

Oral histories reveal post-war trauma affects Vietnamese in Australia across generations

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The ongoing impact of post-war trauma among Vietnamese people in Australia has persisted across generations and led to disproportionate imprisonment rates, a Monash University project on Vietnamese

offenders has revealed.

Despite the Vietnam War ending more than 40 years ago, Vietnamese refugees—the largest refugee community in Australia—and migrants continue to suffer and the imprisonment rate of Vietnam-born is 20 percent higher than the national average.

Researcher Professor Nathalie Nguyen, from the School of Philosophical, Historical, and International Studies, drew on the oral histories of 10 Vietnamese ex-offenders based in Victoria and published her findings in the report *Helping Hands: Understanding Vietnamese Offenders in Victoria*.

Professor Nguyen said many Vietnamese people were subjected to political repression under Vietnam's post-war communist regime, and ensuing experiences of internment in reeducation camps, family separation, and forced migration.

"While the Vietnamese community in Australia is well established, like others who have experienced war, personal or state violence, significant areas of disadvantage remain, and the community remains polarized between high rates of education on the one hand, and high prison rates on the other," she said.

"Trauma among Vietnamese refugees and migrants stems not just from war but more so from oppression in the war's aftermath. The post-war Vietnamese state discriminated against significant groups on political and ethnic grounds, and the consequences of state policy in terms of ruptured familial and social networks continue to reverberate across generations, decades and borders."

Vietnam represents the second most common country of birth for overseas-born prisoners, with illicit drug offenses the most serious and

common offense.

In Victoria, which has both the second highest concentration of Vietnamese in Australia and the highest concentration of Vietnamese in prison, involvement with illicit drugs linked to gambling debt has seen both men and women represented disproportionately in the correctional system.

Vietnamese women have also been vulnerable to exploitation by organized crime syndicates and both genders have had difficulty accessing support and rehabilitation services, particularly if they lacked English-language skills.

Young Vietnamese offenders, many of whom arrived in Australia as children, are often victims of trauma and neglect at home and suffer from mental health, drug and alcohol issues and low engagement in education.

Professor Nguyen said culturally-specific and community-based support services that understood the trauma underlying many Vietnamese lives were required to address the correctional system and post-release issues.

"Pre- and post-release support programs with trusted, gender-specific counselors, alcohol and drug treatment, gambling and family violence prevention counseling are incredibly important," she said.

"Programs must also be linguistically and culturally specific and understand post-war trauma."

Of the 10 Vietnamese ex-offenders who provided their [oral histories](#) for the project, more than half had fathers that served in the armed forces or spent years interned in the gulag or had mothers who hid from authorities and escaped across the border.

Interviewees experienced educational problems in Vietnam, and continuing educational and language difficulties after migration to Australia and a majority were in the correctional system due to drug-related offenses following gambling debts.

"Even though they arrived as either children or young adults, all had difficulty resettling in Australia, and their lives illustrate the ways in which continued disadvantage in terms of lack of English-language skills, isolation, and employment difficulties can set a future direction that leads to prison," Professor Nguyen said.

More than two million Vietnamese left their homeland in the two decades that followed the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, triggered by widespread state repression and human rights violations in post-war Vietnam.

The peak years of Vietnamese arrival in Australia, in 1978-1982 and 1990-1992, coincided with the two worst recessions in this country since the 1930s Depression, making it difficult to seek employment.

Forty percent of Vietnam-born speak poor or no English, their median weekly income is well below that of Australian-born and their unemployment rates are higher than the national average.

More information: Helping Hands: Understanding Vietnamese Offenders in Victoria. bridges.monash.edu/articles/dataset/_/16840912

Provided by Monash University

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