

Double Pandemic:

Discrimination Experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese Descent During COVID-19

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“Amid the pain of this pandemic, the loss of life and livelihoods, we’ve seen another tragedy: racism, harassment, hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islanders.”

— President Joe Biden’s video message marking the 2021 Lunar New Year

INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination and attacks against people of Chinese and other Asian ethnicities surged after the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. Asians and Asian Americans were approximately twice as likely as white people to report instances of COVID-19-related discrimination between March and September of 2020, according to data from the *Understanding Coronavirus in America* survey.¹ In New York City (NYC), 205 anti-Asian discrimination and harassment incidents were reported to the NYC Commission on Human Rights between February and December of 2020, while only 30 incidents were reported during the same 11-month period in 2019.²

Among Asians and Asian Americans, people of Chinese descent have been especially targeted because the first COVID-19 outbreak occurred in Wuhan, China. As early as January of 2020, media coverage began highlighting discrimination against people of Chinese descent worldwide.³ In the United States, the use of stigmatizing terms such as “Chinese virus” to refer to COVID-19 fueled the rapid spread of anti-Chinese rhetoric and discrimination. National survey data showed that, among Asian subgroups, Chinese Americans reported the largest increase experiences of discrimination from 2019 to 2020.⁴

Using data collected among New Yorkers of Chinese descent through the Poverty Tracker, this report sheds light on the racial discrimination experiences of this population and the consequences of these experiences on their mental health during COVID-19. Our findings reveal that New Yorkers of Chinese descent have been suffering from a “double pandemic” of COVID-19 and racial discrimination, both of which are likely to have serious and long-lasting negative impacts on their economic, social, physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. We hope these findings help policymakers and the public gain an in-depth understanding of this important issue and they can act to address it.

¹ See: Wu, C., Qian, Y., & Wilkes, R. (2020). *Anti-Asian discrimination and the Asian-white mental health gap during COVID-19. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 44(5), 819-835*

² See: NYC Commission on Human Rights. *Stop Asian Hate: A toolkit for addressing anti-Asian bias, discrimination, and hate. 2021. Access at: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/community/stop-asian-hate.page>*

³ See: He, J., He, L., Zhou, W., Nie, X., & He, M. (2020). *Discrimination and social exclusion in the outbreak of COVID-19. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(8), 2933.*

⁴ See: Ha, S. K., Nguyen, A. T., Sales, C., Chang, R. S., Ta, H., Srinivasan, M., . . . Lin, B. (2020). *Increased self-reported discrimination and concern for physical assault due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and Filipino Americans. Journal of Asian Health, 1(1).*

Key Findings

- Between March 2020 and December 2020, 58% of New Yorkers of Chinese descent reported experiencing some form of discrimination. Specifically, 1 in 5 New Yorkers of Chinese descent were threatened or harassed, 1 in 3 were treated unfairly at restaurants or stores, and nearly 1 in 2 were treated with less respect or felt that people acted as if they were afraid of them.
- In 2020, experiences of racism-related stress and vigilance were widespread among New Yorkers of Chinese descent. Specifically, 71% of New Yorkers of Chinese descent worried about their or their family's safety from a hate crime or harassment, 66% tried to avoid certain social situations or places due to worries about racial discrimination, and 61% felt unease in public areas or worried about how other people might look at them.
- About one third of New Yorkers of Chinese descent reported experiencing an incident of harassment, assault, or bias in 2020, such as being called a racial slur or name (18%), excluded from activities or events (14%), verbally threatened (12%), or physically intimidated or assaulted (6%). The majority of the victims attributed these experiences to their race or skin color (74%) and/or ancestry or national origin (62%).

DATA | The Poverty Tracker and the Oversample of Chinese Descent

Launched in 2012, the Poverty Tracker surveys a representative sample of New Yorkers every three months, providing critical information on the dynamics of poverty and other forms of disadvantage in the city. In addition to measures on poverty and disadvantage, the Poverty Tracker collects a wealth of information on other topics such as employment, assets and debts, and health.

The Asian population continues to be the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in NYC,⁵ accounting for 14.4% of NYC residents.⁶ Among New Yorkers of Asian descent, those of Chinese origin are the largest ethnic group. Beginning in 2020, the Poverty Tracker expanded to include an oversample of New Yorkers of Chinese descent, enabling us to provide a more detailed understanding of this population. Data used in this report are collected from 423 New Yorkers of Chinese descent. The participants were interviewed from June to December 2020. Appendix A presents the demographic characteristics of New Yorkers of Chinese descent in our sample.

