

“Racial Discrimination Has Changed My Daily Life”

Suffering and vigilance among Chinese Americans in New York City and California during the COVID-19 pandemic



Qin Gao, Xuan Jia, Ao Shen, Xinyu Xia and Xiaofang Liu



About the Authors

Qin Gao is a professor of social policy and social work at Columbia School of Social Work and the founding director of Columbia University's [China Center for Social Policy](#). She is also a faculty affiliate of the Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Committee on Global Thought, Columbia Population Research Center, and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute.

Xuan Jia, Ao Shen, and Xinyu Xia are graduate students at Columbia School of Social Work and Research Assistant Interns at the Columbia Population Research Center during 2021-2022.

Xiaofang Liu is a survey coordinator for the Poverty Tracker studies at the [Columbia Population Research Center](#) and [Center on Poverty and Social Policy](#) and oversees an oversample of New Yorkers of Chinese descent. She is also a fellow of the Columbia China Center for Social Policy.

Acknowledgments

We thank Robin Hood for funding the Poverty Tracker which provided data for this study, Columbia University Weatherhead East Asian Institute for funding the New York City data collection for this report, and the Understanding America Study for collecting the data in California used in this report.

We are grateful to the feedback and support from members of the Poverty Tracker research team, particularly Tingyi Cao, Sophie Collyer, Irwin Garfinkel, Sonia Huq, Yajun Jia, Dani Lin, Matthew Maury, Kathryn Neckerman, Schuyler Ross, Julien Teitler, Jane Waldfogel, and Christopher Wimer.

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“I have been subjected to stereotypes and racial discrimination during the pandemic. I have witnessed an unprecedented version of New York City. I feel like I no longer belong here anymore.”

—Lei, a Chinese American woman who has been living in New York City for ten years and participant of the Poverty Tracker study

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sharp surge in anti-Asian sentiment, discrimination, and violence toward Asian Americans.^{1,2} From March 19, 2020 to December 31, 2021, *Stop AAPI Hate* recorded 10,905 hate incidents against Asian American and Pacific Islander persons across the United States.³ The reported incidents included verbal harassment, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. In addition, although the total number of hate crimes⁴ nationwide decreased by 7% from 2019 to 2020, those targeting Asians in 16 of America’s largest cities rose by nearly 150% from 2019 to 2020 and 164% in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020.⁵ On March 16, 2021, a shooter murdered eight people in Atlanta, Georgia, six of whom were women of Asian descent. This mass shooting was referenced as a catalyst for the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act*,⁶ and was acknowledged in the bill text.

The surges in anti-Asian discrimination and hate have been particularly high in the East and West coasts due to the concentration of Asian Americans in both areas. Asian Americans accounted for 15.6% of the New York City (NYC) population⁷ in 2020 and 15.5% of the California population⁸ in 2021. Among the above mentioned 10,905 hate incidents that *Stop AAPI Hate* recorded nationwide, over half were from New York and California combined (15.7% from New York and 38.1% from California).³

Using data collected among Chinese Americans⁹ in NYC and California, this report presents findings on the discrimination experiences and racism-related vigilance among Chinese Americans and compares them across the two coasts. Our quantitative evidence is supplemented by qualitative data, which reveals the impacts of racial discrimination and vigilance on people’s daily lives. These findings can help policymakers and the public gain an in-depth understanding of these disturbing trends and develop effective responses to combat racial discrimination.

¹ We use the term “Asian Americans” to refer to people of Asian descent living in the United States in this report.

² Reny and Barreto (2021).

³ Yellow Horse, Jeung, and Matriano (2022).

⁴ A hate crime is a crime motivated by bias against race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability. For more information about hate crime and bias or hate incident, please visit the website of the United States Department of Justice. [Access here.](#)

⁵ Levin and Grisham (2021).

⁶ GovTrack.us. (2022).

⁷ Census Results for New York City (2020).

⁸ United States Census Bureau (2021).

⁹ We use the term “Chinese Americans” to refer to people of Chinese descent living in the United States in this report.

