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COVID-19 and Racism: A Dual Pandemic and the Mental Health of Asian American Youth

Coronavirus, death tolls, unemployment, social distancing, masks. These words bombarded everyone as the chaotic year of 2020 progressed into another chaotic year of 2021. As countries scrambled to navigate an unprecedented global pandemic, the world truly felt like it was ending. However, an additional set of words found their way into the constant consciousness of some: *Chinese virus, bat eaters, Kung Flu, dirty.* While Asian Americans feared for their own safety from an invisible yet murderous virus, they also feared for their safety against racial attacks from fellow human beings. Consequently, this minority faced a dual pandemic of both COVID-19 and racism. Experiencing such dramatic disruptions in life routines coupled with the harsh reality of being scapegoated for the COVID-19 outbreak significantly harmed the mental health of Asian Americans, especially youth and young adults as they experienced this all during a critically sensitive developmental period of their lives.

There is a long history of blaming marginalized communities for starting and spreading epidemics. In the 14th century, Jews were used as scapegoats for the Black Death pandemic in Europe; in 2009, Mexicans were targeted as infectious agents of the Swine Flu pandemic; and now, most recently, Chinese and Asian Americans have taken the brunt of being accused for the COVID-19 pandemic. Rana Hogarth, a professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign describes that assigning fault to marginalized communities rationalizes the

majority's anxiety by "explaining disease in a way that conform[s] to a specific worldview" and "bring[ing] a semblance of order to a world turned upside down" (Chamberlain). From the first coronavirus cases being identified in Wuhan, China, to the messy yet rapid spread of conspiracies and scientific misinformation, to multiple politicians referring to COVID-19 as "Chinese virus" and "Kung flu," murmurs about Chinese people eating bats and being inherently disgusting quickly propelled the belief that they were, by nature, vectors of the disease. However, this belief was soon directed towards many people who were not Chinese but of other Asian descent, as with existing xenophobia in the US, they "have been flattened into a monolithic group and all assumed to be Chinese" (James). With people's mental associations between Asians and COVID-19 came a resultant internal discomfort that soon showed itself through racially motivated acts of verbal harassment, physical assault, subtle microaggressions, and blatant discrimination.

Directly experiencing acts of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic due to being Asian has been proven to be associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescents and young adults. In one study with Chinese American participants, it was found that due to experiences with direct or vicarious online or in-person discrimination, "18.7% to 23.91% of the youth had a slightly elevated to substantial risk of clinically significant mental health problems," which are "higher than the US norm, in which 10.9% of 15- to 17-year-olds and 14.3% of 11- to 14-year-olds have similar scores" (Cheah). Additionally, because adolescence is a period of rapid development during which youth are especially vulnerable to depression, these experiences with discrimination alongside the common stressors of surviving a global pandemic may "[increase] fear and mistrust of others, promoting intergroup hostility, concealing one's culture,

and hinder positive identity development” (James).

I interviewed some of my Asian American friends about their thoughts regarding anti-Asian hate during the pandemic, and Amy stated:

I live in a very white town. Nothing bad really happened to me or my family, but I used to walk to church when the weather was warmer, and after people started blaming Asians for COVID, my parents restricted me from walking alone. I became really distrustful of the town I originally felt safe in because even though I knew they wouldn't say racist stuff, I always felt like they were thinking it.

This anxiety caused by the increase in global and nation-wide skepticism of Asians had crept its way into something that was once routine and created an insecurity in the intentions of others and an underlying sense of self-consciousness. These emotional states were shared by other Asian American youth across the US, as a study conducted in May 2021 to March 2022 found that 76% of Asian American adolescents “reported feeling less safe now than before the pandemic,” and 85% of them felt as though “the level of anti-Asian violence had gotten worse since the pandemic started” (James). We, Asian Americans, had reason to believe that. A report published by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism “revealed that anti-Asian hate crimes across the US increased by 339%” within just one year from 2020 to 2021, and that statistic only accounts for the crimes that were reported (“Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Increased 339 Percent Nationwide Last Year, Report Says”). We will never know how many accounts of verbal harassment, physical assault, property vandalization, and discriminatory microaggressions went by unnoticed except for the victims who endured them.

Those who were fortunate enough to have not experienced anti-Asian hate during

the pandemic were not at all spared from emotional trauma and a heightened risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Especially during the height of lockdown, when schools and extracurriculars were halted, youth were more likely to use social media to engage with the outside world. With social media came a constant stream of breaking news regarding COVID-19 as well as seemingly case after case of anti-Asian hate crimes. Witnessing violence and discrimination second-hand—either through word of mouth, news articles, or released video footage—also detrimentally affected the mental health and well-being of Asian American youth. Conducted studies showed that “exposure to racial discrimination in the media [...] has been associated with an increased risk of depression and suicide in Asian American youth” (Liu). As an Asian American teen myself, I can personally testify to feeling higher levels of distress as these hate crimes became more frequent and more severe. I follow an Asian American news network on Instagram called NextShark, which, according to the Human Rights Watch organization in 2020, “only received a few messages per day before the pandemic about cases involving anti-Asian bias; now it receives dozens” (“Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide”). I very clearly remember this spike in incidents, as throughout the pandemic, I absorbed post after post from NextShark submitted by Asian American victims of various ages experiencing hate in all forms across multiple locations.