⁵ See: PEW Research Center. Budiman, A., Cilluffo, A., & Ruiz, N. G. (2019). Key facts about Asian origin groups in the US. Access at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>

⁶ This result relies on data from American Community Survey. 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimates Data Profiles. 2019.

Methods to identify New Yorkers of Chinese descent

In this study, New Yorkers of Chinese descent are self-identified. Our survey included a question “What do you consider your own ancestry or ethnic origin to be?” If the respondent answered “Chinese” or responded with a specific subcategory of Chinese ancestry or origin such as Taiwanese, Fujianese, Taishanese, or Hongkongese, then the respondent is considered to be of Chinese descent. Since all respondents are aged 18 or older, “New Yorkers” in this report refers to adults living in New York City.

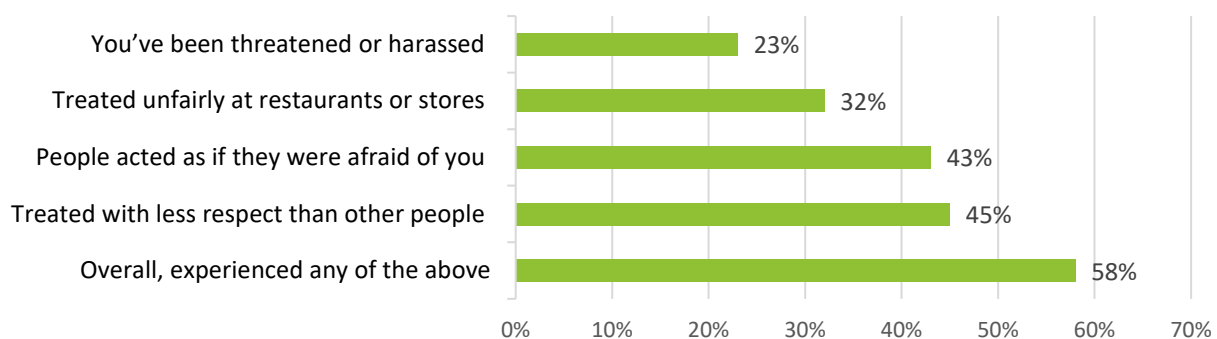
Respondents could choose to complete the surveys online or via phone, in either English or Chinese. Our online surveys were translated into simplified and traditional Chinese, and respondents could choose to complete the surveys in either language or in English. For the respondents who preferred to complete the surveys over the phone, we used only English or Mandarin to conduct the interviews. Because of this, though Mandarin is the most common Chinese language spoken in NYC, people who speak other Chinese languages (such as Cantonese) or dialects may be underrepresented in our sample. Nevertheless, the Poverty Tracker is the only longitudinal data source on the well-being of New Yorkers of Chinese descent and provides vital information for understanding the experiences of this group and offering policy solutions.

RESULTS

How common were experiences of discrimination among New Yorkers of Chinese descent during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Figure 1 shows that, during the period from March 2020 to December 2020, 1 in 5 New Yorkers of Chinese descent were threatened or harassed, 1 in 3 were treated unfairly at restaurants or stores, and nearly half were treated with less respect or felt that people acted as if they were afraid of them. Overall, 58 percent of New Yorkers of Chinese descent had experienced some form of discrimination during this period.

Figure 1. Everyday discrimination experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=423)

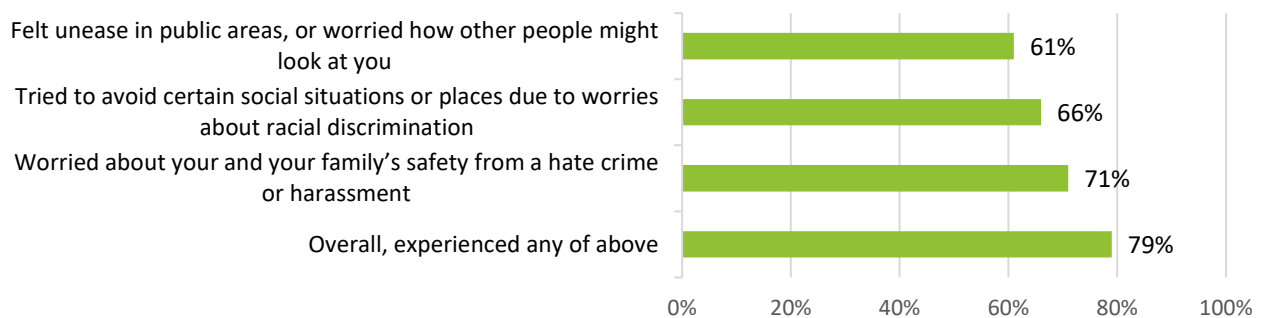


Source: Poverty Tracker 2020 survey data.

