

**Anti-Asian Racism in North America during COVID-19:  
Exploring the Role of Media and the Reproduction of Social Inequality**

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on the discrimination and racism experienced by people of Asian descent during the COVID-19 pandemic in North America. It has been 2 years since the COVID-19 outbreak began. The unstable situation caused by the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted our society and the economy. During the COVID-19 epidemic, we have witnessed an increase in hate-motivated incidents where race or ethnicity has been a factor, including incidents against Asian people. Anti-Asian racism was further exacerbated by the xenophobic and racist political rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 virus, especially after former President Trump described the coronavirus as a “Chinese virus”. The faulty belief that Asian ethnicities are solely responsible for causing COVID-19 has triggered hate crimes and discrimination toward people of Asian descent. This study shows how the discrimination and racism experienced by people of Asian origin can take various forms and how racial stereotypes produce social inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords: Anti-Asian Racism, COVID-19, mass media, social media, social inequality**

## **Introduction**

After the new coronavirus first appeared in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province of China, it has led to a huge loss of human life worldwide, causing widespread disruption in the personal, social, and economic lives of people across the world (Edara, 2020). The outbreak of new infectious diseases has resulted in increased levels of fear, anxiety, and outbursts of strong emotions amongst many (Ziems et al. 2020; Ahorsu et al. 2020; Zandifar and Badrfam 2020; Miller 2020; Montemurro 2020). Fear is an adaptive emotion that serves to mobilize energy to deal with potential threats. However, when fear is not well calibrated to the actual threat, it can be maladaptive and burdensome. For instance, when fear is too excessive, this may bring detrimental effects both at the individual level (e.g., mental health problems such as phobia and social anxiety) and at the societal level (e.g., panic shopping or xenophobia) (Mertens et al. 2020).

In the case of Canada, as the government imposed the strictest lockdowns, including closing schools and a ban on non-essential travel, people stockpiled items like toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and canned food due to fear of running out of supplies. Businesses and schools have been forced to close their doors, and people have been scared (Grove & Zwi, 2006).

Unfortunately, fear and anxiety have fueled misinformation and xenophobia as the unstable situation has raised people's concern for personal safety and heightened their anxiety (Gilbert et al. 2020). Likewise, global pandemics and crises create fear and anger, which are the key ingredients for racism and xenophobia to thrive. Particularly, against those from China, as well as their culture and traditions. However, since the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been an increase in acts and displays of racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, directed at all Asians. Further, this fear and anger are often stocked by the media and influential political actors. Most

notably, by Donald Trump when he referred to the coronavirus as the “Wuhan virus” or “Chinese virus.” Thereby associating Chinese communities with the virus, and contributing to processes of racialization, Sinophobia, general xenophobia, and racism (Edara, 2020).

Evidence shows that hateful incidents throughout the world, such as acts of microaggression, physical and verbal abuse, and online harassment have increased since COVID-19 was framed as a Chinese issue (Ziems 2020; Arnold 2020). Online harassment refers to a broad spectrum of abusive behaviours enabled by technology platforms and used to target a specific user or user (Blackwell et al., 2018). Although the current virus is now officially named COVID-19, individuals of East Asian or Asian backgrounds have still been unfairly targeted. They have often suffered from acts of racism, such as accusing the culture, victim-blaming, dealing with slurs or glares and being physically attacked in public places (Edara 2020, p.14). It took the forms of white supremacy, xenophobia, Sinophobia, and institutional and aversive racism. As COVID-19 has spread, it has been institutionalized and politicized (Edara, 2020). Consequently, these victims of racism and xenophobia are more likely to experience negative implications of well-being.

In this regard, COVID-19 has contributed to the increased of racism, discrimination and social inequality, especially against Asians across the world. My research will focus on North America and the purpose of this research is to explore the increased social inequality examining xenophobia, the fear or hatred of that which is perceived to be foreign, particularly on people of Asian descent, amid COVID-19. And my research questions are as follows: (1) How do global pandemics affect Asians in North America? (2) How do racial stereotypes produce social inequality during COVID-19? Even though Asians are born in North America, they are usually treated as outsiders and struggling because of racism and xenophobia.

Therefore, in the following pages, this paper will present the rise of racism in the shadow of COVID-19, starting with a description and components of racism, and historical background, linkage to racism in the event of an epidemic threat. Then, some significant incidents of racism and xenophobia in North America that have occurred during COVID-19 will be described. In the last section, the increased social inequality will be discussed during the COVID-19.

### **Theoretical framework: Critical Race Theory**

Since COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China, racism towards Asian people has increased. As noted above, this includes individual acts of bullying, discrimination, and violence, for example, Asian people being barred from establishments (Devakumar et al., 2020). Despite anti-racism movements, racism is still deeply rooted in our society. It seems that COVID-19 has fueled hatred and fear towards Asians, including Canadian Asians. In this article, I will look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian communities from a critical race theoretical perspective.

The critical race theory (CRT) movement comprises activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power (Taylor, 1998). Interestingly, CRT was not created by sociologists. The first founders of the critical race theory movement include such legal scholars as Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crenshaw (Taylor, 1998). They see racism as inescapable and inherent in the legal system. More specifically, the CRT movement was officially organized in 1989, but its intellectual origins go back much further to the 1960s. At that time, many lawyers, activists, and legal scholars realized that the heady advances of the

civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled in many respects. In order to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground, they believed that new theories and strategies were needed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT is a useful theoretical framework to considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up. At the same time, CRT provides us with a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, the group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious (Liu, 2009). Soon after CRT was introduced, it started to be applied to other disciplines, including politics and education. It has spread beyond legal studies' confines to many different fields like gender studies, LGBTQ, American studies, and sociology. As mentioned above, although CRT began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline (Kathleen, 2018). Today, in sociology, critical race theoretical perspectives are used to understand social issues related to racial conflicts, racism, and invisible racial hierarchies.

Therefore, CRT can be described as an emerging transdisciplinary, race-equity methodology that originated in legal studies. As a tool for conducting research and practice, CRT is intended to elucidate contemporary racial phenomena, expand the vocabulary with which to discuss complex racial concepts, and challenge racial hierarchies (Chandra, 2010). Furthermore, CRT in sociology is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact the social structures, practices, and discourses that affect people of colour. CRT also argues that the perception and experience of the world are determined by the race structure of society. Critical race theorists believe ignoring racial differences maintains the status quo with its deeply institutionalized injustices to racial minorities (Romero & Eric, 2005, p. 121).

In this respect, we can see that CRT in sociology is conceived as a social justice project. CRT combines the issues of power and race to understand racism which is engrained in the very fabric of society. It also seeks to analyze racial minorities' experiences while examining existing power systems like white privilege and white supremacy (Kathleen, 2018). According to Solorzano (1997, p.6), critical race theorists also take the position that racism has at least four dimensions: (1) it has micro and macro components; (2) it takes on institutional and individual forms; (3) it has conscious and unconscious elements; and (4) it has a cumulative impact on both the individual and group (Davis, 1989; Lawrence, 1987).

In my research, I will see some of the recent social issues from CRT perspectives to understand how global pandemics like COVID-19 influence Asians in Canada. To do this, I will choose some empirical examples that happened during the pandemic as critical race theorists often utilize the experiences of people of colour through the narrative and storytelling methodology. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how institutionalized racism restricts racial minorities who do not belong to the dominant culture from power, opportunities, and prosperity. I expect CRT will help me examine social constructs that result in oppressive situations for non-dominant race group.

Before looking at the hateful incidents following the spread of COVID-19, the history of racism and its components will be described. Then, I will explore linkages between a theoretical framework in critical race theory and its relation and application to the concepts of race, racism, and racial stereotyping in media.

## **Understanding anti-Asian Racism**

Manning Marable (1992) has defined racism as “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and colour.” Although many policies are being enacted to prevent racism, discrimination based on ethnicity, racial inequality, and exploitation are big problems in North American society.

Also, the definitions of racism that Marable provides are at least three important points: (1) one group believes itself to be superior; (2) the group which believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out the racist behaviour and exploit other races; and (3) racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups. These points take the position that racism is about institutional power, and people of color in the United States have never possessed this form of power. In other words, only white people had the power to exploit other races (Solorzano, 1997).

## **Major Characteristic of Modern Racism**

Historically, one major characteristic selected as the basis for the categorization of non-western peoples was differences of bodily appearance, primarily skin colour. This perception of racial differences has produced the ideology of racial superiority and this is often used by whites to oppress other ‘races.’

It has been seen that, in spite of the progress made towards racial justice and social equality within the past decades, many Asians in North America have never felt fully accepted in society and continue to be treated as perpetual foreigners (Chen, 2020). Also, racism has changed to include more subtle forms. If we see our world today, while racism is alive and well,

egregious and overt acts of racism are less prevalent today and have been replaced with more subtle forms of exclusion and prejudices (Her 2017; Sue & Capodilupo et al. 2007).

