

# The Effect of Racism and Hostility on Asian American's Identity and Wellbeing during COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Related Factors

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**Abstract.** Discrimination and prejudice against Asians in the United States have existed for centuries, beginning in the 19th century. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic continually spreads worldwide, Asian Americans' identity in the United States has become even more threatened. This study analyses the impact of social discrimination and prejudices on the social level and well-being of Asian Americans. To do so, this paper reviewed a large body of literature focusing on explaining the historical background of Asian Americans, the "model minority myth" stereotype, and the impact of the traditional Eastern mindset. Later, this study combined those mentioned factors with existing sociological models. This study has found that discrimination against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 epidemic threatened Asian Americans' mental health, well-being, and sense of identity, identifying numerous unfounded accusations of mass illness and the contradictory nature of the "model minority" and "virus carrier" identity labels of Asian Americans in the United States.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Anti-Asian Racism; Model Minority; Racial Identity; Mental Health

## 1. Introduction

"An Asian woman was pushed to her death at a subway station in Times Square on Saturday morning in what city officials are calling an 'unprovoked' attack." [1]

Beginning in 2020, many Asian Americans have experienced discrimination and victimization against their race in their own country. Shockingly, due to the spread and constant recurrence of the epidemic, Asian Americans continue to experience targeted discrimination based on race to this day while the world is not yet free of the coronavirus. With the rise of discrimination against Asians, this article takes the current situation of discrimination against Asian Americans today as a stimulus to analyse the historical factors of discrimination and exclusion experienced by Asians when they arrived in the United States for the first time. This paper later organizes the subsequent incidents of discrimination and exclusion and the habitual perception of Asians as disease transmitters since the 19th century. The research also explores the stereotypes of Asians in the United States as yellow peril and model. This paper also draws on the Minority Stress Model [6] and other studies to analyse the impact of Eastern traditions on Asian people's suppressive response to discrimination and subsequent internalization of stress, demonstrating the effect of racial discrimination and malice on Asian Americans. Such discrimination thus reflects its impact on Asian Americans. Finally, this study combines these factors to analyse the implications of anti-Asian discrimination on the object's mental health and identity in the United States during the epidemic, the potential causes of this discrimination, and the prospects for social adjustments in Asian American-related history education and mental health services.

## 2. Asian American history of discrimination and "model minority" social barrier, mental health taboo

### 2.1 History of Discrimination

The identity crisis of Asians in America did not emerge at the same time as the covid epidemic. As early as the mid-19th century, when the first significant influx of Asians onto American soil occurred, the local people and laws showed a degree of hostility and rejection of their arrival [2]. At

that time, the slavery abolition movement and the expansion of the states created an increase in demand for labor, which Asian Americans duly met, and many Asian laborers came into the United States. Asians worked at the bottom of the social ladder in various positions, including farmers, miners, laundry workers, and housekeepers [2]. They had few demands on their social status and wages and could work hard and perform their jobs mechanically, contributing much of the labor force to local industries. Many industries then chose to hire Asians and pay them less than the local whites. However, this social change caused resentment among many white workers in the area, accusing Asians of taking jobs away from Americans. Once the news media captured this resentment and fear, they began stigmatizing the image of Asians, associating them with terms such as diseased, devious, alien, and sexually impotent [3]. Asians were called yellow peril, and Chinatown, where the Chinese were resident, was used as a place to harbor intrigue and obscenity. This trend was soon followed by the official Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned East Asians from entering the United States [2]. This law was made permanent in 1904. Chinese was the first ethnic group that was banned from the United States from the law. Soon after, in 1924, the law extended the role group to all Asians.

As a result of the discrimination against Asians by authority, in 1885, white miners organized an atrocity against Asian miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming. As a result, 28 Asians were burned, 15 were seriously injured, 26 were missing, 75 Chinese homes were burned, and the local Chinatown was destroyed [4]. After Pearl Harbor in 1942, the United States suspected that Japan was planning a large-scale attack on the United States and detained and imprisoned approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans, including those born and raised in the United States who did not speak Japanese. Six to seven people were crammed into houses of less than 30 square meters at the time, surviving on 50 cents a day for meals with multiple families sharing a single toilet and open shower.