What were the levels of racism-related vigilance among New Yorkers of Chinese descent during COVID-19?

Racism-related vigilance, also known as anticipatory stress, is a chronic stress response when people are constantly on guard, having to simultaneously ruminate over past experiences and work actively to fend off stereotypes and discrimination. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of New Yorkers of Chinese descent in our sample experienced high levels of racism-related vigilance in 2020. About 71 percent of New Yorkers of Chinese descent worried about their or their family’s safety from a hate crime or harassment, 66 percent tried to avoid certain social situations or places due to worries about racial discrimination, and 61 percent felt unease in public areas or worried about how other people might look at them. Compared to results presented in Figure 1, the prevalence of racism-related vigilance was much higher than the prevalence of everyday discrimination experiences among New Yorkers of Chinese descent, indicating widespread severe worry and fear of racial discrimination in the Chinese American community.

Figure 2. Racism-related vigilance among New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=423)



The quantitative evidence presented above is corroborated and enriched by data that we collected through in-depth interviews as part of the Poverty Tracker study. When discussing experiences of racial discrimination in these interviews many respondents described being in a state of suspense or feeling agitation because of their worries and uncertainty about potential racial discrimination and assaults. Below are some selected quotes from our participants.

“I’m afraid of being attacked if going out. Most of the time I just stay home and feel depressed.”

“I’m very worried when going out.” “I feel lots of pressure and fear.”

“Trump calling coronavirus ‘China virus’ brought many concerns to me. A lot of people had asked me to stay away from them, which made me really uncomfortable.”

“My family and I are fearful of racial discrimination every day.”

“I worry about being punched in the face or harassed.”

Lucy's Story

To further understand the experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese descent related to racial discrimination during the pandemic, the Poverty Tracker launched a qualitative study to explore the impact of anti-Asian discrimination on people's day-to-day lives. Below is an excerpt from one story told in a recent interview.

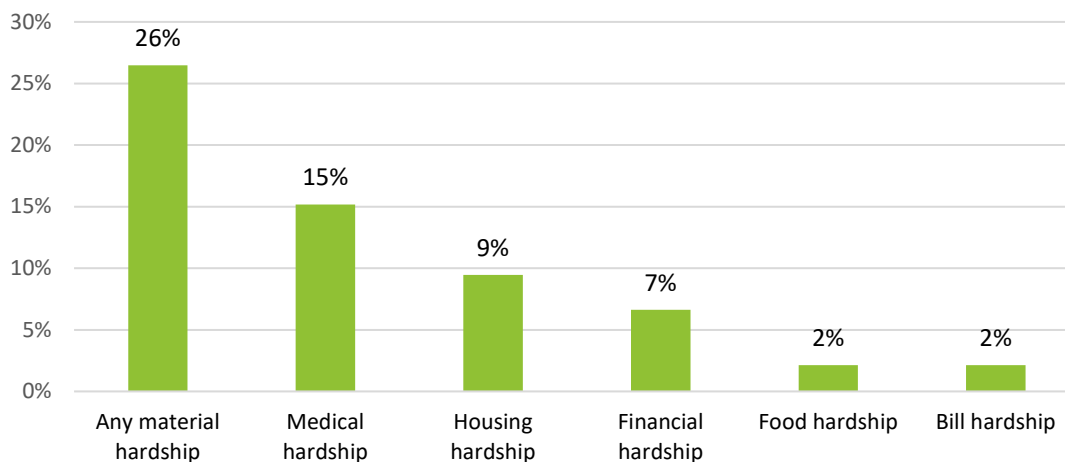
Lucy, a Brooklyn resident in her early forties, told us that she had experienced racial discrimination and harassment several times throughout 2020. In the summer 2020, Lucy and her 10-year-old son were yelled at and threatened by two people when they got off the subway and walked home. She believed that part of the reason this happened was that she is Asian. She heard the two people yelling something like "I hate..." "Asian" and "COVID-19" toward her and her son. Since Lucy had read about various anti-Asian hate crimes in the news, she was very scared and told her son to run away as fast as he could. Lucy wouldn't go out if unnecessary and was extra careful when she had to go out. She would carry chili or pepper powder, as did her family.

"You have to be extra careful when you go out. You don't know if someone is going to stab you in the back, shoot you, or punch you in the face. Very scary. It's so unsafe nowadays. I feel like I'm at the mercy of others."

Are New Yorkers of Chinese descent who had material hardship more likely to experience racial discrimination?