Racism is not always ostentatiously egregious, explicit, or even conscious (Pat, 2010). Incidents of blatant and explicit racial discrimination, as envisioned in the classic racial harassment paradigm, unfortunately still occur-but much less frequently. I argue that it has been changed to more subtle and complex ways as I mentioned above. Today, people in the majority group make far fewer overt hostile actions towards minorities compared to previous decades. This is because, when racist acts do occur, they are widely condemned rather than being condoned as they were in the past. These positive changes are due to widespread disapproval of racist activities in society: it is no longer socially acceptable to express racism directly. However, COVID-19 has triggered anti-Asian racism and became a reason to justify discrimination against Asian races.

Today, racism manifests itself in numerous ways:

First, avoiding any meaningful contact with the minority group. Second, practising racial discrimination when the circumstances allow it. Third, rather than criticizing a minority group, those with racist beliefs will attack a policy or action and use that as an outlet for their attitudes. Fourth, making a distinction between groups in terms of their 'values'

Unfortunately, the impact of negative images and stereotypes we have inherited from the past is difficult to eradicate. In other words, a lack of tolerance of hostile behaviours is not necessarily the same as genuine equality of opportunity. For example, a reduction of racist acts does not automatically mean people of colour are being fairly treated in the workplace.

The forms of prejudice we live with today have different names, one being modern racism (Question 2 liberal views?). Modern racism, a term coined by John B. McConahay

(1986), refers to one type of racism that is more subtle and indirect than its traditional counterpart. It is characterized by the following beliefs: (1) discrimination is no longer an issue for people of colour who (2) continue to make excessive demands for changes to the status quo—demands that are unfair because people of colour have all the rights they need; (3) consequently, the attention people of colour receive from the government and other institutions is undeserved and constitutes “special treatment.” Two additional tenets are: (1) the aforementioned three beliefs are empirical facts, and thus, (2) individuals endorsing these beliefs are not racist (i.e., racism is seen in its traditional form only) (Awad et al. 2005). Modern racists do not perceive themselves as biased (Todd et al., 2017)

Modern racists neither express nor endorse racist views and stereotypes. They believe in greater integration between people. However, modern racists also believe racial equality has been already achieved and we do not need further policies to promote equality. If racism has been neutralized, then it’s reasonable to maintain the status quo. For people who think in this way, racism is over and there’s nothing left to discuss. Put simply, people of colour are not minority from this point of view.

However, unlike old racism, modern racism reveals itself at opportune moments, is more oblique than confrontational, and often leads to a conflict in our own personal values. In other words, racial prejudice has not disappeared, it has changed.

Compared to the past, obvious forms of prejudice are witnessed less than they were and, for people of colour, it is comforting to believe that racism is becoming a thing of the past; that somehow we live in an enlightened age where judging people by appearance, especially the colour of their skin is no longer acceptable. However, it doesn't mean racism is over.

Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. Today, prejudiced attitudes are expressed in more subtle and nuanced ways. For some of the points, valid claims can be made that this is not racism at all.

Our understanding of racism needs to become much more developed and sophisticated in order to match its increased subtlety and elusiveness. Subtle and subversive discrimination can be also considered as one of the most common ways racialized people experience unequal treatment.

It is not hard to find many examples of subtle forms of racial discrimination. In employment, it can take the form of failing to hire, train, mentor or promote a racialized person. Racialized persons may find themselves subjected to excessive-performance monitoring or maybe more seriously blamed for a common mistake. In addition to this, normal differences of opinion or failing to get along with a co-worker may be treated as more serious when a racialized person is involved. According to Alleyne (2004), she explained that people of colour often face oppression and discrimination in the workplace. It is usually characterized by subtle comments and discriminatory acts based on a person's race and cultural identity, such as being silent or not responding to a person of colour's comments in a meeting (Her 2017; Alleyne 2004). Due to rising pressure to appear egalitarian, subtle discrimination pervades today's workplace (Jones et al, 2017)

Also, Asian female workers are more likely to be excluded and marginalized than Asian male workers due to negative stereotypes about them. According to a qualitative research (Kim 2017, p.65), many Asian female workers experience and face stereotypes and subtle discrimination for being Asian women. The participants from Kim's article spoke of the disadvantages of being Asian and the unconscious and subtle prejudices that they encountered. They said the discrimination was more challenging to deal with because it was too subtle and

often could not be considered as racism. Subtle racial discrimination can occur in a variety of other contexts as well. In housing, racialized persons may be turned away as tenants, or may not be granted equal access to maintenance and repairs. Issues also arise in services and facilities including malls, restaurants, movie theatres, education services and healthcare services.

Nevertheless, modern racists further believe that racial prejudice is bad and that the above beliefs do not constitute racism. Modern racists would claim to disagree with any type of racial prejudice and strongly disagree that they are prejudiced themselves (Migetz, 2004).

### **Defining Hate Crime**

According to the United States Department of Justice (DOJ, n.d.), a hate crime involves a criminal act, including violent crimes such as harassment, assault, murder, arson, vandalism, or threats to commit such crimes against a person or his/her property due to their real or perceived race, colour, religion, nationality, country of origin, disability, gender or sexual orientation. Some incidents of bias and hate that occur toward marginalized groups meet the legal definition of harassment but are considered “hate incidents” or acts of prejudice that do not rise to the level of a criminal act (DOJ, n.d.). These can occur in a subtle way and are defined as “acts of prejudice that are not crimes and do not involve violence, threats, or property damage” (DOJ, n.d.; Gover, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, hate crimes may have occurred because “other” marginalized and minority racial/ethnic groups are perceived as dangerous, for example, the faulty belief that Asian ethnicities are solely responsible for causing and spreading COVID-19 trigger Asian hate crimes (Grove & Zwi, 2006).

## **History of Anti-Asian Racism in North America**

The government of Canada (2022) illustrates anti-Asian racism is historical and ongoing discrimination, negative stereotyping, and injustice experienced by people of Asian descent, based on others' assumptions about their ethnicity and nationality. People of Asian descent in Canada are still subjected to specific overt and subtle racist tropes and stereotypes at individual and systemic levels, which lead to their ongoing social, economic, political and cultural marginalization, disadvantage and unequal treatment. They have been faced with many unfair situations based on the stereotypes towards Asians. This includes perceptions of being a "Yellow Peril," a "Perpetual Foreigner," a "Model Minority," "exotic," or "mystic" These stereotypes are rooted in Canada's long history of racist and exclusionary laws like Chinese immigration act on 1923. In the United States, for a very long time, we have seen that Asian Americans have experienced physical violence/hate crime and harassment. For example, violent attacks during the establishment of Chinatowns in the late 1800s are the most representative incidents [Chen, 2000]). In addition to this, there have been persistent marginalizing stereotyping (e.g., the perpetuation of the "yellow peril" myth at the turn of the 20th century [Mudambi, 2019]), and verbal attacks and microaggressions motivated by individual-level racism and xenophobia from the time they arrived in America in the late 1700s up until the present day (Chen, 2000).

## **Xenophobia and Sinophobia in North America during COVID-19**

In the last week of 2019, the world began to take notice of reports out of Wuhan, China hospitals about an increase in pneumonia cases of unexplained origin (Wang, Horby, Hayden, & Gao, 2020).

Soon thereafter, scientists found that these illnesses were due to a new type of coronavirus (i.e., severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 [SARS-CoV-2]), which causes a disease referred to as COVID-19 (i.e., 2019 coronavirus disease) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). It is believed that the virus spread from animals to humans in Wuhan's open-air "wet markets" that sell fish and raw meat to consumers (CDC, 2020a), and by mid-January 2020, began to spread rapidly throughout Asia and globally (Schumaker, 2020; Gover, 2020). These outbreaks created fear, and fear is a key ingredient for racism and xenophobia to thrive, bringing detrimental effects such as social instability and inequality (Mertens et al. 2020 ).

Following the spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan, China, there has been a large increase in discrimination and hate crimes against Asian people. This includes individual acts of microaggression or violence, to collective forms, for instance, Chinese people being barred from establishments (Delan et al. 2020).

The hatred toward Chinese descent has extended to all Asian races, which means xenophobia has spread much like the virus itself, affecting those not just of Chinese descent but those of any East Asian origin or nationality (Chen, 2020). Modern racism has always existed in subtle forms, but the spread of COVID-19 has become a catalyst for allowing racism against Asians (Cheng, 2020). Although this has been a global phenomenon, I deal with racist incidents towards East Asian people in the US and Canada where there are large Asian minority groups.

