

**Our Way Home Research Institute**  
**For War Resistance and Policy Alternatives**

**Housed within the University of San Francisco**

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Conference Paper:

*Welcoming US war resisters to Canada: The role of prejudice reduction in allowing these new immigrants to live full, satisfying lives in Canada.*

What is the effects of stereotypes and targeting of US war resisters in Canada, and what were and are once again the ramifications of such “stereotyping” and “targeting” for this immigrant group?

It is important to note that “prejudice” and “stereotyping” comes from “social conditioning”

which we all get in the culture. As a child, you would have had to have been blind, deaf, you would have not attended school, church, mosque or synagogue. You would have had not to have been in the culture. So we all get misinformation and stereotypes about other groups, and as such, we are all in various stages of recovery from prejudice.

The recycling of this negative conditioning is a paramount form of oppression experienced by US war resisters who came to Canada during the Vietnam War. In fact, this “recycling of negative conditioning” passed on from generation to generation is evident in the “broken record” phenomena, which we currently have witnessed and is shared in this recent chronology:

In 2004 Nelson, BC became “ground zero” for verbal threats to city and business leaders due to my announcing a monument to honour US war resisters from the Vietnam War, living in Canada. By December 2006 the first US military deserters from the Iraq war started to arrive in Nelson, and by March of that year the first of three US military deserters were arrested in Nelson, providing a “platform” for angry, stereotypic comments from both the US and Canadian public. The comments heard were frequently the exact pronouncements condemning those, who a generation earlier came to Canada as Vietnam war resisters, including the pejorative terms “cowards,” “traitors.”

Certainly, Pierre Trudeau set the standard by indicating, “Canada should be a refuge from militarism.” Still, Trudeau’s open attitude and support for US war resisters in Canada could not ameliorate the impact of misinformation and the recycling of stereotypes “embedded” in Canada’s militarist history and the current values stemming from these embeddings in Canadian life and culture.

In this historic period here in Canada, the forgoing of the clear indicators of the “barbaric act” that is warfare, and the often “otherness” of resolving conflicts non-violently is prevalent, due to the Canadian military conflict in Afghanistan. The dynamic of “suedo neutrality of war,” as opposed to condemning war as barbaric, is a sign of where “militarism is embedded in our culture in Canada and should alert us to the likely “targeting” of war resisters from the US that

are coming to Canada out of conscience, due to the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the likely targeting of any member of the Canadian Forces who may speak out in opposition to Canada's military role in Afghanistan.

In 2003 I invited Canadian award winning filmmaker Michelle Mason to join me in a film project that led to the in depth interviewing of a dozen US war resisters in Canada, who settled in the West Kootenay region communities' of Nelson, Kaslo, and the Slocan Valley from the mid 1960's to mid 1970's. These war resisters came to Canada in what was the largest outward-migration in US history. Yet, as Michelle Mason and I interviewed these war resisters, it became evident that they never coalesced and organized as a "long term," visible immigrant population as might be expected due to their sizable numbers (Estimates range from 75,000 to 125, 000 US war resisters and back-to-the-landers arrived in Canada during the Vietnam War.).

Through our many interviews of US war resisters in the Kootenays, a common thread was the "heart felt appreciation" the vast majority of war resisters felt for the welcome they received in Canada. From these interviews, my initial view was that these new immigrants of conscience may not have coalesced due the "drive" to become "Canadian."

With my near meteoric fame and presence in Nelson, BC, after having attracted world media attention to the war resisters in Nelson (soon to be coined *Resisterville* , due to the major articles headlining Nelson as "Resisterville," first in the New York Times, then in the three page article in the Vancouver Sun, and finally on CNN's Anderson Cooper 360), by early 2005, people would approach me in downtown Nelson to spontaneously share their story as war resisters in Canada, arriving during the Vietnam war. In the course of time, these stories began to reveal the systemic targeting of war resisters who came to the region. Often, but not limited to the rural communities in such locations as the Slocan Valley and its villages of New Denver and Silverton, and the towns of Nelson and Kaslo on Kootenay Lake. Some of the stories described discrimination and targeting as they first arrived in major urban settings in Canada. This was particularly true for the US military deserter arriving in Canada during the Vietnam War. Perhaps the near "hermit" lifestyle of some US deserters (from the Vietnam War), who in most cases only approached me once, due to their near hermit ways, could well have been an outcome of the targeting they experienced or feared in their new land, Canada, as well as a condition associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in some cases.