As shown in Figure 3, 26 percent of New Yorkers of Chinese descent faced material hardship, including medical hardship (15 percent), severe housing hardship (9 percent), severe financial hardship (7 percent), severe food hardship (2 percent), and severe bill hardship (2 percent). New Yorkers of Chinese descent had lower prevalence of material hardship compared to all New Yorkers (32 percent) but higher prevalence of material hardship than white New Yorkers (18 percent).

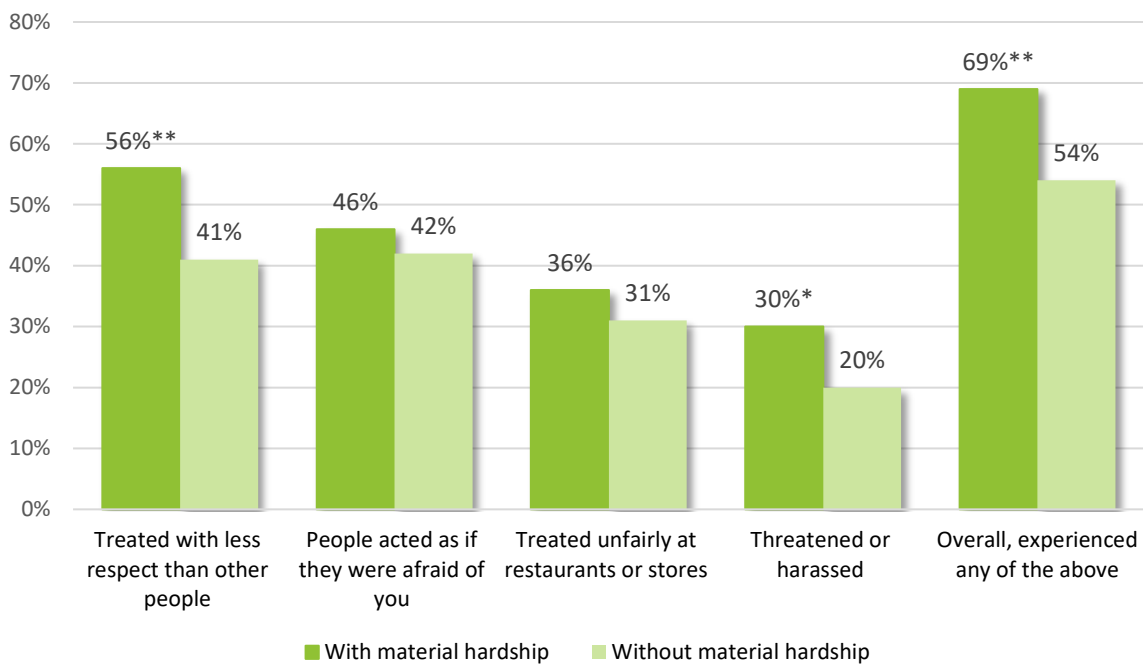
Figure 3. Material hardships experienced by New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=423)



New Yorkers of Chinese descent who faced material hardship were more likely to experience racial discrimination than those who did not face material hardship. As shown in Figure 4, overall, New Yorkers of Chinese descent with material hardship were 15 percentage points more likely to experience racial discrimination during the pandemic than those without material hardship (69 percent vs. 54 percent). Those with material hardship were more likely to report being treated with less respect (56 percent vs. 41 percent) and more likely to be threatened or harassed (30 percent vs. 20 percent) than those without material hardship.

The results indicate that these discriminatory experiences are more commonly experienced by people who are already financially and materially vulnerable. New Yorkers of Chinese descent who have fewer resources to avoid these negative experiences may face more severe consequences. For example, people who have to take the subway because they cannot afford other means of transportation and those who must work in a more exposed environments might be easier targets for racial discrimination than their peers who are better off economically.