Beyond the above, the current pandemic was not the first time Asians have been seen as the culprits of spreading disease; in the early 1900s, rats and fleas brought on an outbreak of bubonic plague. Suspecting Asians to be carriers of the virus, the U.S. government forcibly quarantined and vaccinated them, subsequently destroying the local Chinatown and causing the death of a Chinese man mistakenly seen as the original transmitter of the virus in his home during quarantine [5]. Similarly, targeted speculation and public opinion also existed during the SARS era. In today's America, which is particularly sensitive to racial issues, perhaps many fourth-, fifth-, or more-generation Asian Americans born and raised in the United States may not be actively aware of this potential discrimination and sense of threat. This new COVID outbreak could be a new flashpoint for the long-standing animosity.

## **2.2 Asian American's "model minority" social barrier; mental health taboo**

### **2.2.1. Ignorance of Ethnic Heterogeneity**

For a long time, the social stereotype of Asian Americans has gradually changed from the yellow peril to the model minority, which is the traditional perception that Asians are generally excellent learners with a high income, hardworking, silent, and free of problems [6]. This homogeneous view of Asian-Americans has also solidified many assumptions about the Asian community. However, this homogeneous perspective only includes Asians who are successful in their careers and the United States but ignores the large percentage of Asian Americans who are still struggling to survive. The Asian-American population is almost double of its population in the last two decades. It is projected to reach a 46million by 2060, making it the largest immigrant group in the United States [7]. The annual household income for Asians in 2019 was 85,800, 24,000 higher than the U.S.. However, the gap between rich and poor within the Asian community varies widely by ethnicity and nationality (Pew Research Center). For example, while the overall U.S. poverty rate is 13 percent, the poverty rate for Indian Americans is 6 percent, while the poverty rate for Mongolian Americans is 25 percent. Even so, stereotypes of the model Asian group ignore the group's heterogeneity and encompass Asian Americans as a whole.

### **2.2.2. The Implicit Discrimination and Isolation**

Although the term model minority may sound positive and seem like a compliment to Asians, it is not a reason to ignore their discrimination. The excellent performance of some Asians has led society to assume that they have achieved the same social and economic status as whites and that Asians do not encounter difficulties. If they do, they do not feel bothered or the need to seek help. This perception has led to Asians often being overlooked in the design and consideration of research and social policy [6]. According to C. J. Kim's (1999) theory of racial triangulation, that Asian Americans are restricted in their political and civic discourse while being viewed as models of success, despite being a racial minority [8]. Asians have become a compelling example of racial minorities who succeeded in the United States through efforts and diligence and rarely advocated for their rights. In this way, the Asian situation is distinguished from the plight of other minorities, creating a racial barrier while preserving white dominance. Some critics and theories even claim that the concept of "model minority" was initially proposed and praised by the U.S. government to stand against the human rights movement of African Americans while protecting the positions of white supremacists [8].

The influence of model minorities also continues today, such as the default behavior that Asians naturally excel at math and can get high grades with less effort. This Asian stereotype has been criticized as a form of implicit discrimination and has become a form of anxiety among Asian Americans about meeting social expectations. Because of their perceived superior abilities, Asians are not considered disadvantaged. They are often ignored regarding racial discrimination, and people are less sensitive to discrimination against Asians than African Americans [8]. However, according to Goto's study conducted in 2002, about 20% of its research participants had experienced racial injustice or discrimination, and 43% of those participants had experienced racism just a year before [3]. This perception of discrimination counters the common perception of the model minority myth.

The model minority stereotype has also given rise to a sense of threat and hostility among a segment of society regarding the competitiveness of Asians in social activities. Moreover, this danger has resulted in Asian immigrants still being viewed as outsiders by other Americans despite having been in the United States for hundreds of years and having many native-born descendants in the country [3]. Asians are thus placed in an uncomfortable and unappealing situation.

## **3. The effect of discrimination on Asian American's mental health and the impact of COVID-19 on Asian Americans**

### **3.1 The Effect of Discrimination on Asian American's Mental Health**

#### **3.1.1. Lack of Social Warmth and Sense of Belonging**

When attempting to investigate the root causes of discrimination against Asians, the author found previous research showing that as Asians become more socially adjusted, their level of discrimination does not decrease. Instead, as the opportunities for Asians to spend time with other races increased, Asians' perception of racial discrimination experienced an increase [3]. This tendency indicates that society is not adapting to the integration of Asians in the United States, which also reflects the persistent perception of Asian Americans as "outsiders," as the hostility and racism toward Asian Americans often use expressions such as "Go back to your own country." According to data collected by Census Bureau, the rate of Asian Americans experiencing depression and anxiety after the police's killing of George Floyd has increased from 28% to 34%, which is greater than the increase of the black community. However, Asian Americans are still widely believed to be excluded from racism and are free of racial concerns [8]. Asian Americans, therefore, might experience a low sense of belonging caused by the lack of warmth in the country where they grew up.

