

Unemployment, shock plague refugees

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One year after the fall of Saigon, many of the Vietnamese refugees in America suffer from culture shock and high unemployment.

And nowhere is the problem as acute as in California.

California began with the largest number of refugees, 27,199, and now supports about 35,000, far more than any other state.

About three in five of the 130,000 refugees scattered nationwide who want to work have found jobs, but examples of under-employment abound.

In Los Angeles the former director general of Saigon's Interior Ministry does yard work. An Air Force colonel delivers newspapers. A medical doctor is a night watchman.

Gary McComber of the California Health and Welfare Agency expects the state's refugee population to reach 44,000 to 53,000 by the summer of 1977.

One study of refugees in the Los Angeles area showed 25 per cent first had settled outside the state.

The U.S. government, acting under congressional pressure, had promised to disperse the refugees widely to reduce the unemployment problem. But more than a third are now concentrated in California, Texas, Pennsylvania and Florida.

No one claims to know for sure, but three reasons generally are cited by resettlement officials on why the largest migration has been to California.

Camp Pendleton was the only one of the four refugee camps on the West Coast. There was already a sizable Vietnamese community in the state. And Southern California's climate is closer to the weather in Vietnam than any other section in the United States.

There has been some exploitation of the refugees. A Vietnamese psychiatrist, Dr. Daniel Le Dinyh Phuoc, studied 157 families in Los Angeles and found that nearly half reported serious troubles.

He says he's found increasing numbers of suicide attempts, physical violence, drunkenness and depression.

"It's getting worse because many refugees are trying to hide their problems, thus adding to the mental pressure," Phuoc says. "We Vietnamese do become inscrutable Orientals when it comes to

admitting mental ailments to a stranger. We suppress it and pretty soon there's an explosion."

Culture shock has compounded the problems. The refugees moved from a conservative Asian culture to the fast pace of American life. Traditionally close Vietnamese family life may be the first casualty.

"Women are working while men sit at home," Phuoc says. "Children are learning a language their parents cannot understand. Discipline, respect for age, even the food — all are different in the United States."

In California women frequently have found it easier to find work than their husbands, mainly in secretarial jobs. Marital problems have been aggravated in some households where husbands feel humiliated at having to babysit while their wives support the family.

One sponsor reports that Vietnamese families she knows stay closeted at home, never venturing from the paths necessary to get to work and back again.

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