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ANTI-ASIAN BULLYING AND HARASSMENT: SYMPTOMS OF RACISM IN K-12 SCHOOLS DURING COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for K-12 students. However, these challenges have not been experienced equally across student groups. There has been a significant increase in mainstream media coverage of anti-Asian racism, but very little attention has been given to Asian American youth, who are not immune from incidents of bullying and harassment in our K-12 schools. This brief discusses how Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)¹ students face unique challenges associated with bullying and harassment because of their racial and ethnic identity. We examine the historical context of bullying and harassment of Asian Americans and how that persists as anti-Asian racism today. Finally, we propose policy solutions to create a more positive learning environment and address racist attitudes towards this specific community. Notably, we propose that K-12 leaders disaggregate data by ethnic subgroup, collect more comprehensive data on school bullying, harassment, and victimization disaggregated by AAPI ethnic subgroups, and invest in culturally sustaining mental health resources and curriculum.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for school-aged youth. These challenges have not been experienced equally across student groups, however. Despite an increase in media highlighting anti-Asian racism, very little attention has been given to Asian American youth, who are not immune from incidents of bullying and harassment in our K-12 schools. In fact, in a recent survey of Asian American youth, 81.5 percent of respondents reported being bullied or verbally harassed during the pandemic (Jeung et al., 2021). Moreover, 16 percent (341 incidents) of the total incidents reported by Stop AAPI Hate involved AAPI youth. Consequently, Asian American parents have been reluctant to send their children back to school at a disproportionate rate (Balingit et al., 2021). Too often, racism against Asian Americans – particularly in K-12 schools – does not receive the attention it deserves, even though national and local data reveal Asian Americans are most likely to experience bullying as a result of racial bias. In California, AAPI students reported being bullied at a higher rate than other racial groups due to their racial and ethnic background.

Bullying and harassment against Asian Americans are not new phenomena, though they have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Asian American youth are exposed to racist rhetoric like “kung flu virus” from elected officials, viral videos of Asians being physically and verbally assaulted, and the massacre at a spa in Atlanta targeting predominantly Asian women.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Every October, schools participate in National Bullying Prevention Month to raise awareness on bullying prevention. In 2020 however, COVID-19 required educators to address school climate and safety virtually. As a result, the transition to remote learning was associated with higher incidents of cyberbullying (L1ght, 2020). A study by L1ght, an organization dedicated to protecting children from online harassment, found a 70 percent increase in cyberbullying during the pandemic among kids and teens on digital platforms (L1ght, 2020). They also saw a 900 percent increase in hate speech against China and Chinese people on Twitter, with explicit tweets accusing Asians of being responsible for the coronavirus outbreak.

The stories about bullying and harassment of Asian American youth are underscored by what we have found in national data, which paint a unique picture: Asian American students reported the lowest levels of being bullied, yet they were far more likely to indicate that the bullying that they did experience was based on their racial or ethnic origin (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Further, there is a notable difference in the impact of bullying by racial groups. In the same survey by NCES, Asian American students experienced the most negative impacts on their academic work, relationships with family and friends, and perception of self. This finding is alarming as Asian American students are less likely to seek mental health due to cultural stigma (Han & Pong, 2015).

While these data provide useful insights into an understudied issue for the Asian American student population, it is important to highlight what is missing from these data: they do not include Pacific Islanders, nor do they disaggregate data for Asian American ethnic subgroups such as Filipinos. Additionally, this dataset overlooks the importance of geographic contexts, such as cities and states that have greater concentrations of Asian Americans.

In California, data on AAPI students are not disaggregated by subethnic groups (also known as subgroups). There are 48 subethnic groups within the AAPI aggregate category (Chaudhari et al., 2013; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008). It is important to understand the varied experiences across specific subgroups to ensure they receive the appropriate resources and supports.

THE CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

In California, issues of racism and harassment across racial groups parallel national trends. However, AAPI students, who collectively make up approximately 10 percent of K-12 enrollment in the state (California Department of Education, 2020), experience bullying at higher rates.

On the California Healthy Kids Survey, Asian American students generally reported feeling the safest² in schools compared to other racial groups, yet they experienced bullying and harassment more than any other racial group (California Department of Education, 2019). For example, while the majority of Asian students in 7th grade felt safe at school, nearly half of them were harassed or bullied within the last 12 months (Figure 2). Asian American youth were also more likely than other racial groups to perceive their harassment as linked to one of the six bias-related categories, which include: race, ethnicity, or national origin; religion; sex (being male or female); sexual orientation; a physical or mental disability; and immigrant status (Figure 3). This suggests that while students may feel physically safe at school, they do not feel as emotionally safe.

FIGURE 1: Feeling Safe or Very Safe at School by Race/Ethnicity and Grade

	Grade 7 %	Grade 9 %	Grade 11 %
Hispanic or Latino	59.0	52.8	51.1
American Indian or Alaska Native	64.7	55.1	52.0
Asian	65.6	59.2	58.9
Black or African American	55.2	46.0	47.3
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	57.6	57.2	54.0
White	65.7	58.8	57.7
Mixed (two or more) races	57.9	52.2	49.6

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017-2019

Note: School safety is defined as exposure to six measures of emotional and physical harm. More details can be found online at <https://calschls.org/reports-data>.

