

Spotlight on Health Equity: Addressing the Mental Health of Asian Americans Across the Lifespan

Problem Statement:

Over 22 million Asian Americans comprised of more than 40 distinct ethnicities live in the United States. Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing populations, at a rate faster than any other major race group in the United States (Ruiz, Noe-Bustamante & Shah, 2023). According to data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over 37 percent of Asian American adults, or 7.7 million people, report poor health status. While Asian Americans have clinically significant needs in mental health, they are three times less likely compared to White Americans to seek and use mental health services (Centers for American Progress, 2018).

Executive Summary

Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in the United States and they face significant unmet mental health needs, a challenge exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research has underscored the under-identification and inadequate treatment of mental health conditions within the Asian American population. To address this issue it is critically important to develop culturally tailored interventions to identify and treat mental health conditions within the US health care system. Policymakers can play a pivotal role in meeting this need by supporting legislation that incentivizes the implementation of community-based mental health initiatives for ethnic-specific or culturally distinct Asian American groups in their local communities.

Mental Health Among Asian Americans

Although Asian Americans report fewer diagnosed mental health conditions, this may be misleading due to patterns of under-reporting and under-identification (Spencer et al., 2010). The reasons for this under-reporting and under-identification among Asian American populations are complex, which may be due to differences in perceptions of mental health conditions. Sometimes, symptoms related to mental health challenges may be attributed to chronic conditions (Gee et al., 2007). This can result in mental health symptoms that may not be recognized by those experiencing these challenges or their providers (Gautam et al., 2011; Ina et al., 2011). Stigma associated with a mental health diagnosis in Asian American communities may also play an important role in the under-reporting of mental health symptoms and conditions.

COVID-19 and Impact on Asian American Mental Health

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Stop AAPI Hate (as of this writing in July, 2024) received over 11,500 reported hate incidents involving explicit acts, aggravated violence, harassment, and direct harm. Anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic was linked to an increase in psychological distress among Asian Americans, regardless of ethnicity and worries about the pandemic (Macaranas et al., 2023; Okazaki et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2022). Among Asian American young adults, vicarious, or second-hand, discrimination such as witnessing racism targeting one's own race group was associated with race-based stress symptoms, even when controlling for having directly experienced discrimination (eITomhamy et al., 2023). Vicarious racism was also associated with poorer sleep quality among Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is linked to an overall reduction in mental health status such as increased depression and anxiety along with other health hazards (Yip et al., 2024).

“We need to make mental health a priority in our communities. AAPI may have had bad experiences engaging in mental health services, and do not know about case managers and mental health clinicians who speak their language and understand the issues they are dealing with.”

-- Isabel Ching, Executive Director, Hamilton Madison House, New York, NY & Community Advisory Board Member

Voices from the Community

“There is an intersectionality of housing, food insecurity, having to look for work, learning English, and substance use issues that are hidden in our community. We need trained clinicians who know both the language and culture of Asian Americans seeking services.”

Mitch Wu, Director of Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) in Queens, NY & Community Advisory Board Member

“The Western mental health system focuses on individualism which is different from the collectivism of our Asian communities. If we want to have mental health work for Asian Americans, it has to take into account the relationships we have in our families and our communities.”

Larry Lee, NYC Social Worker & Community Advisory Board Member

“Non-Western approaches to mental health can be extremely supportive for our communities. Most of these are untapped or unresearched, but can make a real difference in our communities.”

Anita Gundanna, Co-Executive Director, Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, South Orange, NJ & Community Advisory Board Member

Need for Culturally-Tailored Framework for Asian American Mental Health

Overall, it would appear that a culturally-tailored framework for understanding mental health for Asian American populations is inadequate in the current service delivery system. Culturally appropriate mental health treatments continue to be under-resourced or unavailable for Asian Americans (Augsberger et al., 2015; Derr, 2016). This can deter the use of mental health supports from those who direly need them (Hechanova & Waelde, 2017).

Key Policy Recommendations

Policy solutions to address the under-identification and **undertreatment of mental health issues among Asian Americans** can include:

- Providing funding for mental health services in ethnic-specific Asian American communities and increasing outreach to increase mental health literacy in this population.
- Incentivizing hospitals and health care systems (including insurance companies) to work with community-based mental health service providers that serve different ethnic Asian groups.
- Creating more funding mechanisms to train and support the pipeline of Asian American psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and other mental health professionals who can serve ethnic-specific Asian families and communities.
- Provide funding to explore how culturally-relevant services like acupuncture, spiritual practices and other culturally-based practices can improve mental health for Asian American communities.
- Working with professional societies that provide certifications for health professionals to require more trainings in cultural competencies and culturally-tailored approaches to prevent, diagnose, and manage mental health needs of Asian families and communities.

Scan QR Code with your phone to see references and resources.



Center for Asian Health Promotion and Equity (CAHPE)