Today, with a new generation of US war resisters coming to Canada, due to the US war in Iraq, there has been a new, related visibility and some organizing, with a new found cohesion of Vietnam era US war resisters in Canada, primarily to assist the new US deserter arrivals to

Canada. To some degree this has ended the relative invisibility of this Vietnam era immigrant group to Canada. But without a plan for “systematic reclaiming” of their place as an immigrant group and the reclaiming of their history and pride as such, it is possible that the visibility of Vietnam era US immigrants will only be a passing endeavor, in order to assist current US deserters. Perhaps receding as was the case previously, in part due to the affects of prejudice, and stereotyping and associated internalized oppression.

**An effective, systematic means leading to prejudice reduction, toward reclaiming their proudful place among immigrant groups visible in Canada**

Currently and over the last fourteen years, I have been a facilitator of “prejudice reduction” workshops and conflict resolution workshops with the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) and as such, I have led workshop on how the dynamic of stereotyping leads to prejudice for many groups in society.

The underlying NCBI theoretical set of assumptions in reference to “internalized group oppression” indicates that the targeting and fear of being targeted was perhaps a leading reason why the Vietnam era US war resisters in Canada never organized in an ongoing, formal way as we often see with most large immigrant groups in Canada.

To remove the systematic targeting of US war resisters and welcome them to Canada, **the following goals of the NCBI prejudice reduction workshop model can assist the dismantling of prejudice and help in the forming of “group pride,” an antidote to the “internalized oppression,” the less than positive feelings war resisters may have about themselves as a group. Those affected by the robust NCBI workshop model can be an effective and proud organizing presence within a US war resisters community. The elements of this model may also provide a “pro-active” stance against “injustice” and prejudiced toward all groups in society. As such, this model may be a good match for the social activist tendencies of this US immigrant group that came to Canada during the Vietnam War.**

**The NCBI workshop goals are:**

1. Identifying the information and mis-information we have learned about other groups; and the formation of prejudicial stereotypes.

2. The effect and consequences of the internalization of prejudicial stereotypes.
3. Identifying and expressing pride in the group(s) to which we belong.
4. Learning how groups other than our own experience mistreatment.
5. Learning the personal impact of specific incidents of discrimination: Demonstration and discussion of experiential techniques for identifying and healing early sources of mistreatment.
6. Learning how to interrupt prejudicial jokes, remarks and slurs.

When enacted these goals provide a foundation for the healing work and safety necessary for emotionally healing the impacts of specific incidents of mistreatment experienced by the individual war resister in Canada.

NCBI's founder and director Cherie Brown book, *Healing into Action: A Guide to Creating Diverse Communities* is a great resource as well as the international and Canadian NCBI programs provided that the following websites:

*National Coalition Building Institute – International: [ncbi.org](http://ncbi.org)*

*National Coalition Building Institute – Canada: [www.ncbi.ca](http://www.ncbi.ca)*

Isaac Romano is founder and director of the Our Way Home Research Institute for War Resistance and Policy Alternatives. Isaac Romano initiated the film project along with filmmaker Michelle Mason, which later became the feature length film, *Breaking Ranks*. Mr. Romano and Michelle Mason conducted in depth interviews with US war resisters (who settled in Canada during the Vietnam War) living in Nelson, BC, and the West Kootenays. Mr. Romano is responsible for the international media attention, and corresponding international war resister events (Our Way Home Peace Event and Reunion and

associated initiatives) and the bronze Welcoming Peace Sculpture, honouring the contribution made to Canadian society by US war resisters who came to Canada during the Vietnam War.

Isaac Romano holds a Master of Science Degree in Education, Educational Administration Program, Bank Street College of Education, Manhattan, NY. Ph.D. Studies, Developmental and Child Psychology, Union Institute and University (Dissertation to be completed).

Since 1994, Isaac Romano has led Prejudice Reduction workshops for the National Coalition Building Institute.

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