

Service Delivery To Indo-Chinese Refugee Children — The South Australian Experience

SAIK LIM

DEPARTMENT FOR
COMMUNITY WELFARE,
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



This paper will discuss some of the issues arising from the South Australian experience in the resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugee children. The main emphasis of this paper will be on the issue of service delivery to these refugee children and the problems arising from their adjustment to a new and foreign environment.

INTRODUCTION

Although the South Australian community has been involved with the resettlement of refugee children since the fall of Saigon, the main influx of 'unattached minors' did not occur until early 1977; the main bulk of refugee children arriving by boat at Darwin between October, 1977 and May, 1978.

The term 'unattached minor' refers to 'immigrant children within the meaning of the Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act, 1946-1973, who arrive in Australia

unaccompanied by, or not proceeding to a parent or an adult relative, who are not generally available for adoption'.¹ The term 'adult relative' is defined to include grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, and siblings, all of whom must be over 21 years of age. Unattached minors are therefore those children under the age of 18 years and unaccompanied by an adult relative over the age of 21. The Director-General of the State Department for Community Welfare is the delegated guardian of these refugee children.

As at April 30, 1979, the cumulative total of all unattached minors ever to arrive in South Australia stands at 130. The number currently under the guardianship of the Director-General of the Department for Community Welfare is 67. TABLE 1 shows four broad categories of the 130 unattached minors.

TABLE 1: Cumulative Distribution Of Unattached Minors as at April 30, 1979.

Children currently under guardianship and under 18 years of age:	67
Children once under guardianship and who have subsequently turned 18 years of age:	33
Children re-united with relatives who have subsequently arrived, or who now have relatives over 21; some interstate:	24
Children who have subsequently moved interstate, including some now over 18 years of age:	6
	<u>130</u>

Of the 130, 85.4% (i.e. 111) have been males, and the remaining 14.6% females, with 47.7% between the ages of 15-17. It must be stressed that none of these refugee children are available for adoption and that they are mainly male youths between the ages of 15-17. It is important to clarify this point because a large segment of the community believe that many of the refugee children are 'young ones' under the age of 10 years; this, is in fact not the case. The frequency distribution of these unattached minors by age groups is shown in TABLE 2 below.

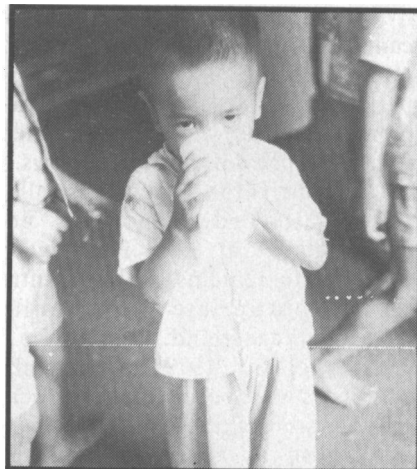


TABLE 2: Frequency Distribution By Age Groups, as at April 30, 1979.

Age group (years)	Number	Relative frequency (%)
18 and over	38	29.2
15-17	62	47.7
10-14	23	17.7
9 and under	7	5.4
Total	130	100.0

THE STORIES OF REFUGEE CHILDREN.

It is reasonable to state that as a reaction to the publicity surrounding the arrival of 'boat people', there exists some confusion within the community at large over the issue of unattached minors arriving on their own. A large segment of the community remains unconvinced that families and unattached minors are true refugees.

The prevailing attitude held by a large segment of the community is the belief that the arrivals from Indo-China cannot be considered as true refugees in that they had 'purchased' their passage out of their country of origin. The process of deductive reasoning associates their ability to purchase a passage with them being in a financially affluent position to do so. This association is incongruent with the societal image of the oppressed, malnourished refugee. This incongruity leads to the conclusion that because they paid their way out, they are therefore not true refugees.

The United Nations considers a refugee to be '... an individual who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or, who, not having a former nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'² According to this definition, there is no doubt that those leaving Indo-China are true refugees.

