

Asian American shootings: This is 'not an exception' and other issues need to be discussed, says professor

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Days after two California massacres involving the Asian American

community, many are seeking to understand what drove two men to commit these crimes. Primary among questions are the role of culture and society, and whether mental health is a pressing issue in the Asian American community.

Dylan Rodríguez, professor of media and cultural studies, sees [mass shootings](#) as a societal issue that affects all communities. The Asian American community is not an exception, he said.

"Thinking of this as an Asian/American 'exception' to the overwhelmingly young white male problem of 'mass shootings' is a dire mistake and the wrong premise," said Rodríguez, the author of three books, including his most recent, "White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logic of Racial Genocide," published in 2021.

These most recent shootings are part of a national symptom; the aggressors are part of communities absorbing negative behaviors influenced by celebrities and politicians, all of whom contribute to the violence, Rodríguez said.

"What happened in Monterey Park, Half Moon Bay, Oakland, and before that, Virginia Tech, should not be framed as Asian American exceptions, but rather as direct reflections of a national culture and climate that actively cultivates acts of repression and terror against women, criminalized and vulnerable people, and whomever else is deemed a target of resentment. Mass shootings are the horrific logical expression of this national culture and climate," Rodríguez said.

The Half Moon Bay massacre involved Asian Americans farmworkers, a job many do not associate with the Asian community, said Carol K. Park, an ethnic studies doctoral student and staff with UCR's Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies.

"We often don't think of Asians as [immigrant workers](#) in the field like we used to do in the early-to-mid-1900s when Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, etc., all worked as farmworkers," said Park, author of "Memoir of a Cashier: Korean Americans, Racism and Riots." "But they are still here; there are still Asians working in California farms. In the case of Half Moon Bay, the attacker lived there."

One reason for this lack of connection is the intentional omitted history in U.S. textbooks and Asian exclusion laws enacted in California and in the U.S., Park said. For example, in 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, limiting migration from China, and in 1913 California enacted the Alien Land Law, prohibiting Asian immigrants from owning land.

The Asian American presence in the United States can be traced to the mid 1800s, when Chinese workers migrated to the United States. Their labor was first used in gold mines, and then in building the West, including working in agriculture, railroads, and the garment industry.

In the Monterey Park shooting, it seems to be a case of ostracizing. The attacker lived in Hemet and drove about 80 miles to Monterey Park apparently in search of community and acceptance. "He ended up committing suicide. Obviously [mental health](#) plays into this," Park said.

When it comes to mental [health](#), seeking psychological services can be a cultural barrier for Asian Americans, said Kalina J. Michalska, assistant professor of psychology and director of the Kids Interaction and NeuroDevelopment Lab, or KIND Lab. In a 2021 study, Michalska found that Asian American students were less likely to seek mental health resources. Their reluctance can be a mirrored response to how their families perceive sharing their family issues with therapists—someone families can consider a stranger.

"There's a lot of stigma around mental health, for men especially," Michalska said of her study, titled "Shared Cultural Values Influence Mental Health Help-Seeking Behaviors in Asian and Latinx College Students."

Asian American study participants indicated that cultural values were one of the reasons preventing them from accessing mental health resources. For those participants, beliefs such as putting others' needs above theirs and not deviating from familial and social norms, were priorities.

Other barriers might be more related to language and access, such as not being able to leave work for an appointment, finding childcare or transportation, said Toshia Ann Yamaguchi, UCR health director of Student Mental Health and a health sciences assistant clinical professor with UCR School of Medicine.

"There is a lot of stigma around mental health in Asian American communities. Many families might be inclined to avoid acknowledging mental health symptoms exhibited by their family members and dismiss the mental health treatment recommendations by providers," Yamaguchi said. "Many individuals may be inclined to deny symptoms they are grappling with themselves. Furthermore, there is a lack of psychiatrists and therapists who speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Korean, etc."

Another aspect that does not get discussed often, is the sense of community and belonging.

"A deficit in the sense that one belongs in one's community has been increasingly acknowledged in the literature recently as a profound risk factor for poor mental health outcomes, including suicide risk," Yamaguchi said. "Notably, participating in one's community traditions

and feeling a sense of belonging are two modifiable factors that protect against the pervasive harmful effects of childhood trauma. In other words, a lack of community or sense of belonging can impair one's resilience in the face of other stressors."

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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