

Vietnam's Long Shadows of War: Trauma Exposure, Social Support, and Later-life Health among Vietnamese Survivors

Reference:

Teerawichitchainan, B., Korinek, K., Zimmer, Z., & Nguyen, H. M. (n.d.). Vietnam's Long Shadows of War: Trauma Exposure, Social Support, and Later-life Health among Vietnamese Survivors [Manuscript in preparation].

Abstract:

Social support has been reliably linked to lower morbidity and mortality rates among older persons. Nevertheless, little is known about the importance of social support in moderating extreme stress such as those experienced during wartime and its long-term health consequences among surviving populations in less-developed settings. Vietnam provides a uniquely illustrative setting to address the research gap. The country witnessed protracted military conflicts with the French and Americans over much of the 20th century and bore a heavy societal toll, including not only death and injuries but also severed social fabrics. Based on the 2018 Vietnam Health and Aging Study, this paper examines the associations between war trauma exposure, social support, and old-age health outcomes among Vietnamese war survivors aged 60 and older. We assess how social support—including social relationships with family and community members, as well as those with military comrades—varies by gender and war trauma exposure. We further examine the extent to which social support is associated with older persons' current health status, particularly how it matters for the deleterious effects of war stress. Preliminary findings show little variation in familial and community social support among war survivors, regardless of their wartime experience, although male and female veterans demonstrate significant differences in military social support. Importantly, we find that while social support, particularly close relationships with children, is protective of ill health in old age, war trauma exposure in early life has enduring negative effects on later-life health that operate primarily through post-traumatic stress disorder.