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From Forced Relocation to Social Ascension: An Examination of Vietnamese Migratory Trends, Adjustment, and Social Advancement in America

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A Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative publication

Abstract: This research paper critically assesses the practices, policies, and implications surrounding the integration of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States. For clarity, this study is broken into four sections. Part I begins with a brief overview of Vietnamese migration, including the primary factors driving international migration and resettlement within the United States. Part II then turns to data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey taken from 2021 (5-year report), 2022 (1-year report), and additional national-level datasets to probe into the socioeconomic progression of Vietnamese immigrants. Factors including, inter alia, education, English proficiency, occupation, median household income, and poverty rates are examined. Part III then offers actionable insights in areas including research, practice, and policy for better serving the Vietnamese-American community and highlights ongoing challenges they encounter.

Part I - Background: According to the U.S Census Bureau's 2018-2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, there were 1,349,684 foreign-born Vietnamese in the United States.¹ In this statistical profile, the term Vietnamese "immigrant" collectively refers to those in the United States who were not US citizens at birth, including naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, those admitted under refugee or asylee status, legal non-immigrants (such as persons on student or work visas) and undocumented individuals residing within the country. As such, Vietnamese immigrants are one of the largest foreign-born groups in the United States, constituting around 2.98% of the total US foreign-born population (estimated to be around 45.3 million) in 2022.² Furthermore, in a Migration Policy Institute Report examining tabulated data from the ACS (2010; 2019; 2021) as well as the 2000 Decennial Census, Vietnamese immigrants represented the sixth-largest foreign-born group in the United States and the fourth-largest among Asian immigrant groups (behind India, China, and the Philippines).

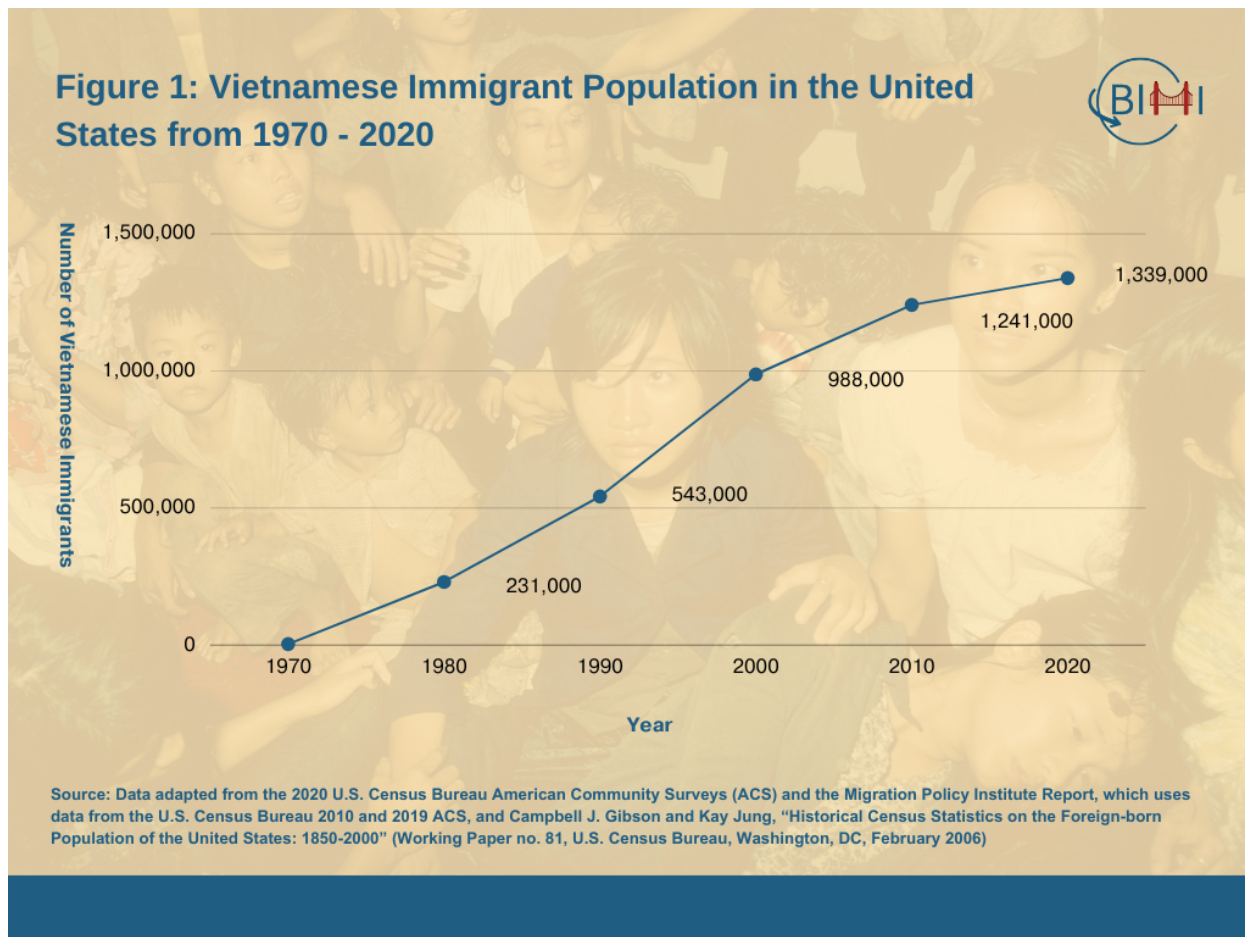
While Vietnamese immigrants are not the leading immigrant group in the United States, the United States is the leading nation for Vietnamese refugees: over half of the Vietnamese diaspora live in the U.S. today. According to the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, immigration from Vietnam to the United States substantially began in the 1980s following the end of the Vietnam War. Since then, the number of Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. has grown precipitously, roughly doubling every decade between 1980 and 2000, before increasing gradually thereafter. The post-war arrival of Vietnamese American immigrants offers a distinct narrative compared to other Asian American groups, such as those from East and South Asia or the Philippines. While these other communities have roots tracing back to the late 1800s, the recent influx of Vietnamese Americans stands in contrast. Their nascent arrival, driven primarily by geopolitical upheavals, offers a distinct context for understanding their current needs. Acknowledging Vietnamese migration history is not purely about the past; it provides essential insights for crafting contemporary practices and policies to better serve the Vietnamese-American community. Therefore, a historical analysis of Vietnamese immigrant experiences is critical.

Historical Analysis/Background: Historically, significant Vietnamese immigration to the United States did not begin until after the conclusion of the Vietnam War. Before the fall of Saigon and its effective end on April 30, 1975, immigration from Vietnam to the U.S. was limited. According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics, the earliest record of Vietnamese obtaining lawful permanent resident status (LPR) in the U.S. was between 1951-1960, when 351 Vietnamese immigrants were granted residency. While these numbers grew steadily during the war (estimated at around 4,430 Vietnamese immigrants from 1961 to 1970), Vietnamese migration increased dramatically

¹ACS 2022 5 Year Survey (2022). Social Explorer. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from https://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/ACS2022_5yr/R13546773

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States*. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B05006. Retrieved December 22, 2023, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACS5Y2022.B05006?q=b05006&t=Populations and People>.

throughout the mid-late 1970s. During this period, three pivotal events—1) the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, 2) escalating conflicts among Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese forces from 1977 to 1979, and 3) the Communist government's economic restructuring in 1978—collectively set the stage for mass emigration from Vietnam.



