

### VIETNAMESE IN SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE IN 1996: SOME PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM THE CENSUS

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*The results of the 1996 Census indicate that residential concentrations of Vietnam-born Australians have stabilised. Public concerns about these concentrations have been exaggerated.*

Where people live in Australia and the meanings we attach to that are not only of abiding interest to academics and policy planners. These are now highly contested issues in Australian politics with charges of the formation of Asian ghettos and failure of Asians to integrate influencing social attitudes and immigration policy.

The preliminary results of the 1996 Census cast some clear light on at least some of these issues and should allow a more factual basis for the ongoing debate on race and settlement in our migration. Here I look only at the data for Sydney and Melbourne, and on a Local Government Area basis, comparing residential concentration for various groups between the censuses of 1991 and 1996. In the case of Melbourne, the boundaries of local government areas for 1996 data have been changed so that the data are not strictly comparable but can nonetheless give some indication of trends. Residential concentration for this purpose is the proportion of a birthplace group compared to the total population of the local government area. Local Government Areas (LGAs) can be of variable population size and may include suburbs of higher concentration within them — as for example in the suburb of Cabramatta within the LGA of Fairfield in Sydney. Data at the suburban or postcode level were not available for the purposes of this inquiry.

Although the case at issue here is Asians, and in particular Vietnamese, it is useful to give some context to this discussion. I regard residential concentrations of around ten per cent of local government area populations for any birthplace group as normal for Australian cities on the basis of past migration and settlement patterns. Such a view does not imply that concentrations above this are a cause for concern, simply that it is worth investigating why higher concentrations occur over time and whether these are associated with levels of social disadvantage which need to be addressed by public policy measures. The central point in any inquiry into such issues is what is happening over time, since migrants are highly mobile in our society.

In Sydney in 1996, there were only two birthplace groups with residential concentrations above ten per cent in any LGA. Those born in the United Kingdom and Ireland formed 10.8 per cent of the population of Manly, and above nine per cent of the populations of Mosman, North Sydney and Pittwater — all middle-class areas on Sydney's North Shore. Those born in Vietnam formed 13.6 per cent of the population of Fairfield but nowhere else in Sydney were their proportions above eight per cent (see Table 3). The highest propensity to concentrate is shown then by the British and Vietnamese. The Greek-born are quite widely dispersed in Sydney as are those born in China and elsewhere in Asia, and only the Italian-born approach

the ten per cent level in the Drummoyne LGA.

In Melbourne in 1996, a slightly different pattern is seen on a LGA basis. Again the British-born formed more than ten per cent in four areas around Mornington and Frankston, and in eight other areas they were between eight and ten per cent of local populations. The Greek-born, as in Sydney, are widely dispersed while the Italian-born are more concentrated, being above ten per cent in the Essendon and Coburg areas. All Asia-born groups are widely dispersed in Melbourne except the Vietnam-born. Their highest concentration is 13.7 per cent in Footscray, followed by 12.8 per cent in Springvale and 9.6 per cent in Sunshine. As in Sydney, the British-born and the Vietnamese have the strongest propensity to concentrate.

These findings are against the conventional wisdom. The propensity of the British-born to cluster receives little attention in the literature and presumably wrings no withers in Oxley or elsewhere in white Australia for the reason that they are accepted as a part of middle-class Australia. As the British-born form nearly six per cent of Australia's population (as against 1.7 per cent for the Vietnam-born), this together with class and other factors influences their concentration patterns.

The tendency of Greeks and Italians to concentrate and 'form ghettos' was a major concern for Anglo-Australians in the 1960s and 1970s. Recent work by Birrell and Khoo<sup>1</sup> showed decisively that the children of Greek and Italian migrants (and those of East European migrants) had a better education and occupation performance than the children of British and West European migrants, and also when compared with third-generation Australians. Since this superior performance took place when Greeks and Italians had high levels of residential concentration, the popularly perceived link between 'ghettos', low performance, low social status and social trouble was simply mistaken, and it is long past time that the government and media caught up with this. The question is whether the same stereotypes, now applied to Asians, are also mistaken?

First, all Asia-born groups, with the exception of those born in Vietnam, are highly dispersed by LGA in Sydney and Melbourne, though as noted there may be some particular suburban concentrations, as for example, in the Hay/Dixon St area of central Sydney for Chinese. There is thus no case for complaint about 'Asian ghettos', and, leaving aside Vietnamese for the moment, most evidence indicates that Asian birthplace groups are doing well in this country in economic and social terms.<sup>2</sup>

Second, to understand why Vietnamese differ from other Asians in their residential patterns, we need to look at these over time. In 1996 there were 150,839 people born in Vietnam in Australia, an increase of 23.9 per cent since 1991 (see Table 1). Half of these people had arrived here before 1986 (see Table 2). Vietnamese migration to Australia was at its highest level in the 1980s, has plateaued, and is now in steady decline as family reunion is completed. So this is a small group by the standards of the Greeks or Italians. It has been here for just one generation, with a second generation of about 40,000 Australian-born children.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Vietnam-born population in Australia, 1991, 1996	
1991	121,759

1996	150,839
Source: 1996 Census	

<b>Table 2: Vietnam-born population in Australia by period of arrival, percentage, 1996</b>					
	Year of arrival				No. of persons in 1996
	Before 1986	1986-90	1991-96	Total <sup>a</sup>	
Australia	49.3	24.8	23.1	100.0	150,839
Sydney	50.3	24.0	22.8	100.0	59,297
Melbourne	45.8	27.3	24.2	100.0	54,518
Brisbane	54.0	22.4	21.1	100.0	10,303
Source: 1996 Census					
<sup>a</sup> Total includes not stated year of arrival					