The unattached minors in South Australia entered Australia either as 'boat people' or were flown from South-East Asian refugee camps after having been screened by Immigration Officials stationed in overseas countries. The 'boat people' are given temporary residence status whereas those flown in are granted permanent residence.

However, regardless of the method of entry into Australia, these Indo-Chinese refugees do not possess travel documents or passports for international travel; having left Indo-China, they can no longer return to their respective country of origin until they are eligible for Australian citizenship, and hence Australian passport for international travel.

Whatever the individual motivation for leaving the country of origin, the main reason is that of fear — fear of the unknown and fear of persecution. The American propaganda during the war years instilled in the people a great fear of the communists. The extent to which the communist regime has reinforced or helped eliminate such fears is unknown. Nevertheless, the reality is that fear exists in the minds of those leaving Indo-China. Like the old adage, 'when in doubt, run'. And run they did.

Of the unattached minors in South Australia, it is possible to identify four broad 'categories' of refugee children. One consists of children from middle-class families, the majority of which are ethnic Chinese. In nearly all these cases, the children have not been informed of the intricacies involved in getting them out of Indo-China; they were simply instructed by their parents that they had to leave. In these cases, there is a high probability that parents had purchased their children's passage of freedom out of Indo-China.

The second 'category' of unattached minors is those who have had an independent existence in their country of origin. Some of these were once crew members of boats leaving Indo-China, or had access to boats because of their links with the fishing community. Others were 'Saigon Cowboys', named as such because they were street-kids, who made an independent living on whatever they could find.

The third category consists of

those who were caught up in the exodus and suddenly found themselves in boats heading out to sea.

Fourthly, there are a number of unattached minors who originally journeyed with relatives but became separated from relatives during their overland journey towards the awaiting boats.

As far as communication with their families is concerned, there does exist a highly complex and effective informal network whereby information is disseminated to the unattached minors who have arrived in South Australia. Some of them have been able to re-establish contact with their families, but many have no idea of their families' whereabouts. The unattached minor may find that members of his family may still be in the country of origin, or have escaped to refugee camps in South-East Asian countries, may be deceased, imprisoned, or simply lost during the escape. At most, approximately 18.5% of unattached minors are subsequently re-united with family members.

PLANNED RESETTLEMENT.

The past is relevant only insofar as it remains the foundation upon which the present is built; past experiences provide the necessary data for the purposes of planning. Although the State Department for Community Welfare has been involved in the resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugee children since 1975, the scale of its involvement was minimal until the arrival of 29 unattached minors at the Pennington Centre,³ in February, 1977.

It is reasonable to state that in the 'early days' little planning was done in terms of the best possible community placement to suit the needs of the refugee child. Nevertheless, despite the problems brought about by the lack of planning, there is some evidence to suggest that there has been a reasonable degree of success with those community placements.

The current resettlement program can be seen as an attempt to minimise some of the problems experienced in the past. The resettlement program for unattached minors can be described as follows.

Upon arrival in South Australia, the unattached minor is accommodated at the Pennington Centre. He remains in the Centre until appropriate community placements are found.

Prior to May, 1979, all unattached minors were enrolled at two local schools serving the area. Teachers of English as a second language from the Multi-cultural Education Centre of the State Education Department were based at these schools to provide for the educational needs of all refugee children. Special English classes were necessary as the majority of the refugee children possessed very limited or absolutely no knowledge of the English language.

There has since been a change in policy. All new arrivals are now enrolled at the Gilles Street Language Centre where they are given lessons on the fundamentals of the English language. Upon arrival, each student is assessed and graded into four levels of English competence. The course for each level runs for a period of six weeks. The amount of intensive English instruction received by any one student therefore varies between six weeks and a maximum of twenty-four weeks. The student then moves into the local school serving his area of residence. Those arriving after the commencement of course programs are placed in a 'continuous holding class' until the six-week change-over occurs. They are then placed in any of the four levels.