Key Findings

- Over half of Chinese Americans in NYC and California experienced some form of discrimination in 2021.
- Roughly 8-in-10 Chinese Americans in NYC and California experienced high levels of racism-related vigilance in 2021.
- The most common type of bias and hate incidents experienced by Chinese Americans in NYC and California was being called a racial slur or name, followed by receiving a verbal threat and being excluded from activities or events.
- The majority of the victims of bias or hate incidents attributed these experiences to their race, skin color, ancestry, or national origin.

BACKGROUND

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans have faced heightened racially-motivated harassment and violence. At the core of this anti-Asian racism is the blaming of Asian Americans, especially Chinese Americans, as the source of the coronavirus. This is a continuation of America's long history of race-based scapegoating. It was exacerbated by the more recent use of stigmatizing terms and anti-Asian rhetoric by public figures both online and offline.¹⁰

Harassment and violence against Asian Americans have increased particularly sharply in both coasts during the pandemic. Besides the hate incidents reported online, hate crimes recorded by the government agencies spiked as well. NYC saw a significant increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans, especially Asian American elders and women. The number of hate crimes targeting Asian Americans in NYC rose to 129 in 2021 from 28 in 2020, a 361% increase.¹¹ In California, the number of hate crime incidents targeting Asian Americans more than doubled from 43 in 2019 to 89 in 2020.¹² It is important to note that these crime statistics include only incidents reported to the police and thus reflect just the tip of an iceberg. Many incidents are not reported, and thus are missing from official statistics.

Hate incidents and crimes against Asian Americans in NYC and California share some common features, but also have distinct characteristics in each coast. In both coasts, Chinese Americans have been especially targeted among Asians. The *Stop AAPI Hate* national report revealed that Chinese Americans reported more racial discrimination incidents (42.8%) than other Asian racial or ethnic groups, followed by Koreans (16.1%), Filipinos (8.9%), and Japanese (8.2%).¹³ Asian Americans in NYC and California experienced similar types of bias and hate incidents such as harassment, racial slurs, and being spat on.¹⁴ However, notable coastal differences exist regarding the site of hate crime incidents. For example, NYC data show a greater number of

¹⁰ Budhwani and Sun (2020); Stechemesser et al. (2020).

¹¹ The New York City Commission on Human Rights (2021); Pillai et al (2021); Yam (2021).

¹² Bonta (2020).

¹³ Yellow Horse, Jeung, and Matriano (2022).

¹⁴ Stop AAPI Hate: New Data on Anti-Asian Hate Incidents against Elderly and Total National Incidents in 2020 (2021).

incidents that happen at public transportation sites compared to other regions of the US, mainly because of the heavy reliance on public transportation in NYC.¹⁵ Since the outset of the pandemic, there have been many reports of Asian people being assaulted on subways and buses or being shoved onto the tracks at subway stations in NYC. On January 15, 2022, Michelle Alyssa Go, a 40-year-old Asian American woman, was pushed into the path of an oncoming subway train at the Times Square subway station, which caused her death. This incident added to the fear and vigilance experienced by many Asian Americans and led the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to pilot installing platform screen doors at three NYC subway stations.

These racial discrimination experiences and hate incidents add to the mental distress of the victims and their families in the Asian American community.¹⁶ According to the *Stop AAPI Hate* Follow-Up Survey conducted in 2021, one-in-five Asian Americans who have experienced racism report trauma, the psychological and emotional harm caused by racism.¹⁷ Among Asian American subgroups, Chinese Americans have been especially influenced. For example, a national survey¹⁸ conducted between March 14 and May 31 in 2020 revealed that, among 543 Chinese American parents, nearly half reported being directly targeted by COVID-19-related racial discrimination in person (50.9%) and/or online (31.7%); in the group of 230 of their children, ages 10-18 years, who were also surveyed, 50.2% and 45.7% said they had experienced racial discrimination in-person and/or online, respectively. Those who experienced discriminatory incidents were significantly more likely to show symptoms of possible generalized anxiety disorder and depression.

Building on the existing findings and using comparable data collected in NYC and California, this report provides updated evidence on the discrimination experiences and racism-related vigilance among Chinese Americans. Comparing these results across the two coasts is meaningful as it can help us understand the prevalence and severity of these experiences in both locations, as well as suggest appropriate policy implications. Our in-depth interviews with 22 Chinese New Yorkers enrich our quantitative findings by revealing how people's daily lives are impacted. Findings from this report add to the existing evidence to help policymakers and the public develop effective responses to the disturbing rise in anti-Asian racial discrimination.

