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**CONTENT WARNING:** Non-graphic discussion of violence, racism, suicide, depression, and anxiety



# Perpetual Foreigners in America

## COVID-19 and the Rise of Hate Crimes and Racism Toward Asian Americans

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**S**ince the beginning of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, hate crimes against Asian Americans have been steadily on the rise. Over a three-month timespan between March and June 2020, more than 2,100 anti-Asian hate incidents related to COVID-19 were reported across the country. Within the past couple of months, there has been a sharp increase in attacks that threaten the safety and mental health of Asian Americans. These hate crimes range from verbal assaults to physical acts of violence. In San Francisco, an 84-year-old Thai man died after being violently shoved to the ground during his morning walk. These cases of forcefully shoving Asian seniors to pavements have become increasingly common, causing seniors to fear for their lives. Another incident under investigation is an attempted murder of a Burmese American family at a Sam's Club in Texas. The suspect who stabbed the family stated he "thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with coronavirus." These hate crimes are indicative of long-standing negative perceptions of Asian Americans that are prevalent in American society. Now, Asian Americans are not only burdened by the risk of COVID-19, but they are also vulnerable to stigmatization and victimization of hate crimes occurring regularly. This article will provide a brief overview of the foreigner label placed on Asian Americans as well as the impacts that racial discrimination and hate crimes have on their physical and mental health.

### Asian Americans and COVID-19: Both Viewed as Foreigners in America

As COVID-19 spread around the globe and throughout the United States, the virus was coupled with xenophobic labels such as "China Virus," "Kung Flu," paired with other racist remarks from politicians and other influential figures. These factors led to the large surge of hate crimes against Asian Americans. Through this type of rhetoric and violence, the perception that COVID-19 is bound to Asian bodies regardless of national origin, race, or ethnicity became normalized. Through the portrayal of news media and politicians, COVID-19 is viewed as foreign and "other." Similarly, Asian Americans are viewed as "other" and as perpetual foreigners, a stereotype where individuals with Asian ethnic appearances are directly associated with foreignness regardless of generational status. This racial categorization that any Asian-looking individual is perceived as Chinese, Asian, and foreign puts all Asian Americans at risk. These hate crimes and anti-Asian rhetoric also have deep historical roots. In the late 19th to mid-20th century, the portrayal of Asian Americans as the "Yellow Peril" was heavily popularized through news media and pop culture. The "Yellow Peril" represented the fear of uncivilized Asian invasion and domination. These long-standing discriminatory views are resurfacing in the time of the pandemic as many non-Asian Americans are looking for someone or something to blame for the current fear, anger, illness, and economic hardships.

### Hate Crimes and Racism Toward Asian Americans Significantly Impact Physical and Mental Health

Recently, Asian Americans have been experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety from not only these uncertain times but also from racial discrimination as well as fear for their safety. Under stress, the body works to adjust to these stressors and maintain homeostasis through a process known as allostasis. Allostasis activates a fight-or-flight response as a means to respond to the perceived threat. When the fight-or-flight response is activated, the sympathetic nervous system is also activated. As a result, blood pressure and heart rate increase, and hormones like adrenaline and norepinephrine flood into the bloodstream to provide quick energy. Typically, this hypervigilant mode is only active for a few minutes, but under chronic, prolonged stress that comes from racial discrimination and anxiety, the sympathetic nervous system is continually active. Studies have shown that racial discrimination and anxiety increase inflammation and decrease the body's immune response. Under prolonged stress, the sympathetic nervous system activates pro-inflammatory processes resulting in a high allostatic load. Allostatic load describes the damage and overtaxation of the body's regulatory system due to persistent stress. These race-based traumatic stresses can result in acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, which are disorders that arise from real or perceived racial discrimination. As minority groups regularly experience racial biases, they can go into a chronic state of "racial battle fatigue."

Not only does stress impact the physical body, but it also heavily impacts an individual's mental health. Even before the pandemic, research has shown that Asian Americans are the least likely to seek mental health services due to factors ranging from cultural beliefs to social stigma. Dangerous and misleading racial stereotypes such as the model minority further exacerbate the situation. The model minority is a term often applied to Asian Americans who are praised for their successes across economic, academic, and various other sectors. However, when the group's successes cross the acceptable threshold, Asian Americans are met with hate crimes and racism. The term is often used to contrast the achievements of other racial groups and pit Asian Americans against other people of color. With increasing anti-Asian sentiments due to COVID-19, Asian Americans are alienated through the politicization of the pandemic. The impacts of this scapegoating can have long-lasting and severe consequences such as heightening suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety.

### Conclusion

Disease does not differentiate between citizenship, race, or ethnicity. Yet, Asian Americans have suffered discrimination, prejudice, and disease scapegoating during the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise in Asian American hate crimes due to COVID-19 and the recent Black Lives Matter movement draws attention to ongoing racial issues and provides a means in which to challenge the notion of America as a post-racial society. During this time, close introspection and reflection on our biases and beliefs are necessary steps to combat racism and create a safer society for all people. ● ● ●