

**Drug abuse amongst the Vietnamese Youth**

**1994**

**An environmental perspective**

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"A study into the cause of  
drug abuse amongst  
the Vietnamese youth:  
An environmental perspective "  
by

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## ABSTRACT

This study describes the environmental causes of alcohol and other drug misuse amongst the Vietnamese street youth. It explores how factors of migration affected the Vietnamese family life, mainly language difficulty, employment, racial bias, and ill-image of the Vietnamese community reported by the media. The study further outlines three atmospheres: family, school and media that contribute to the problems of alcohol and other drug misuse by the Vietnamese youth. Conflict and tension issues between parents and children are discussed in terms of cultural differences, communication and lack of effective parenting skills. Problems at schools faced by the Vietnamese students are discussed in terms of racism, language difficulties and lack of appropriate services. The study highlighted that "very easy" and "easy" to get drug was an added factor to increase drug use amongst this target group.

To date there is no existing intervention and prevention programs initiated by the government and the community to deal with racism and schooling issues. The paper suggests some practical strategies that can be employed to deal with these issues in relation of cross-cultural training, racism prevention, parenting skills and increase in employment rates amongst the Vietnamese community.

## INTRODUCTION

Alcohol and other drug (A&OD) abuse is a concern to the Australian community because of its social, economic and health consequences ( Commonwealth Department of Health , Housing and Community Services: 1992) (CDHHCS). There are two costs related to A&OD abuse: financial and human cost. It was estimated in 1988 that drug abuse cost the Australian community more than \$ 14 300 million per year (CDHHCS:1992). The direct costs of caring for persons with alcohol and other drug-related illnesses are hospital and nursing home care, health professional fees and medication. The indirect costs on the other hand are productivity loss and earnings loss due to sickness (U.S Department of Health and Human Services: 1992). Such cost has its effect on the mortality as well. It is estimated that one in five of all deaths in general population are related to drug abuse (CDHHCS:1992). The problem is more serious for the youth as one in three deaths are related to drug abuse amongst the 15-34 year olds (CDHHCS:1992).

In the case of A&OD misuse, the Vietnamese street youth has become a major concern to the authorities because of the increase in the death due to drug overdose in Sydney recently (Integration, 1994 ). This issue has also become the main concern for the Vietnamese community in Australia. There is very limited information about alcohol and other drug use amongst the Vietnamese youth, in particular to the cause of it. The cause of drug abuse is however a complicated subject and there is no single cause for it. It has been recognised that social factors play an

important role in the alcohol and other drug use amongst the youth ( Mc Callum 1990). Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the *environmental cause* of alcohol and other drug use within this group. The environmental causes include the immediate surroundings and living conditions the youth are raised including the family atmosphere and the schools where they study. Throughout the study the "Vietnamese youth" refers to persons aged between 14-21 years. Illicit and licit drugs are also mentioned as substances consumed by the youth in this study.

It is expected that the results of this study would be useful for addressing the alcohol and other drug problem among the Vietnamese youth.

## Socio-economic Problem

To explore the environmental causes of A&OD problem, one has to look at the factors which pose the most important effect on the development and interaction of youth. There are three factors: the family, school and the media, which have the maximum impact on this process.

### a. Disruptions Caused By Migration To The Vietnamese Family.

#### Language Difficulty

The most important influencing factors (during migration) affecting the youth and their family is English language difficulties (Nguyen,1989). The 1986 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that 44.3 per cent of the Vietnamese population spoke English "not well" or "not at all" (Bureau Immigration Research, 1990). The 1991 ABS shows that 42.7 percent of Vietnamese population in New South Wales spoke poor English (ABS1991). Not only do the elderly experience language difficulties but the younger population also face the same problem. The 1991 ABS data shows that 27.8 percent of 15-24 had low level English skills (Census Applications Pty Limited,1993).

Difficulties in language creates communication difficulties in and leads to a high degree of stress when dealing with non-Vietnamese people. People are generally reluctant to ask for clarifications if they are less than proficient in the language spoken. This is also true of the Vietnamese people (Nguyen,1991). As a result, this has

become a barrier for the Vietnamese population to integrate into the mainstream society in Australia.