By the end of the Vietnam War, the United States had withdrawn its forces from the region. However, various agreements, programs, and initiatives were subsequently established to repatriate both remaining American and Vietnamese dependents. In the immediate aftermath, American diplomats orchestrated one of the most ambitious evacuations in U.S. history, transporting approximately 65,000 'high-risk' individuals out of Vietnam. A quote by Anne D. Pham, a former refugee and now a Foreign Service Officer, captures the logistical challenges and resourceful initiatives taken by American diplomats during the crisis:

“...Brave individuals like USAID officers Joseph Gettier and Mel Chatman sought alternative, last-ditch means to rescue people. They commandeered military transport barges that had been used to carry supplies during the war... That was how my parents left their homeland with their six young children. Our escape down the Saigon River, with darkness setting in, was a dangerous one. Near Vung Tau Harbor, where the river opens to the Pacific Ocean, we came under rocket fire. Thankfully, as I was only three years old, I have only faint memories of the journey. As the barge drifted out to sea, crammed with refugees, my father held me close and solemnly said to my

eldest brother: “Take a good look at your country. It will be the last time you see it.” - Anne D. Pham, Foreign Service Officer and former Vietnamese Refugee³

Meanwhile, many others sought escape over land or took to the sea in search of refuge. In response to growing Vietnamese migration, the United States designed and implemented various programs, including, inter alia, Operation New Life (1975) and Operation Babylift (1975), to facilitate the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. Perhaps surprisingly, the initial reception of South Vietnamese resettlement in the United States was met with resentment from the American public. For example, in one national poll conducted by the New York Times, only 36% of American respondents supported the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, while over half (54%) opposed the proposition.⁴ Despite considerable public opposition, the U.S. government, driven by a moral obligation to Vietnamese refugees, passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, which provided over \$400 million in aid for resettlement and allowed Vietnamese refugees to enter the United States under a special parole status. By the end of 1975, around 130,000 Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees (of which 125,000 were Vietnamese) were accepted and resettled throughout the country (reflected below in **Figure 2**).⁵

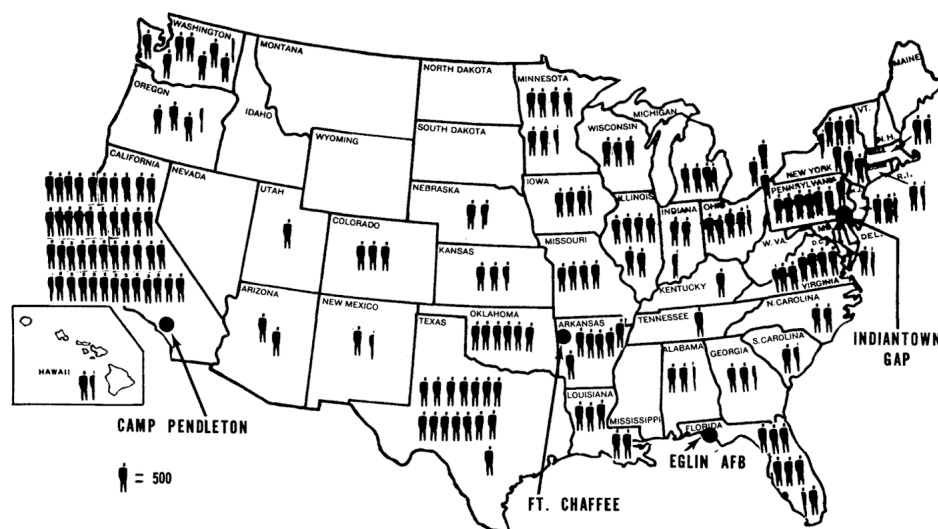


Figure 2: A figure adapted from the U.S. Government Accountability Office report reflects the initial distribution rate of Vietnamese refugee resettlement on October 17, 1975.⁶

³ U.S. Department of State - The National Museum of American Diplomacy. (n.d.). *The Fall of Saigon (1975): The Bravery of American Diplomats and Refugees*. U.S. Department of State.

<https://diplomacy.state.gov/stories/fall-of-saigon-1975-american-diplomats-refugees>

⁴ Kneeland, D.E. (1975, May 2) *Wide Hostility Found To Vietnamese Influx—The New York Times*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from

<https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/02/archives/wide-hostility-found-to-vietnamese-influx-hostility-found-across.html>

⁵ Bankston, C. L., & Zhou, M. (2021). Involuntary migration, context of reception, and social mobility: The case of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in the United States. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(21), 4797–4816.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724411>

⁶ United States Government Accountability Office. (1976, June 3). *Evacuation And Temporary Care Afforded Indochinese Refugees - Operation New Life*. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/id-76-63.pdf>

Although Vietnamese refugeeship peaked in 1975, the subsequent admittance of Vietnamese immigrants to the U.S. began to (temporarily) taper off post-conflict. This was largely due to the U.S.'s more stringent immigration policies, which predominantly permitted entry to Vietnamese individuals solely on the grounds of family reunification. However, by 1978, U.S. admission rates for Vietnamese refugees had re-surfaced following growing political and ethnic conflict between Vietnam, Cambodia, and China. At the same time, civil repression from the Vietnamese Communist government and post-war economic hardship created conditions in which refugee flight was endemic. Against this backdrop, Vietnamese refugees fled in droves, primarily by boat, in search of safety. From 1978 to 1979, the number of Vietnamese refugees, often referred to as 'boat people,' saw an unprecedented spike, with as many as 65,000 departing per month by mid-1979.⁷

However, by the end of June 1979, the issue of Vietnamese migration had garnered international attention. Public alarm intensified when members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand at the time—announced they would no longer accept new arrivals despite continuing refugee flows from Vietnam. Amidst the crisis, 65 member states of the United Nations convened in July to discuss solutions for the 'refugees and displaced persons in Southeast Asia.' Chief among these were renewed commitments by the countries of origin (including Vietnam) to prevent illegal exits and promote orderly departures, countries of first asylum (primarily ASEAN) to continue providing temporary asylum, and countries of resettlement to accelerate refugee admissions and reception. Furthermore, states, including the U.S., agreed to accept more refugees and helped establish the Orderly Departure Program under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which allowed Vietnamese to petition for resettlement without having to leave the country. As a result of the 1979 conference, emigration from Vietnam declined to a few thousand per month while resettlement increased. Over the next three years, around 623,800 Indochinese refugees were admitted in over 20 countries, with the United States accepting approximately three-quarters of them.⁸

The rapid influx of Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s raised serious concerns and implications for U.S. immigration policy. Although the U.S. was an original signatory of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the first modern international agreement on asylum—and of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the U.S. government took an ad hoc approach to refugee admissions. In particular, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 carried no provisions that expressly covered the resettlement of refugees, and it was not until 1965 that Congress finally amended the INA to include refugees as a seventh category of 'conditional entrants.' However, the Southeast Asian refugee crisis prompted the United States to enact the most comprehensive refugee legislation in American history, the Refugee Act of 1980. In place of the INAs seventh category, which originally admitted refugees as part of the total annual number of immigrants allowed into the U.S., the Refugee Act of 1980 established an entirely separate annual admission rate for refugees.

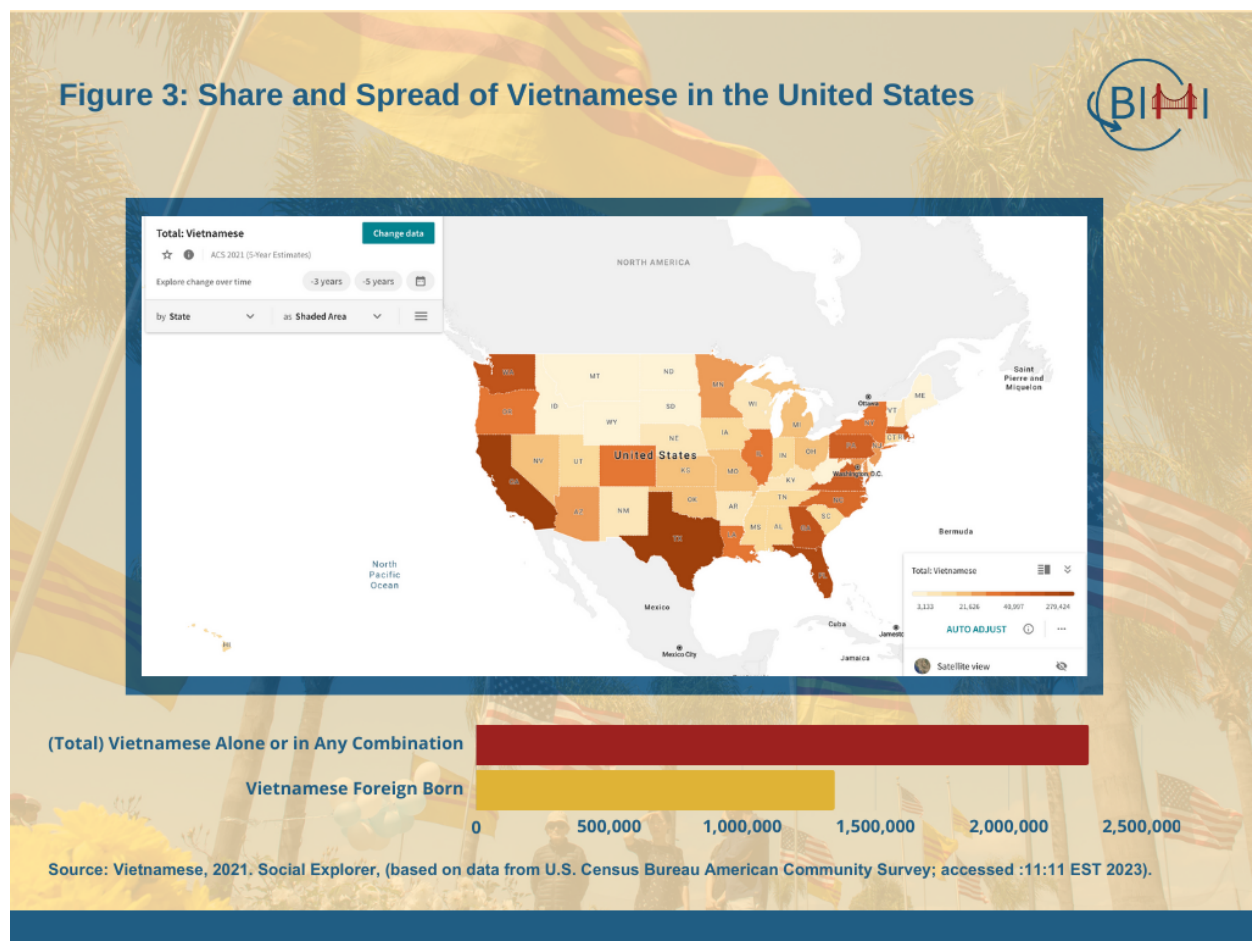
By the late 1980s, a third and final wave of Vietnamese refugees immigrated to the U.S. due to diplomatic easings between the U.S. and Vietnam. Two programs in particular, the Amerasian Homecoming Act of