### 3.1.2. Suppressive Responses and Internalized Depression

According to Meyer's Minority Stress Model, which was first applied to sexual minorities, discrimination, prejudice, and stigma create hostility and stress in the social environment, leading to a higher prevalence of mental health problems and concerns within the minority group compared to the majority group [9]. This theory has been widely applied to other mental and racial issues [19], [20]. Perceptions of racism often lead to psychological and physical stress reactions.

Wei and Heppner's study of the coping methods of White Americans and Asians in the face of discrimination also indicated that, unlike the aggressive coping of Whites, the stress response of Asians is more likely to be an inhibitory response when faced with external stressors [10]. The general starting point of this stress response is to avoid head-on conflict and trouble. However, this inhibitory coping approach has a positive correlation with the vulnerability of Asians to depression in the face of discrimination; the inhibitory response increases the depression of Asian Americans experiencing discrimination.

This response is because of the acceptance and valuing of self-reflection and criticism taught by traditional Asian collectivist cultures [11]. At the same time, responding positively to discriminators with solid emotions is hugely challenging for Asians. Even Asian Americans born in the United States may have cultural influences from their traditional family environment. According to the minority stress model, this absorption of discrimination in many Asian cultures may exacerbate minority stress and further develop internalized stigma, thereby endangering the mental health of Asian Americans [9].

### 3.1.3. The Mental Health "taboo"/Reluctance of Help-Seeking

Asian Americans' reactions to discrimination are not only reflected in immediate response behaviors, but their inhibitory instincts also influence their subsequent approaches to mental health. According to Munyi and Christine's study, Asians mostly associate personal competence and worth with family approval and emotional self-control. They may stigmatize seeking psychological help as weak, infantile, or pathological behavior stigmatizing the family; Asian cultures have traditionally paid less attention to mental subhealth than Western cultures. They often view mental states other than severe mental illness as usual or assume that depression symptoms are temporary unhappiness they can overcome after a period of tolerance [11]. These factors contribute to the more reluctant negative attitudes of Asian Americans to seek help or acknowledge mental health problems compared to other races. However, only 8.6% of these Asians have attempted to seek help from any mental health service [12]. This value of help-seeking is one-third that of white Americans, while the overall U.S. rate of help-seeking is near 18 percent.

## 3.2 COVID-19 and the Impact on Asian Americans

### 3.2.1. Increasing Hostility/Reviving the "Yellow Peril."

According to the WHO, COVID-19 now has 570 million confirmed cases and 6 million deaths worldwide. The United States has the most confirmed cases, with 89 million confirmed cases. The anti-Asian movement has been rampant since March 2020, when the epidemic first entered U.S. soil. With the U.S. authorities referring to the Covid-virus as the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" at the time, the country further intensified the hatred and hostility of the American people towards the Chinese and the Asian community as a whole [13]. The Stop AAPI Hate Center received a whopping 750 racial discrimination and harassment complaints within a week of its inception. Public hatred towards Asians, especially those who wear masks, is particularly evident [14]. The Anti-Asian hate crime rate from 2019 to 2020 in the United States increased by 149%, despite the decrease in the country's overall hate crime rate [13]. This increase means that Asian Americans have to endure socially targeted hostility and discrimination while experiencing fear and anxiety about the disease, contracting the virus, and being victimized on the street by stigmatizing accusations of being a virus carrier.

However, information about the virus's origins was not absolute, many Asian Americans were subjected to targeted discrimination, even though they were born and raised in the United States, and some of them had never been to China [15]. This scapegoating phenomenon had similarities to the earlier planting of the Bubonic plague's purveyors as Chinese in the United States in 1900. Studies have shown that searching for a definitive source of a disaster filled with uncertainty manifests an inner desire for control and a way to reduce guilt [16]. Seeing Asians as virus carriers is like returning to Yellow Peril's time. Asians have thus served as the culprit in the United States for the restricted mobility of American citizens and the unemployment of more than 30 million people. It is only in this context that society's perception of Asians has shifted from being a successful model minority isolated from social movements to a health threat and hazard, revealing the paradoxical and questionable status of Asian Americans in the United States.