It is crucial to note a fact, that there is a problem with access to English class for migrants as well. Dr Theophanous, MP Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Federal Government conducted a round of community consultations on the implementation of Access and Equity Strategies (Kusuma,1994). He reported that there is a lack of English services for most migrants. Current legislation limits learning English through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMES) to 510 hours. This can be a factor in creating difficulties for migrants to improve their language skills. Besides this, lack of child care service prevents women with children utilise the classes. As a result, the number of women utilising this service is low (Kusuma,1994).

b. Employment level and rate of Unemployment

Findings indicate that immigration is a major disruption to any career, regardless of inherited capital or individual achievements. (McAllister, Ian 1991). This is worse for the Vietnamese people because a vast majority of the Vietnamese are refugees and are mostly unprepared for migration (Pham, Halikiotis and Bertram1992).



Table 2: Unemployment rate of Vietnamese and Australian Born  
Persons

	July 1990	July 1992	July 1993
Vietnamese	19.3	31.1	26.7
Australian Born	6.4	10.1	9.7

Source: Immigration Update, June Quarter 1993 p36.

Employment therefore is another difficulty facing the Vietnamese in Australia. As shown in the Table 2 there is a high rate of unemployment amongst the Vietnamese people. In fact, as reported by the Bureau of Immigration Research, the unemployment rate of Vietnamese population was 26.7 per cent in comparison to 9.7 per cent of Australian Born in 1993. Stromback, Chapman, Bruce, Dawkins and Bush-Jones (1992) studied the pattern of unemployment within the Vietnamese people. They concluded that the Vietnamese experience more serious long term problems than the other migrant groups because of low level of language competency, lack of educational qualifications in Australia, short term residence in Australia, and workforce discrimination.

Table 3: Factors responsible for unemployment.

Factors	
Length of residence	Short time **
Language skills	Low English competence *
Qualification in Australia	Lack of qualification *
Experience in the workplace	racism, discrimination *
Migratory status	refugees **
Work experience in Australia	lack of experience *

Source: \*: (Stromback, Thorsten; Chapman, Bruce ; Dawkins, . and Bushe-Jones, ; 1992), (McAllister, 1991).

\*\* : (Kirk, 1991).

Table 3 shows a number of factors which strongly affects unemployment: English language skills, short-term residence in Australia, lack of educational qualifications and experience in Australia, refugee status and discrimination in the labour market. These are all important factors that contribute to the rise of unemployment among the Vietnamese community.

### c. Employment Pattern of the Vietnamese

Another study on the level of employment, and rate of unemployment of the Vietnamese community in Victoria in 1991, in particular of those who arrive under the special humanitarian program, was conducted by Coughlan and James in 1991. Of the 500 Vietnamese households participated in the survey, it was found that less than one per cent began their new job or re-obtained job after being out of work more than six months. Of the participants in the study, it was estimated that between 15 to 20 per cent were retrenched in the previous twelve months. The author also predicted that the restructuring of textile and clothing industry would have an impact on many Vietnamese people. The authors' anticipation was confirmed by the Sydney Morning Herald that the Vietnamese were hit hard by job crisis (Kirk,1991). This reveals that the work pattern of the Vietnamese people was insecure, vulnerable and susceptible to any societal changes. Because of susceptibility to changes, many Vietnamese people feel that job security is more important than job satisfaction (Tran and Hold 1991).

### d. Low income earners

In addition, the individual income of the Vietnamese is lower than that of the English speaking people. For example, 31.4 percent of Vietnamese people as compared to 18.4 per cent in New South Wales reported an income of \$12,000 or less in 1991 ABS report

(ABS,1993). This reflects the fact that the majority of Vietnamese have been classified as unskilled and employed in manufacturing industries where they earn a limited income (BIR,1990). Tran and Hold (1989) noted that Vietnamese people have been reported as hard labourers but they have limited success in return. The authors also emphasised that immigrants from Vietnam are less successful in the labour market than other NESB groups.

e. Racism, Discrimination, Prejudice

An added issue to the rate of unemployment and related issues of the Vietnamese is discrimination and racial bias in their new home country - Australia (Loh,1988). The severity of this issue was identified by Irene Moss, Race Relations Commissioner (Herbert,1988). In order to understand how severe it is, said Moss, one has to look at the racism ranking. The Aborigines were identified as the racial group that is most discriminated against. The Vietnamese community was identified as the most common target of Anti-Asian discrimination (Herbert 1988). It may be argued that racism and discrimination against the Vietnamese is deliberately organised by anti-Asian groups. As an illustration, recently residents and usually aged living in Sydney suburbs received bogus letters purported by Senator Gareth Evans of the Department of Community Relations. The letter told them that they have been selected to care for some "coloured" or Vietnamese families. It also implied that Vietnamese are carriers of several contagious diseases (Vietnamese Herald 1990). It seems that the

government appears to be slow in responding to this. As Ms Moss put it,

*" On the whole, public authorities do not response effectively to reports of racist violence" (Greenlees,1994,p 9)*