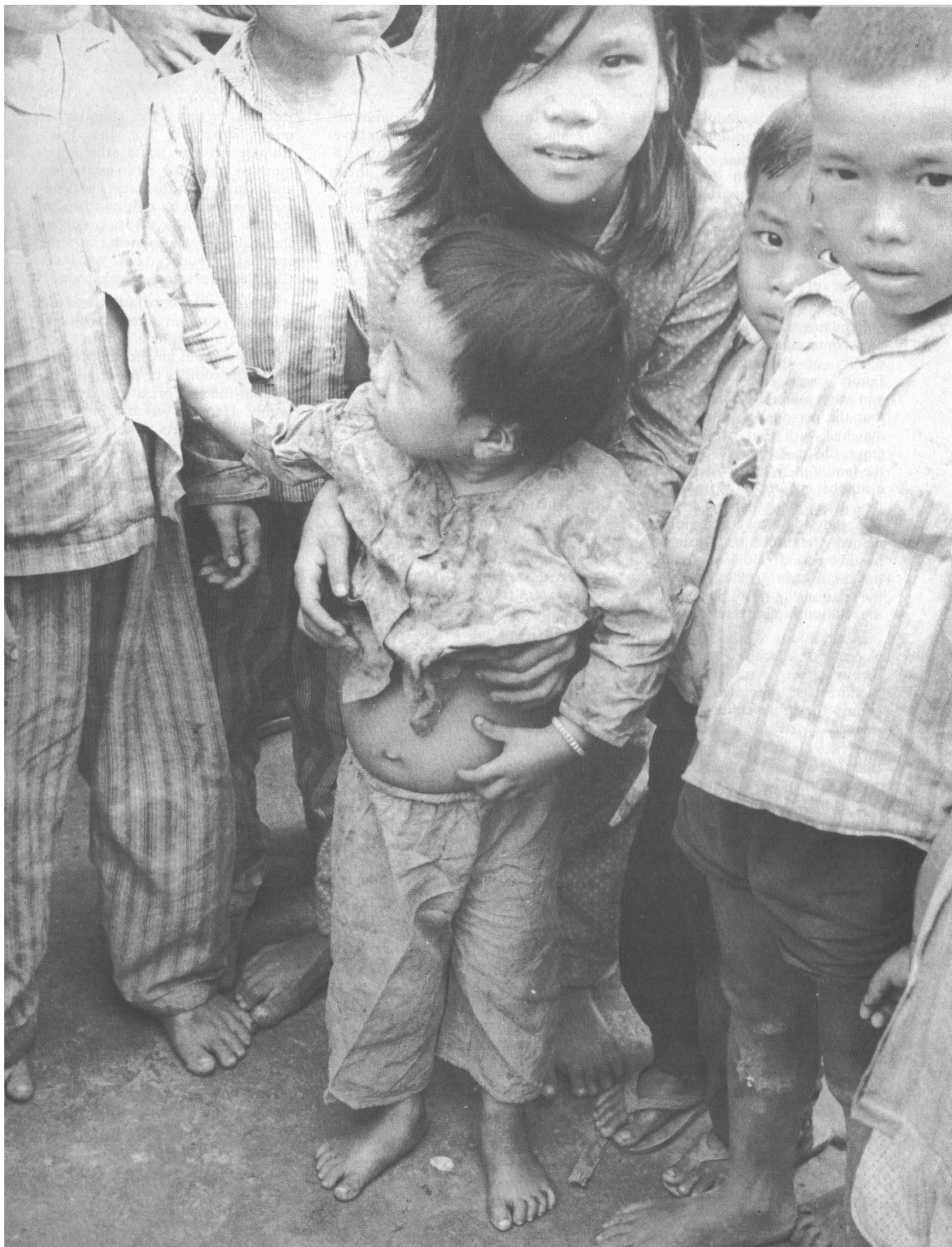
It is possible to identify four broad categories of community placements: those living independently on a flat-sharing basis; boarding with families or individuals, placements within Australian families; or with Indo-Chinese families. Whilst in the Pennington Centre, the unattached

minor is asked to think about these alternatives and to identify his preference. Each refugee child is also assessed in an attempt to determine the most appropriate type of community placement for that child.

