

Beyond the Facade: The Toll of the “Model Minority” Myth on Asian American Students

Bernadine C. Dela Peña | Riverside High School

Introduction

The “model minority” myth has long shaped perceptions of Asian Americans in the United States, particularly in education. Beginning in the 1960s, Asian American students are portrayed as science and math geniuses, as well as highly intelligent and well-off compared to other minority groups. However, beneath the surface of a seemingly flattering stereotype lies a tragic reality that often goes unnoticed. Researcher Janelle Wong describes this facade: “Asian American college students have higher rates of attempting suicide than those in other groups.” This statement challenges the apparent success that is associated with Asian American students, and instead, highlights the underlying pressures and mental health issues that come with the stereotype.

Research Question: How does the “model minority” myth affect Asian American communities’ mental well-being in secondary and collegiate education in the United States?

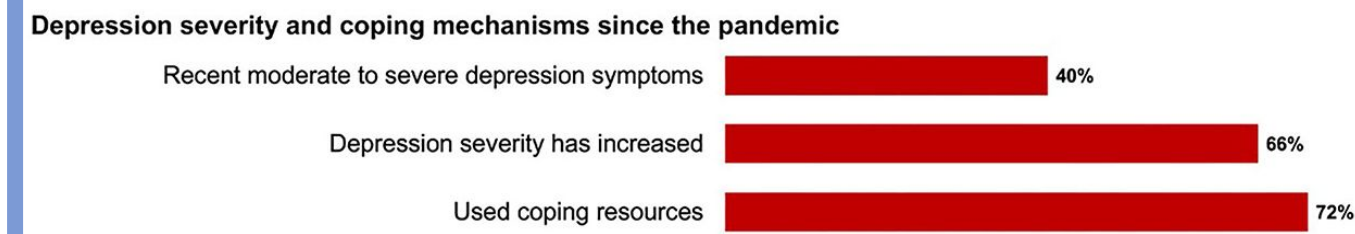
Thesis Statement: The “model minority” myth negatively affects Asian American communities’, particularly Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, and Korean groups, mental well-being in secondary and collegiate education.

Methodology: This research project, The Mental Health Effects of the “Model Minority” Myth Among Asian Americans in the U.S. Education System, included quantitative and qualitative data from scholarly organizations, such as Pew Research, Frontiers Public Health, and the National Library of Medicine. It was imperative to select secondary source articles that showcased reliable statistics, with the support of Google Scholar. These organizations provided the most accurate information, in contrast to other articles that did not have ample data to support these findings. For example, this research did not include Asian ethnic subgroups such as the Vietnamese, due to little statistics and information discovered. However, this project incorporated data from other subgroups, particularly Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, and Korean groups, as many scholarly articles included analytical information of the effects of the “model minority” myth on these certain groups.

