

Asian American and Pacific Islander Students in Focus: Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Jeremy Anderson

This brief is the second of a two-part series focused on AAPI students and their families in California and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. While part one focused on demographic, enrollment, and academic data, this brief focuses on how the pandemic impacted the community from a health perspective and examines the troubling rise in hate crimes against the AAPI community.

IN THIS BRIEF

- ▶ Pandemic health data for the AAPI community;
- ▶ Data on hate crimes against the AAPI community;
- ▶ AAPI families and in-person instruction; and
- ▶ Resources for addressing concerns related to the above areas.

The U.S. Census Bureau classifies survey responses using broad racial and ethnic categories. In this data, "Pacific Islander" encompasses many different ethnicities and nationalities. These include Native Hawaiians, Chamorus, Samoans, Marshallese, Tongans, and Fijians.

Filipino Americans are included in the "Asian American" race and ethnicity category along with Cambodians, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Koreans, Malaysians, Pakistanis, Thai, and Vietnamese.

For this reason, this pair of briefs include Filipino Americans in the Asian American designation unless specifically using data from the California Department of Education or other sources.

People of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) descent have been the targets of a disturbing rise in racially motivated hate crimes across the United States over the past year. Investigations of these crimes have linked their growth to discrimination connected with the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic, combined with these hate crimes, have had powerful repercussions for AAPI communities and the education of AAPI students. An emerging body of data suggests that, for some AAPI families, these factors have created a reluctance to return their students to school as more districts offer in-person instruction.

This brief will discuss several different factors experienced by AAPI communities throughout the pandemic. These experiences include the COVID-19 case and fatality rates of various AAPI communities, the pandemic's impact on students, data on hate crimes directed at the AAPI community, and resources for board members to address these issues in their local educational agencies (LEAs).

The Pandemic and Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

The first brief in this series stressed the critical nature of disaggregating broad racial/ethnic data categories. Asian Americans are not a monolith, and by only looking at broader categories, leaders can miss the variation that occurs within different Asian American communities. Early statistics from this past year indicate that different communities of Asian ancestry experienced the pandemic in drastically dissimilar ways.

To understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on California's AAPI students, it is important to consider the impact on their families. Data from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research indicates higher COVID-19 case and fatality rates in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander is a combined group in the Center's data because they use the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which combines the groups. While Asian Americans have the lowest case rate of any racial or ethnic group in California, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders have a case rate of 10,735 per 100,000 in California. This is the

highest case rate of any racial or ethnic group in the state and is over twice that of white Californians. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders also have the highest death rate from COVID-19 in the state at 219 per 100,000.¹ Among other factors, health experts attribute these high rates to the disproportionate impact of chronic illnesses pre-pandemic, lower access to quality healthcare, and higher representation in front-line healthcare fields.²

Another Asian American community disproportionately impacted by the pandemic is the Filipino community. Nationally, Filipino Americans make up 4 percent of nurses but accounted for 32 percent of nursing-related COVID-19 deaths. In California, Filipino workers constitute 20 percent of the state's healthcare worker population;³ however, 30 percent of COVID-19 healthcare worker deaths in California have been Filipino Americans. Filipino healthcare workers experienced a mortality toll of 6 percent as compared to 0.4 percent of white healthcare workers.⁴ Like the experiences of Pacific Islanders in California, Filipino Americans were impacted disproportionately by chronic illnesses pre-pandemic, such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. Additionally, 38 percent of Filipino Americans live in multigenerational households, increasing the risk for household transmission of the virus. These factors contribute to the reluctance of some AAPI families to return students to in-person instruction.

AAPI Unemployment During the Pandemic

In the first six months of the pandemic, the AAPI community experienced disproportionate unemployment rates in California. While Asian Americans made up 16 percent of the workforce in California in early 2020, they made up 19 percent of initial unemployment insurance claims nearly three months after the pandemic hit. Before the pandemic began, Asian American's unemployment rates were roughly comparable with white Americans at around 3 percent. However, by May 2020, Asian American unemployment rose to 15 percent, which outpaced the 12 percent unemployment rate for white Americans.⁵ Eighty-three percent of Asian Americans with high school degrees or less filed unemployment claims last summer. Even as these high unemployment rates have begun to return to pre-pandemic levels, 48 percent of Asian Americans are still dealing with long-term unemployment, which is the highest rate of any demographic group.⁶

FIGURE 1: COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents by ethnicity in California

