

Discrimination leads older Chinese-Americans to consider suicide at high rates

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Elderly Chinese-Americans feel helpless when faced with racial biases and become twice as likely to consider suicide than those who don't encounter similar discrimination, according to a new University of Michigan study.

U-M researchers examined how racial [discrimination](#) contributed to Chicago-area Chinese-American adults age 60 and older thinking about taking their lives during a 30-day period.

Discrimination can impair a person's physical and mental well-being, and can be challenging for the elderly, said Lydia Li, U-M associate professor of social work and the study's lead author. The Chinese-American population is rising and aging quickly, but little research has examined this population, especially as it relates to [suicidal behavior](#).

Li and colleagues used data from 3,157 Chinese seniors who immigrated to the United States an average of 20 years before completing the survey. Their average age was 72, and 57 percent of them were women.

In addition to obtaining background information on the participants, such as age, education and marital status, the questionnaire asked about [suicidal thoughts](#). Participants also provided specific experiences of discrimination.

About 4 percent considered suicide in past 30 days and roughly 21 percent reported experiencing discrimination in public places, at work

and in other situations. Those who reported discrimination were nearly twice as likely to think about suicide than those who didn't harbor similar thoughts.

"Among older Chinese-Americans, discrimination encounters may not only invoke a sense of alienation and helplessness," Li said.

"Assimilation difficulty, cultural beliefs and family pride may preclude them from seeking help. Consequently they may come to see suicide as a viable alternative."

The researchers also found that age, loneliness, pain and depression are significant risk factors for this group, but family support can be a positive protective factor to lessen the risk of suicidal thoughts.

Li said help can also come from clinicians, who must also recognize the impact of discrimination on ethnic minority elders.

"Efforts to promote civil rights and reduce discrimination may also be a form of primary prevention of [suicide](#)," she said.

Li collaborated on the research with Gilbert Gee of UCLA and XinQi Dong of the Rush University Medical Center.

The study appears in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*. Li presented the findings last month at the World Congress of Gerontology and Geriatrics in San Francisco.

More information: Lydia W. Li et al. Association of Self-Reported Discrimination and Suicide Ideation in Older Chinese Americans, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jagp.2017.08.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2017.08.006)

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