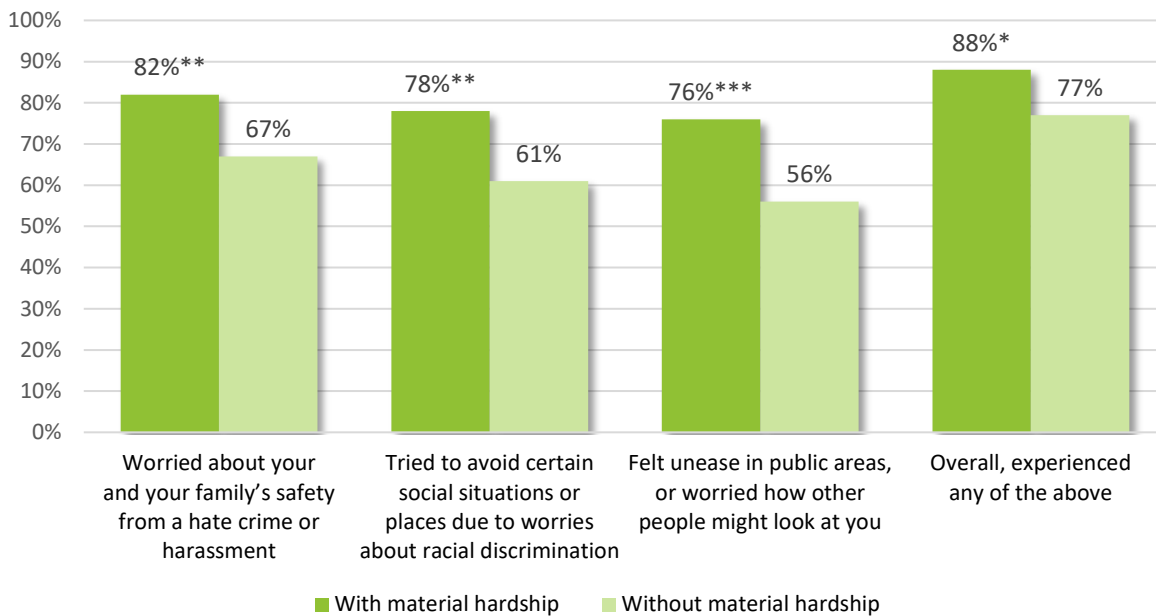
Figure 4. Racial discrimination experiences among New Yorkers of Chinese descent with or without material hardship (N=423)



Note: Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those with and without material hardship. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

New Yorkers of Chinese descent who faced material hardship were also 11 percentage points more likely to experience racism-related vigilance than those without material hardship (88 percent vs. 77 percent) (see Figure 5). This has the potential to put those dealing with material hardship in even worse economic situations. For example, if the fear of racial discrimination leads people to be afraid of going outside, it could be more challenging for them to find work, further increasing their material hardship and compromising their well-being. These results show how the double pandemic of COVID-19 and racial discrimination is more severe for those experiencing material hardship.

Figure 5. Racism-related vigilance among New Yorkers of Chinese descent with or without material hardship (N=423)



Note: Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those with and without material hardship.
 * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Mei's Story

Mei's family lived in a Queens neighborhood that she perceived as unsafe. She and her husband had worked in restaurants before, but both lost their jobs due to COVID-19. From March to December 2020, neither of them received any income from work. Their only income was the stimulus checks that the family received and the unemployment insurance that her husband collected. They didn't have savings, but fortunately their relatives lent them some money to help cover their rent and other bills.

Mei's husband stayed at home until January 2021, when he went out to look for a job as a cook at Chinese restaurants, but it was hard for him to find a stable job. He had to work multiple part-time jobs but could barely make half of his previous earnings. He worried about being attacked as an Asian and felt unsafe taking the subway. Her husband's boss—the restaurant owner—who is also Chinese American, was also concerned about employees' safety and drove them to and from work every day.

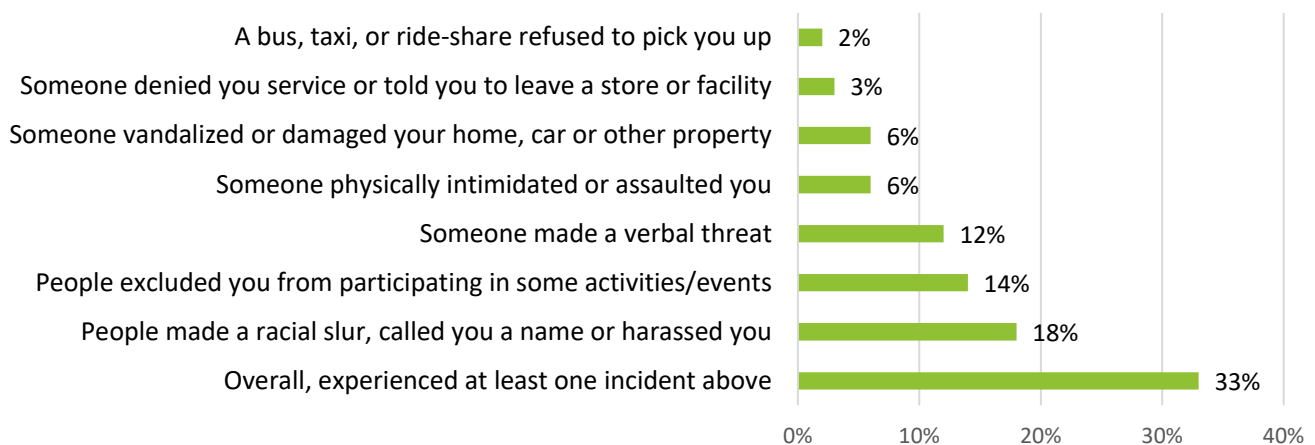
Mei herself reported that she still couldn't look for a job because she needed to stay home and watch their two children and supervise their studies. They didn't dare let the children go outside, even just right outside the house.