⁷ *Vietnamese Boat People Arrive at Indonesia's Anambas Islands* | *Encyclopedia.com*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/vietnamese-boat-people-arrive-in-donesias-anambas-islands>

⁸ Cutts, M. (2000). *The State of The World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action - Chapter 4: Flight from Indochina*. UNHCR. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://www.unhcr.org/media/state-worlds-refugees-2000-fifty-years-humanitarian-action-chapter-4-flight-indochina> ; Miller, K. (2015, April 29). *From Humanitarian to Economic: The Changing Face of Vietnamese Migration*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/humanitarian-economic-changing-face-vietnamese-migration>

1988 and the Humanitarian Operation Program of 1989 allowed Vietnamese with close connections to Americans (e.g., by blood) and those ideologically aligned (e.g., political prisoners) to enter the United States. Together, over 129,300 Vietnamese had resettled within the United States under the auspices of the two programs.⁹ After 1990, Vietnamese immigration to the United States began to slow following market reforms (Đổi Mới) and the re-establishment of relations between the two countries in 1995.

By the turn of the new millennium, Vietnamese Americans have emerged as one of the most visible minorities within the American ethnic mosaic. From around 4,800 in 1970 to over 1.3 million today foreign-born Vietnamese, the United States is home to over half of the Vietnamese diasporic community. In total, however, around 2.3 million Vietnamese live in the United States.¹⁰ **Figure 3** illustrates the spread of Vietnamese in the United States today, a majority of whom reside in California (671,401) and Texas (279,424), followed by Washington, Georgia, Virginia, and Massachusetts (ACS 2021 5-Year Report).



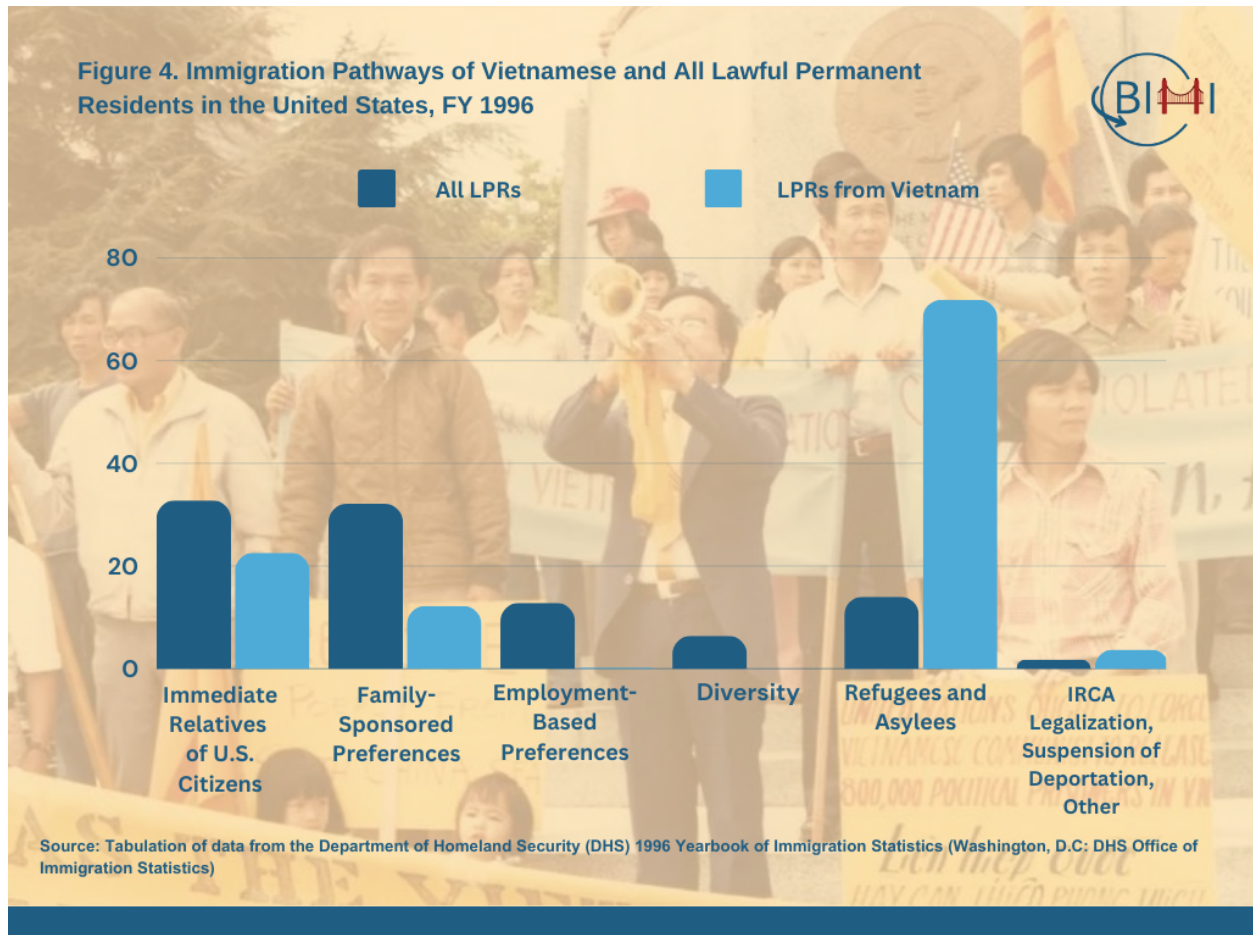
⁹ *The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive: Vietnamese Americans Subject Guide*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/resources/vietnamese-american.php>;

Dizon, L. (1997, October 14) US Ends Era of Welcome For Vietnam's Refugees. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://www.csmonitor.com/1997/1014/101497.intl.intl.3.html>