As mentioned above, after COVID-19 spread across the world, people of Asian descent have reported a surge in racially motivated hate crimes involving physical violence and harassment targeting them specifically despite the disease impacting people of all races (Chiu, 2020). According to Vachuska (2020), COVID-19 has enabled the spread of racism and created

fear of foreigners, national insecurity, and general xenophobia, which may be associated with the increase in anti-Asian hate crime during the pandemic.

### **1. Incidents of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States**

Anti-Chinese sentiment has continued in the US since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and attacks have occurred to people of Asian descent as a whole regardless of whether they are Chinese or not. Anti-Chinese sentiment and racist incidents was significantly exacerbated in the United States in the early months of 2020 after President Trump described the coronavirus as a “Chinese virus” and U.S secretary of State Mike Pompeo made claims that the virus was released from a lab in Wuhan (Reja, 2021).

By associating virus with China, I argue that this increased American hatred against Asian people. The expression “foreign virus” makes people think and identify foreign countries as an external threat (Viala-Gaufrey & Lindaman, 2020) and shapes the world view of people by both highlighting and hiding certain aspects of a concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

This kind of racist rhetoric is also seen on Social media. Most existing research on online hate speech and harassment does not focus on anti-Asian hate and is not situated in the context of a pandemic (ElSherief et al. 2018; Liu et al. 2018; Mathew et al. 2019). What research has examined COVID-19-related hate and xenophobic writing against people of Asian descent has consistently shown evidence that after the pandemic began to spread, many people of non-Chinese have ascribed to blame Asian communities for the huge economic ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic (Vidgen et al. 2020; Schild et al. 2020). This has been illustrated by the 900% rise in cyber abuse against both Chinese and non-Chinese Asian people (Cheng, 2020).

A recent analysis of Twitter and online image message boards revealed a sudden increase in the use of Sinophobic slurs beginning in late January 2020 (Chen, 2020). Compared to data from before the COVID-19 pandemic occur in the United States, its authors discovered a shift on Twitter of blaming Asian people for the outbreak, and an increase in Sinophobic terms on message boards. On Twitter, they observed, the terms “virus” and “chink” began to appear more frequently alongside the word “Chinese”. Twitter also showed substantial upticks in the use of Sinophobic slurs Trump’s references to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” (Chen, 2020).

Although, social media has provided a venue for increased racism, it has also played a significant role in exposing anti-Asian hate crimes where news stories of anti-Asian racism including verbal and physical attacks have been widely disseminated—those who experienced discrimination and racism during COVID-19 engaged in more social media private messaging, posting/commenting, and browsing. In this context, people of Asian descent in the United States have also been able to use social media as a coping tool to share feelings and to appeal to the public about their horrible experiences.

The increases in racist rhetoric have also coincided with increases in racist attacks. Since COVID-19 began, Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to verbal and physical attacks, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination around the world. Also, it is interesting to note that many news reports and social media have perpetuated the idea that anti-Asian violence is committed mostly by people of colour , a new analysis shows the majority of attackers are white (Yam, 2021).

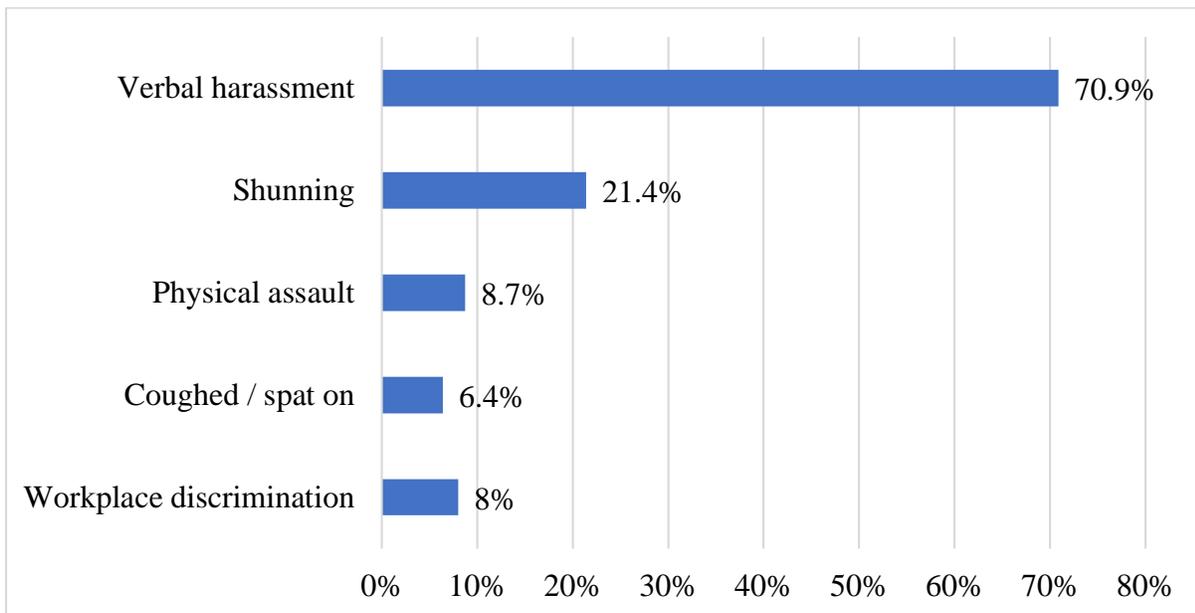
Due to the anti-Chinese sentiment, there have been a large number of physical assaults against Asian Americans and ethnically Asian individuals in the United States directly related to COVID-19 (Jeung & Nham, 2020). Several incidents have occurred throughout the country since

January, including the defacement of Korean and Vietnamese restaurants, as well as a rise in physical assaults and verbal slurs (Cheng, 2020).

In response to the increased experiences of racism, in 2020, a coalition of Asian-American groups created a reporting center called STOP AAPI HATE (AAPI refers to Asian American and Pacific Islander). Within 2020, they received more than 2,800 reports of incidents of racism, hate speech, discrimination, and physical attacks against Asians and Asian-Americans (Cabral, 2021). Figure 1 shows the proportion of each incident that is triggered by Anti-Asian sentiments in the pandemic of COVID-19.

Most discrimination that Asian Americans experienced was verbal discrimination (70.9%) followed by a subtle form of racism (21.4%).

**Figure 1. Types of discrimination reported from March-December 2020 (Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center 2020)**



Further, Jeung & Nham (2020) found that, even though the majority of Americans were sheltering-in-place and staying at home, 80% of the self-reported anti-Asian incidents have taken place outside people's private residences, in grocery stores, local businesses, and in public places and NBC News reported that 30% of Americans have personally witnessed someone blaming Asians for the coronavirus (Ellerbeck, 2020). In one typical incident of verbal harassment, a Chinese American reported "I was on the phone with my mom speaking in Mandarin when a woman walked by and yelled 'get this coronavirus chink away from me,' directed at me." A Filipino family in Carmel, CA was subject to a racist tirade by a drunk British man who told them to go back to their country (Oriol 2020). Two Asian Americans were verbally and antagonistically harassed by the same woman in a single day in Torrance, California (Campa, 2020). There were hundreds of cases in which Asian-Americans were harassed in public or barred from businesses or transportation, yelled at in supermarkets, accused of "bringing coronavirus" to the US or refused transport in-car services like Uber or Lyft. On May 4, 2020, the Anti-Defamation League released a list of near-daily incidents of racist attacks and cases of harassment from January through early May.

Many examples of harassment led to physical violence as well. For instance, on May 3, a stranger shouted at an Asian man on the New York subway "*You're infected China boy, you need to get off the train*" and then attempted to pull the man out of his seat. Moreover, among the reported incidents, for example, an Asian told racism he faced right after the COVID-19 spreads: "*A truck drove by and threw a fast-food franchise drink on my back and yelled 'Hey chink, you're fucking nasty.'*" (TDS News, 2020 May) In another, an Asian-American waiting for a bus said a man *began berating me. I ignored him ... [then] an object of substantial weight was thrown at me with high velocity – missing me but impacting the side of the bus with a sickening*

*'thwack.'* Instantly, I sobered to awareness of the amount of trauma the object would have caused if it had struck my head (TDS News, 2020 May).

Asian Americans are also reporting physical threats being made against them (Driscoll, 2020; Parascandola, 2020). Police have also investigated numerous other physical incidents including attacks with acid (Moore & Cassady, 2020), an umbrella (Madani, 2020), and a log (Kang, 2020). There have been a number of physical altercations at bus stops (Bensimon, 2020; Madani, 2020), subway stations (Parnell, 2020), convenience stores (Oliveira, 2020), and on the street (Jeung & Nham, 2020; Sheldon, 2020).

