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Khmer Rouge Refugees Seek Aid

Cambodians in Long Beach, CA willing to turn to medical help for emotional stress.

By Kevin Butler

LONG BEACH, California — Contrary to what researchers had assumed, Cambodian refugees traumatized by the brutal Khmer Rouge regime frequently seek medical help for emotional or psychological problems, according to a study released Wednesday by the RAND Corporation.

The study, which featured interviews with Cambodian refugees in Long Beach, found that nearly 70 percent of those with mental health disorders had turned to a medical provider for help within the previous year.

Those refugees sought medical help at higher rates than the general population suffering from such mental disorders, said Grant Marshall, lead author of the study, which was published this month in the American Journal of Public Health.

The results represent an exception to researchers' belief that Asians seek mental health treatment less frequently because of cultural stigma, he said.

"Seeking treatment for mental health problems is stigmatizing for a lot of the population, but it's particularly seen as problematic for Asian-Americans," Marshall said. "In the case of the Cambodians we find that the rate of care-seeking is actually higher than in the general population" who have similar needs.

Researchers between 2003 and 2005 interviewed 339 Cambodians who met diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder or alcoholism, and had lived in Cambodia at some point during the Khmer Rouge regime.

The study did not examine whether the refugees actually received mental health services or evaluate the level and nature of services received.

Sokunnary Sao, a program director at United Cambodian Community, Inc., in Long Beach, said that many of the Cambodian refugees came to the United States without much education and experienced language barriers.

As a result, they didn't understand the nature of their mental health problems, she said. Many were in denial, she added.

Now more refugees are aware of mental health issues and ways to get help, she said.

"I think we have a better knowledge of the mental health issue, and people are seeking help more than before," said Sao.

Almost all of the adult refugees in a 2005 RAND study reported experiencing a traumatic episode in Cambodia, such as nearly starving to death or having a friend or family member killed by the Khmer Rouge.

That study found that nearly two-thirds of Cambodian refugees suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and more than half had major depression.

Marshall speculates that the Cambodian refugees may not be stigmatized as much as other Asians, who tend to attribute mental illness to individual weakness, moral transgressions and genetic heritability.

Perhaps Cambodians are less stigmatized because the genocidal atrocities they witnessed or experienced are seen to have been largely out of their control, he said. The refugees may also feel more comfortable with treatment because so many of them experience mental health problems, he said.

Marshall credits the Long Beach social service providers for outreach to Cambodians.

"It appears that the people in the Long Beach area are doing a very good job in reaching out to the community there," he said.

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