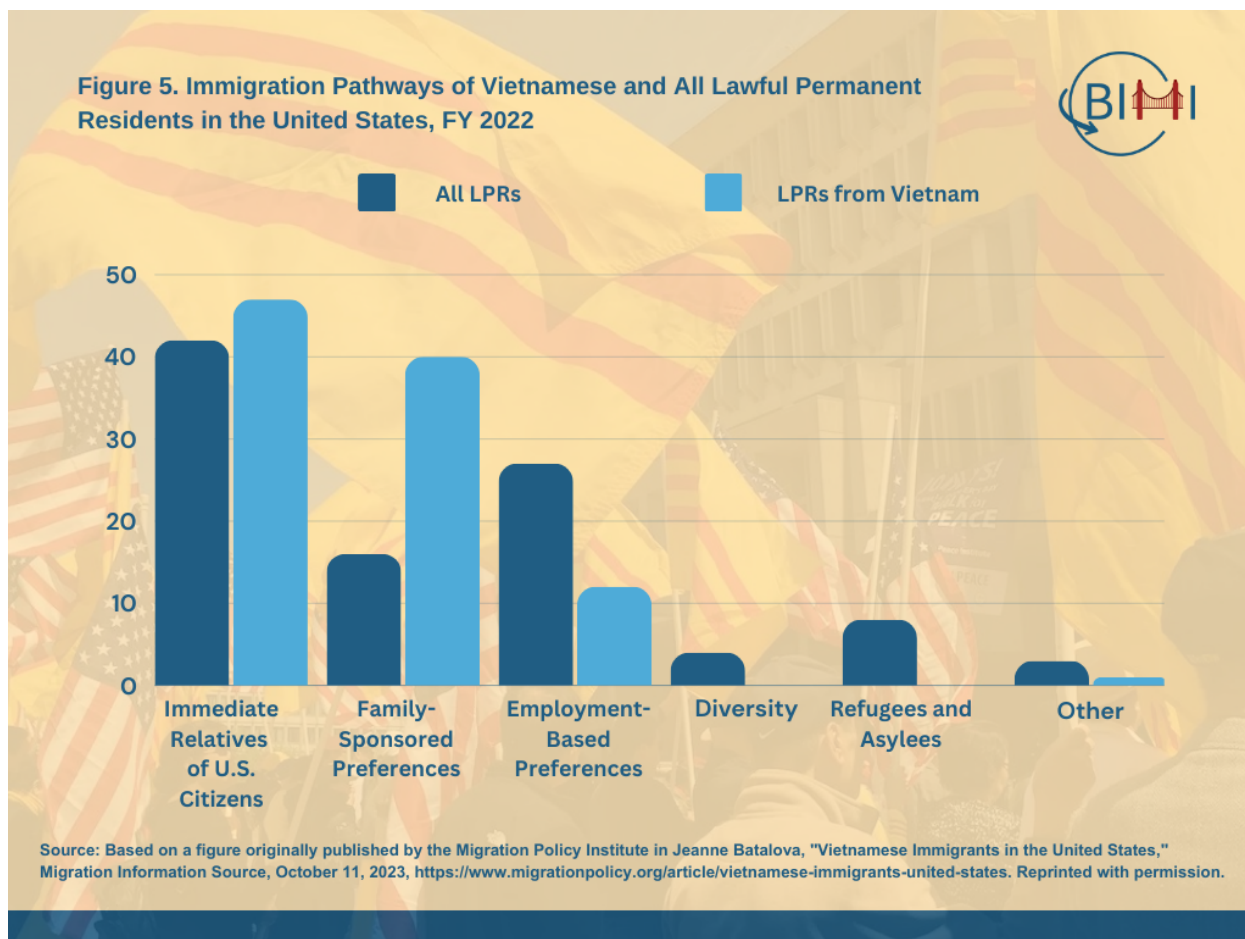
¹⁰ 2.3 million Vietnamese refers to the total number of Vietnamese living in the United States. Alone or in Any Combination" should be considered the maximum population size in any analysis that uses Census data

Predominant Means of Entry Today:

The predominant means of entry amongst Vietnamese immigrants have changed precipitously from the Vietnam War to today. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, Vietnamese immigrants were far more likely to obtain green cards as refugees and asylees. For instance, in 1996, almost 72% of Vietnamese immigrant pathways in the U.S. were of refugee and asylum claimants, followed by Immediate Relatives of U.S. citizens (22.55%) and Family-Sponsored Preferences (12.23%), respectively.



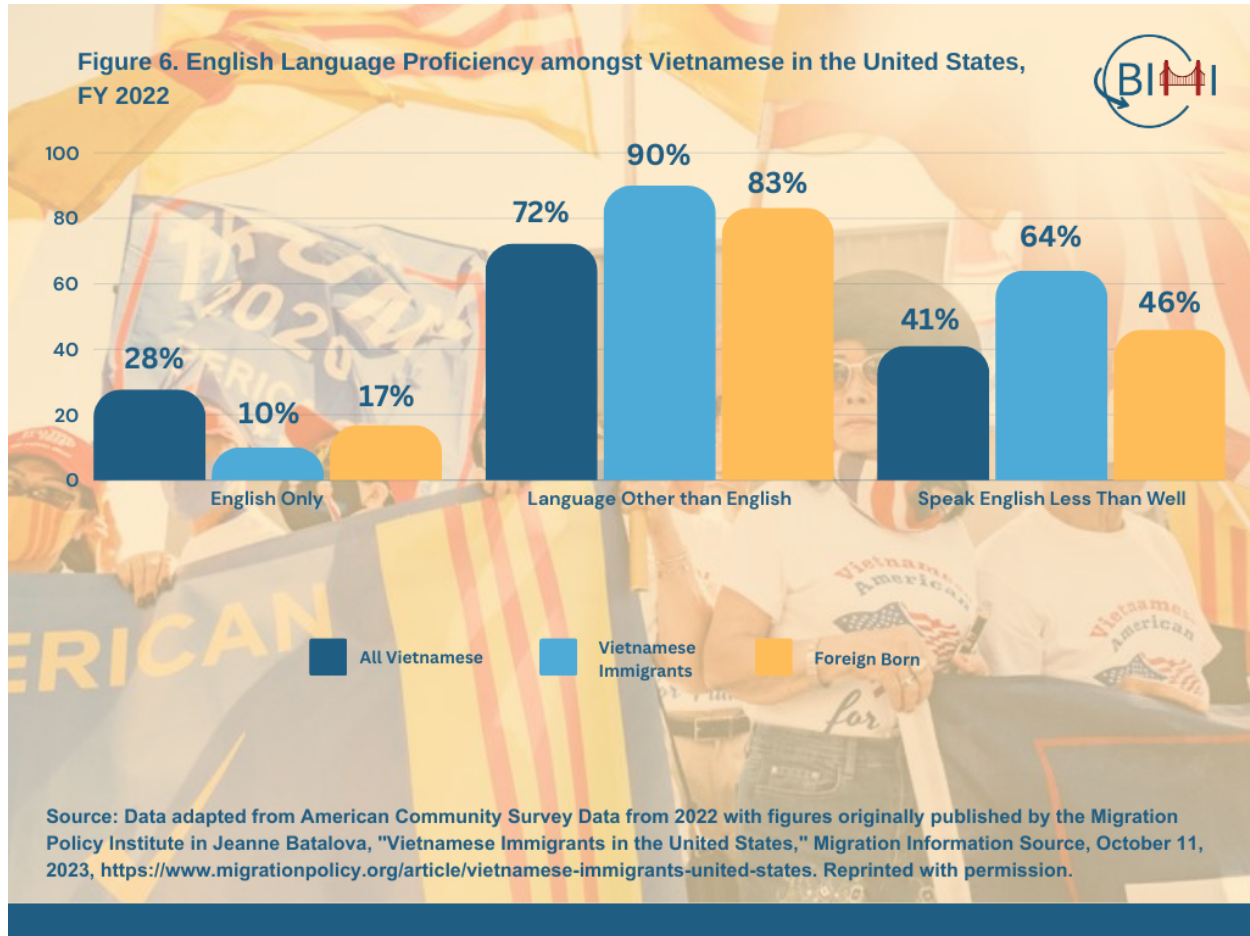
In comparison, very few cases involving Vietnamese immigration fall under humanitarian grounds and have instead shifted within the realm of family reunification today (see **Figure 5**). In fact, according to the Department of Homeland Security’s Yearbook of Immigration Statistics for 2022, the average number of Vietnamese immigrants who had obtained permanent residency did so as Immediate Relatives to U.S. Citizens (47%). This was followed by Family-Sponsored Preferences (40%) and Employment-Based Preferences—both of which have grown dramatically over the last two decades (12%).



