

Majority of Chinese-Canadians say they've experienced discrimination because of COVID-19, study finds

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A majority of Chinese-Canadians say they have been victims of discrimination as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new research by the University of Alberta and Angus Reid Institute.

In the first survey of its kind since the pandemic was declared, more than 500 Canadians of Chinese ethnicity were asked about their experiences with discriminatory behavior.

Two-thirds, or 64 percent, reported at least some level of disrespect during COVID-19, and half said they had been called names or otherwise insulted. Forty-three percent said they had been directly intimidated or threatened.

Sixty-one percent said they've had to adjust their routines to some degree in order to avoid unpleasant encounters, and just over half are worried their children will be bullied when they return to school.

"The big takeaway is that this is happening in proportions that are strikingly large, higher than I would have expected," said U of A social psychologist Kim Noels, whose contribution to the study is supported by the federal government's Rapid Research Funding Opportunity, created to aid in the battle against COVID-19.

Noels said the research follows work she's been doing for the past five years on language and identity development among Chinese-Canadians and the impact discrimination might have on immigrants' experiences settling in Canada.

Two of her research associates have also been tracking differences in attitudes between Asian-Canadians and non-Asian-Canadians toward protective face masks.

"Discrimination is really happening to a lot of people, and the fact people are changing their lives to avoid discriminatory incidents is revealing," said Noels.

"No level of discrimination is OK, no matter what the percentage, but these numbers are high."

A large proportion also felt the racist behavior—referred to by some as the "shadow pandemic"—would continue beyond COVID-19, she added.

Just under half of those surveyed were born in Canada, while one in five were born in either mainland China or Hong Kong, according to the report. While these groups were not the only ones singled out for insult, they have borne the brunt of it during COVID-19, said Noels.

Chinese-Canadians make up about five percent of Canada's total population, or 1.77 million

individuals, according to Statistics Canada.

Thirty percent of those surveyed said they'd been exposed to anti-Chinese social media, graffiti, propaganda or jokes. Two-thirds felt North American media coverage had contributed to negative views of people of Chinese ethnicity.

Media reports about tense relations between China and Canada—and the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor—may also be driving discriminatory perceptions and behavior, said Noels.

About one in five reported more direct abuse, such as regularly facing insults or being called names, while about 13 percent said they'd often been threatened or intimidated. Almost one in 10 said the abuse had been physical.

"Walking down the street with a mask on, there have been instances where people will scream at me to go back to China, or swear and say other racist remarks," said one woman in her 20s.

Another man in his 50s described abuse from a man who got too close in a grocery store lineup.

"I requested that he back up to allow for social distancing and he stated, "Shut up and go back to where you came from."

The next phase of Noels' research will consider strategies for countering racist behavior, she said.

"We want to talk to people about what can be done to support the Chinese community and how we can stand up to this kind of racism," she said.

"The question is, how do you do that in a way that doesn't increase the confrontation and make people more resistant and committed to their views, but rather is persuasive and helps them rethink their views?"

She also plans to explore whether perception of risk and personal threat from a health crisis like COVID-19 leads to greater prejudice and discrimination among the public.

More information: Blame, bullying and disrespect: Chinese Canadians reveal their experiences with racism during COVID-19 angusreid.org/racism-chinese-canadians-covid19/

Provided by University of Alberta

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