

# Asian Canadians felt unsafe due to discrimination linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, study shows

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As COVID-19 began its spread around the world after emerging in China, people of Asian descent started to experience one of the pandemic's uglier consequences—a surge in discrimination that involved both verbal and physical abuse.

In some of the most grievous incidents, an elderly Thai grandfather died after being shoved to the ground in San Francisco, a Filipino-American was slashed in the face with a box cutter and a Burmese American man and his son were attacked by someone who thought they were Chinese and blamed them for the pandemic.

From the extreme to more commonplace, there have been thousands of such cases of anti-Asian discrimination since the pandemic began with perpetrators often pinning responsibility for COVID-19 on them.

While there was widespread awareness of the rise in [hate crimes](#) against people of Asian descent, little was known about how COVID-19 affected their sense of safety and belonging in their communities, particularly in Canada.

A team at Dalhousie looked into the issue and found that many Asian Canadians experienced outright racism or felt unsafe and unsettled during the pandemic because of the unexpected and unpredictable nature of discrimination, leaving many stressed and exhausted.

"I was disappointed, but unsurprised by what we found," says Josh Ng-Kamstra, a trauma surgeon, intensivist, and health services researcher in the School of Health Administration.

"The study was conceived at a time when the racist rhetoric about the virus coming from U.S. political leadership was saturating the Canadian news cycle. Unfortunately, we discovered that such messages found resonance in Canada. Every single one of our participants witnessed or directly experienced discrimination during the pandemic.

"One participant commented that, 'this is not [just] an American problem,' which I think is important for the Canadian public to hear."

## **A responsibility to respond to discrimination**

The researchers interviewed 32 Asian Canadian women and men of different ages in different parts of the country from March to May 2021. In a paper published today (Tuesday June 14) in *CMAJ Open*, they describe how all participants experienced a range of emotions, including anxiety, depression and anger, leaving them feeling that they couldn't safely use public spaces for fear of discrimination.

Most commented on the unexpectedness of the discrimination, causing them to feel they had to remain alert in anticipation of harm, which in turn led to distress and exhaustion. Also, all mentioned the key role politicians and media played in enabling discrimination through rhetoric and misinformation.

"There is a certain kind of unsettling discomfort just knowing that people do blame such a large scale, horrific pandemic on one community, and on people that look like me, or that look like my parents," said one participant.

Another said they were less willing to do things on their own or go into certain neighborhoods for fear of being harassed.

Jeanna Parsons Leigh, an assistant professor in Dal's School of Health Administration and co-author of the report, says that what stayed with her is that every participant in the study said they felt politicians and media played a vital role in enabling the spread of Asian Canadian discrimination and fear toward Asians during the pandemic.

"This is a crucial and truly necessary area for improvement," says Dr. Parsons Leigh. "Our politicians and media need to do more in times of crises to decry and dismantle racism and scapegoating, and it is our job as members of the general public to hold our elected officials and media

outlets accountable."

Information disseminated by politicians and [mainstream media](#) has been found in other research to influence public behavior. Studies have shown that the presence of anti-Asian hate speech on Twitter was more prevalent than counter-hate messages during the COVID-19 pandemic. Former U.S. President Donald Trump and his supporters made a point of referring to SARS-CoV-2 as the "China virus" or "Kung flu," leading some participants to comment that politicians deliberately misled, triggered and emboldened their supporters to attack or harass Asian people.

## A 'tsunami of hate'

The surge in discriminatory acts became so concerning that on May 8, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering." He urged governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate."

Most participants described the effects of racism as immeasurable and the impact on their mental and social health as devastating. Some said they experienced depression, anxiety and persistent stress through the pandemic. There some distinctions in the experiences, however.

"A critical takeaway from our work is the notion that educational, linguistic, professional and economic privilege provide significant protection from the racism and [discrimination](#) faced by those working public-facing, minimum-wage jobs," said Dr. Ng-Kamstra.

But many also said they felt connected to their communities.

"Our findings also suggest that despite feeling scared during the

[pandemic](#), Asian Canadians in our sample felt a strong sense of belonging to Canadian society and felt well connected to their Asian Canadian communities," says co-author Stephana Julia Moss, a post-doctoral researcher in Dal's School of Health Administration.

**More information:** Jeanna Parsons Leigh et al, Lived experiences of Asian Canadians encountering discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative interview study, *CMAJ Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.9778/cmajo.20220019](#)

Provided by Dalhousie University

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