One video of an elderly Thai man brutally shoved to the pavement, which resulted in his death a few days later; another video of a woman being beaten and called racial slurs on a bus; photos of vandalized Asian-American-owned stores; photos of a grandma’s shaved head and swollen-shut eyes after being attacked on the street and receiving subsequent surgery; a

video of Asian American customers being blocked from entering a store; news about a woman pushed to her death in front of a moving train; a post made by a celebrity about being physically assaulted for their race.

And just like that—videos, news, pictures, posts, videos, news, pictures, posts. Over time, I felt increasingly helpless as people out there who looked just like me, my grandparents, and my friends were suffering at the hands of others who looked different. Another friend of mine, Catherine, felt similarly, expressing that “there wasn’t anything I felt like I could do to help. Like, ok yeah, put a #StopAsianHate sign on the front lawn or sticker on the car, but then what? And even then, I felt like somebody would wanna crash into my car because of that sticker, so I never even did it.” To think that for being Asian, we somehow became the coronavirus and thus a threat to this country, overwhelmed me with constant dread thinking about what might happen to my parents when they went to work, or to my grandparents when they went to Chinatown, or to my friends or myself when we so much as set foot outside our homes. I could not help but assume the worst, that one of us might come back with a story of verbal harassment, or a busted lip from assault, or just not come back at all.

While these fears consumed Asian Americans across the US, the toll that they took on mental health remained largely unaddressed, even within many Asian American communities. One reason might be because “In many Asian cultures, it is a taboo to openly discuss mental health related problems, and oftentimes people tend to hide, neglect, or deny symptoms rather than seek help.” (Lee) In addition, due to intergenerational differences in acculturation between immigrant parents and their children, it can be challenging for either side to start a conversation about the emotional impacts of the pandemic and racism. Consequently, this

silence further isolated many Asian American youth and increased their risk of developing depression. Even if individuals were willing to break the stigma and seek professional mental help, few quality resources were available with the restrictions placed on in-person interactions.

However, the visible and widely felt efforts of many—both Asian and non-Asian—who mourned tragedies together and rallied in support of targeted communities should not be overlooked. As anti-Asian hate showed itself more and more, so did human empathy, right alongside it. Hushed feelings of individual loneliness amassed into a unified voice that demanded justice for Asian Americans and gave meaning to the slogan ‘Stop Asian Hate.’ The Asian American community was in pain and rightfully angry; we cried out to be heard, and it was up to others to listen.

And some people did. I will never forget the day in my junior history class when my teacher, Mr. Delaney, canceled our class plans in order to discuss the Atlanta Spa Shooting that had occurred two days prior in which a gunman killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women. Watching my classmates contribute to an honest and heartfelt conversation about the tragedy in light of the recent anti-Asian hate touched me. Although I was one of only two Asians in the room, I felt heard. I felt an almost crashing sense of relief seeing other people express sincere frustration for a community not of their own ethnicity, treating my pain as their pain because at the end of the day, COVID-19 and racism are human issues. After class, I emailed my teacher a Thank You note for having led the discussion and acknowledging the need for help and support from white allies, to which he replied, “Thanks for your thoughtful and honest note Nina, I’m so sorry about all of this and wish that I had addressed it all earlier... We have so much

work to do as a people. Take care and please know that I'm here if I can ever lend an ear or a hand as we move forward" (Delaney).

We can unite as Asian Americans. We can unite as African Americans. We can unite as any one ethnic race. But it is when we unite as a human race that we are the strongest; it is when we unite with empathy that we are the most accomplished; it is when we unite with peace that we are the safest. The dual pandemic greatly damaged the mental health of many scapegoated Asian Americans, and although the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is over, racism is far from it. We must expose this second virus and keep it in the light, not letting it hide behind ignorance or corruption, because as long as we continue to hurt each other, we continue to hinder ourselves from withstanding threats that endanger us all, pandemic or not, threats that endanger life itself.

This past summer, my family attended my older sister's college graduation ceremony, where Isabel Wilkerson, a renowned journalist and author, delivered the commencement address. I listened in awe as Wilkerson's powerful speech resounded through the speakers of the stadium and lingered in the silence of nearly 20,000 people holding their breaths. In the strange mix of summer heat, joyful celebration, bittersweet goodbyes, and thoughtful reflection, her words echoed:

If we learned anything from COVID, it's that an invisible organism without a brain managed to cause upheaval across the planet and overtake a smarter species because it does not care about color or nationality or immigrant status or gender or sexual orientation or national borders or passports. COVID sees all humans for what we actually are, one interconnected and interdependent species. COVID sees all humans as fundamentally the same. It will infect anyone that it has access to long enough. It sees

what we have in common if humans don't see it themselves. We are all in this together.

And it is time we started acting like it. (Wilkerson)

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