"I feel it's difficult to live in NYC. It's not safe and it's very expensive at the same time."

What types of bias and hate incidents were reported? How did Chinese New Yorkers perceive and cope with these experiences?

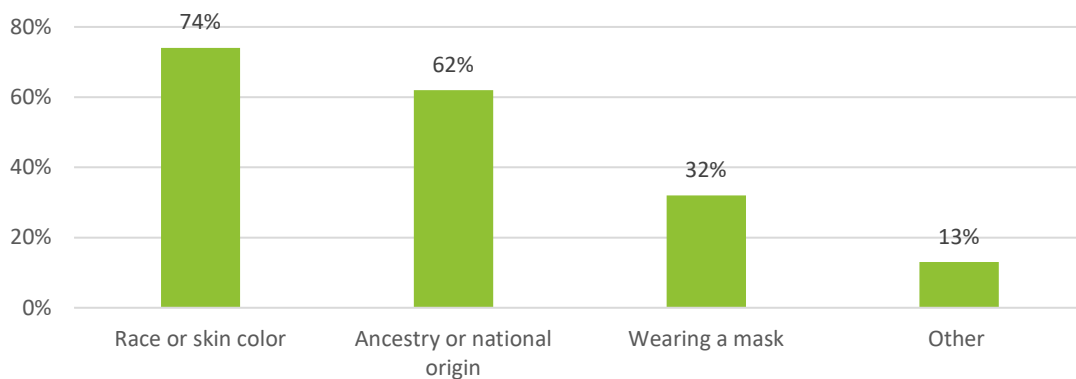
In this section, we delve deeper to learn more about the other experiences of harassment, assault, and other biases endured by New Yorkers of Chinese descent during COVID-19. Figure 6 shows the specific types of bias and hate incidents experienced in person or online by New Yorkers of Chinese descent in 2020. Overall, 1 in 3 New Yorkers of Chinese descent reported experiencing at least one kind of harassment, assault, or bias incident. These include 18 percent who were called a racial slur, a name, or harassed; 14 percent who reported being excluded from participating in some activities or events; 12 percent who were verbally threatened; 6 percent who were physically intimidated or assaulted; and 6 percent who reported their home, car, or other property being vandalized or damaged.

Figure 6. Bias and hate incidents experienced by New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=423)



Respondents who indicated that they experienced at least one bias or hate incident were asked a follow-up question about what they thought were the main reasons for these experiences. As shown in Figure 7, the majority of New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims attributed these experiences to their race or skin color (74 percent) and/or ancestry or national origin (62 percent). About one third (32 percent) attributed these experiences to their wearing a mask.

Figure 7. Attribution for bias and hate incident experiences by New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=139)



Note: Examples of "other" reasons volunteered by respondents included not wearing a mask, speaking with an accent, working in healthcare, coughing/sneezing, racist rhetoric in the media, racial profiling, and hate crimes.

New Yorkers of Chinese descent responded and coped with these biases and hate incidents in different ways. As shown in Figures 8 and 9, we classify these coping strategies into two sets: active and passive. Overall, 81 percent of New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims of bias and hate incidents used some of the active coping strategies, such as talking to someone about their feelings (65 percent); seeking advice on dealing with the issue (40 percent); praying or seeking spiritual support (39 percent); making a verbal protest or trying to reason with the offender (33 percent); expressing anger to let off steam (33 percent); or going to authorities (e.g., police; 11 percent). In comparison, 92 percent used some of the passive coping strategies, such as accepting it as a fact of life (69 percent); trying to forget what happened (64 percent); or trying to keep feelings to themselves (57 percent).

Figure 8. Active coping strategies used by New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims of bias and hate incidents (N=139)

