

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's been a significant uptick in violence against Asians and Asian Americans. The organization [Stop AAPI Hate](#) collected [more than 2,800 reports](#) of verbal abuse, harassment, and physical assaults against Asians in the United States from March to December 2020. These reports depict a disturbing reality, especially for Asian women, who experienced violence [nearly 2.5 times more](#) than their male counterparts. However, the numbers do not tell the full story: They don't include many of the unreported and increasingly normalized incidents of violence that started as soon as the Trump administration began to unapologetically characterize the global pandemic as the "Chinese virus." Since then, Asians and Asian Americans have shared countless accounts with one another, privately describing the challenges of everyday life in the U.S.

### **This Is What No One Tells You About Being Asian In America In 2021**

A couple of years ago, my friends and I called an Uber to take us to a Laker game. We were a motley crew, reflective of the diversity of Los Angeles, and I was the only Asian. The driver, who spoke with an accent that made me believe he was an immigrant like myself, asked us all where we were from.

"Around here," we replied in unison. Then he looked at me and smirked. "Not you" he said, pointing to my eyes and making that slanty gesture. You can't be from here. Where are you *really* from?" I've spent so much of my time here trying to convince everyone, including myself, that I am indeed American. It is an isolating and lonely existence, one that is specific to the Asian American experience.

I sat still, frozen in discomfort and silence, as my friends giggled. I began to replay similar scenes from my childhood in my head while sitting in a car with another person of color othering and jeering me while my non-Asian friends stifled their laughter. I couldn't help but wonder: Why does everyone else find me and my experience so funny?

After many years of enduring a special kind of racial trauma, I learned the answer. This is what no one tells you about being Asian in America in 2021: Our world minimizes us and we minimize ourselves. This lack of acknowledgement is nothing new for Asian Americans. We are used to being ignored. We are used to minimizing our own pain because we don't want to rock the boat.

Although there is a world of diversity among Asians, these cultural ideals have forged a shared minority experience: Asians are extremely collective with strong family values and a sense of putting others first. This is clearly evident in how Asian countries have handled the spread of COVID-19. We wear masks not for ourselves, but to protect those around us. We come from countries where we are born with a sense of duty to our families and regard our neighbors as one of our own.

As children, we were taught not to talk back, to be respectful, and to be mindful of others. As adults, we continue to be silent and fear taking up space when discussing racism in America because we don't want to diminish other minority groups' experiences. Our repeated racial trauma and childhood conditioning prevent us from speaking up and making our voices heard.

I feel guilty writing this during Black History Month and in a time when all eyes should be on the injustices of anti-Blackness in America. I am fully aware that the oppression against Asians is nothing compared to what Black Americans have experienced and still experience to this day. It makes me want to sit back and hold my tongue, as I've become so accustomed to doing. It is this same conditioned minimization that sets off the

### **Important U.S. Immigration Laws and Policies**

**The Naturalization Act of 1790** limited citizenship in the United States to free white persons.

**The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882** suspended immigration of Chinese people to the United States for ten years and made Chinese immigrants ineligible for citizenship.

**The 1924 Immigration Act** established quotas for immigrants by country and completely excluded immigrants from Asia.

**The Zero Tolerance Policy of 2018** established that every migrant – including asylum seekers – attempting to cross the U.S. border without authorization anywhere other than at an official port of entry was to be detained and criminally prosecuted. The policy led to the systematic separation of newly arriving adult migrants from children who had accompanied them.

narrative in my mind of *your experience isn't valid because you didn't have it as bad*. But comparing who had it worse and whataboutism doesn't further anti-racism.

Instead, it pits us against one another — just as the Model Minority Myth was designed to do. As a psychotherapist who works with Asian and immigrant populations in both public and private settings, the most prevailing emotions I help clients process are guilt and shame. I believe these feelings derive from our collective roots that often teeter on codependency.

For many, our life's mission is to make our parents proud. We can't help but seek others' approval, and we care deeply about what others think about us. It is this cultural norm that has made us susceptible and vulnerable to the Model Minority Myth, which argues that if we behave and work hard enough, we will finally be seen as equals — as white. In addition, this myth perpetuates that racism, including more than [two centuries of Black enslavement, can be overcome by hard work and strong family values](#).

It's why I, a non-Black person of color, have a hard time discussing racism against Asians in America. To this day, I feel self-conscious calling myself a person of color due to my proximity to whiteness. However, this proximity doesn't make me white either, as I am regularly reminded of this when people of all colors — white, Black, and everything in between — tell me that I don't belong here.

Since we don't talk about it and call it out, racism against Asians has become normalized. It took me years of therapy, grad-school and understanding my trauma responses for me to recognize what got me so frozen in those moments of confrontation and that if I wanted things to change I had to speak up. In the words of one of my professors in my master of social work program, "if you're not confronting, you're enabling. What's even worse is when we do finally muster the courage to speak up, sometimes we are met with dismissing comments like "Well that's not racism" or "What's so bad about that?" This reinforces the feelings of being dismissed and feeling unimportant — things we may have internalized as non-Black people of color and children of immigrants whose experiences pale in comparison to our immigrant parents' traumatic past.

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) experience complex racial trauma on a daily basis. Complex trauma refers to any kind of trauma (physical, psychological, emotional, societal, etc.) that [occurs repeatedly and cumulatively](#).

Those who experience complex trauma have a tendency to feel unheard, unseen and unable to make change. What is unique about complex *racial* trauma is that it occurs on both societal and individual levels. The world that we exist in tells us that we don't matter, our family's words at home also reflect this sentiment, and we begin to internalize these negative core beliefs.

These negative core beliefs then manifest in our daily lives in myriad ways. We come to believe that we don't matter and behave in ways that reflect this belief — at home, work, school, and in our relationships — becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. What other people see is that we are submissive, quiet and reserved. What we actually feel is that we are not as important, therefore we should just follow others' opinions and desires. Why speak up when no one else cares anyway?

As we continue to practice anti-racism and work toward more diversity and inclusion, individually and collectively, I hope that we can do just that and involve *all* groups in the discussion. We can't call ourselves anti-racists until we acknowledge *all* marginalized people, including Asian Americans.