Part II - Socioeconomic Characteristics:

English Language Proficiency

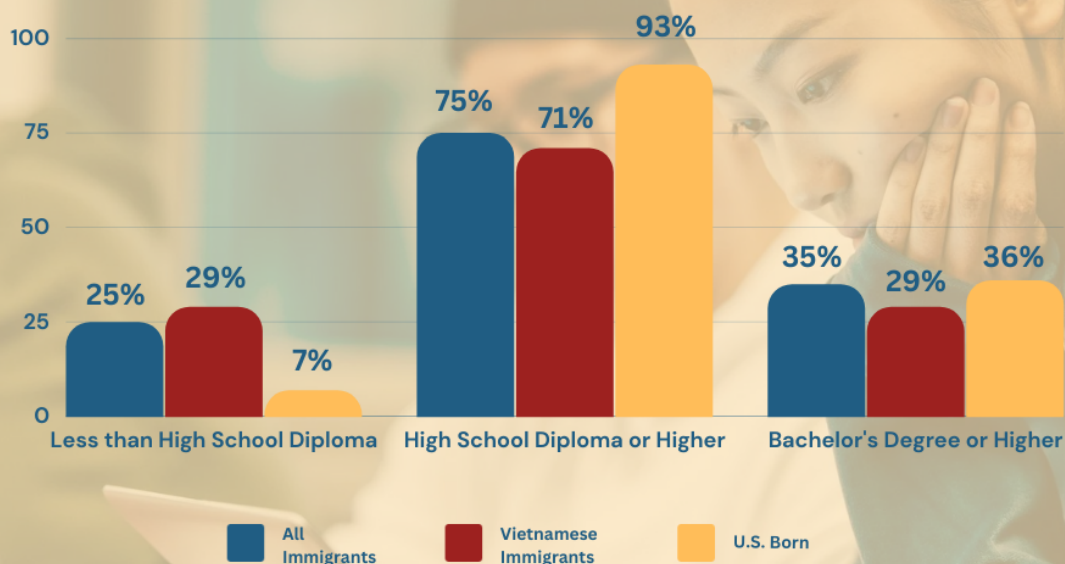
Vietnamese integration in the United States may be measured (in proxy) by a myriad of factors, including inter alia, poverty, median household income, educational attainment, employment, labor force participation, and English language proficiency. **Figure 6** shows general trends in integration amongst the Vietnamese population in the United States. Notably, Vietnamese immigrants tend to have a lower average English proficiency than their foreign-born counterparts. Similarly, nearly 64% of Vietnamese immigrants speak English less than well compared to only 46% of foreign-born. However, when aggregated among all Vietnamese in the United States (including immigrants and Vietnamese Americans), the number of English-only speaking Vietnamese increased by 18%. In other words, just over 1 in 4 Vietnamese in the United States speak only English. The rate of English language proficiency across all Vietnamese increases as well, with 59% reporting proficiency in English.



Educational Attainment

Vietnamese immigrants aged 25 and older generally held lower educational attainment rates than their native- and overall foreign-born counterparts. In 2022, only 29% of Vietnamese immigrants reported having a bachelor's or higher, compared to 35% of all immigrants and 36% of U.S.-born. Similarly, Vietnamese immigrants were on average, less likely to hold a high school diploma or higher at 71%. **Figure 7** (adapted from the Migration Policy Initiative) shows the general lack of educational attainment among Vietnamese immigrants.

Figure 7. Educational Attainment of the U.S. Population (ages 25 and older) by Origin, 2022



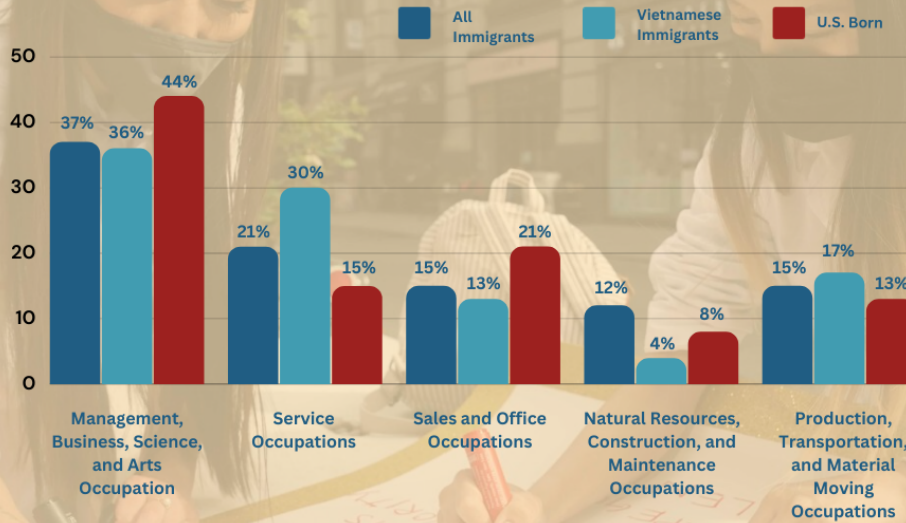
Source: Based on a figure originally published by the Migration Policy Institute in Jeanne Batalova, "Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Information Source, October 11, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>. Reprinted with permission.

Distribution of Vietnamese in the U.S. Labor Force

As noted by the Migration Policy Institute, the average labor force participation rate amongst Vietnamese immigrants (65%) falls just under 67% of all immigrants in the labor force and slightly higher than U.S.-born natives.¹¹ A chart (**Figure 8**) adapted from the Migration Policy Institute shows that across the civilian labor force, Vietnamese immigrants were, on average, more concentrated in Service occupations, followed by Production, Transportation, and Material moving at 30% and 17% respectively. Across all industries, the top three occupation fields among Vietnamese immigrants were Management, Service, and Production. However, these metrics slightly change when all Vietnamese (both Vietnamese foreign- and native-born) are considered (see **Figure 9**). While the spread/concentration of all Vietnamese is similar to Vietnamese immigrants, the third largest field shifts from Production, Transportation, and Material Moving to Sales and Office occupations.

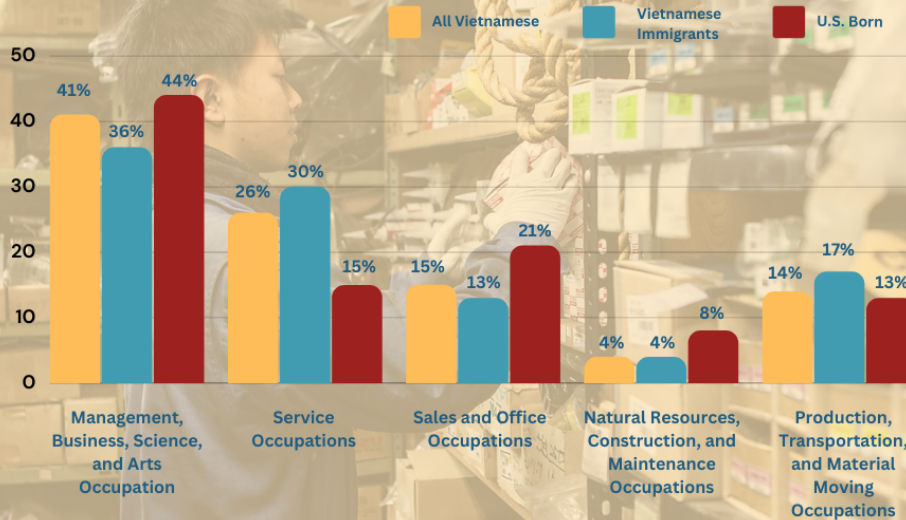
¹¹ Batalova, J. (2023, October 10). *Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>

Figure 8. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2022



Source: Based on a figure originally published by the Migration Policy Institute in Jeanne Batalova, "Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Information Source, October 11, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 9. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2022



Source: Data adapted from American Community Survey Data from 2022 with figures originally published by the Migration Policy Institute in Jeanne Batalova, "Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Information Source, October 11, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>. Reprinted with permission.