Since COVID-19 started, the FBI anticipated a rise in even more brutal hate crimes across the United States (Schild et al. 2020), which was confirmed by the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (Jeung, 2020), which documented over 1,000 reports from Asian people of coronavirus discrimination and hate crimes from March 19th to April 1st, 2020. In one case, a Korean American woman was punched in the face while walking in New York City (Bishara, 2020). One of the most violent examples includes the attempted murder of a Burmese American family at Sam's Club in Midland, Texas (Yam, 2020a) The suspect said that he stabbed the father, a four-year-old child, and a two-year-old child because he "thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with coronavirus" (Yam, 2020a).

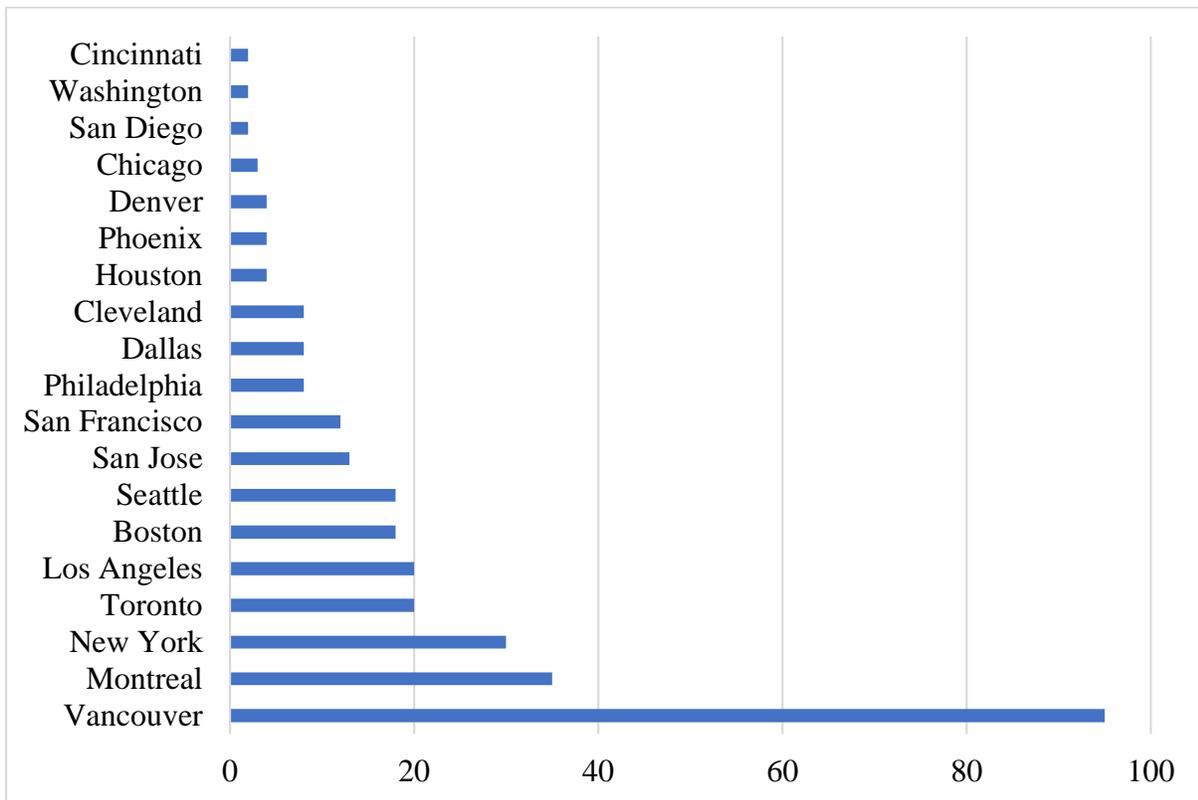
From March through early May 2020, there were numerous public reports of violent physical attacks on Asian Americans including in California, Minnesota, New York, and Texas. NextShark, a website focused on Asian-American news, only received a few messages per day about cases involving anti-Asian bias but after COVID-19 occurs it received dozens. At the end of 2020, the United Nations issued a report that detailed "an alarming level" of racially motivated violence and other hate incidents against Asian Americans. Still, it is difficult to determine exact

numbers for such crimes and instances of discrimination, as no organizations or governmental agencies have been tracking the issue long-term, and reporting standards can vary from region to region (Cabral, 2021). Further, some victims may not report their experiences out of fear or concern about the legal process (Jeung & Nham, 2020).

## **2. Incidents of Anti-Asian Racism in Canada**

The situation in Canada is similar to that in the United States, although Canada is now reported to have more anti-Asian racism reports per capita than the United States (Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, 2020). In 2020, as Figure 2 shows, more anti-Asian hate crimes were reported to police in Vancouver, a city of 700,000 people, than in the top 10 most populous U.S. cities combined. Surprisingly, this figure indicates that almost 1 out of every 2 residents of Asian descent in British Columbia experienced a hate incident. The region is confronting an undercurrent of racism that runs as long and deep as the historical links stretching across the Pacific.

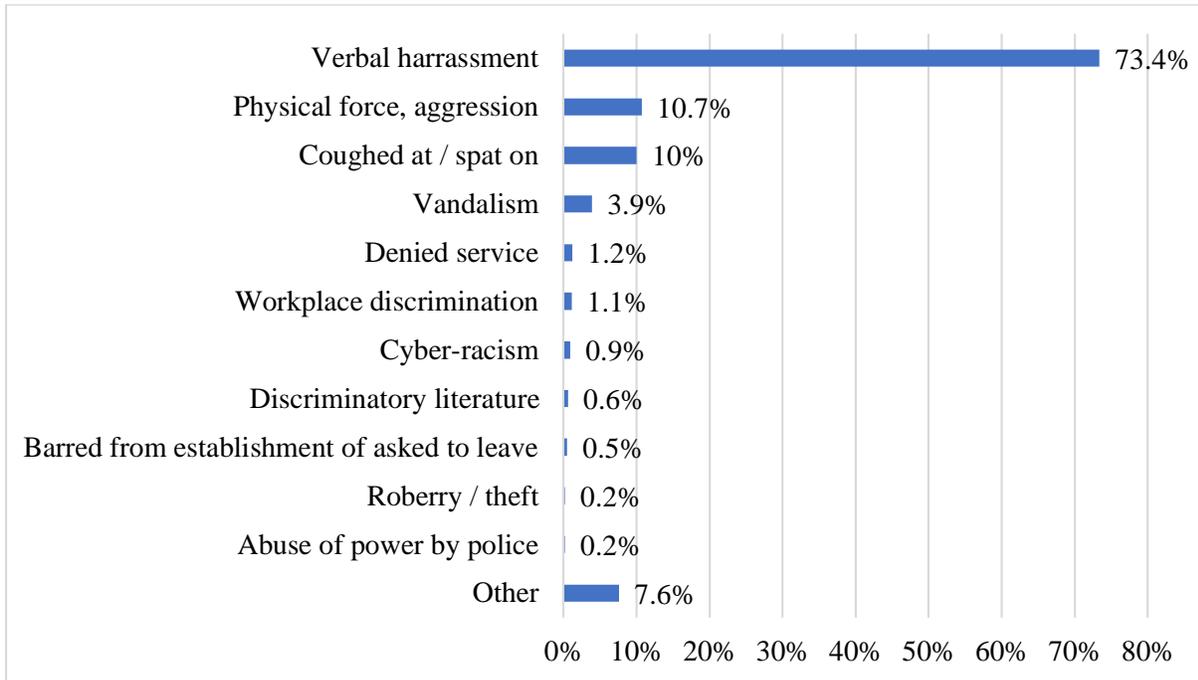
### **Figure 2. Reports of Anti-Asian Hate Crimes in Major North American Cities, 2020**



*Note:* Data adapted from Police Departments; Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, California State University at San Bernardino (2020)

According to Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, California State University at San Bernardino (2020), 643 complaints were submitted and analyzed between March 10 to December 21, 2020. One in 10 of all cases involved being people being coughed or spat on; with 11 percent involving unwanted touching or physical assault. Similarly, in the United States, 75% of attacks were related to verbal harassment.

