

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

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Statement of the Evidence

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global surge in harassment and hate crimes against individuals of Asian descent, including Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> and Islamophobic conspiracy-theories. Blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian Americans<sup>4</sup> 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 Asians<sup>5</sup> have framed Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners.”

STOP AAPI HATE has received over 1,800 anti-Asian incident reports related to COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Over 60% of Asian Americans witnessed someone blaming Asian people,<sup>7</sup> and over 80% of 10- to 18-year-old Chinese Americans experienced or witnessed COVID-19-related discrimination in person or online.<sup>8</sup> Increasing Islamophobia has also been reported.<sup>9</sup> Asian American students are vulnerable to increased psychological distress, lower academic achievement, and lower engagement when exposed to racial discrimination.<sup>8,10</sup> Just hearing about or witnessing hate incidents, including through social media, can exacerbate distress<sup>8,11</sup> leading to poor academic performance and truancy.<sup>12</sup>

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 racism<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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of Asian Americans witnessed someone blaming Asian people, and over 80% of 10- to 18-year-old Chinese Americans experienced or witnessed COVID-19-related discrimination in person or online.

### **The Model Minority Myth Masks Challenges with At-Home Learning**

The model minority myth (MMM) masks disparities among Asian Americans.<sup>15</sup> Asian Americans have the highest median income, but also the largest income gap.<sup>16</sup> 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,<sup>17</sup> 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-born<sup>18</sup> 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 internet<sup>19</sup> and computers,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> Asian American children whose parents have limited English skills may struggle with at-home learning.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Asian Americans are unlikely to seek or receive academic help due to the MMM.<sup>23</sup>

### **Asian Americans Face Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Support**

More than 5,000 Asian Americans have lost their lives,<sup>24</sup> and among all racial groups, Asian Americans experienced the largest percentage increase (450%) in unemployment rates from February to June 2020.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

Whether direct or vicarious, in person or online, racial discrimination and perceptions of Sinophobia due to COVID-19 were associated with poorer psychological wellbeing and increased internalizing problems, anxiety, and externalizing problems in Chinese American families.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Race-based prejudices can be acquired in schools,<sup>26</sup> and such racial discrimination and harassment can negatively impact mental health.<sup>27</sup> Asian Americans, however, are less likely than non-Hispanic White Americans to seek help<sup>28</sup> due in part to perceived stigma, language barriers, and lack of ethnic match with mental health providers.<sup>29</sup>

### **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 children<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

- 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.<sup>31</sup>
- 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.<sup>32</sup>

This brief is part of [a larger volume](#) that addresses the impact of systemic racism and the potential exacerbating effects of COVID-19 on racial-ethnic minority children, youth, and families, and LGBTQ+ youth. The full volume includes the following briefs:

- [Considerations for American Indian and Alaska Native Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19](#)
- [Considerations for Asian American Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19](#)
- [Considerations for Black Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19](#)
- [Considerations for Latinx Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19](#)
- [Considerations for LGBTQ+ Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19](#)

## Endnotes / References

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