

Study reveals why some blame Asian Americans for COVID-19

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Prejudice was top reason Asian Americans were blamed for the pandemic.
Credit: The Ohio State University

A blend of racial prejudice, poor coping and partisan media viewing were found in Americans who stigmatized people of Asian descent

during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new study.

But it was prejudice against Asian Americans that was most strongly linked to beliefs that Asians were responsible for the pandemic and most at risk for spreading it, results showed.

"It was striking that this general prejudice against Asian Americans appeared to play a powerful role in the stigmatization of this group in the specific context of COVID-19," said Hyunyi Cho, lead author of the study and professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

Findings were published online this week in the journal *Ethnicity and Health*.

The study comes in the wake of other evidence of prejudice against Asian Americans linked to COVID-19, a virus that was first identified in the Wuhan province of China. An April poll of Americans found that one-third had seen someone blaming Asian people for the pandemic.

"We wanted to see what could explain people of Asian descent being stigmatized for this virus," Cho said.

The researchers conducted a nationwide survey of 842 American adults between May 11 and May 19.

Participants were asked a variety of questions about COVID-19 and how they have been impacted and coped with the pandemic's effects, media use, their views of Asian Americans, and other related issues.

Overall, stereotypical racial beliefs about Asians and envy about the success of some Asian Americans in society were most linked to stigmatization.

"It turned out that the stereotypes and beliefs that people already had about Asian Americans were more powerful in predicting stigmatization than other factors we studied," said Wenbo Li, study co-author and doctoral candidate in communication at Ohio State.

"That is what was most surprising to me."

But other factors did play a role, such as how people were coping with the pandemic.

People who reported higher levels of fear about COVID-19 were more likely to stigmatize. The same went for those who felt most harmed by the pandemic and also reported lower levels of ability to deal with the crisis.

As in many issues in the United States today, ideology played a role in stigmatization.

One example was where people got their news. Findings showed that people who reported more viewing of COVID-19 news on Fox News and social media outlets were more likely to blame Asian Americans and see them as a disease risk than those who got their news from CNN or MSNBC and didn't consume as much social media.

In addition, people who believed the Trump administration was doing a good job responding to the pandemic crisis were more likely to report prejudicial views about Asian Americans.

"We saw evidence in our results that stigmatization of Asian Americans because of COVID-19 can have a political and ideological aspect," Cho said.

But some findings suggested ways to help reduce the stigmatization

aimed at people of Asian descent, Cho and Li said.

For example, results showed that people who reported watching more foreign language movies showed less prejudice.

"Being exposed to other cultures, even through media like movies and TV, can help mitigate stereotypes," Cho said.

Most importantly, lower [stigmatization](#) was found in people who reported higher levels of what researchers call "collective efficacy." People high in collective efficacy strongly agreed with statements like "I feel that Americans can work together to effectively overcome the current COVID-19 crisis."

"Finding ways to foster collective efficacy can be an antidote to divisive communication on partisan cable television and social media," Li said.

The researchers said they believe this study has implications beyond Asian Americans and COVID-19.

"It is Asian Americans who are targeted in COVID-19. But in another crisis, it may be a different group," Cho said.

"It is about how people make sense of crises like this [pandemic](#) and how biases and prejudices can be exacerbated in situations like this."

More information: Hyunyi Cho et al. Testing three explanations for stigmatization of people of Asian descent during COVID-19: maladaptive coping, biased media use, or racial prejudice?, *Ethnicity & Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/13557858.2020.1830035](https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2020.1830035)

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