The children are placed in selected locations within metropolitan Adelaide. These areas have been selected on the basis of their accessibility to schools where there are facilities to meet the children's special educational needs. Another factor influencing selection is the population structure of the area. Areas with an emerging high teenage population in 3-5 years time have not been considered. It is argued that such areas would probably have a high rate of youth unemployment in the near future, and as such, the refugee youth, if placed in these areas would quite likely be drawn into delinquent-type activities through the influence of peers within these areas.

The unattached minors are therefore placed in small groups of 4-6 within one selected area. There are a number of reasons for placing children in this manner. Firstly, being in close geographic proximity to each other, these children can maintain contact with their ethnic peers. Secondly, those children placed in a selected area would enrol at the local school serving that area. Past experiences have shown that peer support at the local school is an important factor in bringing about a successful placement in the community.

Although peer support is an important factor, it must be stressed that there are limits, in terms of a threshold number, beyond which the advantages of socializations through peer-group support become an obstacle to their educational development. Schools with a high concentration of refugee enrolments are finding that refugee youths are segregating themselves from other students in the school. This lack of interaction with other students is a



concern because it could retard the rate of their educational development.

The third reason for placing children in close geographic proximity is that the families involved in the resettlement program would eventually get to know each other, thereby providing support through sharing of experiences with one another.

Fundamental to the success of any community placement is the quality of the placement. Each family is assessed for its suitability, and every attempt is made to ensure that the personality of the child is matched with that of the family. Once the matching is considered, the family then 'hosts' the child for a number of weekends until such a time when both parties concerned feel ready to partake in a more permanent relationship. During this hosting period, either the child or the family can decide to terminate the relationship if it is perceived that the relationship is dysfunctional.

In addition to the community placements discussed above, the Department for Community Welfare also operates a 'Family Home' for those children who are

unable to cope with these community placements. The main objective of the Family Home is to provide a transitional environment for these children to learn the necessary skills so that they can eventually survive in the community. The children placed in the Family Home are supervised by a 'house parent'. It operates on a 'communal' basis where the occupants share the tasks of household management.

TABLE 3 below gives the frequency distribution of the types of community placements.

RESETTLEMENT: A HARD TIME FOR ALL CONCERNED.

Having arrived in South Australia, the unattached minor is faced with the major task of attaining his niche within a new and foreign environment. In order to survive, he must learn the ways of his new environment, and then make a conscious decision regarding the extent to which he wishes to be assimilated by, integrated into, or disengaged from his new environment.

Although this process is a dynamic and fluid one, it is possible to identify a number of stages

through which the unattached minor develops. For the Indo-Chinese refugee youth, the initial months are filled with excitement and exhilaration; his senses are constantly aroused by new and foreign stimuli. For a little while, he forgets the reality of his existence and the traumatic journey out of Indo-China recedes into the background.

The novelty soon fades, and the refugee youth is faced with the harsh reality that he is now in a new country without any hope of returning to the country of his origin, and without the support of his extended family. He discovers his loneliness. Depression sets in, and he withdraws into the silence of deep introspection. This is the stage of grief associated with the loss of his country of origin and the separation from kinship ties.

Those who emerge with a successful resolution of the grief process move on to seek a new identity for themselves. They attempt to integrate into the new way of life, without losing pride in their own cultural heritage. Those not so successful seek refuge within the security of their own ethnic group.

The passage continues with the refugee youth identifying and expressing his needs. He begins to search for avenues which will enable him to satisfy his expressed needs. He feels ready to start a new life in the community and he prepares himself to move out of the Pennington Centre.

In his move into the community, the refugee youth is faced with a new set of fears and anxieties. This move also evokes some of the emotions faced by the refugee youth during his early stages of re-adjustment. These apprehensions arise as a consequence of the interplay of three variables: the interaction between personal attributes which exist within the person himself, the impact of environmental conditions on the person, and the response of the person to external and internal influences.

TABLE 3: Frequency Distribution By Placement Type, as at May 15, 1979.

Placement Type	Number	Relative Frequency (%)
Australian families	41	31.5
Indo-Chinese families	40	30.8
In private accommodation	25	19.3
Pennington Centre	9	6.9
Gone interstate	15	11.5
Total	130	100.0

The average length of stay at the Pennington Centre for each age-group is tabulated below in TABLE 4.