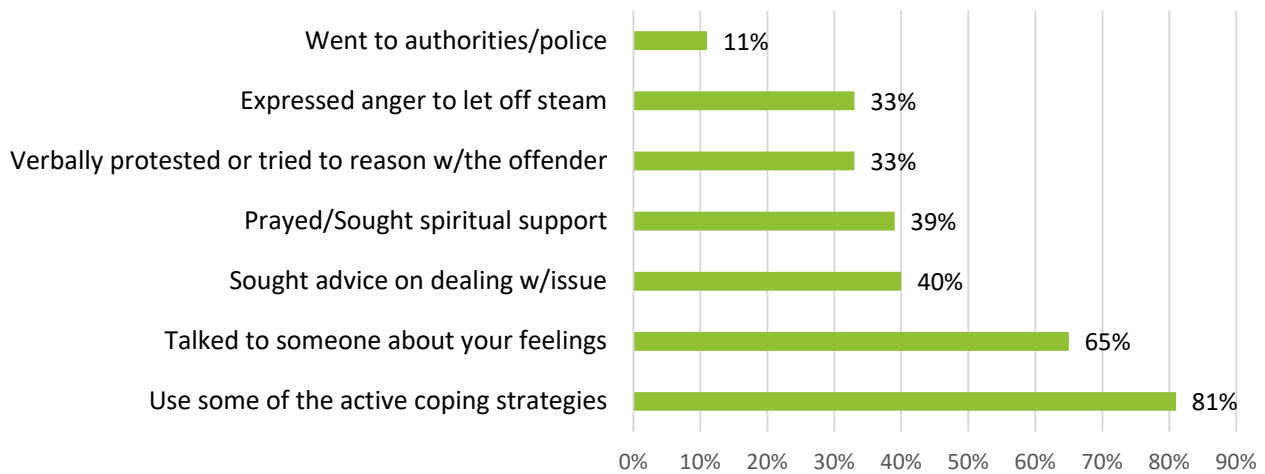
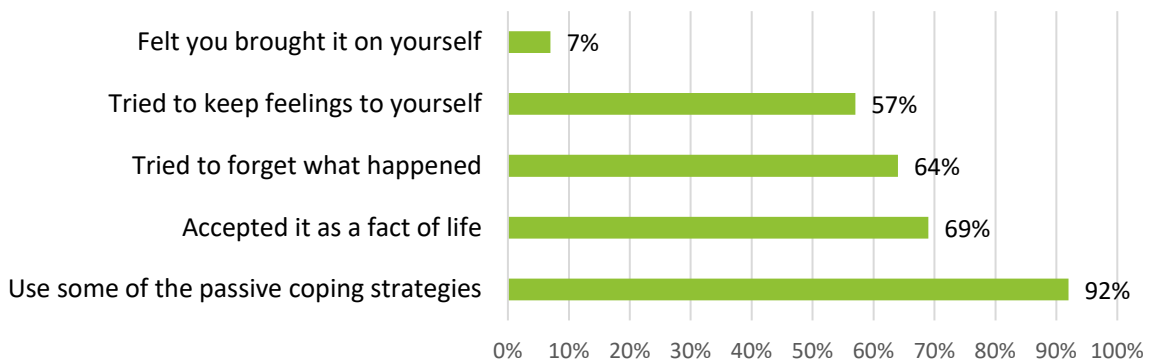


Figure 9. Passive coping strategies used by New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims of bias and hate incidents (N=139)



CONCLUSION

New Yorkers of Chinese descent have been suffering from the “double pandemic” of COVID-19 and racial discrimination. Findings from this report based on the Poverty Tracker data reveal the pervasive prevalence of racial discrimination in various forms and the experiences of bias and hate experienced by New Yorkers of Chinese descent. Most New Yorkers of Chinese descent in our study reported high levels of racism-related vigilance and stress and had to find ways to cope. Our findings also show that New Yorkers of Chinese descent who faced material hardship were more likely to experience racial discrimination and were more vigilant and stressed about these experiences than those without material hardship. These findings suggest that those who face material deprivation and economic insecurity might suffer more from racial discrimination and related mental health problems.

After eight people—including six Asian women — were murdered in Atlanta in March 2021, President Joe Biden stated in his speech, “...*Hate and violence often hide in plain sight. And it's often met with silence...but that has to change — because our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit. We have to speak out. We have to act.*”⁷ The *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*⁸, signed into law on May 20, 2021, is one of the federal government’s first efforts to address the rise of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic. It is of great significance that the government is standing by our communities, but more will need to be done to address the root causes that fuel the racist rhetoric and acts that hurt Asian-American communities.

In this report, we build the scientific evidence on the severity of anti-Asian discrimination by documenting the experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese descent during the pandemic, especially those already facing other challenges related to poverty and hardship. Our research is also a call for action to leaders and organizations, researchers and policy makers, and to one another to address anti-Asian racism through policy and practice, activism and education, and support and protection of our communities towards achieving racial equity and justice.