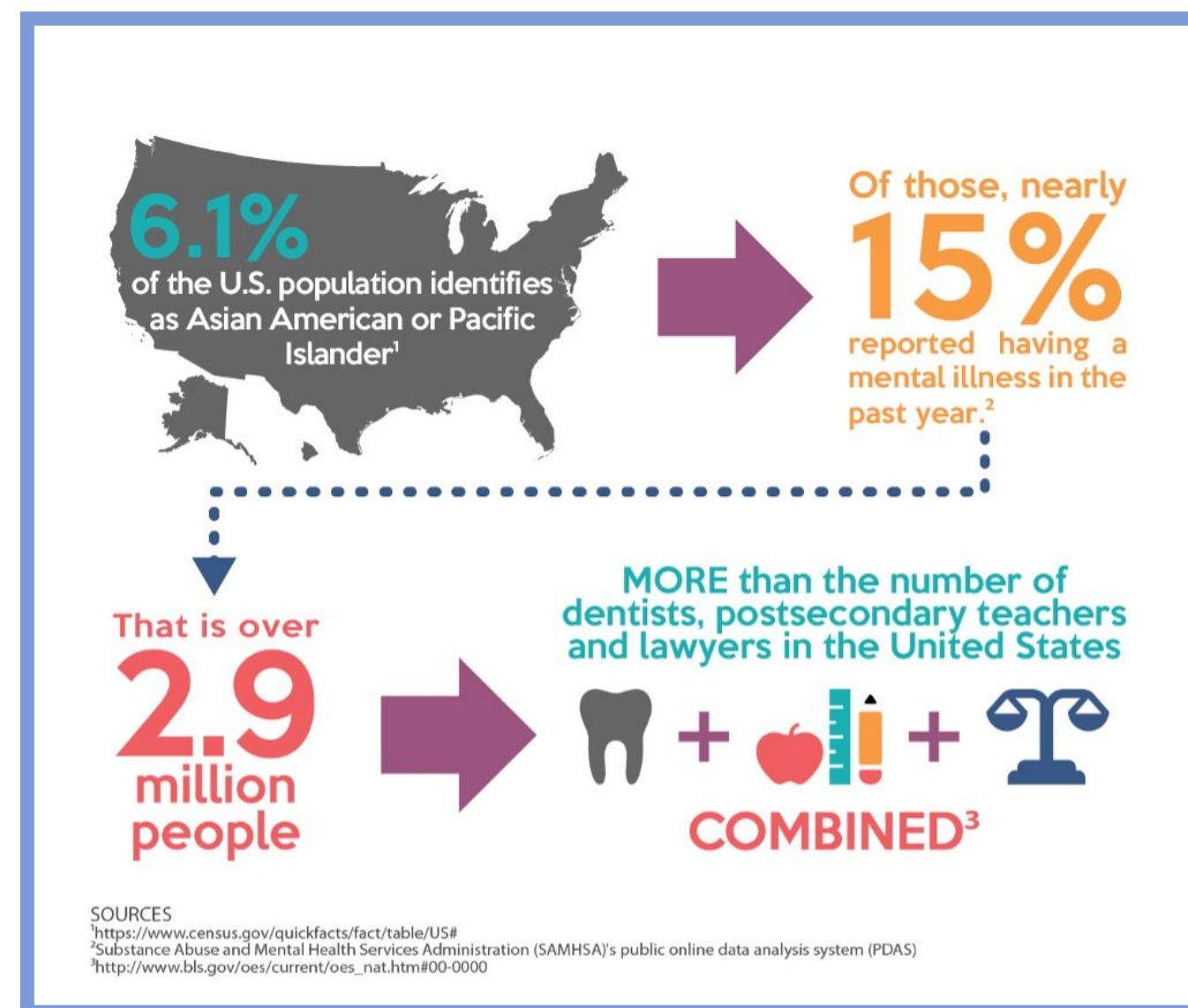
Background

In the 1960s, the term “model minority” first stemmed from *The New York Times Magazine*’s article: “Successful story: Japanese American style,” written by William Petersen. An article entitled “Model Minority” discussed how Petersen described the story of how Japanese Americans “bounced back” to American society after facing hate crimes, racial prejudice, discrimination, and anti-Japanese sentiment. Petersen then continued to emphasize the discipline and hard work that Japanese Americans endured in order to reach their high socioeconomic status. This commendation caused Asian Americans across the United States to feel obligated to fit under the “model minority” myth. The stereotype began to enter classrooms, as it became associated with psychosocial problems faced by Asian American students, including anxiety and depression, as stated in *Great Expectations: The Negative Consequences and Policy Implications of the Asian American “Model Minority” Stereotype*. This even extends to their households, where many Asian American cultures value parental academic expectations. Failing to reach these standards often results in shame or guilt. According to the *Asian American Mental Health: What We Know and What We Don’t Know*, the terms ‘Haji’ among Japanese, ‘Hiya’ among Filipinos, ‘Mianzi’ among Chinese, and ‘Chaemyun’ among Koreans describe expressions used in different Asian ethnic subgroups that refer to the humiliation from the shame of seeking help. These harmful phrases and stigmas lead to even more alarming statistics. The article, *Model Minority At Risk: Expressed Needs of Mental Health by Asian American Young Adults*, states, “Among females 15-24 years old, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (APIs) have the highest rate of suicide deaths (14.1%) compared to other racial/ethnic groups...API males in the same age range have the second highest rate of suicide deaths (12.7%)...” This “model minority” myth not only imposes unrealistic expectations on Asian American students but also exacerbates mental health issues by intensifying pressures to fit under this damaging stereotype. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the mental health needs of this population.

Data Analysis



The data above represents depression severity among Asian Americans since the pandemic. Coping resources include talking to friends (84%), talking to family (63%), reading about coping mechanisms online (42%), attending therapy (24%), and engaging in an online support group (12%). [Extracted from the Young Asian American Health Survey, ages 13-17 and 18-29]



This 2022 infographic from Mental Health America illustrates the percentage of reported Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders with a mental illness in the United States.

