Anti-Asian Racism Is A Mental Health Crisis And It's Finally Time For Workplaces To Change It

Mind Share Partners Contributor ⓘ ⊕

Careers

We write about changing the culture of workplace mental health.

By Bernie Wong, Manager of Research & Design at Mind Share Partners

Unemployment among AAPIs grew 450% amidst COVID-19.   GETTY

I haven't always felt close to the American Asian and Pacific Islander community (hereon "AAPIs"). Maybe it was being raised in a predominantly white neighborhood with enough AAPIs at school to form a social clique, but not enough to avoid being called "those Asians." Or maybe it was being gay and overhearing mixed reception from your fellow AAPIs about Prop 8—a

California proposition that denied same-sex couples marriage rights in 2008.

Still, centering historically underrepresented voices—including AAPIs'—has been a driving principle in my work around workplace mental health at Mind Share Partners. However, the recent targeted, yet indiscriminate, violence against AAPIs—a Filipino man's face slashed in New York City; a Thai elder murdered in San Francisco; six AAPI women killed in Atlanta—sends a resounding message not only to myself, but also to AAPI professionals and the community at large. You can be "quiet," you can be "assimilated," you can be the alleged picturesque "model minority." It doesn't matter whether you or I feel close to our community. We are still, in their eyes, "those Asians."

It can be easy for companies to say, "not us," pointing to their AAPI Heritage Month activities or "diversity" by mere employment as evidence of equity. Yet among the 3,800 anti-Asian hate acts reported by the advocacy organization *Stop AAPI Hate* since the start of the pandemic, 38% occurred in businesses.

Erasure plagues AAPI history, not only at a social and economic level, but also in the workplace and growing dialogue around mental health as well. Workplaces and mental health advocates alike must move beyond performative allyship to demonstrative advocacy. With that comes truly understanding our community's experiences around racism, erasure and an impending mental health crisis for AAPIs.

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In New York City, anti-Asian hate crimes grew 1900% in 2020.   STRF/STAR MAX/IPX

A Short History of AAPI "Success" And Erasure Of Inequity

From "Yellow Peril" in the mid-1800s to AAPIs' "success" as a "model minority," anti-Asian propaganda erases the pervasive inequities and anti-Asian sentiments that still persist today and impact mental health. AAPIs are among the:

- Most economically divided racial and ethnic group.

- Least likely group to receive mental health services among those with diagnosable conditions.

- Least likely group to be promoted into management among white-collar professionals.

- Most impacted in the unemployment spike—by 450%, in fact—amidst COVID-19.

To be clear, racism against AAPIs didn't grow during the pandemic—it was enabled. Even before the pandemic, one-third of AAPIs reported experiencing discriminatory acts, such as racial slurs and offensive comments. These anti-Asian attitudes reached new heights in 2020, fueled by the "China Virus" and "Kung Flu" rhetoric espoused by the previous U.S. administration. As a result, the U.S. saw a 150% increase in hate crimes against AAPIs from 2019 to 2020.

Still, these acts go vastly underreported. "[AAPIs] have had a harder time proving racism," wrote Stewart Kwoh, president emeritus of Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Los Angeles, in an article for NBC News. "In a large part because, in general, people still don't know the history and struggles of Asian Americans. That's the overwhelming problem we have to confront as a society."

AAPIs are now the most economically divided racial and ethnic group in the U.S.   GETTY

AAPI Erasure In Mental Health And The Workplace

The corporate dialogue around mental health has long struggled with a bias towards centering mental "wellness," with significantly less emphasis on more challenging experiences and the intersection of mental health, equity and historically underrepresented groups.

But what remains minimally addressed is how historical erasure of AAPI voices contributes to the mental health experiences of this community. Gordon Shen, Assistant Professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center, shares: "Metaphors (e.g. tigers), stereotypes (model minority), or representations (bamboo ceiling) in conversations at work both marginalize this group and inhibit talking of mental health."

Instead, our culture is presented as one with "high stigma," as fundamentally harmful to our own wellbeing rather than as an outcome to a complex and diverse cultural history, one that has coped with immigration, isolation, oppression and erasure.

"I came from a disadvantaged neighborhood with immigrant parents, so I grew up being taught that as long as I worked hard, that would be enough," shares Vy (Jessica) Ngo, Data Informatics Analyst at Adobe. "Now that I'm a working professional, I've struggled with balancing what I wanted to do with my career, what my parents thought I should be doing with my career, and what I believed my career expected me to deliver—and my mental health has suffered as a result."

Despite the diversity of experiences in mental health across racial and ethnic groups, what remains true across *all* communities is the clear and negative impact of discrimination on mental health regardless of coping style, social support, or ethnic group identity. However, anti-Asian acts have only grown throughout the pandemic, and it was only until recently did significant attention and coverage emerge for the outright violent acts.

"Even for many [of our API ERG, Asians@] members who have thankfully not been directly targeted by violent attacks, harassment was certainly

experienced," shares Trisha Todman, diversity and belonging business partner at Airbnb. "The sheer knowledge of violence and discrimination being directed at people who share your racial identity is enough to cause racial trauma."

AAPIs are the least likely group to be promoted into management among white-collar professionals.
GETTY

Actions for Workplaces To Improve Equity And Mental Health For AAPIs

"The biggest companies right now are continuing to use high-visibility representational wins and DEI initiatives as a shield while actively lobbying legislatures to continue tearing down regulations and finding excuses to underpay workers," wrote DEI expert and author Lily Zheng in a recent LinkedIn post. "'Performative diversity' is too nice a word for that. That's a perversion of justice."

Companies, colleagues and mental health advocates alike must more actively advocate not only for AAPIs, but also for all historically disadvantaged identities and communities. Here's how:

- **For leaders.** In the near-term, join leaders like PayPal's president and CEO Dan Schulman. State your stance in allyship with the AAPI community and call on others in your organization, industry, and community to do the same. Looking forward, however, the greatest impact will come in doubling down on your investment in equitable recruiting, hiring and inclusion practices. There is no perfect solution, but go beyond the awareness months and inclusion campaigns, and understand how equity plays out day-to-day, hour-by-hour within your organization.

- **For HR and people leaders.** Ensure that all employees have equitable, affordable access to culturally competent mental health care. Consider expanding these offerings in response to acute events such as these recent attacks. Take time to understand your employees —AAPI, LGBTQ+, and all identities. Their experiences are not the same as the aggregated averages in national surveys and reports.

- **For DEI experts, employee resource groups (ERGs) and similar roles.** Many groups have faced immense challenges and traumas in the past year. All deserve their respective platforms for advocacy. That said, consider intentional community-building across groups to create a united effort for change. "The empathy between our Black and API ERGs at Airbnb has grown exponentially in the last year, especially in deep reflection and acknowledgement of the racial trauma each community experiences," shares Todman. "This is the kind of support needed now for the API community; being vocal, steadfast and deliberate about elevating their voices and intervening when they are mistreated."

- **For everyone.** Consider what you are uniquely positioned to do to create a more equitable future. Share AAPI-specific mental health resources and donate to AAPI organizations doing impactful work for the community. Our roles aren't to be experts in each others' experiences across our intersectional identities and communities. Our role is to truly listen, believe in their realities, and advocate for equity we all deserve.

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