In relation to policies, it was criticised that the government did not try to alleviate this issue by forewarning refugees about public behaviour and ignorance. This activated one of the many shocks linked to immigration (Nguyen 1990). To present, the Commonwealth government is forced to redraft a race law (Kingston and Youmard,1994). At present there is no study about the effects of racism and discrimination against the Vietnamese population, therefore no information is available. As a result there was no action taken by victims or by the authorities against the perpetrators (Greenlees,1994). In another case a student was killed and a family had received a death threat into that effect (Lester, 1989). A typical idea from the racists remark after these incidences was that " Vietnamese are taking our jobs" . This leads to discrimination against the Vietnamese in the workforce. The Victorian Police often shared a perception of Vietnamese community as riddled with crime (Network for Intercultural Communication Newsletter,1988).

f. Media and the Vietnamese community.

The Vietnamese community has repeatedly been a subject of ill image as reported by the media. Soon after the death of John Newman – local State member of New South Wales Parliament – Journalists and commentators have been quick in drawing conclusions and linking the crime to the Vietnamese community. However, there has been no evidence to back up their claims. Henderson, Executive Director of the Sydney Institute commented:

*" Right from the start Carleton ( 60 Minutes Program Reporter, Channel 9 ) declared that Newman's death was an ' assassination'. How would he know?. An assassination implies political motivation... At this stage there is no evidence of a political motive in Newman's death." (Henderson, 1994)*

The Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales Kerkyasharian shared the same point of view as he said:

*" It is regrettable that some commentators have taken this opportunity to blame "Asian migration" as the cause of it all " (Kerkyasharian, 1994)*

Ngo, a Fairfield Councillor also stated:

*" I have said publicly and repeatedly that spreading ill-researched speculation wouldn't help with the investigation." (Fife-Yeomans, 1994)*

As result of the Newman incidence the Vietnamese community was subjected to heightened racism and discrimination.

#### g. Life At Home

Conflicts between parents and children at home in Australia can be categorised into three main aspects: parenting skills, cultural differences and communication.

#### h. Lack Of Effective Parenting Skills

The first cause of conflict between parents and children is lack of effective parenting skills. The traditional way of upbringing children such as " Spare the rod, spoil the child " is still the dominated method for some parents. Restriction of outside activities of the children, with friends, punishments with unclear explanations given to the children, and failure of negotiation with children contributes day to day problems with both children and parents (Family Enhancement 1993; Integration 1994). In addition, lack of information on education systems, and inadequate knowledge on child development is another problem that challenges many Vietnamese parents. Moreover, it is said that the cultural value is high in the educational achievements and many Vietnamese parents often share this value and they perceive education in Australia as an child investment (Giese,1990). Thus, many parents pressure their children to study hard and be successful in education. This can be good for some children but bad for others. For those who are unable to cope with, feel distressed. They ,in turn, expect their parents to empathise with their

difficulties and to help them to cope with their daily problems rather than to push them to unwanted situation. Therefore children's expectation of parents are often unsatisfied. As a result, this leads to children getting into conflicts with their parents.

### Conflicts By Cultural Differences

The second factor that causes conflict between parents and children is the lack of understanding of cultural values and differences in cultural norms. For example, the parents played an important role in the choice of the children's spouses. ( Nguyen 1990). Such parental right is strongly opposed by the children. The pressure to live under the same roof contradicts the adolescents' wishes to be independent. Besides, children are expected to assist with family matters including income earning. Some parents are too busy to cope with settlement and as a result they have limited time to spend with children. Moreover, studies revealed that Vietnamese parents, regardless of time overseas, strongly maintain traditional values while adolescents tended to reject the traditional values. This serves to widen the family gaps. (Hingron, Strunin, Grady, Strunk, Carr, Berlin and Craven, Strum,1991).