According to *Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans’ Lives*, “63% of Asian adults have experienced incidents where people assume they are a model minority. This includes Asian Americans who say that in day-to-day encounters with strangers in the U.S., people have assumed that they are good at math and science or that they are not creative thinkers.”

Results

The “model minority” myth is extremely problematic among Asian American students. Racial discrimination also plays a role in Asian American suicide rates. According to an article titled “Model Minority at Risk: Expressed Needs of Mental Health by Asian American Young,” “Previous studies have demonstrated the relationship between perceived discrimination and depressive symptoms and substance use among Filipino Americans, and perceived discrimination was also associated with poor mental health and decreased use of mental health services among Chinese Americans...” (Lee et al., 2009). Racial discrimination has proven to impact the mental well-being and education of Asian American students. Another study led by Researchers Cress and Ikeda found that most depressed Asian Americans view their campus negatively, as they face hostility and discrimination regularly.

Additionally, this damaging label can cause many mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and social incompetence, which are all issues that are usually not associated with Asian American students (Tayag, 2011). In the same study by Cress and Ikeda, more Asian American students reported feeling depressed than their White or students of color counterparts.

The “model minority” myth not only negatively affects high-achieving students but also underachieving Asian American students. The education system assumes that the entire group is academically gifted and, therefore, does not need any extra educational support (Tayag, 2011). While the term “model minority” shines a positive light on Asian Americans, those students who are less achieving or motivated to fit the stereotype receive educational neglect (Tayag, 2011).

This stereotype prevents Asian American students from receiving mental health services. Due to higher parental academic expectations that come hand in hand with the myth, many Asian American students feel more pressured in the classroom. One study found that merely 17% of Asian Americans with mental health issues sought assistance (Lee et al., 2009). In lieu, Asian Americans tend to internalize their issues until the problem becomes critical.

Conclusion

Although the “model minority” myth may be perceived positively, many Asian American students still suffer the harmful consequences. Asian Americans are generalized into one group, and the vast diversities among the different Asian ethnic subgroups are promptly ignored. Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, sprout from this stereotype and become a nationwide issue among Asian Americans. It is fundamental to discover solutions to eliminate this problem. Encouraging these students to seek psychological services on their campus, individually identifying each Asian ethnic subgroup, providing more educational services to underachieving students, and urging Asian American parents to visit counseling to understand the harmful effects of the stereotype will keep the “model minority” myth from becoming more prevalent in the U.S. education system.

Bibliography

Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans and Mental Health | Counseling and Psychological Services | Nebraska.

caps.unl.edu/asian-americans-and-pacific-islander-americans-mental-health.

Chu, Joyce, and Stanley Sue. "Asian American Mental Health: What We Know and What We Don't Know." *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2011, scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=orpc. Accessed 24 July 2024.

Huynh, James, et al. "The Mental Health of Asian American Adolescents and Young Adults Amid the Rise of anti-Asian Racism." *Frontiers in Public Health*, vol. 10, Jan. 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.958517>.

Lee, Sunmin, et al. "Model Minority at Risk: Expressed Needs of Mental Health by Asian American Young Adults." *Journal of Community Health*, vol. 34, no. 2, Oct. 2008, pp. 144–52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-008-9137-1>.

"Model Minority" · *Deconstructing the Model Minority at UM · Aapi*. aapi.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/aapi_michigan/page/model-minority.

Panelo, Nathan Divino. "The Model Minority Student: Asian American Students and the Relationships Between Acculturation to Western Values, Family Pressures, and Mental Health Concerns." *The Vermont Connection*, vol. 31, 2010, www.uvm.edu/~vtconn/v31/Panelo.pdf.

Ruiz, Neil, et al. "Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans' Lives." *Pew Research*, 30 Nov. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/11/30/discrimination-experiences-shape-most-asian-americans-lives/#:~:text=63%25%20of%20Asian%20adults%20have,they%20are%20not%20creative%20thinkers.

Tayag, Michael. "Great Expectations: The Negative Consequences and Policy Implications of the Asian American 'Model Minority' Stereotype." *Stanford Journal of Asian American Studies*, 2011, docs.google.com/document/d/1XHF3pZe8BjhQ5tctri_feW4JQSgU8XCTrfWw1kUkABA/edit.

"What Is the Model Minority Myth?" *Learning for Justice*, 21 Mar. 2019, www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/what-is-the-model-minority-myth#:~:text=Asian%20American%20college%20students%20have,within%20an%20Asian%20American%20identity.