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MENTAL HEALTH

OF ASIAN-AMERICANS

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Introduction

4 Social Stigmatization

5 US History of Xenophobia

7 Who's Affected

8 Current Climate

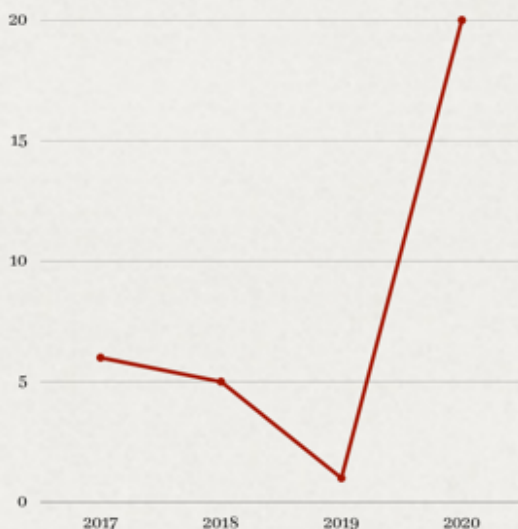
9 Policy Recommendations

10 Works Cited

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, has already caused drastic changes in the world in the past few months of its existence. However, many people in the United States are feeling the adverse effects of not one, but two pandemics: COVID-19 and racism. The intersection of these two diseases poses a threat to Asian-Americans in multiple aspects: economically, socially, and especially in regards to their mental health. So not only did COVID-19 wreak havoc in its original epicenter of Wuhan, China when it first broke out, but it also has major worldwide implications for anyone that identifies as or even merely resembles East Asian descent. For example, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, reports of discrimination and violence against Asians and Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) increased substantially (Litam 2020). As the saying goes - “History repeats itself” - and as we’ve seen in the past, traumatic events such as 9/11 can cause ramifications on race-based stress and mental health for endless years to come. Looking back at the single year following 9/11, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported a 1,700 percent increase in hate crimes and harassment against Muslim-Americans (Khan and Ecklund 2013). Similarly, just last month, NYPD data revealed that anti-Asian hate crimes surged by 1,900 percent in the last year alone (Donlevy 2020).

Anti-Asian Hate Crime Incidents (as of March 2020)



Therefore, not only are Asian-identifying individuals battling anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the virus itself, but they also have to fear for their safety and well-being regarding covert and overt racism stemming from COVID-19 as well - leaving them increasingly vulnerable to mental health issues. Unfortunately, it is clear that Asian-Americans are already feeling the weight of this inscrutable burden - since the virus’s emergence, the online Mental Health America anxiety screening tool saw a 22% increase in access with a 39% increase in Asian-American respondents (Campbell and Ellerbeck 2020). This report will further examine the mental health outcomes of the pandemic, expose the xenophobic practices and biases deeply rooted in our nation’s history, and provide recommendations for necessary policy change.

SOCIAL STIGMATIZATION THEORY

One theory that may aid in understanding these negative attitudes is the concept of social stigmatization. Social stigma is the mental classification of others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one. This perception often stems from lack of awareness or lack of education and leads to harmful implicit biases that can further translate into discriminatory actions. President Trump's constant use of racist terminology referring to the COVID-19 virus as the "Chinese virus" or "Kung Flu" throughout mass media platforms is a direct example of how the Asian identity has been stigmatized and explicitly linked to the pandemic. After these controversial incidences swirled throughout mass media, online social platforms such as Twitter saw a substantial increase in the use of anti-Asian slurs (Schild, Ling, Blackburn, Stringhini, Zhang, and Zannettou 2020). The combination of this stigma along with the commonly asymptomatic nature of the virus leads many Americans to rely on other characteristics such as race to falsely identify those who are infected from those who are not, resulting in the social exclusion and harassment that is evident today.

Trump is a huge part of the problem - when national leadership is seen linking a negative stimulus such as a pandemic with an entire race, the implications on social stigmatization is practically inevitable. After all, shouldn't our very own president set the precedent for how we view and treat other Americans?



US HISTORY OF XENOPHOBIA

From the moment Asians began immigrating to the United States in the late 1700s, they have been subjected to xenophobic prejudices and practices at both societally (in general mistreatment) and institutionally (in policy). Beginning with the concept of 1800s nativism, or the favoring of native-born Americans over immigrants, the Chinese arrivals became the first of many targets of large-scale discrimination. As more arrived to the United States and the original Chinatowns began developing and growing, so did distrust in them and their presence. This led to massive acts of opposition and oppression against the Chinese, such as the 1871 Chinese Massacre (deemed one of the worst lynchings in our nation's history). Even worse - rather than coming to the aid of the Chinese, the national government turned a blind eye and responded by fueling xenophobia with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned all immigration of Chinese laborers until it was officially repealed in 1943. Additionally, during that time period, the racist ideology of the "Yellow Peril" also further manifested this fear of Asian immigrants at the societal level. In the years following, the bombing of Pearl Harbor and consequential Japanese internment camps of World War II continued to contribute to the internalized hatred of Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants, along with the anti-Asian wartime cartoons that were constantly published in newspapers and other mass propaganda.

