

Addressing Inequities in Education: Considerations for Asian American Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global surge in harassment and hate crimes against individuals of Asian descent, including Asian Americans.¹ Misdirected blame and fear of COVID-19 is xenophobic, and simulates historical and systemic racism that frames Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.” Racial discrimination negatively impacts academic well-being and mental health; yet Anti-Asian sentiments and microaggressions are often overlooked due to the model minority myth (MMM). Asian Americans are a highly diverse group; the MMM can mask significant differences in students’ risks and needs. As schools prepare to reopen, policymakers and school administrators should craft their messages to avoid furthering anti-Asian sentiments that filter down to schools and communities. Misinformation is shared virtually across communities regardless of their Asian American composition. School/community leaders must proactively address COVID-19-related social stigma and discrimination, take steps to ensure Asian American children’s psychological and physical safety, and address social-emotional and academic needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic was first documented in Wuhan, China in late 2019. As the virus quickly spread, people of Asian descent, regardless of their ties to China, became targets of global blame.² In the United States, both in-person and online forms of xenophobia increased as anti-Chinese social media posts, media coverage, policies, and comments from public leaders exacerbated violence against Asian Americans,³ and Islamophobic conspiracy-theories. Blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian Americans⁴ simulates historical racism in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese internment during World War II, and post-9/11 discrimination against South Asians⁵ have framed Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.”

STOP AAPI HATE has received over 1,800 anti-Asian incident reports related to COVID-19.⁶ Over 60% of Asian Americans witnessed someone blaming Asian people,⁷ and over 80% of 10- to 18-year-old Chinese Americans experienced or witnessed COVID-19-related discrimination in person or online.⁸ Increasing Islamophobia has also been reported.⁹ Asian American students are vulnerable to increased psychological distress, lower academic achievement, and lower engagement when exposed to racial discrimination.^{8,10} Just hearing about or witnessing hate incidents, including through social media, can exacerbate distress^{8,11} leading to poor academic performance and truancy.¹²

Another problematic image of Asian Americans is that of “model minorities,” which emerged in the 1960s as a way to dismiss the existence of systemic racism¹³ by portraying Asian

Americans as academically and economically successful. However, Asian Americans have highly diverse heritages, religions, and immigration and socio-economic backgrounds. Their double status as “perpetual foreigners” and “model minorities” creates conflicts in identity and belonging, and divisions across races.¹⁴

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The Model Minority Myth Masks Challenges with At-Home Learning

The model minority myth (MMM) masks disparities among Asian Americans.¹⁵ Asian Americans have the highest median income, but also the largest income gap.¹⁶ Asian Americans exceed their share of the population in 72% of high-contact essential medical-related occupations and personal-appearance workers (e.g., cosmetologists) during COVID-19,¹⁷ creating challenges to meeting childcare and at-home learning needs. Partially due to the surge in Asian immigration after race-based quotas were lifted in 1965, over 59% of Asian Americans are foreign-born¹⁸ and may face immigration-related challenges (e.g., low wages, food insecurity, hazardous working conditions). Low-income families may have difficulty accessing

technologies such as the internet¹⁹ and computers,²⁰ which are needed for at-home learning.

Asian Americans are the least likely racial/ethnic group to report speaking English at home or speaking it well.²¹ Asian American children whose parents have limited English skills may struggle with at-home learning.²² Nevertheless, Asian Americans are unlikely to seek or receive academic help due to the MMM.²³

Asian Americans Face Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support

More than 5,000 Asian Americans have lost their lives,²⁴ and among all racial groups, Asian Americans experienced the largest percentage increase (450%) in unemployment rates from February to June 2020.¹⁷ The anti-Asian stigma on top of these losses and disruptions to peer relationships, family routines, and kinship support caused by shelter-in-place regulations can exacerbate mental health problems including PTSD, depression, and anxiety.²⁵

Whether direct or vicarious, in person or online, racial discrimination and perceptions of Sinophobia due to COVID-19 were associated with poorer psychological well-being and increased internalizing problems, anxiety, and externalizing problems in Chinese American families.⁸ Over 65% of Chinese American children/adolescents and over 78% of parents reported being worried that they will suffer because of China being blamed for COVID-19.⁸ Race-based prejudices can be acquired in schools,²⁶ and such racial discrimination and harassment can negatively impact mental health.²⁷ Asian Americans, however, are less likely than non-Hispanic White Americans to seek help²⁸ due in part to perceived stigma, language barriers, and lack of ethnic match with mental health providers.²⁹

Policy and Practice Implications

Policymakers should craft their messages to avoid further anti-Asian sentiments that filter down to schools and communities. Schools and community leaders must proactively address COVID-19-related social stigma and discrimination against Asian American children³⁰ by:

- Providing scientifically-validated information on COVID-19-spread and implementing policies to correct misinformation among school personnel and students, including the misconception that Asian Americans are carriers of, and should be blamed for, COVID-19.
- Mandating that teachers/staff take diversity, equity, and inclusion training, including bias reduction and bystander training that addresses issues specific to Asian Americans, since anti-Asian sentiments and microaggressions are often overlooked due to the MMM.¹⁵
- Including accurate coverage of Asian American history in school curriculum.
- Updating anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies to include clear reporting guidelines and constructive follow-through, such as restorative justice.³¹
- Engaging families and community members prior to reopening schools and strengthening school-community efforts to identify and prevent anti-Asian sentiments from spreading in person and online.
- Ensuring that teachers/staff proactively assess Asian American students' and families' technology access and support, English language support, and socio-emotional needs via regular online or phone check-ins, as they may be reluctant to seek help.
- Disseminating COVID-19-related information and resources in the languages spoken across their communities, ensuring that interpretations and/or translations of school-home communications and English language support and tutoring are readily available.
- Connecting teachers/staff and families with school-based mental health programs and community healthcare providers to facilitate culturally-relevant, integrated mental and behavioral health services that provide resources to normalize help-seeking behaviors and support Asian American children's mental health.³²

Full references are available at srcd.org/statements-evidence.

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