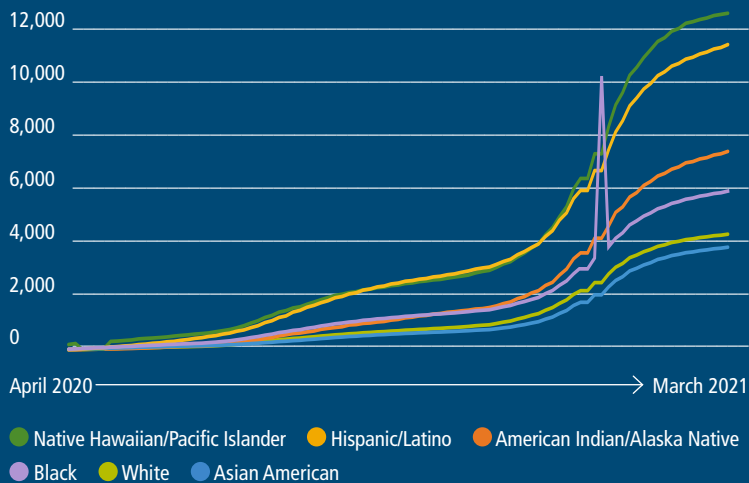
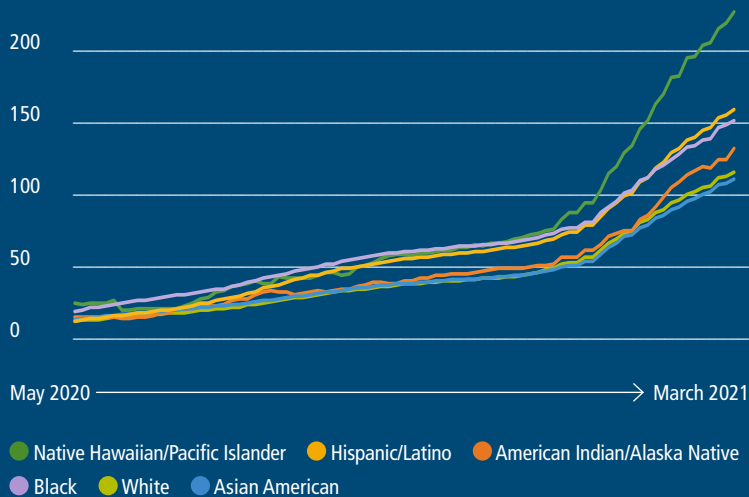


FIGURE 2: COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 residents by ethnicity in California



Note: Cases and Death per 100,000 by ethnicity data obtained from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research NHPI COVID-19 Dashboard. <https://bit.ly/3v9beFG>.

Access to Broadband and Technology

Internet and device access are both major educational issues in California that pre-date the pandemic. However, the pandemic further strained the digital divide when students moved to online learning environments. According to a report from the Public Policy Institute of California, Asian American students were the most likely demographic group to have consistent access to reliable internet and personally owned devices statewide during the pandemic. Asian Americans were also the most likely to have live, prolonged contact with a teacher. However, when disaggregated by income levels, Asian American students in low-income households may have had less hands-on help at home than their classmates.⁷

As students and their families weigh the prospect of returning to in-person instruction, they are doing so within communities that have experienced significant loss throughout the ongoing pandemic. School board members should consider these differences in experience when deciding on appropriate supports for students through resources and learning recovery options. Additionally, these impacts have implications for the communication strategies that might make families feel more comfortable allowing their students to return to in-person instruction.

Hate Crimes Against the AAPI Community

Health concerns are not the only factor influencing how AAPI families feel about their children returning to in-person instruction. Hate crimes against Asian Americans, fueled by discrimination surrounding COVID-19, have dramatically escalated since 2020 and have included instances of verbal and physical assault.⁸ Anti-AAPI hate crimes have increased 145 percent in 16 of the United States' largest cities during 2020. The rise in hate crimes directed at Asian-Americans occurs amidst a 6 percent overall drop in total hate crimes across all demographic groups. The three cities with the greatest number of reported incidents between 2019 and 2020 were New York City, NY; Los Angeles, CA; and Boston, MA.⁹ Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition aimed at addressing anti-Asian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, has received nearly 6,603 firsthand reports of anti-AAPI hate over the past year. The number of reports has significantly increased over the past three months, with 36 percent (2,410) of the total number of reports occurring in 2021 alone.

California accounted for 40 percent of self-reported hate crimes to Stop AAPI Hate between March 2020 and March 2021.¹⁰ In Los Angeles County alone, 245 self-reported incidences of hate crimes were directed at the AAPI community through October of last year.¹¹ When looking at Anti-AAPI hate crimes reported to the police, the numbers are lower, but the percentage increases are striking in three of California's largest cities. From 2019 to 2020, AAPI hate crimes reported to the police increased 114 percent in Los Angeles, 150 percent in San Jose, and 50 percent in San Francisco in the same timeframe.¹²

Stop AAPI Hate also produced a report that specifically looked at discrimination experienced by AAPI youth (ages 12-20) in the United States. The survey examines 341 self-reported instances of discrimination. Bullying or verbal harassment accounted for 81.5 percent of the incidents, 24 percent reported shunning or social isolation, and 8 percent reported physical assaults. AAPI high school students were the most likely student group to experience discrimination. Female youth were two and a half times more likely to report hate incidents than male youth, consistent with the disproportionate amount of incidents against AAPI women overall.¹³