DATA AND MEASURES

The Poverty Tracker and the Chinese Oversample

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,¹⁹ accounting for 15.6% of the city population in 2020.²⁰ Among New Yorkers of Asian descent,

¹⁵ Song and Vázquez (2021).

¹⁶ Chae et al. (2021).

¹⁷ Saw et al. (2021).

¹⁸ Cheah et al. (2020).

¹⁹ Budiman, Cilluffo, and Ruiz (2019).

²⁰ Census Results for New York City (2020).

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 were collected from 416 Chinese New Yorkers between June and December 2021 using surveys conducted in English or Mandarin (both phone and online).

The Understanding America Study

The data on Chinese Californians used in this report are from survey data administered by the *Understanding America Study* (UAS), which is maintained by the *Center for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California* (USC). The content of this report is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of USC or UAS.

The *Understanding America Study* is an internet panel of households, with approximately 9,500 respondents representing the entire United States. Data used in this report were collected from 120 participants who were of Chinese descent living in California. The participants completed the survey between August 30 and October 10 in 2021 in English.

The Appendix presents the demographic characteristics of the Chinese American sample respondents in NYC and California.

Racial Discrimination Measures

In this report, we use four sets of measures to capture the racial discrimination experiences of Chinese Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include everyday discrimination experiences as measured by the Williams Everyday Discrimination Scale and three new scales that we developed or adapted from existing scales, including a 3-item scale to measure racism-related vigilance; a 7-item scale 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 that are used in response to these experiences.²¹

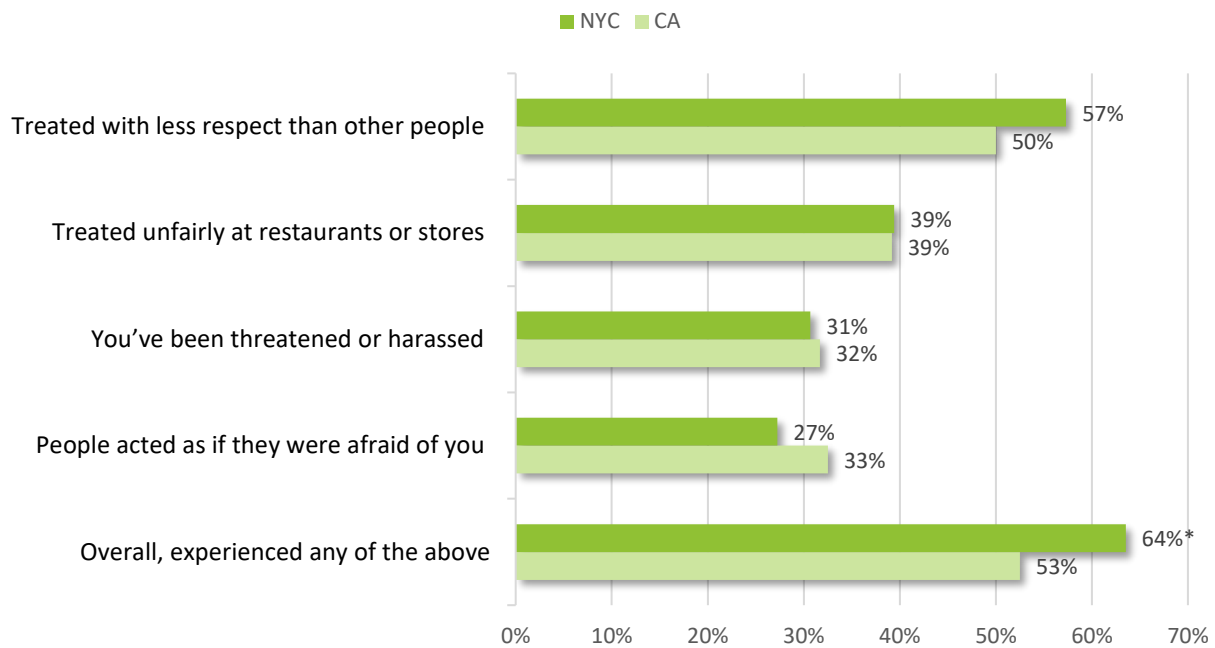
RESULTS

More than half of Chinese Americans in NYC and California experienced some form of discrimination in 2021.