Residence of Vietnamese has been characterised in the past by three patterns: relatively high and fast growing concentration in a few areas (generally in the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne), spillover into areas adjoining these, and a clear class and status move over time to middle-class areas.<sup>4</sup> The 1996 census data shows the following for Sydney where boundaries are comparable (see Table 3). Concentration of the Vietnam-born in Fairfield (which includes Cabramatta) has increased from 11.3 per cent in 1991 to 13.6 per cent in 1996. This slight increase is actually a stabilisation, since the percentage increase in *numbers* of Vietnamese settling in Fairfield in that five years is roughly the same percentage increase as in total numbers of Vietnamese entering Australia over the same period. By comparison, in the period 1986 to 1991, the numbers of Vietnamese settling in Fairfield more than doubled and their proportions of local population almost doubled also.<sup>5</sup> At that time, some raised fears that Vietnamese settled elsewhere in Australia might be converging on Fairfield (and in particular in Cabramatta) creating, in difficult social conditions, the prospect of a ghetto. It seems clear now that there is significant movement both in and out of Fairfield by Vietnamese, with the first signs of a stabilising proportion of the total LGA population. This is not to say that concentrations may still not be much higher in Cabramatta and the suburb's social problems remain serious. Yet, as we would expect with a decline in Vietnamese migration over time, Vietnamese concentrations in all the major LGA areas in Sydney and Melbourne had more or less stabilised by 1996.

<b>Table 3: Areas of highest concentration of Vietnam-born population<sup>a</sup> in Sydney 1991 and 1996 by selected Local Government Area<sup>b</sup></b>				
	1991		1996	
	%	No.	%	No.
Fairfield	11.3	19,324	13.6	24,725
Auburn	6.9	3,215	7.4	3,768

Marrickville	5.0	3,826	5.6	4,232
Bankstown	4.1	6,231	5.5	8,583
Canterbury	3.7	4,657	4.0	5,239

Source: 1996 Census

<sup>a</sup> Concentration is percentage of total Local Government Area population

<sup>b</sup> Sydney LGA boundaries were constant between 1991 and 1996. Melbourne boundaries changed.

Fairfield is the only LGA in Sydney with high concentrations of Vietnamese. Three other LGAs have from five to seven per cent, Bankstown, Marrickville and Auburn, but these and the other major areas where Vietnamese have settled have also stabilised. The pattern is patchy since the spillover areas are growing slightly in numbers of Vietnamese but hardly at all in proportions of local populations. Numbers of Vietnamese moving to middle-class areas in Sydney have also risen and when ten middle-class LGAs (including Ryde, Hornsby and Randwick) are compared from 1991 to 1996, a 15 per cent increase in numbers is evident. Vietnamese are still minuscule proportions of middle-class LGA populations but the trends of moving up and out of working-class areas, quite clear in 1991,<sup>6</sup> are confirmed by the 1996 early census data. The Melbourne data, so far as can be adduced by rule of thumb observation with changed boundaries, shows similar patterns.

So why do Vietnamese (unlike other Asian groups) concentrate? It is principally because, unlike other Asian groups and like most Greeks and Italians, they arrived poor, unskilled and did not speak English. They are from a poor country and they were, before family reunion, refugees. Other migrants from Asia and Europe bring capital and skills. This means that the Vietnamese had to find cheap housing close to unskilled jobs and this engendered the first concentrations in Fairfield, in Footscray and similar areas. When their families joined them this increased concentration, and when business and services grew in these areas these served as a magnet for Vietnamese settled elsewhere. At the same time, despite the double recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, it was clear that growing numbers of Vietnamese were succeeding in economic and educational terms and were able, after accumulating capital, to move out of these areas of concentration to middle-class areas.

This is an old Australian story, one familiar to us from the Greek, Italian and East European migrations: some succeed and move out of areas of concentration, some succeed and stay and others do not succeed, much like other Australians. But the Vietnamese story has two different twists. The Vietnamese first generation is overrepresented significantly in our universities, and this is showing up in their presence in professional occupations. Yet the Vietnamese also suffer some of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. This means that the Vietnamese community, like the wider Australian community, is increasingly socially differentiated — that while all Vietnamese started out poor, some are doing extremely well, and some are doing badly. It is unemployment that feeds the problems of crime and drugs in Cabramatta that attract the media attention, and no amount of policing there will resolve those problems until something is done about unemployment there and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

It is time to stop going on about so called ghettos, since areas of Vietnamese concentration seem to have stabilised and since Vietnamese social mobility to middle- class areas continues. We can, on past experience, expect further change in these patterns of concentration over time. There are significant social problems in one or two of these areas as there are in many localities where Vietnamese do not live, and these are related principally to high levels of youth unemployment. Focussing on 'Asian ghettos' in the absence of getting unemployment down encourages racist opinion in this country.

## References

1 R. Birrell and S. Khoo, *The Second Generation in Australia: Educational and Occupational Characteristics*, Bureau of Immigration and Multicultural Research (BIMPR), Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1995

2 J. Coughlan and D. MacNamara, *Asians in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1997

3 N. Viviani, *The Indochinese in Australia 1975 to 1995: from Burnt Boats to Barbecues*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.47ff.

4 *ibid.*, pp. 53-55

5 *ibid.*, p. 51

6 *ibid.*, pp. 54-55

7 For a more detailed discussion of this problem, see *ibid.*, Chapter 3.

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