Poverty Rate and Median Household Income

A cursory glance at income and poverty rates amongst Vietnamese immigrant households appears rather promising. Vietnamese (both native-born and immigrant) tended to have higher incomes than their foreign and native-born counterparts. In 2022, Vietnamese immigrant and/or mixed-status households reported a median income of \$81,000. When aggregated across all Vietnamese, however, Vietnamese households reported an increase in median income (around \$94,000) compared to just \$75,000 for both “all immigrant” and U.S.-born households.¹² Similarly, Vietnamese immigrants were slightly less impoverished (11 percent) than their overall foreign-born and U.S.-born counterparts (14 percent and 12 percent respectively).¹³ However, when considering the net worth (or wealth) of AAPIs, the socioeconomic standing of Vietnamese Americans becomes less clear. For instance, in a joint 2016 study examining intraracial wealth gaps among select Asian American communities in Los Angeles, researchers found that the wealth gap between Vietnamese and other Asian groups was increasingly disparate. Especially when compared to the next three biggest subgroups: Chinese (\$408,200), Indian (\$460,000), and Filipino (\$243,000), the average net worth of the study’s Vietnamese respondents was only \$61,500.¹⁴

The data presented above offers a nuanced yet complex understanding of Vietnamese immigrants' adjustment and socioeconomic advancement within the U.S. On one hand, Vietnamese immigrants report higher income levels compared to both their foreign-born and native-born counterparts and demonstrate marginally lower poverty rates. On the other hand, other areas, such as educational attainment, proficiency in the English language, and net worth reveal notable challenges. While this study endeavors to assess the integration of Vietnamese immigrants using metrics from the American Community Survey (ACS) and DHS Immigration Yearbook, it is essential to acknowledge that socioeconomic factors are not complete indicators of community adaptation.

Part III: Issues and Implications

Section III moves beyond socioeconomic indicators to unravel the complex tapestry of challenges facing the Vietnamese-American community. This section will examine pivotal issues, including health, racism and discrimination, and political participation and disinformation, to better illuminate the intricate interplay of factors that shape their experience in the United States. While the Vietnamese community faces various challenges, the issues covered within this paper will only focus on a select few, providing insights and implications relevant to future research, practice, and policy work.

Health Outcomes and Implications

Although much scholarly ink has been spilled over the social determinants of health on Asian American health outcomes, studies involving Vietnamese Americans have been limited in scope and size.¹⁵ On a cursory glance, a review of the literature reveals that Vietnamese Americans are at a higher risk for developing various complications, including inter alia, malignant neoplasms, cardiovascular, and cerebrovascular diseases (i.e., stroke), which have been cited as the top three leading causes of death amongst Vietnamese Americans.¹⁶ When compared to all Asian-American subgroups, Vietnamese

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Cruz-Viesca, M. D. L., Chen, Z., Ong, P. M., Hamilton, D., & Darity Jr., W. A. (2016). *The Color of Wealth in Los Angeles*. AASC | Asian American Studies Center. https://www.aasc.ucla.edu/besol/Color_of_Wealth_Report.pdf

¹⁵ Nguyen, T., Cho, Y. J., & Jang, Y. (2021). Perceived discrimination, psychosocial resources, and mental distress in Vietnamese Americans. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 3, 100039. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2021.100039>

¹⁶ Ta, H., Lin, B., & Palaniappan, L. (2020, March). *Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American health statistics, 2003-2019*. CARE Data Brief No.2. <https://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/care/VNDataBrief.pdf>

Americans were the second highest group to die from stroke-related mortality.¹⁷ While various factors can be attributed to the ailing health of Vietnamese in the United States, certain lifestyle habits such as smoking and alcoholism place Vietnamese Americans at greater risk for long-term health complications. Especially when disaggregated by gender, studies have found that Vietnamese men had higher incidence rates of stomach and liver cancer compared to Vietnamese women, who were at far greater risk for developing and dying from cervical and breast cancer.¹⁸

Interestingly, a study conducted by Gomez et al. (2010) observed that immigration status significantly affected breast cancer mortality among Vietnamese immigrants, with foreign-born Vietnamese individuals experiencing rates four times higher than their U.S.-born counterparts.¹⁹ This discrepancy suggests that migration and its associated challenges may contribute to increased health risks. Despite these risks, however, Vietnamese women were one of the least likely groups to screen for cervical and breast cancer, citing cultural (i.e., customs, knowledge, and beliefs), linguistic (i.e., limited to no English proficiency), and socioeconomic issues (i.e., lack of insurance and poverty) as barriers to care.²⁰ Similarly, other factors, including the lack of linguistically and culturally responsive healthcare have also proved to be formidable barriers to reducing health inequities in the Vietnamese community. These findings are consistent across the broader Vietnamese-American and immigrant communities, reflecting systemic challenges that impact access to quality healthcare services.

At the same time, various studies have found that Vietnamese immigrants are also at greater risk for developing mental health issues. In contrast to other Asian American subgroups, the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. are a relatively recent immigrant group whose arrival can be traced back to just half a century. While an increasing number of Vietnamese immigrants today arrive through family reunification tracks, the initial majority arrived as refugees having faced early life adversity and other traumatic experiences. The confluence of these experiences predisposes Vietnamese immigrants to impacted cognitive function and psychological distress. For instance, in a 2015 survey conducted by the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, researchers found that around 30-50% of Vietnamese Americans experienced probable depression or psychological distress, a rate significantly higher than those observed in the general U.S. population.²¹ Similarly, other studies have identified particularly high levels of psychological distress among Vietnamese individuals compared to other Asian American subgroups.²²

While limited data exists on the mental health of Vietnamese Americans (in large part due to aggregation in Asian American health data), research has shown that mental health service utilization by this

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Lee, R. J., Madan, R. A., Kim, J., Posadas, E. M., & Yu, E. Y. (2021). Disparities in Cancer Care and the Asian American Population. *The Oncologist*, 26(6), 453–460. <https://doi.org/10.1002/onco.13748>

¹⁹ Gomez, S. L., Clarke, C. A., Shema, S. J., Chang, E. T., Keegan, T. H. M., & Glaser, S. L. (2010). Disparities in Breast Cancer Survival Among Asian Women by Ethnicity and Immigrant Status: A Population-Based Study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(5), 861–869. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.176651>

²⁰ Ma, G. X., Fang, C. Y., Feng, Z., Tan, Y., Gao, W., Ge, S., & Nguyen, C. (2012). Correlates of Cervical Cancer Screening among Vietnamese American Women. *Infectious Diseases in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2012, e617234. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/617234>

²¹ Nguyen, T., Cho, Y. J., & Jang, Y. (2021). Perceived discrimination, psychosocial resources, and mental distress in Vietnamese Americans. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 3, 100039. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2021.100039>

²² Cheung, M., Leung, P., & Nguyen, P. V. (2017). City size matters: Vietnamese immigrants having depressive symptoms. *Social Work in Mental Health*, 15(4), 457–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332985.2016.1231156>; Jang, Y., Yoon, H., Park, N. S., Rhee, M. K., & Chiriboga, D. A. (2019). Mental Health Service Use and Perceived Unmet Needs for Mental Health Care in Asian Americans. *Community mental health journal*, 55(2), 241–248. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-018-0348-3>; Nguyen, T., Cho, Y. J., & Jang, Y. (2021). Perceived discrimination, psychosocial resources, and mental distress in Vietnamese Americans. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 3, 100039. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmh.2021.100039>

population is relatively low.²³ Such underutilization as well as disparities in access can be attributed in large part to cultural stigma in the Vietnamese population.²⁴ In Vietnamese, the label for mental health (Sức khỏe tâm thần) is not a well-defined nor widely recognized term. Furthermore, individuals with neurological, behavioral, and other mental health disorders are often stigmatized as being bad or weak.²⁵ This negative perception is evident in the word that many Vietnamese use to describe mental illness, 'điên,' which translates to 'insane' or 'mad' in English. Consequently, among Vietnamese, the need for mental health interventions is commonly only associated with more “critical” health issues such as suicidal ideation and schizophrenia, while other psychiatric disorders including PTSD and depression are subsequently ignored and left unaddressed.

However, it is crucial to underscore that the health findings delineated above might not be generalizable given the scope, time, and manner of the research study. Put differently, limitations arise when relying holistically on extant Asian health research; some of which tend to focus on localized communities for more specific health characteristics but are not generalizable outside of the contexts in which they were conducted²⁶; are reliant on older survey data²⁷; and where health trends across Asian American subgroups are often obscured by the indiscriminate data aggregation and misclassification.²⁸ Further research is necessary to better understand Vietnamese American and immigrant health outcomes as a basis for developing culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate care. At times, culturally responsive practices are not enough to adequately address cultural tensions (f.e around trauma and mental health). Consequently, strong messaging and framing across community stakeholders, including civic, religious, and political leaders will be instrumental in providing accurate information about healthcare practices and policies. Finally, conducting longitudinal research studies would be beneficial for a nuanced understanding of the risk (i.e., smoking) and protective factors (i.e., mental health literacy) that influence health outcomes among Vietnamese Americans and immigrants over time. Such insights are crucial for informing policies tailored to target the root drivers of health disparities within these communities.

