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Exploring the impact of industrial disasters on the mental health of Vietnamese Americans on Gulf Coast

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Abstract
An explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig caused 200 million barrels of crude oil to spill on the Gulf Coast for over a month span. About 16,000 miles of coastline, ecosystem and marine life in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas were contaminated. This disaster and the recovery process caused social, financial, and ecological shocks. These shocks led to psychosocial and physical health outcomes, health disparities, and socioeconomic inequality. Among the oil spill’s most affected and vulnerable populations are the Vietnamese American community that settled on the Gulf Coast after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The plight of Vietnamese refugees was nothing short of historical trauma from war and displacement.

Impact of Gulf Coast Oil Spill

By the 1980s, the fishing industry comprised 35% of self-employed Vietnamese fishermen (Bunkout & Zhou, 1996). Along the Gulf Coast of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, Vietnamese workers are employed as shrimpers, deckhands, shrimp pickers, oyster shuckers, and crab pickers since resetting in the United States (Ngô et al., 2014).

Perception of Mental Health on Vietnamese Americans

Vietnamese culture plays a significant role in how mental health is perceived and handled. It emphasizes the importance of familial and cultural values in the Vietnamese American community. Vietnamese Americans view mental illness as a culturally determined measure of depressive symptoms, and their perception of mental health is shaped by their cultural background.

Forced Migration after Vietnam War and Resettlement

April 30, 1975, the North Vietnamese military took hold of Saigon, forcing many South Vietnamese to flee by boat or aircraft. The United States’ involvement in Vietnam created an unprecedented refugee crisis that displaced over 2 million people. The resulting disaster disrupted their lives and health, leaving residents and communities from recovering assets before the next disaster.

Decolonizing Mental Health Practice

The impact of man-made and natural disasters on populations with histories of past trauma leaves them more vulnerable to the nuanced and elevated mental health risk, making treatment more complex (Ngô et al., 2014). Over the past 15 years, the Vietnamese American community has experienced psychosocial and physical health outcomes, health disparities, and socioeconomic inequality.

Conclusion
The Gulf Coast has suffered through both natural and man-made disasters. Environmental disasters and the recovery process have had adverse psychological, social, and economic outcomes on the population. Western-standardized treatment plans do not address the Vietnamese American population’s complexities, re-traumatization, and intersectional oppression. The decolonizing framework allows for a critical consciousness that acknowledges and addresses the historical, social, cultural, and racial trauma experiences of microaggression and systemic inequities, and intersectional oppressions (Millner et al., 2021). Furthermore, investing in community organizing is integral to incorporating the treatment framework as Vietnamese Americans have a long-standing relationship with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese and the seafood industry on the Gulf Coast. While it may seem counterintuitive to incorporate Vietnamese American communities to decolonizing frameworks, these foundations have strong cultural ties to the communities. The core of decolonization calls for questioning the hegemony and institutions that continue to perpetuate the harm to communities. However, with the Vietnamese American community’s unique complexities to navigate, fostering an environment of resilience and sustainability will minimize the socioeconomic and mental health shocks caused by environmental disasters.

References