Racial discrimination against Chinese Americans in New York City and California has been strikingly widespread, despite these two populations living 3,000 miles apart on opposite coasts of the US. Over half of Chinese Americans in both NYC (64%) and California (53%) experienced at least one form of discrimination in 2021. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of each form of discrimination experienced by Chinese Americans in NYC and California.

²¹ Please refer to Appendix B in our first report “*Double Pandemic: Discrimination Experiences of New Yorkers of Chinese Descent During COVID-19*” for more details. See: Qin and Liu (2021).

Figure 1. Everyday discrimination experiences of Chinese Americans in NYC and California in 2021



Source: Poverty Tracker and Understanding America Study 2021 data

Note: Sample size: N of NYC = 416; N of CA = 120; Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those in NYC and CA. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

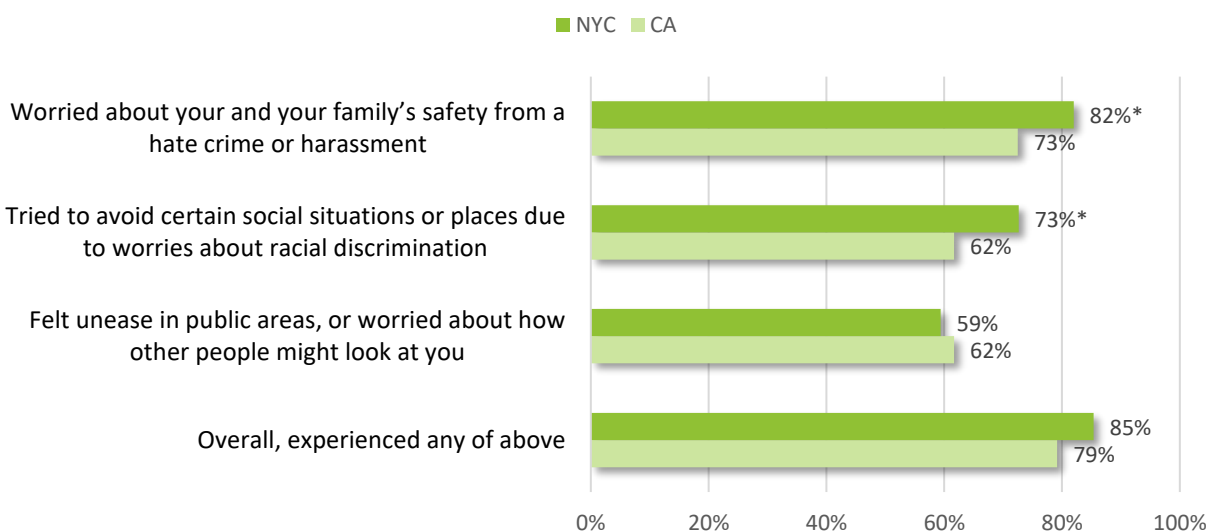
The most prevalent form of discrimination was being treated with less respect than other people, as reported by 57% of Chinese residents in NYC and half of those in California. As shown in Figure 1, 39% of Chinese Americans in both areas reported being treated unfairly at restaurants or stores. Nearly a third of Chinese Americans in both NYC and California were threatened or harassed. Additionally, 27% of Chinese Americans in NYC felt that people acted as if they were afraid of them, while a third of those in California had the same feelings.

Roughly 8-in-10 Chinese Americans in NYC and California experienced high levels of racism-related vigilance in 2021.

Both groups of Chinese Americans reported high levels of discriminatory experiences over the past year. In this section, we seek to understand how the respondents reacted to these experiences and how the spike of anti-Asian racism affected their daily lives.

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. Our data show that Chinese Americans in both locations reported high levels of racism-related vigilance over the past year (85% in NYC and 79% in California).

