

## VIETNAMESE CONCENTRATIONS: A RESPONSE

Nancy Viviani

*Previous studies in People and Place on the residential concentration of Vietnamese migrants have raised concerns that these concentrations appear to be growing, particularly among the more disadvantaged. This article puts an alternative, more optimistic construction on the Vietnamese experience.*

---

I am grateful for Earnest Healy's article, 'Welfare Benefits and Residential Concentrations amongst Recently-Arrived Migrant Communities' published in *People and Place*, vol.4, no.2, 1996 (pp20-31). It provides a wealth of previously unpublished data on the problem of unemployment benefits dependency among several groups, principally the Vietnam-born. It shows that the incidence of this dependency is highest among those Vietnam-born who live in the areas of highest concentration. This relationship between high unemployment (and therefore benefits) and high residential concentration and its longstanding nature, has been remarked upon in earlier studies [1] and Healy's additional data on this is helpful. The relationship certainly stands for the areas of highest residential concentration in Sydney and Melbourne, but interestingly not for Brisbane's suburbs of highest residential concentration [2]. In any case Healy and I agree that this is a cause for serious concern.[3]

Healy's related and wider concern is whether 'migrant levels of concentration tend to dissipate over time' and in this he questions the view of 'Most analysts' that such concentrations 'are a passing phase of the settlement process' (p20). I have not taken such a simple view, arguing in numerous publications over 10 years that there is evidence of both increasing concentration of Vietnamese and increasing dispersion, and that we must wait for further evidence on these patterns before consigning areas of Vietnamese high concentration to ghetto status. My latest findings (to appear in *The Indochinese in Australia 1975-1995: From Burnt Boats to Barbecues*, Oxford University Press 1996) show, on the basis of CD data and the ABS index of socio-economic status of areas, that over the decade 1981-1991, residential concentration in low socioeconomic status areas (like Cabramatta) had certainly increased, which we knew already, but that dispersion of the Vietnam-born to areas of middle and high socio-economic status was taking place at a much faster rate than concentration. If this pattern continues, it will have important implications for the eventual size of Vietnamese residential concentrations (particularly as the migration of Vietnamese has slowed to low levels), the durability of these concentrations and the long term level of social disadvantage in these areas.

This of course is not the end of the issue since we need to see the Census data of the years 1996 and 2000 to monitor these patterns. I agree with Healy (p.28) that those who are left

behind in the areas of highest concentration are a concentration of those most vulnerable in the labour market and this needs immediate policy attention and I have said so.[4] The problem with Healy's analysis is that in focussing predominantly on what is going on within these areas of highest concentration, he pays insufficient attention to the wider significance of the dynamism in Vietnamese movement spatially and in socio-economic terms, which took place in a decade of two recessions.

Healy also argues that 'such claims [that residential concentration is a passing phase] underestimate the impact that the recently changed political and economic environment can have on the settlement process (p.20) For my part these economic changes were treated comprehensively in their impact on Vietnamese settlement in 1993, and again are dealt with at length in my forthcoming book.[5]

Again, Healy, referring to Vietnamese unemployment, says that 'The argument of Viviani et al., that high Indochinese unemployment rates are essentially an expression of these migrants' short period of stay in Australia, is not consistent with this data' -that is, Healey's data on selected SLA's in NSW and Victoria (p.27). Apart from the fact that Healy gets the location of our work on this wrong, he is again sliding from his selected data from small areas to our analysis at the national level. At the national level, the data show clearly that period of residence is a central factor in Vietnamese unemployment in 1986 and 1991.[6] This simply means that unemployment rates for Vietnamese fall with length of time in Australia, and this is backed up by Khoo's work on the same issue[7]. The real problem is that they do not fall fast enough over time to affect significantly the fact that, over the last 20 years, about a third of the Vietnam-born have been unemployed. I have noted earlier the high proportions of long term unemployed among the Vietnam-born in national level data, and many of these are showing up in Healy's data. I do not believe that 30 per cent unemployment among Vietnamese is going to go away, and have stressed this in earlier work, because the jobs these people can do are simply not there, that existing labour market training programs have had little impact for this group, and thus the belief that length of time in Australia (which is expected to improve labour market chances) appears unfounded for this group of Vietnamese. To put it another way, for some 70 per cent of Vietnamese, increasing length of stay in Australia is a significant factor in being able to get and hold a job; for the remainder, this factor has much less importance. For these unemployed the factors of age, gender, education, ethnicity (in the sense of being ethnic Vietnamese or ethnic Chinese) and location also have a bearing on whether they can get jobs.

