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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental
Health and Stressors Among
Asian American and Pacific Islanders

by

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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Stressors Among Asian American and Pacific Islanders

Abstract

The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, along with the rest of the population globally, has been facing disruptions emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic in all parts of life. However, with the significant rise in racism, the AAPI community has had to confront a set of new challenges in their lives. Utilizing studies and literature written over the course of the pandemic, the purpose of this literature review is to examine the impacts observed on mental health outcomes among AAPIs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper aims to collect and present information surrounding the impact on mental health outcomes (i.e., anxiety, depression, distress, PTSD) within the AAPI community, along with identifying future possibilities towards addressing negative mental health outcomes for AAPIs.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Mental Health, Stress

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the daily lives, jobs, education, and healthcare among individuals and communities through quarantine restrictions, health and safety precautions, and shifts to remote and virtual formats. Following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) have also faced increased harassment and violence targeted towards their communities. This recent increase in racism started when politicians, journalists, and others linked the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (i.e., SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19) to China by calling it the “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus” (Saw, et al., 2021). More than 9,000 racially motivated attacks on AAPI communities have been reported between March of 2020 and June of 2021, with reports of attacks specifically on women and elderly community members (The Associated Press, 2021).

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and wellbeing is an emerging public health topic that has been researched through a wide variety of lenses since the pandemic began in early 2020. The AAPI community is now the racial group within the United States with the fastest growth (Kim, 2022). The racism and targeted hate that is experienced by AAPIs today stems from historical systemic and societal racism in the United States, with years of incidents such as verbal/physical harassment, workplace discrimination, and shunning (Saw, et al., 2021). Over the course of the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, such racism and hate has escalated due to the associations of the COVID-19 pandemic with racial stereotypes and misconceptions of AAPI communities.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the current literature regarding the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with actions and events stemming from the pandemic and its impacts on AAPI community members’ mental health outcomes. Populations

within the United States, along with populations and communities around the world have shown elevated levels of negative mental health outcomes and stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Wu et al., 2020). This paper specifically examines the mental health outcomes that the AAPI population has been experiencing during the pandemic.

Methods

The search terms used to find literature from online search engines were "Asian American," "Pacific Islander," "COVID-19," "AAPI," "Mental Health," and "Stress" in combination with each other. "COVID-19" relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and the occurrences surrounding it in the past two years. The term "AAPI" is the common shorthand for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. "Mental Health" pertains to effects such as depression, anxiety, stress, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues. Utilizing the Portland State Library article search engine, articles were found pertaining to the research topic and including the search terms. Search engines Google Scholar and PubMed were also utilized as external search engines for articles. The author found 28 articles from initial searches, including the terms used from both search engines, which the author further narrowed down based on inclusion criteria shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria for Articles Selected for the Literature Review

Inclusion Criteria	Met/Not Met
Data was collected/analyzed on a United States based population.	(Yes/No)
Data was collected/analyzed on AAPI ethnicities.	(Yes/No)

Data was collected/analyzed during the period of COVID-19 (since 2020).	(Yes/No)
Article was published within the last two years.	(Yes/No)
Article data analyzes mental health and/or stress on the AAPI population	(Yes/No)

Out of the examination of retrieved articles using the inclusion criteria, a total of 14 articles were selected to be utilized in the literature review. Four of the articles were retrieved from the Portland State University Library article search engine, eight articles were retrieved from the Google Scholar database, and two articles from the PubMed search engine . Information was then taken and examined over the course of the review. Table 2 summarizes the articles retrieved and utilized in the literature review.

Table 2. Summary of Articles Utilized Within The Literature Review

Title	Author	Year Published	Journal	Mental Health Outcomes	Search Engine	Search Keywords	Retrieved
Differences in mental health status among Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic: Findings from the Health, ethnicity, and pandemic study.	Tiwari, et al.	2022	Health Equity	Psychological distress, depression, anxiety	PubMed	“Asian American” “Mental Health” “COVID-19”	8/2/22
Factors associated with depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomatology during the COVID-19 pandemic: Clinical	Liu, et al.	2020	Psychiatry Research	Depression, anxiety, PTSD	PubMed	“Asian American” “Mental Health” “COVID-19”	8/2/22

implications for U.S. young adult mental health.							
Covid-19 and Asian American College Students: Discrimination, fear, and mental health	Chen, et al.	2021	Journal of Emergency Management	PTSD, Depression	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/24/22
Covid-19 and Its Impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander Mental Health	Fukui, M.	2022	Temple University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing	PTSD, psychological stressors, mental illness	PSU Library Database	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/24/22
Mental health equity of Filipino communities in covid-19: A framework	Chan, et al.	2021	The Professional Counselor	Post traumatic stress, depression, suicidal ideation	PSU Library Database	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/24/22

