

ASIAN  
AMERICANS  
IN THE —————  
WORKPLACE

# Picture this:

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**Y**ou are a studious, hardworking citizen in the United States. You have never lived outside of America, yet you are still perceived as a foreigner. You are expected to achieve greatness in all school subjects, but you are also expected to stay quiet and low on the corporate ladder. You are an Asian American.

Now picture this: once again, you are a studious, hardworking citizen in the United States. This time, you have just graduated medical school and are now looking for work. Hospitals, seeking to increase diversity among its employees, reject you repeatedly despite your grades and experience. As a medical school graduate and member of the Asian minority, my sister struggled to find work in a stereotypically White- and Asian-dominated field because of her race.

Asian Americans experience silent discrimination like this every day. Whether in the office or at university, people often unknowingly discriminate against Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Since the COVID pandemic, hate crimes, violence, and anti-Asian sentiments have dramatically increased in the United States.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, Asian hate crimes rose 164% in the last few months. Although such cruel actions may seem distant, “58% of Asian-American respondents [to a 2021 survey] say racism in the workplace has damaged their relationship with their employer.”<sup>1</sup>

As we navigate through racism and inequality in the workplace, we must include the AAPI community in the discussion so both employees and employers can fully grasp the true meaning of diversity. To help you become more aware, I will draw your attention to three points regarding AAPI discrimination: the model minority myth, the impact in education and the workplace, and the potential solutions.



# What is the model minority myth?

If you haven't heard the term "model minority" before, allow me to expound. This label carries positive and negative connotations; however, like any stereotype, it forces diverse groups of people into limited descriptions. In a New York Times article from the 1960s, a sociologist praised Japanese Americans for "overcoming the prejudice and internment they faced during World War II."<sup>2</sup> They were applauded for their academic success and submissiveness to authority figures.<sup>3</sup>

The Asian-American community was labeled as the model minority because of its perceived success after World War II. Racist individuals used the term model minority to belittle other minorities, like the Black community and its battle for racial equality, for not rising to the same level of perceived success.<sup>4</sup> The term model minority arose solely to perpetuate racist views of other minorities in the U.S.

Although the initial stereotype seems to paint Asian Americans in a positive light, it misrepresents their unique and diverse experiences. Here are two implications of the model minority myth.

Many people perceive Asian Americans as well-educated and successful. They have an average household income of \$78,000 a year, which is above the national average of \$66,000.<sup>5</sup> These statistics, however, fail to represent the massive economic divide between the classes. A Pew research study from 2018 discovered that in the income distribution, Asians in the top 10% earned 10.7 times the salary of Asians in the bottom 10%.<sup>6</sup> Although the averages are high, they do not accurately reflect the large number of Asian Americans who are in the low-income bracket as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The model minority myth also implies Asians lack leadership qualities like

drive and creativity.<sup>8</sup> People of Asian descent represent 13% of the U.S. workforce while white people represent 69%. Of the senior-level roles, executives and upper-level management, Asians represent only 6% while whites represent 85%.<sup>9</sup> According to an Ascend research study, of all minorities in the U.S., "Asians were the most likely to be hired, but least likely to be promoted."<sup>10</sup> As employers perceive Asians as hardworking and intelligent through the lens of the model minority myth, they also perceive Asians as incapable of leadership.

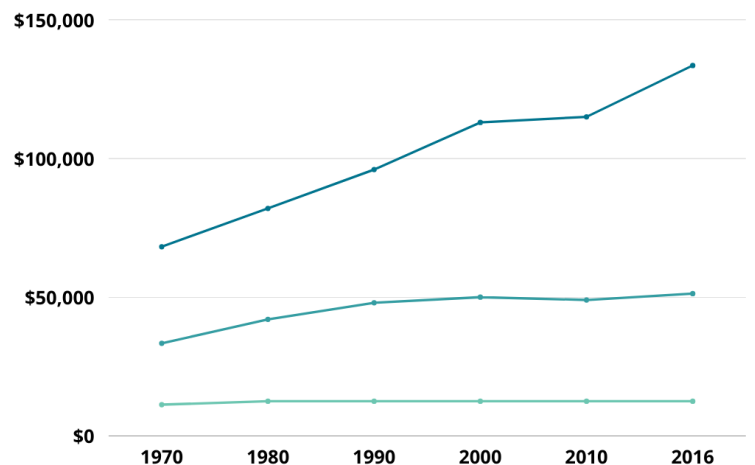
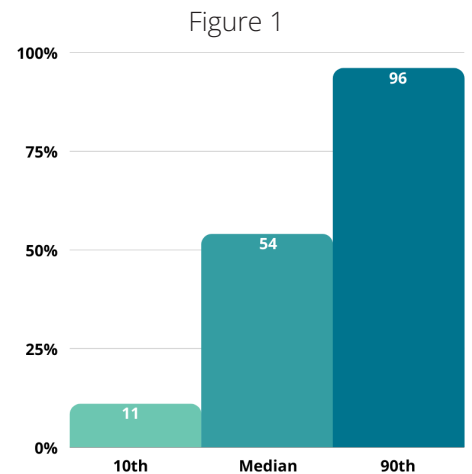


Figure 2



# How Does Anti-Asian Discrimination Affect the Workplace and Beyond?

Anti-Asian discrimination begins before the workplace. In recent years, universities across America have taken measures to increase the diversity of their campuses. They have established outreach programs for the most prominent minorities, Black and Latinx students. Although these are incredible steps towards increased diversity and equality, Asian-American students are often overlooked.