FIGURE 2: Any Harassment or Bullying at School by Race/Ethnicity and Grade

	Grade 7 %	Grade 9 %	Grade 11 %
Hispanic or Latino	31.3	25.2	22.2
American Indian or Alaska Native	27.1	25.0	18.1
Asian	45.3	34.9	28.5
Black or African American	43.4	32.1	28.6
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	36.7	24.9	35.2
White	38.5	34.4	29.4
Mixed (two or more) races	32.7	26.4	24.6

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017-2019

FIGURE 3: Harassment Due to Six Reasons at School by Race/Ethnicity and Grade

	Grade 7 %	Grade 9 %	Grade 11 %
Hispanic or Latino	22.4	19.2	17.1
American Indian or Alaska Native	18.3	17.9	14.9
Asian	39.6	30.0	25.3
Black or African American	35.2	27.9	25.7
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	31.9	19.7	32.2
White	25.8	26.1	23.4
Mixed (two or more) races	23.9	20.5	19.5

Source: California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017-2019

Note: The six reasons include race, ethnicity, or national origin; religion; sex (being male or female); sexual orientation; a physical or mental disability; and immigrant status.

Differences between Asian and Pacific Islander students are also noteworthy. Over one in three Pacific Islander students in 11th grade reported being harassed or bullied, the highest rate when compared to other racial groups (Figure 2). Additionally, they were more likely than other racial groups to attribute harassment or bullying to some form of bias (Figure 3). Further nuance among Asian American students is difficult to understand due to a lack of disaggregated data, including regional differences that exist within the broader community.

The discrimination and racist bullying AAPI students face in school settings warrant greater attention in order to create a more inclusive and safe learning environment. Shedding light on this issue is the first step to preventing racially-biased bullying, which can have negative academic and social impacts on AAPI students. Our recommendations are rooted in a commitment to creating welcoming school environments that value racial and cultural diversity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instead of returning to “normalcy” when schools open during the post-pandemic era, schools have an opportunity to prioritize racial equity in student learning and foster a sense of belonging. Existing data provide insights into the unique experiences and challenges of AAPI students: bullying and harassment, a lack of inclusion of Asian American students in broader conversations about school climate and safety, and a need to consider specific remedies to mitigating the bullying and harassment that may be unique to the AAPI student population. Our recommendations align with the recent [Reimagine and Rebuild brief](#)'s goals of addressing the emotional and social needs of students and making learning racially and culturally relevant.

- 1. Collect more comprehensive data on school bullying, harassment, and victimization:** To further prevent and address bullying in K-12 school systems, we need more robust data on bullying, including documented follow ups to bullying incidents and implementation of anti-bullying efforts. Understanding how frequently, why, and where bullying occurs can promote bully-free schools.
- 2. Disaggregate data by ethnic subgroups:** Data on AAPI students are often aggregated after data are collected, making it difficult to understand the diverse experiences across the broader AAPI community and to make comparisons across other racial groups. While the California Department of Education currently collects disaggregated data on AAPI subgroups, it does not report it publicly. Stakeholders in K-12 education and policymakers should have access to this information in order to better inform local and statewide policies and practices. Los Angeles Unified School District is championing these efforts as the largest school district in the country to disaggregate race and ethnicity data (SEARAC, 2019).

3. Invest in culturally sustaining mental health resources and curriculum: AAPI students experience victimization based on their racial and ethnic identities at higher rates than other racial groups of students. School districts should invest in mental health resources, including partnering with community-based mental health organizations that have experience working with the broader AAPI community, to support the work of school psychologists and counselors who can address the unique experiences of AAPI students. Additionally, schools should prioritize developing culturally relevant and anti-racist curriculum that affirms the diversity of California’s K-12 students.³The California State Board of Education recently adopted an ethnic studies model curriculum, now optional for high school students (Fensterwald, 2021), that is rooted in the history and literature of communities often omitted from classrooms. In an era where discussions about racism are under attack in K-12 schools, school districts should embrace ethnic studies to ensure all high school students – including AAPI students – have access to coursework that reflects the nuance of their history and lived experiences.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 We use the term Asians and Asian Americans in this brief to historically situate the distinct racialized experiences of individuals with origins from Asia in the context of discussions surrounding race and racism. We separate the two terms “Asians” and “Asian Americans” to make a distinction that not all Asian individuals identify with the political panethnic identity of “Asian American.” We do not use Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian Pacific Islander (API), and Asian and Pacific Islander American (APIA) to avoid erasing the experiences of Pacific Islanders within a panethnic identity and reproducing a narrative of them as a homogeneous group in the conversation of race and racism. We do use the term Asian American and Pacific Islander if previous data sources we cite have used the term.
- 2 School safety is defined on kidsdata.org as perceived level of safety at school from very safe to very unsafe, and the number of times in the previous year they were afraid of being beaten up, were in a physical fight, carried a gun, and carried a weapon other than a gun at school
- 3 See, for example, A Pathway to Equitable Math Instruction at <https://equitablemath.org/>.