for practice and advocacy.							
Stop AAPI Hate Mental Health Report.	Saw, et al.	2021	Stop AAPI Hate	Anxiety, depression, racial trauma, stress	PSU Library Database	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/26/22
Racism, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and racial disparity in the U.S. covid-19 syndemic.	Zhou, et al.	2022	Behavioral Medicine	Post-traumatic stress	Google Scholar	“AAPI” “COVID-19” “Stress”	7/26/22
The impact of covid-19 disruptions and perceived discrimination on well-being and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms:	Hood, et al.	2021	Emerging Adulthood	PTSD, emotional wellbeing, psychological well being	Google Scholar	“AAPI” “COVID-19” “Stress”	7/26/22

Testing the moderating role of exercise among African American and Asian American emerging adults							
Tsunami: Recommitting to Address AAPI Mental Health in a Post-COVID Era	Kim, Oliver.	2022	Nova Law Review	Mental illness, behavioral health issues	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/26/22
“Take your kung-flu back to Wuhan”: Counseling Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders with race-based	Litam, et al.	2020	The Professional Counselor	Race-based trauma, anxiety, psychological distress	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “Asian American”	7/26/22

trauma related to covid-19							
Effects of covid-19-related racial discrimination on depression and life satisfaction among young, middle, and older Chinese Americans	Litam, et al.	2021	Adultspan Journal	Depression, life satisfaction	PSU Library Database	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/26/22
Covid-19 racial discrimination on Mental Health and Life Satisfaction among Asian Americans: Examining a moderated mediation model	Oh, et al.	2022	Asian American Journal of Psychology	Depression, anxiety, life satisfaction	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “Asian American”	7/26/22

Anti-asian discrimination and the Asian-white mental health gap during COVID-19	Wu, et al.	2020	Ethnic and Racial Studies	Mental health gaps, stress, depression	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/24/22
Covid-19 anti-Asian racism and race-based stress: A phenomenological qualitative media analysis	Yang, et al.	2021	Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy	Race-based stress, PTSD	Google Scholar	“COVID-19”, “Mental Health” “AAPI”	7/24/22

Literature Review

Of the 14 articles used in the literature review, all research was conducted over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, starting from early 2020 to the present—approximately the past two years. Studies utilized surveys of AAPI individuals within the United States, collecting information about mental health, well-being, and stress concerning the COVID-19 pandemic (Oh et al., 2022; Litam et al., 2021; Saw et al, 2021). Some literature also utilized reported incidents, media analysis, and content analysis about hate crimes and racism (Fukui, 2022; Kim, 2022; Tiwari, et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021).

Within the literature, an overarching theme was found regarding mental health outcomes among AAPI individuals being negative, with increases in mental illness symptoms, including heightened levels of fear and anxiety over the course of the pandemic (Fukui, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Tiwari et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2020). Tiwari et al. (2022) reported a significant increase in the prevalence of specific mental illnesses of depression, anxiety, and PTSD within the AAPI population compared to before the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, the literature noted findings that AAPI populations have been experiencing higher levels of mental disorders in comparison to white populations in the United States since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al., 2020; Litam et al., 2020; Wu, et al, 2020). A study using survey results from approximately 8,500 adult individuals in the United States found that in comparison to white Americans and Asian immigrants, AAPIs had a higher score reporting temporal changes in mental health over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with overall higher depression and anxiety scores (Wu, et al, 2020).

Furthermore, findings across multiple studies (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al, 2020; Saw et al, 2021; Wu et al, 2020) depicted an association between racism toward AAPIs and negative mental health impacts — with occurrences rising over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Saw et al. (2021) found that AAPI individuals that have experienced racism have in turn been affected by heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, along with physical symptoms. Multiple articles had findings relating to Asian Americans displaying signs of racial trauma (Saw et al., 2021; Litam et al., 2020; Zhou et al, 2021), a mental health symptom associated with depression, anger, anxiety, hypervigilance, somatic symptoms, and physiological reactivity, decreased self-esteem, and PTSD. Wu et al. (2020) found themes of negative mental health outcomes, and symptoms relating to race-related discrimination were prominent, with an increase in hate crimes and racism factoring into the COVID-19 pandemic impacting race-related mental health outcomes. Yang et al. (2021) found through content analysis of 84 media articles that race-based stress levels tied to incidents of racism increased over the course of the pandemic as well, adding to the existing stress levels. Studies found that Asian Americans who have experienced racism are experiencing higher levels of stress stemming from targeted racism than the COVID-19 pandemic itself (Jeung et al, 2021)

