

# Asian American Medical Students Experiences of COVID-19 related Discrimination

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## Introduction

- Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Asian Americans have faced a drastic increase in racism, from microaggressions to violence.<sup>1</sup>
- Previous studies have found that 1 in 3 Asian-Americans have experienced direct racial discrimination online, and 1 in 2 Asian-Americans have experienced direct racial discrimination in-person.<sup>2</sup> Both direct and indirect discrimination have been associated with worsened anxiety and depression symptoms.<sup>3</sup>
- The increased prevalence of social media exposed Asian-Americans to not only increased online direct racial discrimination but also to vicarious discrimination, or the witnessing of other Asian-Americans being discriminated against.<sup>4</sup>
- Microaggressions, or brief and commonplace indignities that communicate hostile and derogatory insults, have been shown to cause burnout amongst medical students.<sup>5</sup>
- Asian Americans make up 21.5% of medical students in the United States, yet many perceive exclusion from conversations about diversity and inclusion on campus.<sup>6</sup>
- Our study sought to determine how COVID-19 related discrimination impacted the mental health and academic functioning of Asian American medical students.

## Methodology

### Survey Tool

Our survey tool was comprised of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), depression history, mental health stigma, coping mechanisms, social support, and two open-ended questions about the impacts of COVID-19 related discrimination and medical school mental health support.

### Distribution

This survey was distributed in the form of an anonymous SurveyMonkey online survey through online listservs and organizations to Asian-American medical students nationally.

### Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the open-ended question, “How has racial injustice towards the Asian American community or other minority individuals that have occurred over the past year impacted you?” in which the responses were labeled with recurring themes and parent themes using Microsoft Excel.

## Table 1.

Themes identified from 23 responses to the question “How has racial injustice towards the Asian American community or other minority individuals that have occurred over the past year impacted you?”

Parent Codes + Child Codes	Representative Quote(s) from Survey Response
<b>Discrimination</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct discrimination</li> <li>• Vicarious discrimination</li> <li>• Microaggressions</li> <li>• Exclusion</li> <li>• Being stereotyped</li> </ul>	<p>“[I’m a] victim of stereotyping even more than before; blamed for the pandemic; feeling less than my white classmates”</p> <p>“While I have not been personally impacted, I have seen many peers and some family members struggle and it has caused my mental health to take a hit.”</p> <p>“Comments have been made about my hair, my work ethic, my professionalism in front of patients that have never been made against my white peers.”</p>
<b>Medical school performance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical school stress</li> <li>• Microaggressions in medical sphere</li> <li>• Discouragement</li> <li>• Impaired functioning</li> </ul>	<p>“...I feel exhausted because I don't think I can handle tackling these difficult issues on top of other depressing world news and on top of an already stressful experience in medical school.”</p> <p>“[I’ve experienced] strange looks in the hospital from staff, students, and patients.”</p> <p>“Once a patient refused to share her social security number until I physically left the room since she was so uncomfortable with my presence. Events like these disparage me and decrease my will to continue studying and working towards my MD”</p>
<b>Emotion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration about lack of exposure</li> <li>• Hopelessness</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Safety Concerns</li> <li>• Awareness of Race &amp; White Privilege</li> </ul>	<p>“I see that Asian and Asian-Americans have been attacked at extraordinarily high rates in this country, and no one is really doing anything about it except activists in certain spaces, which is disheartening.”</p> <p>“[It] definitely has made me more jaded about humanity, [and] made me more cautious and scared about my safety.”</p> <p>“...There have been many instances where I have felt inadequate compared to my white counterparts... I have certainly found myself ruminating a lot about the role my race plays in my career as a future medical professional and how much harder I have to work to prove myself and fight implicit bias than white counterparts who don't have to think about race at all. “</p>
<b>Community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social support</li> <li>• Lack of community</li> </ul>	<p>“...the people in my life have been very supportive.”</p> <p>“I think there’s just a lack of support or community for Asian Americans.”</p>
<b>Media increasing awareness</b>	<p>“It was frightening to see news of elderly Asians being assaulted and blamed for causing the coronavirus.”</p>

## Results

- Common parent code themes that emerged were experiences of discrimination, medical school performance, emotional and mental reactions, community, and media.
- The parent code of discrimination contained child codes of direct discrimination (with microaggressions commonly recurring), vicarious discrimination (seeing friends, family, and members of the AAPI being discriminated against), feeling excluded due to race, and being racially stereotyped.
- The parent code of medical school performance contained recurring themes of exacerbated stress on top of medical school stresses, facing microaggressions in the medical sphere and subsequently feeling discouraged to advance their medical careers, and impaired functioning and academic performance.
- The parent code of emotional reactions included themes of frustration about the lack of exposure and support for Asian-Americans, hopelessness, fear (safety concerns, fear of being stereotyped, and hypervigilance), and awareness of and reflections upon race and white privilege.
- The parent theme of community involved the importance of social support and the lacking of and need for community for Asian-Americans.
- Our final parent code was the theme of media increasing awareness of racism against Asian-Americans.

## Discussion

The preliminary results obtained from our qualitative data analysis indicate that our study’s subjects experienced COVID-19 related discrimination in the form of direct discrimination (microaggressions, exclusion, and being stereotyped) and vicarious discrimination, some even occurring in medical school settings. This study found that this discrimination had severe impacts upon Asian-American medical students, such as emotional distress and impairments upon medical school performance, mental health functioning, and even discouragement towards becoming a member of the medical field. Moreover, a prominent theme was the lack of support, advocacy, and community for Asian-Americans. These results should inform improved support and adequate resources from administration and counseling departments to address mental health impacts Asian-American medical students have experienced due to COVID-19 related discrimination. The findings of this study will contribute greatly to future efforts in helping best support these students and their mental health needs.

## References

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