Figure 2. Racism-related vigilance among Chinese Americans in NYC and California in 2021



Source: Poverty Tracker and Understanding America Study 2021 data

Note: Sample size: N of NYC = 416; N of CA = 120; Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those in NYC and CA. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

As shown in Figure 2, 82% of Chinese Americans in NYC were worried about their or their family's safety from a hate crime or harassment, which was higher than the percentage in California (73%). Seventy-three percent of Chinese Americans in NYC tried to avoid certain social situations or places due to worries about racial discrimination, as compared to 62% in California. Additionally, 59% of Chinese Americans in NYC and 62% of those in California felt unease in public areas or worried about how other people might look at them. Overall, compared to the discrimination experiences presented in Figure 1, more Chinese Americans in both locations experienced high levels of racism-related vigilance than some form of discrimination, revealing the heavy mental health and daily life toll of racism on the Chinese American community across the two coasts.

The quantitative evidence presented above is echoed by in-depth interviews that we conducted as part of the Poverty Tracker study in NYC. The following quotes and stories vividly illustrate the psychological distress and restrictions on daily life experienced by Chinese New Yorkers caused by experiences of racial discrimination and the associated heightened vigilance.

“Most of the time I just stay home and feel depressed.”

“In the past, my children could go out and play with friends, but because of the discrimination and hate crimes against Asians, we are too scared to let the kids go out.”

“I always wear a hat when going out now, to keep people from seeing my Asian face.”

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

Anne's Story

Living in New York City for more than three decades, Anne felt that she had integrated into American culture and society. She, her parents, and her three children lived in a neighborhood in Brooklyn with a large Asian American population. Her family felt safe and belonged here before the COVID-19 outbreak. However, racial discrimination experiences during the pandemic led her to be disillusioned with the city and wanting to leave, even though “this city still has a lot to offer.”

Anne told us that she had experienced racial discrimination and verbal harassment several times during the pandemic. Once, while she was taking a walk in her neighborhood, a man whispered “Chink” to her. Anne also encountered a man yelling “go back to your own country!” at her in a parking lot. Anne’s family also faced racial discrimination many times in their neighborhood where someone always insulted people looking Asian by using the F-word.

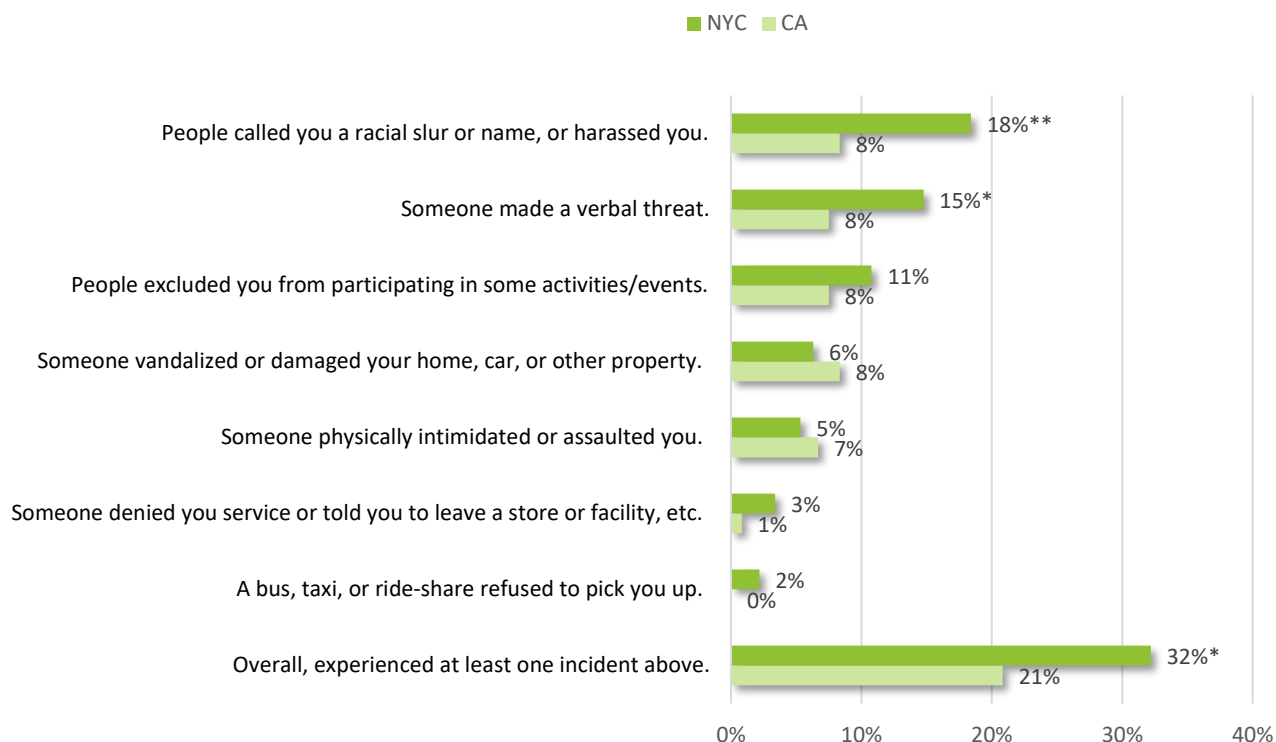
Such experiences of suffering from racial discrimination and insults made Anne feel demeaned and belittled. She felt that she was having a hard time with socialization and didn’t want to talk to anyone. Additionally, Anne tried to avoid certain occasions and was extra careful when she had to go out, as did her family. They had to stay super alert while out and moved away quickly when they felt something seemed wrong. As a mom of three teenagers, Anne always got restless whenever her daughters went out, so she tried to keep her children at home most of the time.