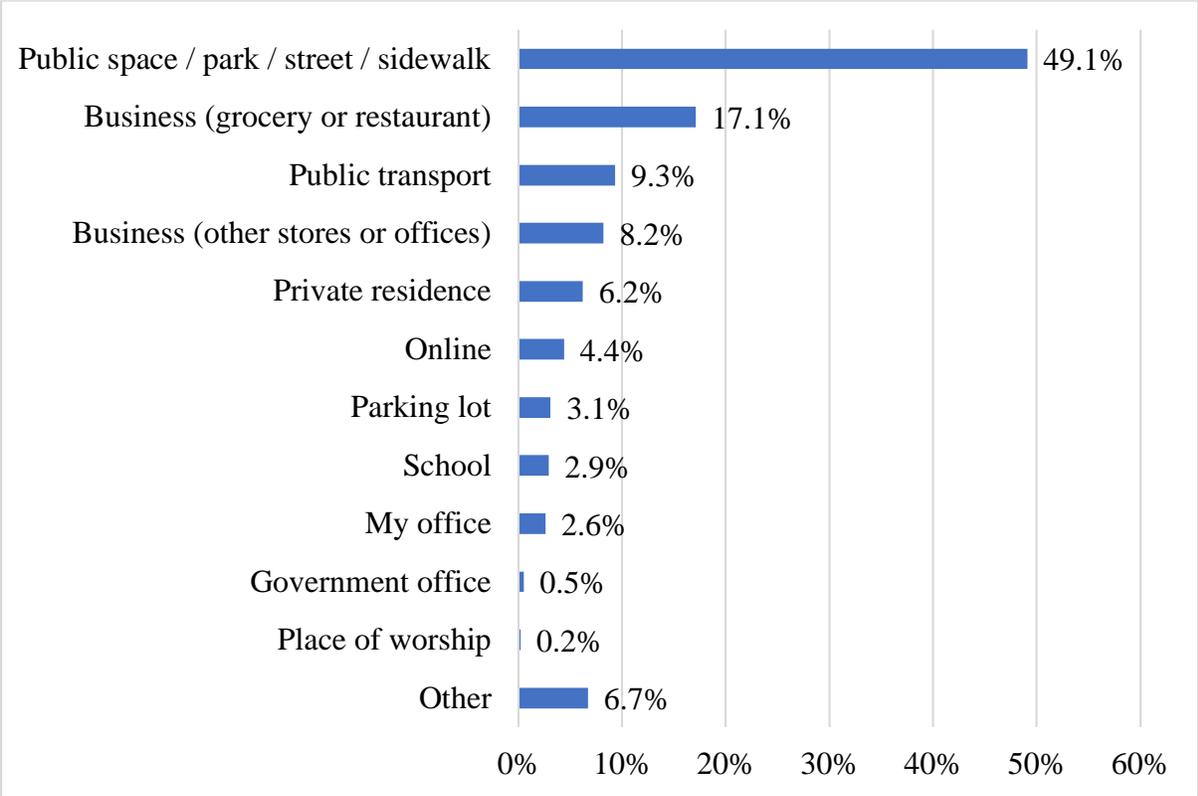
**Figure 3. What type of racist incidents and racist attacks were they?**



*Note:* Data adapted from *A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year Into The Covid-19 Pandemic* (2020)

When it comes to places where Asian ethnicities faced racism, almost half of racism (49.1%) incidents occurred in public spaces like parks, streets and sidewalks. Restaurants and grocery stores were recorded as the second-most-frequent sites for racist attacks, after public spaces. Also, 9.3% of Asians were attacked when they used public transport. Taken together, most of the cases happened in public areas.

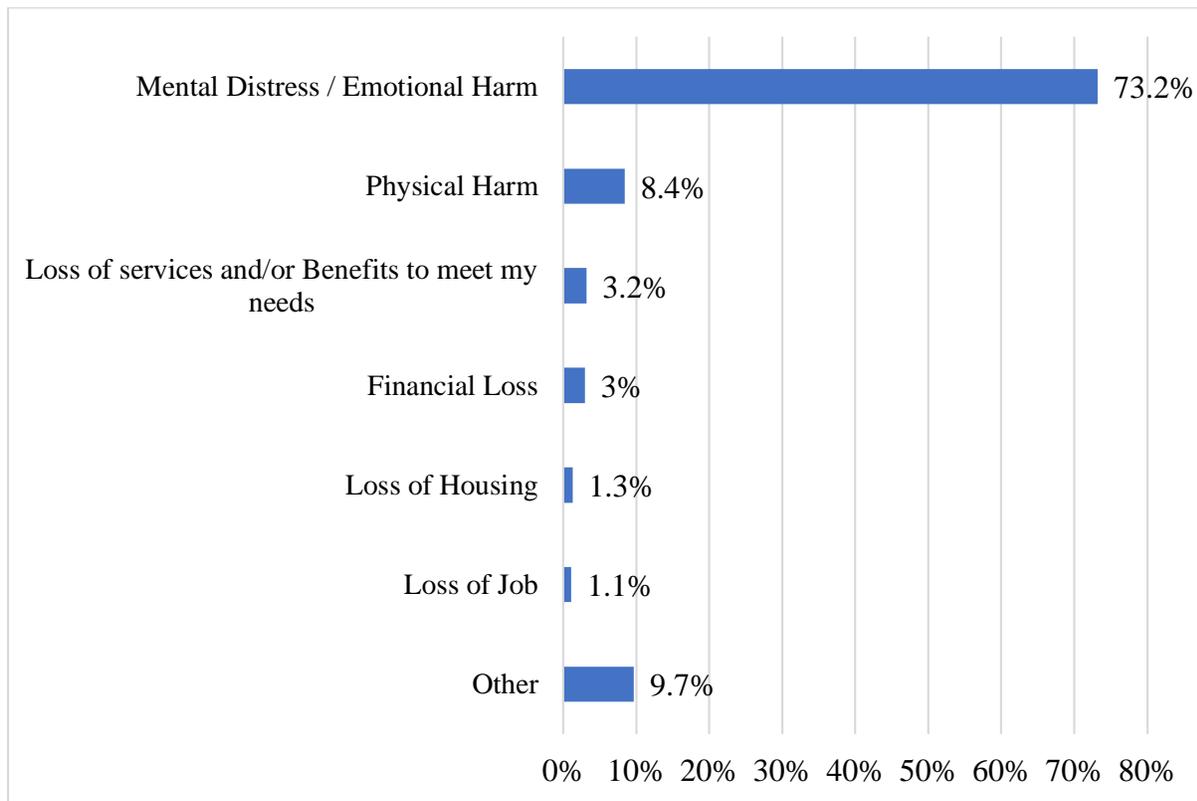
**Figure 4. Where did instances of racism and racist attacks happen?**



*Note:* Data adapted from A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year Into The Covid-19 Pandemic (2020)

Furthermore, it is reported that 73.2% of victims experience mental distress/emotional harm after racial attacks. And 8.4% of respondents suffered from physical harm. These results show the effects caused by racism incidents are not temporary and they bring Asian people many negative consequences.

**Figure 5. What were the consequences of the racist attacks?**



*Note:* Data adapted from A Year of Racist Attacks: Anti-Asian Racism Across Canada One Year Into The Covid-19 Pandemic (2020)

Other research also shows similar results. CCNC reported that 11% of all anti-Asian racism incidents included a violent physical assault and/or unwanted physical contact, while 10% of all attacks contained a person being coughed at and/or spat on. Children and youth under 18 years old and older adults 55 years old and up were more likely to be physically assaulted (42 and 57%, respectively) and more likely to be coughed on and spat on (233 and 250%, respectively) compared to those between the ages of 19 and 35. Public spaces are the most common areas for racist attacks against people of Asian descent in Canada, followed by spaces in the food sector, including grocery stores and restaurants, which account for almost one-fifth of

all racist attacks. 40% of all incidents occurred in Ontario, while 44% happened in British Columbia. In addition to this, more than 1000 cases of anti-Asian racism have been reported by community organizations in Canada, in which Asian women made up close to 60% of reported victims.

Also, according to a 2020 online poll from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute and the University of Alberta, of a random sample of Canadian adults who identify as Chinese Canadian, a large percentage have experienced some type of racism since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Of the 516 Chinese people surveyed from across Canada, almost half of them reported being called names or insulted as a direct result of COVID-19, and 43% said they had been personally threatened or intimidated (Ma, 2020 Jun). They further found that 71% of Asian respondents said that racism and discrimination have gotten worse over the past year, while 55% of non-Asian respondents agreed it has gotten worse. Among the respondents, 58% said they have seen or heard anti-Asian messages while 31% said they've been in situations where they've been treated with less respect than others. 61% say they have adjusted their routines in order to avoid run-ins or unpleasant encounters since the COVID-19 pandemic began. 13% say they've been threatened or intimidated. The poll also found younger people reported more incidents of racism and discrimination (Azpiri, 2021 June 8).