TABLE 4: Average Length Of Stay At The Pennington Centre For Each Age-group, as at April 30, 1979.

Age group	Number	Length of Stay (months)
18 and over	38	6.59
15-17	62	6.73
10-14	23	5.35
9 and under	7	3.71

Unattached minors requesting placement with Australian families do so with the belief that the Australian family provides the best opportunity to learn English quickly. In addition, the refugee youth believes that support from Australian families increases his chances of integration into the Australian society. The refugee youth seldom expresses the need for parental 'mothering'.

The refugee youth therefore enters the relationship with the Australian family with quite precise attitudes and expectations. Conflict situations can therefore emerge if the expectations of the family and the refugee youth involved in the relationship are incompatible. The resolution of such conflict situations would depend on the flexibility and adaptability of those concerned.

In addition to conflict situations arising from differences in expectations, difficulties also occur through insufficient knowledge of the refugee's culture-specific behaviour patterns. One such area is the child's need for withdrawal, both physically and emotionally. At times, the Vietnamese youth would become silent, non-communicative, and even 'hide' himself in his own room. This may be interpreted by those around him as a symptom that there is something wrong, resulting in conjectures and speculations as to what has gone wrong. In reality, this behaviour is perfectly normal. The Vietnamese child requires such times when he can withdraw and lament about life.

Another area which brings about frustration is the inability of Australian parents to understand the non-verbal behaviour of the refugee youth. The Vietnamese youth seldom demonstrates any feelings or emotions. As such, Australian families are left with feelings of uncertainty about the nature of the relationship and begin to doubt whether the child is content or not. Some families find the lack

of eye-contact disturbing, without realising that the avoidance of eye-contact in conversations is a sign of respect for one's elders.

It can be said that the Vietnamese youth's behaviour patterns are governed by certain rules of propriety. The main rule being that it is a breach of propriety to cause disappointment or discomfort to adults in general. The Vietnamese youth therefore finds it difficult to request favours, or ask questions, for he fears that by doing so, he may be a burden on the adult person; he feels awkward lest his requests or questions be taken as impositions by the adult person. Moreover, when conversing in English, he is faced with the absolutes of 'yes' or 'no' frequently finding himself in the dilemma of having either to disappoint or be untruthful. Consequently, an initial 'yes' may eventually turn out to have been meant as 'no'.

Although there are basic cultural differences, it can be said that many of the difficulties which arise are a direct consequence of not being able to communicate fluently with the refugee youth. Australian families are never quite sure whether what is being said, is being understood.

Many of the unattached minors living with Indo-Chinese families are 'related' in some way to those families. Many of these families feel responsible for the welfare of these unattached minors as a result of the bond of friendship established during the journey out of Indo-China. These unattached minors therefore do not share the same experiences as those placed with Australian families. It is difficult to compare the success of those placed in Australian families with those in Indo-Chinese families because those with Indo-Chinese families are there through a mutual agreement between the family and the refugee youth; these refugee youths with Indo-Chinese families have not been 'placed' as such.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the services delivered in the resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugee children. It is difficult to accurately assess the success of resettlement efforts because of the lack of quantitative data to support existing impressions, which are at best, subjective.

The prevailing feeling is that the resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugee youths has been extremely successful. This impression is held by those involved with the resettlement effort, and is based on contacts with those refugee youths in the community and their respective 'families'. It is possible to establish a general impression that a vast majority of the refugee youths who have been resettled are satisfied with their current status in the community.

NOTES

1. Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act, 1946-1973. Section 4.
2. David Cox, "The World's Refugees And Australia's Response." p.l. (Mimeographed. Multicultural Education Centre. S.A. Education Department)
3. The Pennington Centre is a hostel for newly arrived migrants and refugees run by the Commonwealth Accommodation and Catering Service.
4. The 'hosting' program consists of having the selected unattached minor for the weekend. The main purpose is to establish rapport with the refugee youth.