#### a. Communication Problems Between Parents And Children

The last cause of tension between parents and their children is due to communication break down. This may be due to cultural



differences, language problem and parents' problems. In the Vietnamese culture, respectful behaviour is accompanied by the proper use of language (Le, 1983). Respecting the old and the elderly is highly valued by Vietnamese traditional culture ( Le, 1983; VICSEG,1987 ). Even a 70 year old person is required to use terms of respect for some one older. The pronoun "I" indicates great social distance in the Vietnamese culture (Clark,1988). The pronoun "I" can be meant linguistically and differently in Vietnamese. Children who talk to their parents with the English mentality using the pronoun "I" might be understood as being disrespectful by some parents. In addition, due to limited vocabulary children are forced combine English and Vietnamese expression when communicating with parents. This makes it hard for the parents to understand what the children are saying because of low level of English language competency among the elders. Moreover, Vietnamese women find it hard to cope with their unemployed husbands; husbands find it hard to administer their traditional roles (Hassan,1985). These traumatic experiences of parents when living in Australia can add to communication problems with the children. For further specific conflict issues between parents and children refer to Table 4 .

Table 4. Conflict issues between Vietnamese parents and children

Issues	Parents	Children
Cultural differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can not teach children in the traditional way any more</li> <li>• children lack respect towards older</li> <li>• children do not obey</li> <li>• They have the right to leave home</li> <li>• help parents with work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• let me wear what I want</li> <li>• my parents do not spend enough time with me.</li> </ul>
Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children have too much freedom</li> <li>• limited , outings</li> <li>• Traditionally strict " thuong cho roi cho vot" ( Spare the rod, spoil the child)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not allow me to speak with my friends on the telephone</li> <li>• Do not allow me to go out</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children do not understand what I say !</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't understand the Vietnamese</li> <li>• I need them to talk about intimate things like feelings, relationships, sexuality</li> </ul>
Expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• study hard success in education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• should discuss what I choose rather than telling me what to study.</li> </ul>

Sources: (Family Enhancement 1993; Integration 1994)

#### b. Life At School

The third environment that has a direct influence on one's day to day activities has to do with schools and role of adolescents in these institutions.

Life at school is difficult for many Vietnamese students due to the atmosphere of racism, misunderstanding by teachers and lack of inappropriate services. Indeed, not only Vietnamese parents, but youth also experienced racism in the street as well at school (Loh,1985; Intergration,1994). It was reported that 60 % of the Vietnamese students experienced some form of racism at their school. Besides that 59 % experienced discrimination in the streets. As a result, some of them had suicidal thoughts (Integration, 1994). To deal with this issue, the NSW Department of School Education introduced anti-racism policy at school recently. It is not known whether other States adopt this policy. Practically, the impact of this policy into practice is beyond the aim of this report. Further study about this should be explored.

In addition, there is a misunderstanding between students and teachers due to cultural differences. This is illustrated in a study in Melbourne when 72 Vietnamese students were asked "you're not a bad boy, are you?". Many Vietnamese students replied "Yes", meaning they agreed with the implied statement. The reason that most students responded positively was because in the Vietnamese culture it is inappropriate for children to argue and disagree with elders and teachers (Fry, 1990). It is difficult for teachers to understand this response. Thus, teachers often share a common view that Vietnamese students are "very passive " (Herbert,1989). It has been argued that teachers who come from a white middle class background often hold different attitudes and values to Vietnamese students and other minority groups. Such difference in perception can contribute to the alienation of Vietnamese students

at school. It is difficult to change this attitude of the teachers until they understand ways in which the Vietnamese students have been taught. After spending six weeks in Vietnam to explore it, Herbert had less assumption of students passivity. He suggested that teachers in Australia can only benefit in understanding this until they are aware of how Vietnamese students are taught (Herbert,1989).

Moreover, lack of appropriate services to help Vietnamese students is an added factor to their problems at school. There are two identified specific issues that Vietnamese students needed to be helped with by the school. The first issue is the classification of students according to age. It is reported that Vietnamese kids are classified into class according to their age with no consideration of their special needs. Devine, the author of the article of "*Vietnamese Cheated By Our Multicultural Fraud* " noted that:

*" Grade six was the place for 12-year-olds, so into grade six went kids who had spent four years in refugee camps and, apart from having a language problem, had done no study since grade two" (Devine,1994).*

This can be said is the cause of early drop out by Vietnamese students .