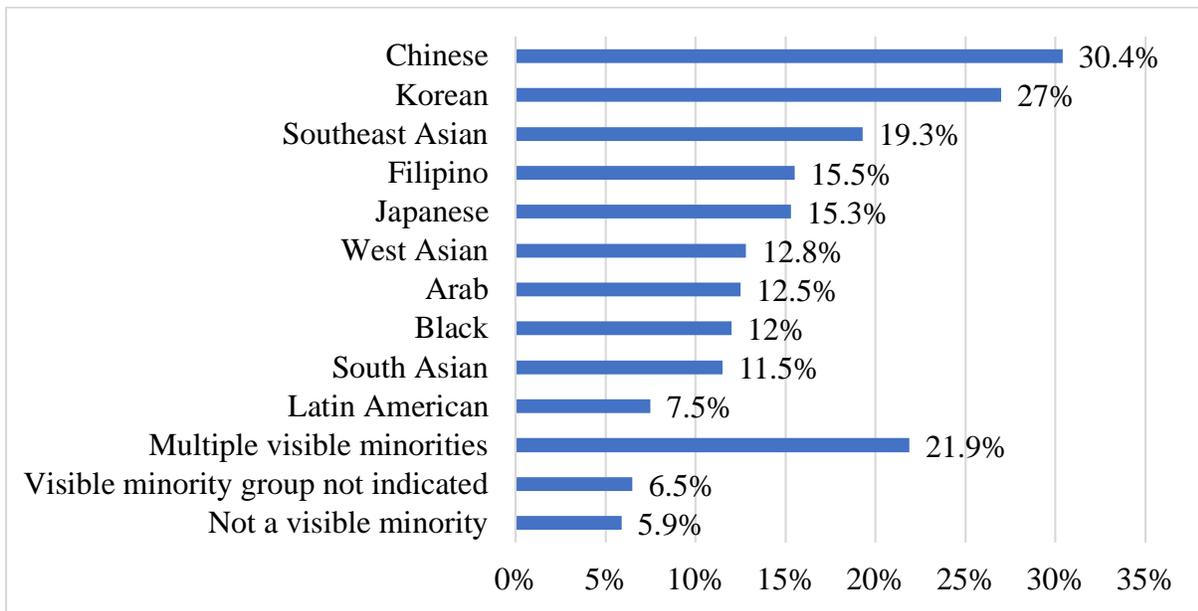
Another survey from the Angus Reid Institute and the University of British Columbia also shows more than half of Asian Canadians have suffered discrimination after the outbreak of COVID-19, according to a new survey that is conducted from 2020 to 2021, 58% of respondents said they have experienced incidents of discrimination. More than a quarter (28%) said these situations happen "all the time" or "often." Also, it is revealed that people who are young and

lower income are more likely to experience more intense forms of bigotry, according to the survey (Hernandez, 2021 Jun 08).

Similar results were found by the institute's another survey that has a total of 631 participants — 580 Canadians who self-identify as ethnically Chinese, as well as 77 individuals who identify themselves as ethnically East Asian or Southeast Asian. Its key findings show how incidents have affected them, with the survey suggesting 53 % of Asian Canadians who experienced anti-Asian racism said the incidents were hurtful and have stayed with them. Two in five (38%) of respondents who had faced discrimination and racism, said they were troubled and sad but able to put it aside, while only 9% said they have not been affected (Hernandez, 2021).

Figure 6 illustrates that the minority groups that have been attacked due to their real or perceived race were not only Chinese. The hatred and a faulty belief that people of Chinese descent are solely responsible for causing and spreading COVID-19 are triggering hate crimes against all Asian ethnic groups.

**Figure 6. Perceived increase in harassment or attacks by visible minority group since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic**



*Note:* Data adapted from Statistics Canada, Crowdsourcing on perceptions of safety, May 12-25, 2020

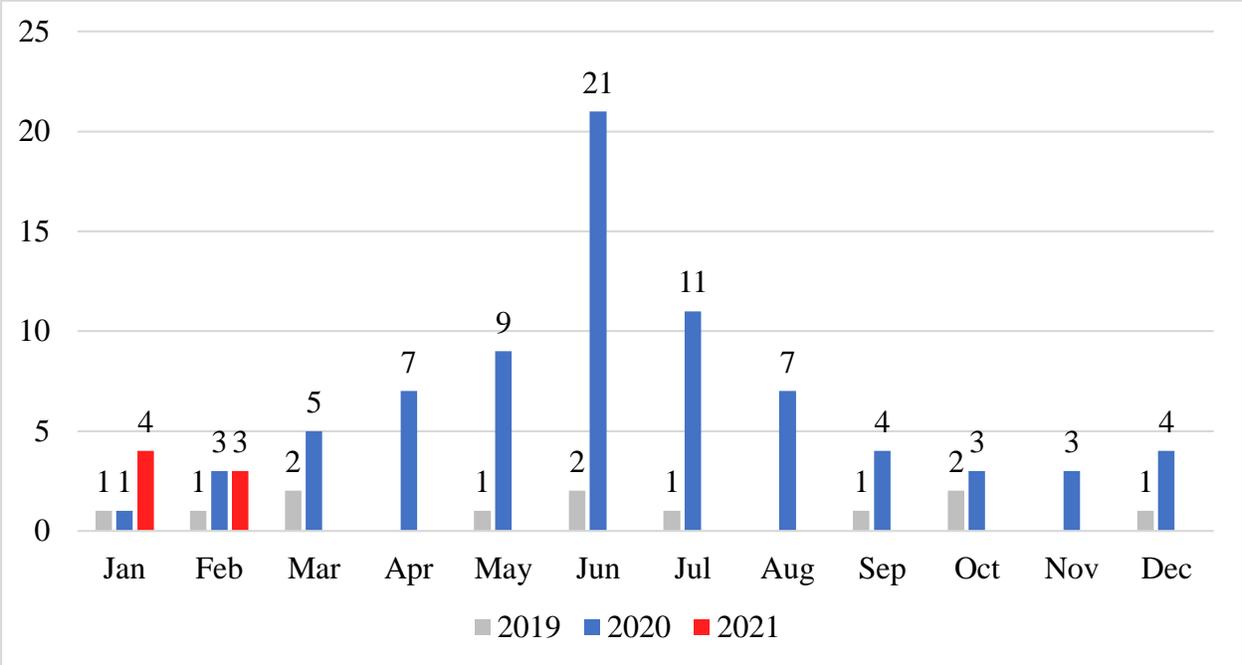
In order to understand the specific situations of Anti-Asian racism in different regions of Canada, I will examine hate crimes in individual big cities: Vancouver, Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto.

## **VANCOUVER**

It is interesting to note that, in Vancouver alone, crimes against Canadians of Asian ethnicity rose by 717% in the span of one year (from 12 incidents in 2019 to 98 in 2020). With 98 reported cases in 2020 (Vancouver Police Department, 2021) – more than all US cities combined – Vancouver was recently dubbed the “anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America (Todd, 2021).” The city’s proximity to major cities across the Pacific has made it a popular landing point for recent immigrants for generations. More specifically, Vancouver’s location made its population grow by attracting many new immigrants from Asian countries. But upon arrival,

many of them have faced discrimination and racism. The spread of COVID-19 in Canada has fueled this increase in Anti-Asian sentiments and racism attacks. Figure 8 shows that hate crimes against Canadians of Asian ethnicity have grown significantly since the start of the pandemic in Vancouver. We can see the extraordinary increase in hate crime incidents from April to July 2020 when COVID-19 was spreading across the nation.

**Figure 7. VPD Anti-East Asian Hate Crime Incidents**



*Note:* Data adapted from Vancouver police hate crimes unit (2021)

One example of the growing racism in Vancouver was reported in *The Guardian* about resident Steven Ngo. He had stopped at a traffic light in a residential neighbourhood in the eastern part of Vancouver when passengers in another car tossed garbage at him, shouting racial slurs as they sped off (Baylon, 2021). Even though he was a local lawyer and a lifelong resident

of the city, he shared that this was the most blatant, overt and apparent racism that he has ever experienced.

Ngo also said, “the government promotes Canada as a multicultural and diverse country, an idea that’s been ingrained in our psychology since we were in school but when you start seeing friends and family who are getting hurt, you start to wonder how accurate that narrative is” (Baylon, 2021). He explained that he was not alone in experiencing blatant racism either. His cousin was spat on while running in a park. His mother, who works at a dim sum restaurant, says her clients are all afraid to go for walks. Moreover, reporting process also made him feel frustrated. He noticed that there is nothing police can do when a person is spat or coughed on. When he went to the Vancouver police website, only to find that he could only submit a hate crime report in simplified Chinese. Even though there are so many different languages in Asia, Vancouver police did not provide a hate crime report in other languages. Ngo said, “There’s this perception that only the Chinese community is affected by anti-Asian racism” also, “why wasn’t it in English? It just didn’t make sense.”

As mentioned above, COVID-19 was the trigger. But the resentment and anti-Asian sentiment seem to have been building for decades. The disproportionate rash of incidents has raised an unsettling question. Vancouver might not be the city of progressive multiculturalism as it claims to be.

