VIETNAMESE COMMUNITIES

SETTLEMENT IN AUSTRALIA:
Vietnamese people in any significant numbers, first arrived into Australia in the mid 1970s, coming as refugees from the war that was occurring in Vietnam at that time. Since then many more have arrived as part of the family reunion program and more recently, as migrants.

Many of the Vietnamese arriving in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s were young, unaccompanied males. It has been suggested that this gender imbalance, along with the fact that a substantial number of Vietnamese youth lived without parental supervision exacerbated social problems within the Vietnamese community in Australia.

With limited English skills, many families ended up working very long hours in low paid, unskilled jobs, while living in poverty.

Historically, a large percentage of business occurred in Vietnam through the black market because of growing suspicion of the Government. This impacted on the development of Vietnamese business in Australia which were potentially less likely to follow business regulations particularly in relation to tax, and more open to alternative methods of money-making.

There was also limited knowledge of the real effect of drugs in Vietnam. This, combined with an awareness of black market trading seems to have some causal link to the trafficking of illegal drugs becoming acceptable practice for some Vietnamese living in Australia.

FAMILY CULTURE:
The low level of English proficiency and the obligation to financially care for their families both here and in Vietnam, often hindered the ability of many newly arriving Vietnamese to train for more skilled employment, or acquire a tertiary education. Additionally, families worked long hours, leaving no time for socialising and therefore no support networks were developed early on.

Vietnamese culture has always been maintained by migrant parents, with the father seen as the head of the family. Strong discipline is used and high expectations are placed on the children to provide a good future for the family unit. Children faced two different upbringings, the ‘westernised’ school approach that encouraged free thinking and the more traditional approach where parents talk and children listen and do not answer back. This had the effect of causing many children to feel they didn’t belong either in the Vietnamese family or in the westernised community. It provided the potential to become estranged from their culture, and move towards other disaffected young people.

‘My father is addicted to work. I’m addicted to drugs.’ (Family member)

The loss of respect, disappointment, and divided loyalties has resulted in a decrease in functioning of the family unit and the relatively new experience of marriage breakdown. Problems are normally handled within the family as to seek outside support is viewed as...
dishonouring the family. These characteristics may also partially explain why the Vietnamese community has resisted public acknowledgment that their community has an illicit drug problem.

**DRUG USE:**
In 1997 Victorian Police statistics show that Vietnamese born (mostly males) comprised the largest non-Australian born group of alleged offenders. Statistics also show that nearly 80 per cent of their offences relate to drugs and nearly 50 per cent of offenders were under the age of 20. Trafficking is not the only issue. In terms of drug use, past statistics from Melbourne Needle Exchange programs show that between 22% and 35% of their clients were Vietnamese.

**DRUG TREATMENT:**
For most of the wider Vietnamese community, harm reduction as an approach to illicit drug use was a new and difficult concept to understand as the approach favoured by Vietnamese involves complete abstinence from drug use. Many do not know how to access information about drugs and this places increasing pressure on Vietnamese users to turn away from their own community supports.

The lack of culturally relevant drug programs has arguably resulted in few people of Vietnamese background participating in drug treatment programs, even though Vietnamese heroin users do desire treatment for their addiction.

**CONNECTION TO CRIME:**
As discussed, there is a range of impacting issues that has led to the Vietnamese remaining one of the poorest migrant groups in Australia with a relatively high rate of unemployment. What has generally occurred among the Vietnamese was the split between those who became high achievers and those who moved into antisocial behaviours.

**TRAFFICKING:**
Because of their history, trafficking in order to access funds, perhaps held less moral barriers for the Vietnamese than the general community. A report in 2005 noted that few Vietnamese drug users were on unemployment benefits as they gained money through conducting their drug business with peers. It is also important to recognise that those who are convicted frequently are those who perform the operational tasks of trafficking for more major players. For example, female Vietnamese prisoners are often charged because they have been cultivating drugs at their home due to pressures from other family members or a more senior dealer, or have acted as drug 'mules' bringing drugs into Australia from Vietnam, frequently hidden in their body cavities.

The family breakdown that now occurs within the Vietnamese community in Australia has also led to increasing numbers of older males dealing drugs as they seek alternative ways to maintain their financial status in the community.

According to the Australian Vietnamese Women’s Association they are the highest increase of Vietnamese prisoners.

**IMPACT OF IMPRISONMENT:**
It has been stated that the family is often pleased when a family member who was using drugs goes to prison, as they feel their child will be safer in an Australian prison than the Vietnamese prison system. Many Vietnamese prisoners will encounter different difficulties in an Australian prison however. They may find it difficult to negotiate the Correctional system with their limited English. Their culture presents a very quiet public face and as prisoners they are often invisible within the system. While this means they may not be getting
into trouble, they can also go unnoticed and may be unable to have their specific cultural needs met while in custody. Prisoners should be encouraged to liaise with the relevant prison chaplain to pursue this issue.

Workers should ensure and understand that:

The family of the person in custody has access to information and understands the Criminal Justice System;

Due to limited knowledge and awareness of blood born viruses, information on these issues and how to manage them should be made available to the families of drug users;

Smiling is a common Vietnamese social response for a variety of reactions including negative ones, and may mean that prison staff misinterpret their needs. Nodding and saying 'yes' to indicate that they are listening again may misinform prison staff that they are understand and agree with what is being said;

A culture of not getting directly to the point giving the impression of wasting prison staff time;

Concern for saving face can result in a reluctance to ask for help or to question authority;

Many Vietnamese have a strong fear of being interrogated (due to their country's political history). This not only includes questioning by police, but the way interviews are conducted by community organisations. Vietnamese clients may often not be telling the truth because they are fearful of the purposes of the questions. If you are supporting a Vietnamese family, be aware of their perceptions of Western interviewing techniques. Using alternative methods to gather information may be helpful.

REFERRAL FOR SUPPORT:
It is preferable, whenever possible, to refer clients to a Vietnamese organisation or Vietnamese worker who has an understanding of their cultural needs.

The Australian Vietnamese Women’s Association provides:

- Family support services;
- Play groups including Grandparent focused play;
- Drug & alcohol support;
- INDICOS
- Elderly support;
- Cultural training.

Follow the link: [www.avwa.org.au](http://www.avwa.org.au)

References
*Vietnamese Injecting Drug Users:* Dr O Nguyen. Sydney Sexual Health Centre 1995

*Barriers to Communication between Vietnamese & Non-Vietnamese.* C. Nguyen

Thank you to members of the Vietnamese community and workers from the Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Organisation and the Mary of the Cross Vietnamese AOD Supported Playgroup for their assistance with this information.