Healy then uses our 1993 work in a misleading way. He says:

Viviani et al. have defended the position of Jupp et al., that ethnic concentrations are principally an expression of class rather than ethnic factors. Rejecting the idea that Indochinese concentrations were ethnic ghettos, their preferred characterisation was that of multicultural suburb. This designation, reflects an apparent reluctance to explore the interaction between class and ethnicity within the process of enclave formation (p.29).

Rather than what Healy thinks we said, and he gives no page references, we said: 'This

discussion by Jupp, McRobbie and York is important because it provides strong evidence for their claim that there are no ghettos in Australia[8], and rather than being reluctant to explore the interaction between class and ethnicity, we have said 'These background factors - class, status, ethnicity and gender - play an important and occasionally decisive part in any explanation about Indochinese employment, residential concentration, changing occupational status and possibility for social mobility' and then go on for three more pages on these factors[9]. The point of Healy's critique, to paint us as excluding the factor of ethnicity, which he does not define, is simply not borne out by the facts.

Healy goes on in his conclusion to argue that there is a reluctance to recognise the serious problems which can be associated with what he calls 'minority residential segregation'. I have not been reluctant to see continuing Vietnamese unemployment as 'a cause for concern', as 'extremely worrying' and needing urgent policy attention in areas of residential concentration, and have agreed with Birrell (and others) in saying

*'that the evidence of social disadvantage in Cabramatta is clear and I would expect much of this to persist over the first generation. I can see also the problems of high youth unemployment persisting in the next generation. I also do not hold out a great deal of hope that governments will manage to deliver a long period of sustained economic growth which could make a substantial dint in this unemployment. We do need to do more in policy and practice for these areas'. [10]*

This cannot be taken as a contradiction, as Healy would have it, between idealistic ideology and empirical research. People of similar ethnic (and class) background often choose to live together, most have jobs and can make a reasonable life (as say do the English in Australia). Since the Vietnamese also choose to live together - and if they had significantly more jobs - we would have less cause for concern about their residential concentration, because the social disadvantage (including welfare dependency) related to concentrations of high unemployment would be significantly mitigated. Vietnamese also cluster in middle class areas to an extent, but the problems of social disadvantage are not carried with them, principally because they have jobs.

## References

1. N.Viviani, J.Coughlan and T. Rowland, Indochinese in Australia: The Issues of Unemployment and Residential Concentration, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1993, N. Viviani, 'The Patterns of Vietnamese Employment and Settlement in Australia', in Jobsearch in the Lucky Country, Proceedings of the First National Conference on Vietnamese Unemployment, Melbourne, 1994.
2. See Viviani, 'The Patterns..', p55.
3. See *ibid.* p41-42 and elsewhere.
4. See Viviani et al. 1993, Viviani, 'The Patterns..' and Viviani, The Indochinese in Australia: From Burnt Boats to Barbecues, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996 (forthcoming October 1996)
5. See Viviani et al., pp7-13,37.

6. See Viviani et al. pp49-50, and Viviani (1996) p.75.
  7. Siew-ean Khoo, 'Some Indicators of Asian Immigrant Settlement and Adjustment in Australia', Immigration Update, Australian Government Publishing Service, June Quarter, 1994.
  8. Viviani et al., p16.
  9. ibid p38ff.
  10. Viviani, 'The Patterns...!', p39,42., see also Viviani et al., pxiv
- 

Back to [Back to Contents Vol. 4 No. 3](#)

Back to [People and Place Home Page](#)