## **OTTAWA**

Ottawa is the nation’s capital and the fourth-largest urban city in Canada. It includes over 1.4 million people, and its population is made up of diverse residents from different cultures and backgrounds. A special feature of Ottawa is that both English and French are widely spoken. The

city is very multicultural with a large immigrant population that contributes to the city's prosperity and vibrancy.

Although Ottawa prides itself on multiculturalism, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city has seen increasing reports of hate crimes targeting Asian residents. Although anti-Asian sentiment and racism previously existed in Ottawa, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new form of anti-Asian racism that links China and the novel coronavirus. Many members of Ottawa's Asian community have reported being targets of verbal threats, intimidation and assaults. More specifically, the Ottawa Police Service Hate and Bias Crime Unit received 15 reports of hate crimes against people who identify as Asian-Canadian in 2020, compared to two reports in 2019. Though we need to acknowledge that these numbers reflect just reported cases, with many going unreported, this 600% increase in hate crimes is a stark contrast from the 57% increase in hate crimes overall (Liu, 2021).

## **MONTREAL**

Montreal police documented that 22 crimes and 8 hate incidents toward people of Asian descent between March and December 2020. Of the reported incidents, nearly 40% were considered property crimes, mischief, or graffiti (Liu, 2021). Racism towards Asians is not limited to people of Chinese descent, which means other groups of Asian descent are also affected by Anti-Asian sentiment that is fueled by COVID-19. For example, a Korean community was particularly shaken after a South Korean academic was stabbed outside a Korean supermarket in Montreal right after COVID-19 spread in Canada. The victim believed it was a hate crime and left Canada to return to South Korea soon thereafter. Further, the South Korean consulate issued a safety warning to its citizens after the incident (Hinkson, 2020).

## **TORONTO**

In Toronto, reported hate crimes doubled from 2019 to 2020, according to the city's Police. Toronto has the second-highest number of cases involving anti-Asian hate crimes, following Vancouver (Liu, 2021), and the Asian community was the ethnic group most victimized in Toronto in 2020. The total percentage of hate occurrences targeting Asian communities in particular has more than tripled, from 2% in 2019 to 7% in 2020 (Toronto Police Service, 2020). Of the 28 hate crime occurrences in which race and ethnicity were the motivating factors, Asian communities, in particular, the Chinese community, were victimized in 15 occurrences, which is over half of the cases. Offences included eight assaults, four cases of mischief under \$5000, one assault with a weapon, one robbery, and one instance of uttering threats of bodily harm/death.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Asian workers in the United States and Canada**

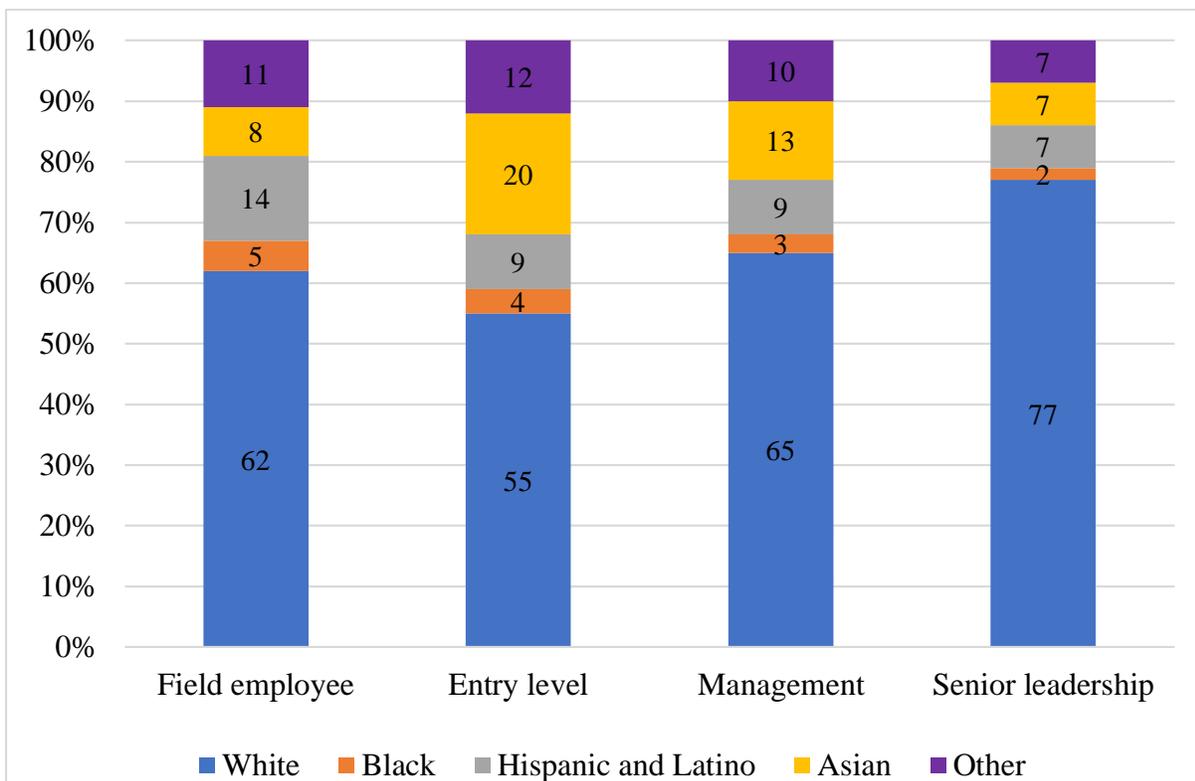
Similar to what happened during the 2003 SARS outbreak, anti-Asian racism has been on the rise all across North America since this current pandemic first started. Reports from people of Asian heritage living across the U.S. and Canada have revealed various kinds of harassment as they go about their lives in their communities and workplaces. Sadly, many front-line Asian health care workers are also experiencing racism even though they try to save lives (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2020). In this section, I will explore how anti-Asian Racism has impacted our lives, especially in workplaces and how it has taken a toll on people of Asian descent' economic situation.

The unemployment rate has steeply increased as a consequence of the lockdown associated with the spread of COVID-19. The negative effect of the lockdown is more notable

among the less-educated workers than the highly educated workers. Because people of Asian descent in America are more likely to be in higher education or have higher degrees than other racial groups, it is expected that they are relatively immune to the drop in employment unless the detrimental impact of the lockdown gets worse for Asian Americans (Kim et al. 2020).

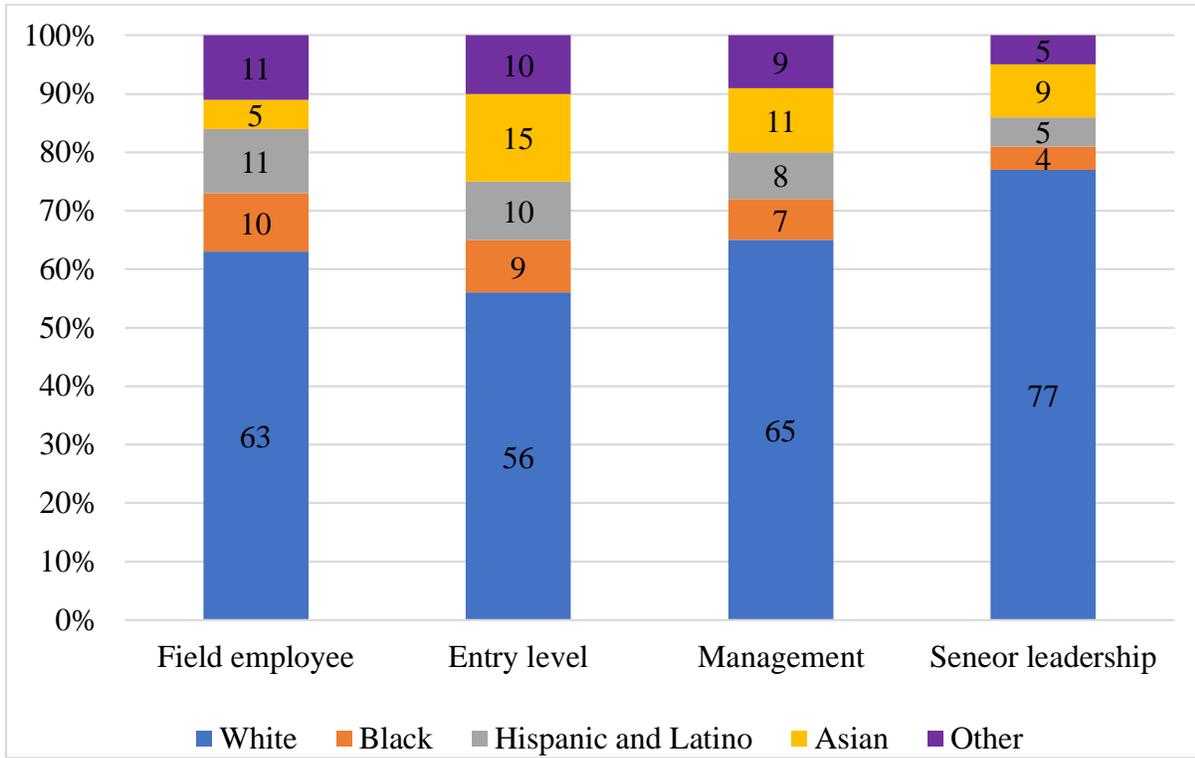
It is important to note that the negative impact of the lockdown is completely concentrated on less-educated people of Asian descent. Regardless of gender, less-educated Asian Americans are considerably more likely to lose their jobs than equally educated Whites and are not more likely to take back employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only highly educated Asian Americans' employment is equally affected by the lockdown with equally educated Whites (Kim et al. 2020).