Racism and Xenophobia

“...I have seen this incredible seesaw effect. We can go back to the turn of the century when Chinese were the only people to be legally excluded from this country because people were so fearful of the jobs they were taking. That was seemingly a place that we would never go to anymore, that level of vitriol. We’ve seen it, though, in waves since then: World War II, we had an Asian enemy; Korean War, we had an Asian

²³ Phan, H. T. (2012). *Influences on Mental Health Service Utilization for Vietnamese Young Adults*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from

<https://utswmed-ir.tdl.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/44b25644-3369-41da-9a4a-90711be37253/content>

²⁴ Do, M., McCleary, J., Nguyen, D., & Winfrey, K. (2018). 2047 Mental illness public stigma, culture, and acculturation among Vietnamese Americans. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 2(S1), 17–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cts.2018.93>

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Jang, Y., Yoon, H., Park, N. S., Rhee, M. K., & Chiriboga, D. A. (2019). Mental Health Service Use and Perceived Unmet Needs for Mental Health Care in Asian Americans. *Community mental health journal*, 55(2), 241–248. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-018-0348-3>

²⁷ Morris, Z. S., Wooding, S., & Grant, J. (2011). The answer is 17 years, what is the question: Understanding time lags in translational research. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 104(12), 510–520. <https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.2011.110180>

²⁸ Yi, S. S., Kwon, S. C., Suss, R., Doãn, L. N., John, I., Islam, N. S., & Trinh-Shevrin, C. (2022). The Mutually Reinforcing Cycle Of Poor Data Quality And Racialized Stereotypes That Shapes Asian American Health. *Health Affairs*, 41(2), 296–303. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2021.01417>

enemy; Vietnam War, we had an Asian enemy. And then we had Asian enemies that were economic in nature.” - Janet Yang ²⁹

The Vietnamese community, like many other Asian communities in the United States., continues to face instances of racism and discrimination. Since their arrival in the United States, the general context of reception for Vietnamese immigrants was at best, ambivalent. Although Vietnamese refugees were resettled with support from the U.S. government, public support for resettlement remained divided. In areas where Vietnamese refugees resettled, tensions flared. By the 1980s, Vietnamese immigrants clashed violently with the Klu Klux Klan in areas including Seadrift, Texas, where fears of economic competition afflicted the local community.³⁰ Vietnamese fishing boats and livelihoods near the gulf were destroyed and vandalized; others were harassed and called parasites.³¹ In cities including Houston and Boston, growing reports of crime against the Vietnamese community prompted some residents to arm themselves for safety.³²

By the turn of the century, racialized violence against Vietnamese immigrants generally subsided within the public consciousness as stereotypes around their newfound adjustment began to emerge. As with other Asian groups, Vietnamese Americans were quickly lauded as a model minority—a community so endeared for their strong work ethic, innate intelligence, and penchant for passivity. However, this oversimplified narrative turned the Vietnamese and Asian community into a monolith, devoid of any feature other than foreign.³³ More broadly, the perpetuation of the model minority myth placed the Asian American community in a perpetual cycle of precarity. In times of peace and prosperity, they were celebrated for their successes and accomplishments, but in times of tension and crisis, they faced attacks and animosity.

It is within this backdrop that the rise in anti-Asian hate during the Covid-19 pandemic becomes unsurprising. Institutionally, racist and xenophobic rhetoric from President Trump and other government officials—referring to the virus as the "Chinese Virus" or "Kung Flu"—created a conducive environment for discrimination and racialized violence. Although the virus was primarily blamed on the Chinese community due to its origin, Asians from all backgrounds were targeted in a growing hate campaign that consumed the country. Across the nation, anti-Asian hate crimes surged by 150% in 2020 before hitting a peak increase of 339% in 2021.³⁴ Of these, Vietnamese Americans were consistently among the top five

²⁹ Scheer, R. (2020, April 20) *The Power and Pain of Being Asian American During the Coronavirus Crisis*. KCRW. <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/scheer-intelligence/power-pain-being-asian-american-coronavirus>

³⁰ Steven, K.W. (1981, April 25). Klan Inflames Gulf Fishing Fight Between Whites and Vietnamese. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/25/us/klan-inflames-gulf-fishing-fight-between-whites-and-vietnamese.html>

³¹ Dao, D.Q. (2020, September 3) *Why “Black Lives Matter” Is So Divisive for Houston’s Vietnamese American Community – Texas Monthly*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/black-lives-matter-billboard-houston-vietnamese-american-community>

³² Ibid; Butterfield, F., & Times, S. T. the N. Y. (1985, August 31). Violent Incidents Against Asian-Americans seen as part of racist pattern. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/31/us/violent-incidents-against-asian-americans-seen-as-part-of-racist-pattern.html>

ml; Patel, P. (2005, April 29). *Vietnamese-Americans serve Houston’s diversity*. Chron.

<https://www.chron.com/business/article/Vietnamese-Americans-serve-Houston-s-diversity-1936892.php>

³³ Gover, A. R., Harper, S. B., & Langton, L. (2020). Anti-Asian Hate Crime During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(4), 647–667.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>

³⁴ Yam, K. (2021). *Anti-Asian hate crimes increased by nearly 150% in 2020, mostly in N.Y. and L.A., new report says*. (2021, March 9). NBC News.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-nearly-150-2020-mostly-n-n1260264>; Choi, J. (2022, February 1). Anti-Asian hate crimes in US spiked 339 percent in 2021: Report. *The Hill*.

Asian subgroups experiencing hate crimes during the Covid-19 pandemic, comprising around 8% of all reported Asian hate crimes, according to Stop AAPI Hate.³⁵ These crimes included vandalism, business destruction, robbery, harassment, and physical assault, among others.³⁶

The contextual analysis above makes it clear that comprehensive measures are necessary to secure the rights and welfare of the Asian American community. Institutionally, political leaders and organizations must acknowledge the impact of political framing on shaping societal responses. By recognizing and addressing harmful rhetoric, advocates can seek accountability and shape discourse that empowers affected communities. Local/state organizations, government, and civic stakeholders can also work together to bridge gaps in social services, including crisis management support and prevention. For example, in San Francisco, community leaders worked with the government to establish the city's street violence intervention program. Through partnerships with community-based and faith-based organizations, the program offers robust counseling and case management services, as well as an elderly escort service to help seniors travel safely.³⁷ Moreover, a report released by the S.F Mayor's office showed that the program had a positive impact on community safety; in 2022, hate crimes decreased significantly (around 68%) in contrast to the year prior.³⁸ However, further research is needed to better understand trends in anti-Asian crimes (e.g., the influence of environmental factors on fostering anti-Asian sentiment) in order to implement prevention-based policies. An examination of the best approaches for collecting, reporting, and analyzing Asian hate crimes are thus critical.

Political Integration and Misinformation

“A common joke among young Viet progressives is that you're bound to be called a communist, or cộng sản, once you openly express any left-leaning political views. And yet, I find that there is something uniquely cruel about this political divide among a war-torn generation and their children, that beyond the language and cultural barriers that already alienate older Vietnamese Americans, there is now a stark political wedge rooted in hate, misunderstanding, and trauma.” - Terry Nguyen³⁹

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 significantly transformed the demographic composition of the American voter. In the following decades, Asian Americans have evolved into a major electoral force in the American political system. In the most recent presidential election, voting turnout among the Asian community hit historic highs of nearly 60 percent, a figure just slightly higher than the average non-white voter turnout (58%) in 2020.⁴⁰ Moreover, Asian Americans have trended as a relatively reliable voting

<https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/592191-anti-asian-hate-crimes-in-us-spiked-339-percent-in-2021-report/>

³⁵ Jeung, R., Horse, A. Y., Popovic, T., & Lim, R. (2021). Stop AAPI Hate National Report. *Ethnic Studies Review*, 44(2), 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2021.44.2.19>

³⁶ *Do Vietnamese-Americans not need to worry about anti-Asian hate crimes?* (2021, March 28). Viet Fact Check/Việt Kiểm Tin.