The second issue of concern is isolation of Vietnamese students from other students in schools. The result of an epidemiological study conducted by the School Education Department, South Western Area Health Service and University of Sydney, indicated that there was a high proportion of Vietnamese students from year 6 to year 10 who felt "lonely" and "very lonely" with no close friends. This was much higher than the other students such as

English speaking and other Non-English Speaking Background Students (Young, Bauman, Rowlands, Hawshaw and Cragg, 1992). This indicates that Vietnamese students are exposed to a higher levels of stress than their counterpart. In fact it was reported that Vietnamese students felt strange in the classroom and in the playground. They feel as if they are living in different country (Devine,1994). Equally important is the fact that no programs address the issue of isolation of Vietnamese students in school (Devine,1994).

As a consequence of these factors, Vietnamese adolescents experienced high emotional distress , which may lead to consumption of alcohol and other drugs by many as ways to forget their past and present suffering. (Jennifer Johnson, SHERAHE FIZPATRICK, Mariane and Felice,1988).

#### c. Drug Availability

The Vietnamese students aged under 16 years reported that shops were the source from where they got their cigarettes (Young et al 1992). This easy accessibility to tobacco can be a contributing factor to a number of students commencing their smoking habit. Another reason is that a high proportion of Vietnamese male are smokers (DAMEC,1992). Thus, the habit of the elderly can be a model for the children to imitate.

Both tobacco and illicit drug are easily accessible. Pham and Stannard (1994) studied the alcohol and other drug use among the

Vietnamese street youth. The results of the survey of drug users, indicated that most of heroin users stated that they found "very easy" and "fairly easy" to get heroin. Cannabis users reported the same (Pham and Stannard,1994 ). However, it is noted that a Catholic priest called the police to report a heroin salesman in action near the Cabramatta railway station. After an hour and more calls, with the heroin sales continuing, the priest gave up, accepting that no police were coming ( Devine,1994). This may be a shortage of police in the area. However, it may be true to say that there is no effective program to deal with this drug trafficking in the Cabramatta area.

#### CONCLUSION

The study found that the environment where the Vietnamese youth has lived play a crucial contribution to the A&OD usage among the Vietnamese youth. Families, school and media directly and indirectly affect the development, personality and lifestyle of many Vietnamese youth. It is convinced that migration has impact on the family life and in turn the family influences the youth. The problems of Vietnamese community are linked with migration, language difficulties, employment and racial bias. Conflicts between Vietnamese parents and children are due to differences in cultural value. Lack of effective parenting skills and breakdown in communication has caused stress to the Vietnamese young people stress. Lack of understanding from the teachers and the strategies to deal with isolation, inappropriate assessment in the classification newly arrived students, also lack of harmonisation within school and especially language problem increase the

problems of Vietnamese young people. The study found the lack of services response to the needs of the Vietnamese people such as racism, employment, language. In spite of this, there is no information available on the effect of racism on the Vietnamese people. It is said that racism and discrimination contributes to the decrease of the Vietnamese people's access to labour market. This in turn lead them isolation and a vicious circle develops which is which is hard to break. If there is continuity of short term and long term strategies responded from the community and government at all levels to deal with these issues of racial bias and to improve the image of the Vietnamese community, it is likely to be more costs to the general community.

It can be concluded that the Vietnamese youth needs healthier environment to live with.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Information on cross cultural issues should be distributed to mainstream staff to increase their knowledge of the cultural differences. This can be done by establishing a Steering Committee consisting of community leaders, school presentative, social welfare workers and parents.
2. Specific programs at school should be organised to meet the needs of the Vietnamese students, especially newly arrived, earlier school leavers and those who have family problems.
3. A further study on the impact of racism on the Vietnamese community should be explored in order to find out long term strategies to deal with issues.
4. Effective parenting skills should be provided to the Vietnamese parents.
5. Job training skills should be provided to the unemployment Vietnamese, especially the youth. It is desirable to have more outreach and bridging courses for the long-term unemployed youth.
6. Increase of English competency of the Vietnamese people should be prioritised by the Vietnamese community and the government. SBS radio can be used as an effective mean of information distribution to the community and of teaching English skill to Vietnamese people of all age.
7. The Vietnamese drug and alcohol counsellor and Vietnamese family therapist positions should be created to meet the high demand of the Vietnamese community. A&OD treatment service and



other agencies locate to where concentrate of the high proportion of the Vietnamese population should be opened their policies to employ workers who are fluently in the Vietnamese language and possess Vietnamese culture knowledge.

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