⁷ See: *The White House* (March 30, 2021). *FACT SHEET: President Biden announces additional actions to respond to anti-Asian violence, xenophobia and bias*. Access at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/30/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-additional-actions-to-respond-to-anti-asian-violence-xenophobia-and-bias/>

⁸ See: *Congress.gov*. Access at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/937>

Appendix A

Table 1. Characteristics of New Yorkers of Chinese descent (N=423)

<i>Demographics</i>	
Gender	
Female	61%
Male	39%
Age	
18-35	33%
36-65	53%
65 and older	14%
Nativity	
Foreign Born	91%
Born in the U.S.	9%
Borough	
Queens	41%
Brooklyn	38%
Manhattan	17%
Staten Island	3%
Bronx	1%
Education level	
High School or Less	37%
Some College/Vocational School	16%
College Graduate	47%
English proficiency	
Limited English Proficiency (LEP) ⁹	81%
English Proficient	19%

⁹ LEP refers to “any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English less than ‘very well’ as classified by the U.S. Census Bureau. The term English proficient refers to people who reported speaking English only or ‘very well.’” (Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

Appendix B

Terms and measures used in this report and the characteristics of New Yorkers of Chinese descent

In this report, we use four sets of measures to capture the racial discrimination experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese descent during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include *everyday discrimination experiences* as measured by the Williams Everyday Discrimination Scale, including a 3-item scale to measure *racism-related vigilance*; a 7-item checklist to identify the specific type of *bias and hate incidents* that victims experienced in person or online; and an 8-item scale to measure *coping strategies* they used in response to their experiences.

- **Everyday Discrimination Scale** – the day-to-day experiences of unfair treatment were measured by one of the most widely used measures for individual discrimination experiences—the Everyday Discrimination Scale.¹⁰ Four items were included in this survey: being treated with less respect, being treated unfairly at restaurants or stores, people acted as if they were afraid of you, or being threatened or harassed. Response categories to this question include never, rarely, sometimes, and often. We recoded the responses into two categories—no (never) and yes (rarely, sometimes, or often)—and present the percentage of the sample reporting yes.
- **Racism-related Vigilance Scale** – the self-developed scale in our survey includes three items asking respondents since January 2020 how often they have felt unease in public areas, have tried to avoid certain social situations or places due to worries about racial discrimination, and have worried about their and their family’s safety from a hate crime or harassment. Response categories to this question include 0 (never), 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), and 3 (often). We recoded the responses into two categories—yes (including 1 to 3) and no (0)—and present the percentage of the sample reporting yes.
- **Bias and Hate Incidents Checklist** – a checklist of specific types of bias and hate incidents experienced by victims (yes/no) developed by us based on the existing literature and case reports. It is a non-exhaustive list of major types of harassment, assault, and other bias incidents against people of Chinese or Asian descent including physical assaults, verbal harassment, vandalism and property damage, and denial of access to services and public spaces.¹¹ (Box 1)

¹⁰ See: Williams, D. R., Yu, Y., Jackson, J. S., & Anderson, N. B. (1997). *Racial differences in physical and mental health: Socio-economic status, stress and discrimination*. *Journal of health psychology*, 2(3), 335-351.

¹¹ See: *The special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. Access at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/SR/StatementProfAchiumeSRRacism.pdf>; and, Tessler, H., Choi, M., & Kao, G. (2020). *The anxiety of being Asian American: hate crimes and negative biases during the COVID-19 pandemic*. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45: 636-646.

Box 1: Bias and Hate Incidents Checklist

- A. People excluded you from participating in some activities/events.
- B. People made a racial slur, called you a name or harassed you.
- C. Someone made a verbal threat.
- D. Someone physically intimidated or assaulted you.
- E. Someone vandalized or damaged your home, car, or other property.
- F. Someone denied you service or told you to leave a store or facility.
- G. A bus, taxi, or ride-share refused to pick you up.

- **Coping Strategies in Response to Bias and Hate Incidents** – adapted from existing scales,¹² our research team developed a checklist (yes/no) to understand the coping strategies adopted by New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims of bias and hate incidents (Box 2). These coping strategies are classified into two sets: active coping strategies that enable people to restore emotional balance and address the problem, and passive coping strategies such as avoidance and self-blame.

Box 2: Coping strategies adopted by New Yorkers of Chinese descent who were victims of bias and hate incidents

Active coping strategies	Passive coping strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Went to authorities (e.g. police) • Talked to someone about how you were feeling • Sought advice and guidance to deal with the problem • Expressed anger to let off steam • Made a verbal protest or tried to reason with the offender • Prayed or sought spiritual comfort and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepted it as a fact of life • Felt that you brought it on yourself • Tried to keep your feelings to yourself • Tried to forget that it had happened

¹² See: McNeilly, M. D., Anderson, N. B., Armstead, C. A., Clark, R., Corbett, M., Robinson, E. L., ... & Lepisto, E. M. (1996); Krieger, N. (1990); Noh, S., Beiser, M., Kaspar, V., Hou, F., & Rummens, J. (1999).