling Two Social Worlds: The Experience of Vietnamese Refugee Children in the United States. This excerpt is used with permission.*

## Footnotes

This excerpt appears here in original form with the exception of several footnotes placed in the text by the editors of this curriculum guide. These footnotes are meant to update statistical information and to provide further comment on particular statements within the text.

1. Actually, demographical data from the recent Census 2000 indicate that Vietnamese Americans make up the fourth largest Asian American population, following Chinese Americans, Filipina/o Americans and Asian Indian Americans. See the *Maps and Demographics Section* at [www.teachingtolerance.org/vietnamese](http://www.teachingtolerance.org/vietnamese) for additional information.

2. It is important to note here that many Vietnamese in Vietnam also suffered or continue to suffer from postwar illnesses, such as nightmares, depression, antisocial behavior and posttraumatic stress disorders.

3. This figure of Vietnamese refugees also includes those who fled Vietnam on foot, crossing the western borders of the country.

4. In 1978, over 85 percent of Vietnam's roughly 1.5 million Sino-Vietnamese lived in the South, where they dominated many business activities. Many of these ethnic Chinese had been living in Vietnam for generations. To the Vietnamese Communist government, the economic prominence of the ethnic Chinese posed a significant threat to the ideals of Communism. Hence, the government launched a series of campaigns against them, including confiscation of land and assets.

In addition, with Vietnam embroiled in tense relations with China, these ethnic Chinese were suspects by virtue of both their class status and their ethnicity. When war broke out between Vietnam and China in 1979, an estimated 250,000 ethnic Chinese and those who were able to buy false papers to register themselves as Chinese headed for China to escape continued persecution.

5. This agreement between the United States and Vietnam refers to the Special Release Reeducation Center Detainee Resettlement Program, popularly known as the "H.O. Program" or "Humanitarian Operation Program," which has been accountable for the admittance of about 167,000 persons into the United States, as of 1999.

6. Although the socioeconomic status of the Vietnamese American population had significantly improved from 1980 to 1990, it is important to consider per capita (per person) income in a comparative approach when evaluating the socioeconomic status and progress of this group.

In 1990, the per capita income of the Vietnamese American population was \$11,027, compared to \$14,420 for all Americans and \$15,687 for white Americans. In percentage terms, the Vietnamese American per capita income was 31 percent and 42 percent less than those of the entire U.S. population and the white population, respectively.

7. We would note here that many refugees and immigrants from Vietnam, particularly those of Chinese ethnicity, have settled into existing ethnic neighborhoods, most notably American Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York.

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