<https://vietfactcheck.org/2021/03/28/do-vietnamese-americans-not-need-to-worry-about-anti-asian-hate-crimes/>

³⁷ *San Francisco Mayor's Office of Violence Prevention Services*. (n.d.). San Francisco Mayor's Office of Violence Prevention Services. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://violenceprevention.sfgov.org/coordination.html>

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Nguyen, T. (2020) Many Vietnamese American voters prefer Trump over Biden. Here's Why. *Vox*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from

<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/10/30/21540263/vietnamese-american-support-trump-2020>

⁴⁰ Morris, K., & Grange, C. (2021, August 6). Large Racial Turnout Gap Persisted in 2020 Election | *Brennan Center for Justice*. Retrieved November 11, 2023, from

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/large-racial-turnout-gap-persisted-2020-election>

bloc for the Democratic party; approximately 62% of registered Asian American voters identify with or lean toward Democrats, compared to only 29% who align with or lean Republican.⁴¹

Yet, the political stature of the Vietnamese community stands as an aberration within the Asian American electorate as the only Asian subgroup to lean rightwards. Of Vietnamese-affiliated voters surveyed in 2023, only 42% were registered and/or identified as a Democrat compared to 51% Republican.⁴² The political context undergirding the Vietnamese community is complex and influenced by various factors, including their cultural upbringing and historical background. This study acknowledges the multitude of factors influencing political responses among Vietnamese Americans. However, only a few factors will be discussed in detail to maintain brevity.

Despite being viewed as part of an ethnic and political monolith, Vietnamese conservatism has endured since the end of the Vietnam War. Having left behind their livelihoods after the communist party came into power, many Vietnamese immigrants have viewed liberal policies with apprehension. This historical legacy, combined with deeply rooted cultural and religious values, has culminated in a cultural praxis that often aligns the older Vietnamese community more closely with conservative ideologies.⁴³ On the other hand, younger generations of Vietnamese Americans often lack the same contextual narrative that grounds the Vietnamese refugee experience. The collective amnesia of Cold War politics among Vietnamese Americans, alongside variances in language fluency and digital literacy, presents a different political consciousness.⁴⁴ This identity, informed by contemporary issues and an American ethos gives light to the community's more progressive wing.

In recent years though, growing concern about the spread of misinformation in immigrant communities (including the Vietnamese) has amplified. At the same time, minority groups, including AAPIs, have emerged as powerful voting blocs in the American electorate. Between the 2016 and 2020 elections alone, AAPI saw the largest increase in voter turnout amongst every other racial group.⁴⁵ This expansion of power, combined with growing distrust in authoritative and expert bodies (i.e., government, academia, etc) has rendered the AAPI and immigrant community particularly vulnerable to misinformation⁴⁶ and disinformation campaigns.⁴⁷

From YouTube to Facebook, rampant misinformation and disinformation across social media platforms have been weaponized against the Vietnamese community to great effect. The use of social media as a

⁴¹ King, H. (2023, May 31). *Asian American support for Democrats drops over generations, study shows*. Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2023/05/31/asian-american-support-democrats-generations>

⁴² Schaeffer, K. (2023, May 25). *Asian voters in the U.S. tend to be democratic, but Vietnamese American voters are an exception*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/05/25/asian-voters-in-the-u-s-tend-to-be-democratic-but-vietnamese-american-voters-are-an-exception>

⁴³ Nguyễn, S., Moran, R. E., Nguyen, T.-A., & Bui, L. (2023). "We Never Really Talked About Politics": Race and Ethnicity as Foundational Forces Structuring Information Disorder Within the Vietnamese Diaspora. *Political Communication*, 40(4), 415–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2201940>

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ramakrishnan, K. (2021, May 18). *In 2020, AAPIs saw the highest increases in voter turnout*. Data Bits. <https://aapidata.com/blog/2020-record-turnout/>

⁴⁶ Misinformation is false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead. It is distinct from disinformation, which is defined as the intentional dissemination of false information with the express purpose of deceiving or manipulating public opinion or behavior.

⁴⁷ Moran, R., Nguyễn, S., & Bui, L. (2023). Sending News Back Home: Misinformation Lost in Transnational Social Networks. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW1), 88:1-88:36. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3579521>

primary source of information has amplified prejudicial attitudes amongst older Vietnamese Americans, who often lack the language proficiency and media literacy necessary to identify instances of misinformation. Furthermore, the lack of fact-checking and deterrence mechanisms for disinformation (i.e., suspensions and bans) on media platforms have allowed actors to spread misinformation with impunity.⁴⁸ These factors, coupled with pre-existing biases rooted in the community's historical trauma and cultural upbringing, expose the Vietnamese community to greater vulnerabilities. As right-wing talking points proliferate across Vietnamese news sources (i.e., Vietnamese YouTube channels and Facebook groups), many individuals in the community have reported distrust in mainstream media sources.⁴⁹ For younger generations of Vietnamese Americans, the subsequent distrust in mainstream media by older generations has complicated the community's ability to engage in meaningful discourse and collective activism.

“Fact-checkers presenting information contrary to narratives from misleading accounts and members with progressive or left-leaning views tend to meet dismissal and/or accusations of being ‘communist sympathizers,’ resulting in fractured relationships among families and friends.” - Nguyen et al. 2023⁵⁰

While political diversity is a hallmark of American democracy, the conflicting values of the Vietnamese community often generate cultural tension between the older, more conservative generation of Vietnamese Americans, and their younger, more liberal counterparts. The gulf within this intergenerational divide—separated by degrees of misinformation, technical and linguistic ability, and trauma—has only grown larger. As such, further work must be done to combat the growing threat of misinformation. Policymakers and media outlets (including traditional news and social media organizations) must take steps towards regulating misinformation where possible while ensuring free speech protections. These regulations should be multifaceted, involving both private and public responses to curb the spread of misinformation. For instance, in 2018, Meta (formerly Facebook Inc.) established its first independent oversight board to combat the spread of misinformation. The board, composed of twenty expert and civic leaders, holds the consequential ability to monitor and adjudicate content decisions for the platform's 3.59 billion users.⁵¹ In 2022, the EU passed the Digital Services Act, a sweeping regulatory framework that holds online outlets legally accountable for content published on their platforms. Under the new rules, online companies must implement ways to prevent and regulate harmful and illegal content (including disinformation), with stiff financial penalties for non-compliance.⁵² Moreover, to the extent that language barriers impede information access amongst the Vietnamese community, creating linguistically appropriate resources such as VietFactCheck.org is crucial. These platforms not only facilitate the translation of information but can also bridge communication gaps and foster community awareness.

While existing research has examined the influence of misinformation on political and social perceptions, few have analyzed its impact on historically marginalized and immigrant communities. Targeted studies on AAPI subgroups, including the Vietnamese community, are needed to address the unique and diverse experiences that shape their interactions with misinformation and its impact on their political and social views. Further support for Vietnamese Americans can be informed by research identifying effective

⁴⁸ Wasike, B. (2023). You've been fact-checked! Examining the effectiveness of social media fact-checking against the spread of misinformation. *Telematics and Informatics Reports*, 11, 100090. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teler.2023.100090>

⁴⁹ Nguyễn, S., Moran, R. E., Nguyen, T.-A., & Bui, L. (2023). “We Never Really Talked About Politics”: Race and Ethnicity as Foundational Forces Structuring Information Disorder Within the Vietnamese Diaspora. *Political Communication*, 40(4), 415–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2201940>

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Oversight Board | Independent Judgment. *Transparency. Legitimacy*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2023, from <https://www.oversightboard.com/>

⁵² Digital Services Act. (2023, October 18). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act/>

strategies for developing intergenerational communication, particularly in response to growing cultural divisions caused by the community's distrust of mainstream media and expert sources.

Conclusion

In sum, the Vietnamese diasporic community is an incredibly diverse and multifaceted subgroup within the AAPI umbrella. While socioeconomic indicators offer some insights into their integration, these metrics capture only a fraction of the broader Vietnamese-American experience. A brief examination of certain social issues, including health, racism, and political misinformation, reveals complexities in the perceived adjustment of the community and underscores the urgent need for additional support across policy, practice, and research domains.

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As the son of Vietnamese refugees, Daniel holds a deep fascination with issues and initiatives relating to immigrant integration and socioeconomic mobilization. His interests span a broad range of issues, from housing accessibility to education equity.