### **3.2.2. Asian Americans' Response Toward Hostility**

According to previous studies, Asians have shown higher anxiety levels than other races in response to the outbreak [10]. A survey of Chinese-American households conducted from March to May 2020 found that nearly 50% of Chinese-American households experienced racial discrimination related to the new crown pneumonia online [17]. This number is in stark contrast to the 18% number of Asians discriminated against in 2019 before the outbreak [10], reflecting the dramatic increase in social pressure on Asians. However, studies have shown that more than just experiencing racial discrimination firsthand, witnessing racial discrimination against Asians can negatively impact the psychological profile of those who see it. This discrimination is also likely to accompany the Asian community, leaving a traumatic psychological image of their race in their minds, internalizing this stigma, and thus endangering racial identity and belonging [9].

In an experimental study conducted by several scholars between March and September 2020 indicated that Asian Americans experienced a higher percentage of mental disorders than Asian immigrants and white Americans and that the gap between the mental states of Asian immigrants and white Americans gradually widened as the epidemic worsened [17]. Subsequently, in June 2021, a survey collected nearly 10,000 Americans and found that 31% of Asians have been stigmatized or laughed at because of their race/ethnicity since the beginning of the epidemic, compared to 21% of Blacks, 15% of Hispanics, and 8% of Whites [17]. The persistent mental impact of the outbreak on the Asian community and the higher level of mental exposure than other races can be seen in this.

This study hypothesizes that the stigmatization of the "Chinese virus" and discrimination against Asians exhibited in this outbreak is related to the long-standing xenophobia against Asians in the United States. The inherent perception of Asians as perpetual foreigners in American society and the history of Chinese being called yellow peril since the 19th century and being seen as the bringers of the virus during many plagues constitute another relentless exclusion and hostility against Asian Americans in American society today. At the same time, the neglect and suppression of mental health in Asian families and cultures have created additional sources of stress and internalized discrimination among Asian Americans.

## **4. Expectations**

Regarding the improvement of discrimination against Asian Americans, this research argues that improving Asian Americans' history education and mental health resources can be helpful for Asian Americans to escape from their social stigma early. The areas of improvement proposed below are possible directions and explanations for improving the current situation inferred from the various reasons compiled in this paper.

### **4.1 Educational Inclusion**

There has been little content in American history education related to Asian history, which has resulted in many Americans' knowledge of Eastern cultures being stuck in ancient times or seeing most Asians as Chinese. This lack of knowledge is likely to trigger the phenomenon of discrimination

caused by ignorance. For example, saying "go back to your own country" to Asian Americans from the second generation onward indicates that the discriminators do not clearly understand that many Asian Americans' homeland is the United States [18]. Incorporating Asian American history into the content can also increase learners' familiarity with Asian culture, thus creating a sense of intimacy and helping Asian Americans break the stereotype of "perpetual foreigner [18]."

#### 4.2 Attention and Importance of Mental Health Resources for the Community

Previous research indicates that mental health services and resources for minorities are scarce. Prior research also suggests that seeking help in psychological or spiritual areas may be a relatively tricky or stigmatizing act due to the importance Asians place on the association between emotional management and personal competence [6]. For Asians who are already resistant to seeking psychological help, this scarcity of resources increases their resistance to seeking help. Welfare policies such as counseling to help discriminated groups and incentives for Asian Americans to seek counseling should improve the overall mental state and openness of Asian Americans, especially during a stressful epidemic, where Asians' mental health experiences the most significant influence among most racial groups in the United States, such resources become even more critical [19].

### 5. Conclusion

With the spread and globalization of the New Coronavirus pandemic, Asian Americans have experienced a significant increase and continued social discrimination and stigma in the United States due to being labeled as transmitters of the virus. This phenomenon has severely impacted the mental well-being of Asian Americans and has created fear and anxiety among many Asians about their own country. At the same time, the emergence of this phenomenon also points to many long-existed trends and issues throughout Asian American history, such as the social alienation and lack of warmth towards "model minorities" and the re-emergence of the old historical stigma of yellow peril. The author can thus acknowledge that the problematic situation and stigma of Asian Americans in the United States come from various intersecting factors, on a more optimistic note, the scapegoating and targeting of the COVID-19 epidemic reveals the specific and contradictory identity of Asian minorities in the U.S. (carefree, isolated, and threatening). Data from research on COVID-19-related Asian hate issues prove that Asians are also susceptible to discrimination and mental disorders, which shatters society's preconceived notions about them and allows people to think about and question the reliability of stereotypes about Asian Americans.

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