“New York City became terrible. I’m very worried, so we hardly ever go out now. Racial discrimination has changed my daily life and activities.”

The most common type of bias and hate incidents faced by Chinese Americans in NYC and California was verbal harassment, verbal threats, and being excluded from participating in activities or events.

Discrimination, bias, and hate is experienced in different forms. In this section, we look deeper into the specific types of bias and hate incidents experienced by victims. Overall, 1 in 3 Chinese New Yorkers reported that they experienced at least one kind of bias or hate incident in 2021, while 1 in 5 Chinese Californians reported these experiences.

Figure 3. Bias and hate incidents experienced by Chinese Americans in NYC and California in 2021



Source: Poverty Tracker and Understanding America Study 2021 data

Note: Sample size: N of NYC = 416; N of CA = 120; Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those in NYC and CA. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Figure 3 shows that the most common type of bias and hate incident experienced by Chinese Americans in NYC and California was being called a racial slur or name or being harassed (18% and 8%, respectively), followed by someone making a verbal threat (15% and 8%), being excluded from participating in activities or events (11% and 8%), their home, car, or other property being vandalized or damaged (6% and 8%), and being physically intimidated or assaulted (5% and 7%). Notably, Chinese Americans in NYC were more likely to be called a racial slur or name or be harassed and threatened than Chinese Americans in California.

The majority of the victims of the bias or hate incidents attributed their experiences to their race or skin color, or ancestry or national origin.

Respondents in NYC and California who reported 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 4, 87% of Chinese Americans in NYC attributed these experiences to their race or skin color, which was somewhat higher than the percentage in California (76%), though still very common on both coasts. Over half (55%) of Chinese New Yorkers and 48% of Chinese Californians attributed these experiences to their ancestry or national origin. Around 21% of Chinese Americans in both NYC and California attributed their experiences to them wearing a mask.

Figure 4. Attribution for bias and hate incident experiences by Chinese Americans in NYC and California in 2021



Source: Poverty Tracker and Understanding America Study 2021 data

Note: Sample size: N of NYC = 134; N of CA = 25; Chi square tests were used to detect significant differences between those in NYC and CA. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Note: Examples of “other” reasons volunteered by respondents in NYC included not wearing a mask, age, occupation, jealousy, disabilities, mental health issues, racist rhetoric in the media, racial profiling, and Asian hate; examples of “other” reasons volunteered by respondents in CA included not wearing a mask, gender, age, being single, and political environment.

John’s Story

John was a tour guide living in Flushing. He came to New York City with his family during his high school years. The economic fallout of the pandemic hit John’s family hard. John lost his job because the international travel agency he worked for was unable to sustain operations after the COVID-19 outbreak. John’s mother who was a hotel housekeeper also lost her job at the same time. His father, who also worked in the service industry, had to shift from full-time to part-time and became the sole source of income for the family.

