

# During pandemic, racism puts additional stress on Asian Americans

September 24 2020, by Sarah Alger

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Many people are feeling anxious during these uncertain times as they navigate the risks associated with COVID-19 and experience the tension from physical distancing or isolation for what can seem like an eternity.

But people of Asian ancestry face yet another set of challenges posed by racism and xenophobia which has soared during the COVID-19 pandemic amidst rumors and blame placed on China.

This pandemic-driven rise in anti-Asian racism is so pronounced, that in a commentary recently published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, psychiatrist Justin A. Chen, MD, MPH, and his coauthors have described it as a "secondary contagion" threatening this population.

Chen is an investigator in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. In addition, he serves as executive director and co-founder of the MGH Center for Cross Cultural Student Emotional Wellness. He is lead author on the commentary, and his co-authors are Emily Zhang Counseling Psychology Ph.D. candidate at Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development and Cindy H. Liu, director of the Developmental Risk and Cultural Resilience Program within Pediatric Newborn Medicine and Psychiatry at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

The United States, the authors report, is no exception to this trend toward an uptick in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic. In the U.S., Asians share a long and well-documented history of discrimination and have been the frequent targets of both interpersonal and structural persecution. Asians of all ethnicities have been scapegoated, verbally attacked with racial slurs, coughed at, spat on, physically assaulted and more.

Observers may consider such acts as just small slights or brief episodes that can be shrugged off. But there is strong evidence that they can have much more serious effects than most people realize, especially on people who are already vulnerable.

In their commentary, Chen and his collaborators provide an overview of

the history of anti-Asian discrimination in the United States, reviewing associations between discrimination and health, describing the associated public health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and reviewing evidence from previous disasters in U.S. history that were "racialized."

The scope of the problem is large and growing. Asian Americans comprise just 5.6 percent of the US population. However, they are the fastest-growing racial/ethnic group in the country, with a 72 percent increase from 2001 to 2015, and are projected to become the largest immigrant group by 2055.

"Prior to the pandemic, Asians were often held up as the 'model minority' who were always successful and excelled at academics," explains Chen. This seemingly positive stereotype comes with its own set of problems, including overlooking differences between different Asian ethnicities and added pressure for Asian American youths to conform to a certain ideal of success and hide their challenges. But since COVID-19 swept across the world and news spread that the virus had originated in China, stereotyping of Asians has assumed a more negative tone, resulting in increasing racism, suspicion, xenophobia, bullying and even more aggressive behavior.

Stop AAPI Hate, a U.S.-based Web site created in March 2020 to track attacks against Asian Americans, received 1135 reports nationwide within the first two weeks of launching. Moreover, the FBI has warned of increased hate crimes against Asian Americans. The cumulative burden of these incidents, along with their coverage in the media, has the potential to exert significant negative health effects.

That trend is starting to be more widely appreciated, Chen says. For example, two recent reports released by the two groups Stop AAPI Hate and Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate Youth Campaign, both looked at the impact of racism and xenophobia against

Asian-American youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report *They Blamed Me Because I Am Asian*, was written and analyzed by the Stop AAPI youth campaign—a group of 87 high school interns—and based on nearly 1,000 interviews they conducted with AAPI youth over the summer. The Stop AAPI Hate report, meanwhile, was written by experts who analyzed 341 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination involving youth reported to the Stop AAPI Hate reporting center from March 19—July 22, 2020.

Findings from the 990 interviews in *They Blamed Me Because I Am Asian* show that eight out of 10 Asian American youth (77 percent) expressed anger over the current anti Asian hate in this nation, and six out of 10 (60 percent) are disappointed over the racism. Incidents of harassment focused on blaming China and Chinese people as the source of the virus and on mocking Chinese dietary habits, such as the consumption of bats.

Chen emphasizes that not all the news is bad. Positive developments include the emergence of mechanisms for reporting and tracking incidents of racial bias, increased awareness of racism's insidious harms and subsequent civic and political engagement by the Asian American community, and further research into resilience-promoting factors that can reduce the negative health effects of racism.

**More information:** Justin A. Chen et al, Potential Impact of COVID-19–Related Racial Discrimination on the Health of Asian Americans, *American Journal of Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2020.305858](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305858)

Provided by Massachusetts General Hospital

Citation: During pandemic, racism puts additional stress on Asian Americans (2020, September 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-pandemic-racism-additional-stress-asian.html>

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