

COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate

April 6 2023, by Kristen de Groot



Research by recent graduates Tiffany Tieu (pictured) and Hope Cho looked at anti-Asian hate experienced by Penn students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Credit: Eric Sucar

For her senior honors thesis, recent graduate Tiffany Tieu chose to look close to home to study anti-Asian racism in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In collaboration with fellow psychology major Hope Cho, Tieu conducted research on the topic surveying her peers, University students at Penn.

"This topic really does hit home for me because I'm part of the Asian American community, and I have close friends and family members who experienced anti-Asian hate during the pandemic," says lead author Tieu. "I wanted to see if I could shine a light on their experiences and try to make an impact on this area before I graduated from Penn."

Tieu and Cho, who both graduated in 2022, conducted two studies on the topic. The first took place in fall 2021, surveying Penn students who identified as East Asian and/or Southeast Asian about their experiences of anti-Asian hate and racism during the pandemic. This sample included both undergraduate and graduate students and U.S.-born and international students.

Their research showed that 61% of Asian students at Penn identified being victims of anti-Asian hate in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Tieu presented the findings at a national conference in the fall. Tieu and Cho hope their research can be a springboard for colleges across the nation to acknowledge the issue and take action.

The goal of the research was to elevate the voices of Penn's Asian students and document their experiences of anti-Asian racism at home, in the city, and on campus, says their advisor, Melissa G. Hunt, a [clinical psychologist](#) in Penn's Department of Psychology.

"Anti-Asian racism has always existed in this country, but the COVID-19 pandemic and Donald Trump's toxic public language really brought it to the forefront," Hunt says. "Many people who might have restrained their worst impulses in the past felt emboldened to act on their racism. We see the impact on our participants."

The first part of the study also showed that 77% of participants were victims or witnesses of anti-Asian hate or discrimination, and 80% of respondents knew someone personally who had experienced discrimination.

"The numbers were striking and unfortunate," Tieu says. "Because COVID-19 was so new, there wasn't any research on anti-Asian hate at Penn when we started our study. People didn't really know how much it was a problem until we gathered information about it."

The vast majority of hate that the study's participants experienced was verbal harassment, but survey responses described a range of incidents from being spit on and being made fun of to actual violence. One respondent reported being yelled at using a racial slur, punched, and hit by a man's truck. According to the student, the aggressor was eventually arrested.

In the spring of 2022, Tieu and Cho conducted the second portion of the study, which applied their earlier findings. They also created strategies that schools could adopt to combat anti-Asian hate and to support students more generally.

Tieu and Cho facilitated group discussions with a subset of participants who previously completed the survey. The students reported they found support in people who they identified with, and said they thought investing more in cultural resources would be helpful, as they provide a safe space for solidarity. Some students also said it would be beneficial to have anonymous channels to communicate any concerns.

Tieu is currently a full-time researcher at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and hopes to attend a Ph.D. program for [clinical psychology](#) or counseling psychology in the near future. Cho is currently a clinical research coordinator at Columbia University's Herbert Irving

Comprehensive Cancer Center, coordinating drug interventional trials for gastrointestinal cancer.

Cho was drawn to study the topic because she'd personally been affected by microaggressions and wanted to dive deeper into the problem.

"It was emotionally more taxing and personal than I anticipated," she says of going through the findings. "Even now, a lot of people discount whether or not COVID-19 impacted hate on Asian individuals. But these responses show how much of the hate was due to COVID."

The topic is emotionally challenging and time-consuming but very important to examine, Hunt says.

"This was difficult work, and I checked in with them frequently about how they were managing the emotional toll," Hunt says. "They were both incredibly professional and noted that, as upsetting as the material was, they were motivated by their hope that documenting the experiences of Asian students might lead to real change in the way the Penn community recognizes and addresses the need for further support for the Asian community."

Cho hopes the study helps people realize they aren't alone and shouldn't wave off such aggressions.

"I'm happy to have been a part of this project that gave a voice to students and validated their experiences," Cho says. "People might feel that these types of experiences were small and they should just deal with them, but now they see they were experienced by a lot of other Penn students; it isn't something that we should ignore. These are issues that could be addressed, and I hope it leads to that."

The two presented their findings to groups on campus, including the

Asian American Studies Program and the Pan-Asian American Community House. They also shared their findings at the annual [Asian American Psychological Association](#) convention on Oct. 2.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate (2023, April 6) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-04-covid-anti-asian.html>

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