In addition to the unprecedented challenges John’s family faced due to the pandemic, such as livelihood issues, they also experienced racial discrimination. For example, John was being called the “Chinese virus” when riding the subway. John also witnessed an elderly Chinese woman being verbally assaulted and yelled at with racial slurs in Manhattan. The elderly woman did not respond to the attacker’s aggressive language as it seemed that she didn’t understand English, but no bystanders interfered or helped her. John was going up to intervene and argue with the attacker, but his mother pulled him away. “Please, I don’t want you to get hit!”

“It’s hard to overcome the fear of being attacked. I wish I had stood up for that old woman on that day. But I won’t be quiet anymore. I hope more Chinese Americans can stand up to make some changes!”

CONCLUSION

Racial discrimination damages not only the victims but also the society at large as it reduces social cohesion and further marginalizes those who often are already vulnerable. The rise in anti-Asian hate amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have placed a heavy toll on the daily lives and mental health of Asian Americans nationwide. Based on data from the Poverty Tracker and Understanding America Study collected in 2021, this report shows that over half of Chinese Americans in NYC and California experienced some form of racial discrimination, bias, or hate incidents. Most Chinese Americans in our study also reported high levels of racism-related vigilance. As the pandemic continues, racial discrimination and hate incidents continue and even increase in their level of brazenness and brutality. The evidence presented in this report shows that these harmful trends hurt people profoundly and are likely to have long-lasting negative consequences.

On May 20, 2021, the *COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act* was signed into law, a significant step toward addressing the rise of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic. However, there is in the law a high bar for hate crime charges. The most pervasive bias and hate incidents reported by Chinese Americans in our study such as street harassments or hateful slurs do not qualify as hate crimes and thus are largely unaddressed by this law. Yet these experiences have seriously affected Asian Americans' freedom of daily activities, psychological well-being, and sense of social belonging.

Therefore, we need more prevention and intervention approaches to address anti-Asian hate and its harm to the Asian American community. Possible prevention solutions include public education campaigns and outreach that advance public understanding of and attention to racial discrimination and its negative impact on Asian Americans' lives, advocate for awareness, and produce behavior change. In addition, timely and effective intervention is important to support the immediate needs of and reduce the long-term impact on the victims and their family and community members. Community-based programs can be developed and enhanced to help the people who are immediately impacted, make more public resources available, provide bystander intervention training, and have a response team to coordinate and align the resources. It is important for these programs and services to be sensitive and accessible to Asian American community members in terms of language, culture, and location.

At the societal level, Asian Americans need to build alliances and collaborations with other racial and ethnic groups to seek long-term solutions, such as highlighting the importance of understanding the history of anti-Asian discrimination in the United States and reaching out to elected officials to change laws and policies to address long-standing racism. For example, the organization *Right to Be* (Formerly *Hollaback!*) has offered a series of workshops that train people to respond to, intervene in, and heal from harassment.²² These prevention and intervention measures are not only effective but empowering to communities impacted by racial discrimination and racism-related vigilance.

We call on political and community leaders, organizations, researchers, policy makers, and the public to speak up against bias and injustice and work tirelessly to pursue effective responses and actions to address anti-Asian racism through activism, education, practice, and policy. It is imperative that all stakeholders and society members work together to “*combat racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and should work to ensure that all members of AAPI communities—no matter their background, the language they speak, or their religious beliefs—are treated with dignity and equity.*”²³

²² Read more about the mission and trainings of *Right to Be* at <https://righttobe.org>.

²³ The White House Official Webpage (2021).

APPENDIX. Characteristics of Chinese American samples in NYC and California

	NYC (N=416)	CA (N=120)
Gender		
Female	60%	64%
Male	40%	36%
Age		
18-35	35%	39%
36-64	50%	48%
65 and older	15%	13%
Nativity		
Foreign Born	91%	41%
Born in the US	9%	59%
Education level		
High School or Less	38%	8%
Some College/Vocational School	18%	12%
College Graduate or Above	44%	80%

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