In October 2020, Yale University faced a lawsuit for this very problem. To increase on-campus diversity, the university practiced “racial balancing [of] Asian-American applicants.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Asian Americans reportedly had only one-eighth to one-fourth of the chance of admission compared to African American applicants with similar academic records. Yale rejects countless Asian applicants based solely on their race.<sup>12</sup>

To provide greater diversity for other minorities, Yale admits fewer Asian-American applicants.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it unintentionally discriminates against the model minority. Unfortunately, this subtle racism follows Asian Americans as they enter the workforce.

Dr. Aurora Le, Assistant Professor of University of Michigan’s School of Public Health, recently reported on the emotional and physical strain racism has in the workplace.

In her article “The Health Impacts of COVID19-Related Racial Discrimination of Asian Americans Extend into the Workplace,” Dr. Le emphasizes how Asian Americans are perceived as “essential, quiet, and hardworking but expendable.”<sup>14</sup>

This microaggression has led to “job strain, decreased job satisfaction, and turnover intention coupled with physiological deterioration.”<sup>15</sup> As employers and employees disregard their Asian counterparts, members of the working Asian-American community become less satisfied with their jobs and experience more physiological stress.

Dr. Le’s studies found that discrimination and microaggression have increased since the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Incidents of scapegoating China for the

coronavirus and racial slurs are on the incline. As of June 2021, the “Stop AAPI Hate National Report” indicates businesses are one of the most common sites of discrimination.<sup>17</sup> As seen in Figure 3, while 31.6% of incidents of discrimination occur on public streets and sidewalks, businesses are a close second at 30.1%.<sup>18</sup>

Please note this research considers both incidents of racism towards customers and employees. Decreased company loyalty due to racist comments and actions will only decrease productivity and profitability in the long run. As Dr. Le’s studies suggest, discriminatory acts affect job satisfaction and turnover intention. Thus, we need to turn our attention to bettering outreach programs and educating each other on matters of racism within the workplace.

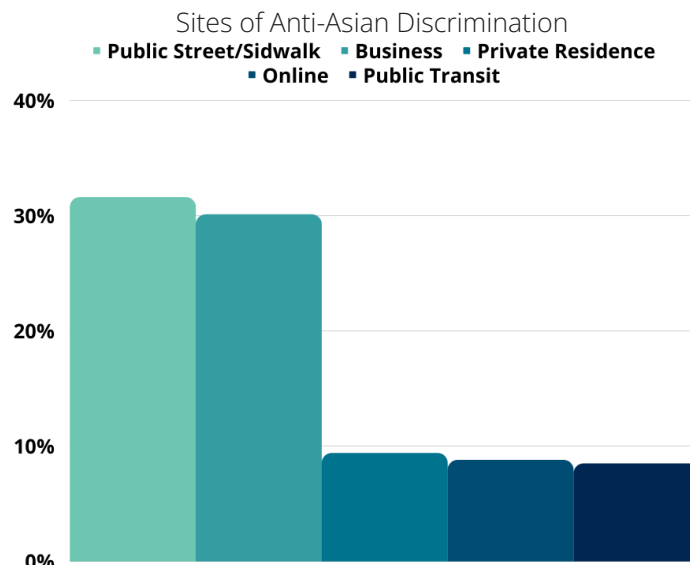


Figure 3

# How we Can Combat Asian-American Discrimination?

As incidences of violence and discrimination increase, many Asian-American business leaders, like co-founder of Yahoo Jerry Yang, have taken action to “increase the [Asian] community’s influence and economic status.”<sup>20</sup> Even politicians are noticing the increase in anti-Asian sentiments. In May, President Biden signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, which condemns violence against Asian Americans.<sup>21</sup>

We are left with the question of “whether corporate America will do its part.”<sup>22</sup> As we navigate racism and discrimination in the workplace, let us be cautious, curious, and caring. Learn how you can change your perception

of your Asian-American co-workers and employees to break down the “bamboo ceiling.”

Look at your acts of microaggression and accidental racist perceptions. Changing a company culture doesn’t happen overnight, but as you increase community outreach and encourage diversity education, you will lead us to a more inclusive future. Whether it’s sharing this article with someone you know or starting an educational workshop on AAPI discrimination, the changes you make today will promote greater diversity and awareness for Asian Americans in the community.

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