**Figure 8. Male professional by role category, %**



Note: Data adapted from *Women in the Workplace 2020*, Leanin.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

**Figure 9. Female professionals by role category, %**



Note: Data adapted from *Women in the Workplace 2020*, Leanin.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

Figure 8 and 9 that I adapted from another article show us, regardless of gender, it is hard to get higher positions at work for people of colour. For example, when it comes to senior leadership, people of colour made up only 23%, while white accounted for 77% (Hua et al., 2021).

**Table 1. Recent change in workplace representation at senior levels**

<b>Change</b>	<b>Field employee</b>	<b>Entry level</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Senior leadership</b>
<b>Male (%)</b>	+41	-57	-24	-64
<b>Female</b>	+38	-53	-43	-39

*Note:* Data adapted from Women in Workplace 2020, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn. Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

Table 1 shows the representation of Asian women at senior levels is 39% lower than at entry-level positions. In addition to this, men of Asian descent in the US and Canada experience a sharper drop-off, with 64% fewer shares at senior levels compared with entry-level positions. Interestingly, it is found that Asian Americans aren't the only ones facing this challenge and that means Black, as well as Hispanic and Latino employees, also experience drop-offs in the share of representation at senior levels (Hua et al., 2021).

**Table 2. % of U.S. unemployed out of work for more than six months**

	<b>Q4 2019</b>	<b>Q4 2020</b>	<b>Difference</b>
<b>All workers</b>	21	36	15
<b>White</b>	21	35	15
<b>Black</b>	25	38	13
<b>Hispanic</b>	18	34	16

<b>Asian</b>	21	<b>46</b>	<b>25</b>
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*Note:* Data adapted from Pew Research Center analysis of 2019 and 2020 Current Population Survey monthly files (IPUMS).

Table 2 depicts long-term unemployment as the highest and has risen more sharply, among Asian American workers. In the fourth quarter of 2020, it is noticeable that 46% of the unemployed Asian workers had been out of work for more than six months, compared with 21% in the fourth quarter of 2019. The data shows the percentage of 2020's unemployment of Asian workers has increased more than twofold. Black unemployed workers had the next highest long-term unemployment rate (38%) in the fourth quarter of 2020, followed by White (35%) and Hispanic (34%) unemployed workers. For these three groups of unemployed workers (White, Black and Hispanic), the long-term unemployment rate was around 15% higher than one year earlier while the unemployed rate of Asian workers increased to 25% (Bennett, 2021).

It seems the main reason for the high long-term unemployment rate of Asian workers in the fourth quarter of 2020 is anti-Asian Racism that is triggered since COVID-19 spread. This figure can be explained by some cases of places that are most impacted by coronavirus shutdowns. Nearly a third of Asian Americans (31%) lived in California in 2019, and as a result of the long shutdowns due to the spread of COVID-19, many Asian Americans lost their jobs. New York is the state with the second-largest share of the Asian population (9%) in the US and it is noticed that the state suffered the third most employment loss since the start of the pandemic (Bennett, 2021).

## **Discussion: Social Inequality during the COVID-19**

As we can see from the history of the anti-Asian racism in North America, Racism toward Asians including Chinese minorities is nothing new. However, the form of racism has turned to more overt ways after the COVID-19 outbreak. I highlight that the mental and physical health of Asian communities is at risk as a consequence of racial prejudice surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheng, 2020). Incidents of blatant and explicit racial discrimination, as envisioned in the classic racial harassment paradigm are unfortunately occurring in everyday life (Pat, 2020). Many articles and data that I have used illustrate COVID-19 has triggered it in a more aggressive way.

When asked to compare their current reporting to Asians' experiences and symptoms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 29% of participants reported increased discrimination, 41% reported increased anxiety symptoms, 53% reported increased depressive symptoms, 15% reported increased physical symptoms, and 43% reported increased sleep difficulties. In addition, 21% reported an increase in social support (Lee, 2021). Not only on individual levels, but acts of discrimination also occur within social, political, and historical contexts. In order to evade responsibilities for people's lives and economies after COVID-19 spread, many political leaders have misappropriated the COVID-19 crisis to reinforce racial discrimination, doubling down, for example, on border policies and conflating public health restrictions with anti-migrant rhetoric (Tondo, 2020; Delan, 2020).

Drawing on critical race theory, this article analyzed incidents that were reported in the popular press during the COVID-19 pandemic. The anti-Asian hate crimes and discrimination against people of Asian descent show how deeply rooted racial discrimination is in the US and Canada. It also reveals that, during COVID-19, Asian workers with lower education are more

likely to experience unemployment compared to other races with similar conditions. More specifically, as for Asian discrimination at work that is triggered by COVID-19, despite the decrease in old-fashioned racism, significant and widespread economic and occupational disparities between races remain. At the same time, a large number of minority employees continue to claim discrimination, including harassment, in their jobs. While the explanations for these ongoing racial disparities and perceptions of discrimination are complex and not fully understood, substantial evidence suggests that racism in the workplace has not ended. Instead, racism in the workplace has simply morphed from its more blatant and explicit form into something that is much more subtle and covert (Pat, 2010).

### **Recent Political Response to Anti-Asian Racism**

The increase of physical and violent attacks that are part of a rising wave of anti-Asian incidents since the COVID-19 outbreak began has shocked many people of Asian descent in North America. In particular, in the US, the March 16, 2021 slaying of eight people at three Atlanta spas, six of them Asian women, has further aroused both a sense of heightened activism from within the Asian American community and broad-based support from beyond (Ramirez, 2021)

In the US, advocates for Asian Americans say the violence can be related to rising anti-Asian sentiment after the COVID-19 outbreak. Some have directly blamed the anti-China rhetoric of former President Donald Trump, who often called the pandemic the "China virus" or the "Kung flu." Due to the result that is caused by political rhetoric, President Biden signed an executive action essentially banning the use of such language within the federal government (Cabral, 2021).

With Democrats now in control of both chambers of Congress, on 20 May 2021, Joe Biden signed into law the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, to handle the significant rising rate of hate crimes against people of Asian descent. The bill designates an official at the US Justice Department to expedite reviews of violence and hate crimes regarding COVID-19 (Cabral, 2021; Ramirez, 2021). It also provides grants for state and local governments to improve their own reporting systems. The bipartisan measure passed through Congress earlier in May 2020 with overwhelming approval from both Republicans and Democrats (Cabral, 2021; Ramirez, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and reinforced social and ethno-racial inequalities rooted in, leading to many discriminatory acts across the country time (Fassin 2020; Desgrées du Loû 2020; Brun and Simon 2020; Calame 2020). While Americans struggle to combat a global pandemic, President Donald Trump has helped normalize anti-Asian xenophobia by stigmatizing Asian people and stoking. Public hysteria and racist attacks against Asian people. Racist aggressors don't distinguish between different ethnic subgroups, which means anyone, who is Asian or perceived to be Asian, can be a victim (Kambhampaty, 2020).

Anti-Asian racism in North America is severe and widespread. In order to tackle the rise of discrimination and hate crime rates, we need to act right away. The government of Canada (2022) suggests several ways we can fight anti-Asian racism and build an even better society where everyone is able to participate fully. First, learning about the diversity that has enriched Canadian society is the first step toward addressing racism. Second, challenging misinformation

is essential and we have to consider how the stereotypes are rooted in the history of anti-Asian racism. Third, it is important to call out acts of racism, and discrimination, and support those victimized by anti-Asian racism. Last but not least, it is needed to interrupt unconscious biases or prejudices against people of Asian descent and consider how they can affect one's own behaviour.

According to Wu (2021), solutions cannot be limited to educating people about anti-Asian racism in North America. We need greater visibility of Asians and members of all racialized groups across sectors, and we must recognize their contributions throughout history and to contemporary society (Wu et al. 2021). In other words, it is more important to see anti-Asian racism as an endemic and fundamental problem than a temporary phenomenon.

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