Mega-Threat

The effects that we are seeing of various historical events on anti-Asian sentiments exemplifies the concept of a mega-threat, or a large-scale cultural, political, or commercial event that attracts significant media attention. Highly publicized events like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the COVID-19 pandemic have a top-down direct impact on individuals whom the events target or portray - in this case, Asian-identifying or resembling individuals. It is theorized that these mega-threats are part of a dual-pathway model that affects cognitive processes operating simultaneously at the individual and group levels, leading to continuous cognitive rumination about said event and negative intrapsychic processes about one's identity and thus leading to poorer mental health. Additionally, when individuals (such as online Asian-American support groups during COVID) share their negative emotions with others after an emotionally charged event (e.g., the multitude of anti-Asian hate crimes occurring after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic), this triggers emotional contagion and them feeling group-level emotions, explaining why mental health declines are being seen across the entire racial/ethnic group.

All of this is to say that the volatile reactions we are currently seeing against Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic is not new - but rather an inferiority complex embedded throughout national policy and individual biases that has been festering for centuries (Roberto, Johnson, and Rauhaus 2020). People of East and South Asian descent have always been the scapegoat for many public health and economic crises throughout history. Asian immigrants and even native-born Asian-Americans have never been seen as truly American - it's always been a battle of "us" vs. "them". It's always been a "no, where are you really from?" in response to Asian-American citizens telling others about their US hometown. It's a convoluted problem with an equally complex solution - and even when we get there, it still won't even be able to reverse 100% of the xenophobic biases. But if we want to take action now, it must be done at the institutional level - starting with a competent government response to the pandemic.

Timeline of Institutional Anti-Asian Practices



WHO'S AFFECTED

General fear, worry, and anxiety related to COVID-19 is not uniformly distributed across the country by geography - an online survey sampling over 10,000 participants found that certain locations had concentrated pockets of fear about COVID-19 (Fitzpatrick, Harris, and Drawve 2020).



(Fitzpatrick, Harris, and Drawve 2020)



(National Geographic 2020)

Fear of COVID-19 is also not uniformly distributed by the population - it was most concentrated among female, Asian, Hispanic, low socioeconomic status, and foreign-born individuals (Fitzpatrick et al. 2020). This makes female Asian immigrants of low SES (certain subgroups like Hmong) especially susceptible to and fearful of COVID. East-Asians (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, etc.) are also more likely to be subjected to the overt acts of racism as a result of COVID than South Asians or other subgroups because they fit the Asian stereotype portrayed in the media and are consequently more easily targeted.

CURRENT CLIMATE

The COVID-19 pandemic along with the perpetuation of harmful stigma by our current administration has created an incredibly hostile environment for Asian-Americans, a marginalized group that already has a long history of being scapegoated among public health crises throughout US history. However, it is important to note that the pandemic isn't generating new biases, but rather just fueling preexisting racist notions.

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“[Trump is] essentially throwing his American citizens or residents of Chinese and Asian descent ‘under the bus’ by ignoring the consequences of the language he uses. He’s fueling these anti-Chinese sentiments among Americans ... not caring that the people who will truly suffer the most are Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans, his citizens whom he’s supposed to protect.”

”

One study found that the more a user believes that their social media consumption is accurate, the more likely that user is to believe that Chinese people pose a realistic and symbolic threat to America (Croucher, Nguyen And Rahmani 2020). This is harmful especially now, when social media consumption is at an all time high amidst quarantine, critical social activist movements, and the upcoming presidential election - all feeding into this increased perceived threat. Not only that, but these feelings are only further exacerbated by our current president's constant racialization of the coronavirus - recent data illustrates a massive surge in the use of anti-Asian derogatory language and other negative sentiments (Schild et al. 2020). The xenophobic behavior extends beyond the screen as well - just last month, the NYPD reported a 1,900 percent increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in the past year alone.

Drawing parallels to the patterns of Muslim-American mental health after 9/11, the vast majority of Muslim-Americans reported experiencing fear for their safety in public, public verbal harassment, and posttraumatic physical and emotional symptoms (Abu-Ras, Wahiba, and Suarez 2009). As such, one only can predict that we will see very similar sentiments among Asian-Americans in the near future.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to note that while it is easy to implement policies that perpetuate xenophobia and racism, it is extremely difficult to create policies that can counter or undo centuries of these implicit biases on a national scale. These suggestions are not an end-all be-all solution, but merely a small step in the right direction.

1

Mandate diversity and inclusion training in all workplaces and schools.

President Trump has claimed that these are “anti-American,” but research shows that bias-focused trainings improve attitudes towards the targeted group, make employees more likely to acknowledge discrimination against said group, express support for fair policies, and acknowledge their own racial and gender biases (Chang et al. 2019). By aiming to teach inclusivity at a young age and continuing this training throughout the life course, we will foster a more accepting world for future generations of Asian-Americans.

2

Greater consequences for government officials who use discriminatory and/or xenophobic terminology to perpetuate fear and hostility.

If discriminatory practices and overtly racist behaviors can be prosecuted as a hate crime, so should glorifying racism on a nationally public platform (which is debatably even more harmful than physical abuse). Evaluative conditioning has shown that pairing an object with valenced stimuli - even incidentally - can affect attitudes towards that object. In a 1958 psychological study pairing positive or negative words (the unconditioned stimuli) with certain nationalities (the conditioned stimulus), researchers were able to elicit varying ratings of pleasantness of racial/ethnic groups (Staats and Staats 1958).

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