With high levels of PTSD symptoms, in addition to stress-related impacts on AAPIs, a theme identified across multiple articles depicted that mental health outcomes varied by age and demographic groups within AAPI communities (Chan et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2022). Chen et al. (2021) found that when it comes to AAPI young adults, it has been reported that there is a high level of fear of COVID-19 and prevention knowledge within the AAPI population, and a significant association between high PTSD and depression scores for college students. The studies additionally indicated that in regards to COVID-19

pandemic-related racial discrimination, younger and middle ages groups were found to have significantly higher levels of depression in comparison to older groups (Litam et al., 2021; Oh et al., 2022). Emerging adults (individuals aged 18 years to 29 years) from the AAPI community were also examined as the specific age group is especially susceptible to negative mental health outcomes, with findings reporting higher stress levels in comparison to pre-pandemic stress levels (Hood, et al., 2021).

Authors differed regarding the future of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the AAPI community, with different findings and means of addressing the negative mental health outcomes and increase in stress. Authors Chan et al. (2021) promoted the concept of racial socialization- utilizing cultural norms and values to assist with mental health treatment for the AAPI communities. In regards to helping with trauma stemming from race, culturally sensitive interventions and increased access to mental health assistance were identified (Oh et al., 2022). Decolonization of current race-based trauma healing and interventions, utilizing cultural proverbs, and seeking awareness and education of perpetrators of racism were brought up as potential means of assistance for the AAPI community (Litam, 2020). Authors Hood et al. (2021) tested 368 African American and AAPI emerging adults, identifying the positive effects of exercise on mental health over the course of the pandemic—in which exercise moderated disruptions in mental, social, and physical wellbeing during the pandemic times. Additionally, Tiwari and Zhang (2022) identified culturally appropriate implementations and interventions regarding mental health awareness and treatment to address the negative mental health outcomes experienced by the AAPI community. Moreover, with regard to addressing negative impacts on individuals and the AAPI community, studies indicated that the lack of access to mental health care and under-reporting associated with mental health, stress, hate crimes incidents, and access

to mental health treatment within the AAPI community makes it difficult to assist individuals who have been negatively impacted (Kim, 2022; Litam et al., 2020; Wu, et al, 2020).

Discussion

The research found on this topic has brought to light the negative mental health outcomes associated with impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such outcomes emerged as a result of stressors the AAPI community has been experiencing beyond the universal stress and mental health impacts relating to COVID-19 and are associated with the rise of racism and hate crimes surrounding the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Differences in ideas were identified surrounding addressing the negative mental health outcomes, with authors bringing up different means of minimizing existing negative impacts. Regarding possibilities for the future of the AAPI and their mental health outcomes, the studies suggested potential future recommendations, with authors differing on avenues of support for the AAPI communities. .

Literature found at the time of the review has analyzed the identified impacts on mental health, and stress on the Asian American and Pacific Islander population from the span of 2020 to 2022 (years of the COVID-19 pandemic), with additional research on the entire population of the United States, along with other minority groups as well. Despite the pandemic being ongoing for two years, the impacts and findings surrounding the topic have yet to be fully investigated, with disruptions and incidents surrounding COVID-19 and racism towards AAPI not yet subsiding. Potential long term negative mental health outcomes, such as generational trauma, increase in mental illness, and community and family disruptions as a result of the pandemic, may be likely.

Further directions regarding the topic of AAPI mental health outcomes will be exploring long-term negative impacts from the pandemic in the next 5 to 10 years, as well as potential

generational and cultural effects relating to mental health. More research could also be done on further examining the different demographics such as gender, sexuality, and age within the AAPI community, along with additional demographic data on specific ethnicities within the AAPI populations. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impacted populations, along with identifying means of interventions and health promotion aligning with the priority population.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this literature review include the systematic approach of conducting the literature search and review, by utilizing a predefined inclusion criteria along with multiple search engines as databases as means of retrieving literature. By examining and summarizing the literature included in the literature review, relevant studies have been identified, along with notable themes and findings associated with the research topic.

As COVID-19 is still a relatively new disease and the pandemic is still ongoing, there are still topics that have yet to be completely researched, such as the topic of the literature review. There may be articles and research relating to the topic being reviewed that are currently in the midst of being published at the time of the literature review. The author also acknowledges the limitations of only three search engines being used to gather literature, with potential other search engines with broader scopes and larger amounts of literature meeting the inclusion criteria. Work published on platforms not included on search engines may have not been included, along with grey literature that may have been useful within the literature review.

Conclusion

This literature review found that the mental health and stress of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community has been negatively impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racism associated with it. Findings depicted higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, along with higher levels of stress were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and disease than before the pandemic, aligning with the increase in the number of hate crimes and racism towards the AAPI community. Further research should examine the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting effects on mental health outcomes within and across AAPI communities.

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