Even though both self-reported hate crime data and hate crimes reported to police increased for Asian Americans throughout 2020, that data is still likely underreported for several reasons. In a March 2021 report, Stop AAPI Hate found that Asian American respondents were the least likely to indicate that they were "very comfortable" reporting a hate-related incident. Researchers from the group theorize that this reluctance could be related to language barriers, a general distrust of law enforcement in immigrant communities, and other cultural factors.¹⁴ Additionally, data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is collected inconsistently and can be hindered by unreliable local reporting. In 2019, for example, 3,000 of the nation's 18,000 police agencies did not submit any hate crime data to the FBI.¹⁵ Finally, the current data may be lower than what is reported by the media and groups that aggregate this data because hate crimes data are released in November of the following year. That means there is a lag between when a hate crime occurs, when it is reported to authorities, when the authorities release their data to the FBI, and then when the FBI releases the data.

A Reluctance to Return to In-Person Instruction

The impact of the pandemic on AAPI communities combined with a rise in hate and discrimination has had a direct effect on the willingness of families and their students to return to in-person instruction. Large proportions of Asian American families across the United States and California are choosing to keep their students in distance learning, even as more districts return to in-person instruction. As of February 2021, the Institute of Education Sciences estimates that only 15 percent of fourth-grade Asian American students were receiving in-person learning, the lowest percentage of any demographic group in the United States. This is as compared to over 50 percent of white students, 32 percent of Hispanic students, and 28 percent of African American students. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students participate in in-person instruction at a slightly higher rate of 26 percent.¹⁶

While the state does not track in-person participation by race/ethnicity, early data suggests that California appears to follow the national trend of AAPI families hesitant to send their students back to in-person instruction. Many school districts across the state have surveyed students' families to gauge interest in different types of instruction, such as in-person, digital-only, or a hybrid schedule. In the Sacramento City Unified School District, 53 percent of all respondents chose in-person learning instead of distance learning. However, only about a third of Asian American households indicated

that they planned to send their students back to school this year, which is the lowest of any racial/ethnic group. That rate is compared to 71 percent of white students, 55 percent of Black students, and 52 percent of Latino students.¹⁷ In the San Diego Unified School District, 73 percent of families who responded to the survey indicated they wanted schools to reopen for in-person instruction. However, Asian American families were the least likely to want to send their students to attend school in person, with 57 percent responding positively as compared to 83 percent of white families, 72 percent of Latino families, and 69 percent of Black families.¹⁸

The reasons that AAPI families' have expressed for this reluctance range from health-related concerns to concerns over bullying and targeted harassment. Many AAPI families have also chosen to keep their students away from in-person instruction because they live in multigenerational households, and they are concerned about the household transmission of COVID-19 among older generations.¹⁹ Other reasons Asian American families have expressed include internal family stresses and a general distrust of promised safety measures.²⁰

How School Districts Can Support AAPI students and Larger Communities

Given the challenges experienced by AAPI students and their families, LEAs and research organizations have begun to put together resources for school districts and county offices of education to support those students. This section will discuss some resources for this purpose that are hyperlinked for ease of access.

In response to the increase in hate-motivated incidents, many advocates have suggested that California should provide a curriculum with a more robust exploration of the history of AAPI groups in America and the state itself. This coincides with the development of resources that can support schools in this effort. In March, the California State Board of Education adopted a [model ethnic studies curriculum](#). This optional model curriculum can be a valuable tool to teach about the history of Asian Americans and illustrate the legacy of discrimination that Asian Americans have experienced in the United States, something often not highlighted in current curricula. The model curriculum includes a unit on Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies with sample lessons that encompass:

- ▶ Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Model Minority Myth
- ▶ Cambodian Americans — Deportation Breaking Families Apart
- ▶ Chinese Railroad Workers
- ▶ Little Manila, Filipino Laborers, and the United Farm Workers
- ▶ Hmong Americans — Community, Struggle, Voice
- ▶ Indian Americans — Creating Community and Establishing an Identity in California
- ▶ The Japanese American Incarceration Experience through Poetry and Spoken Word
- ▶ Korean American Experiences and Interethnic Relations
- ▶ The Immigrant Experiences of Lao Americans

- ▶ Historical Contemporary Experiences of Pacific Islanders in the United States
- ▶ South Asian Americans in the United States
- ▶ Vietnamese American Experiences — The Journey of Refugees

Another resource that school board members can create for their districts is a resolution denouncing the rise in hate crimes and expressing support for their AAPI communities. Numerous LEAs and organizations have issued resolutions condemning the increase in xenophobia and discrimination against their AAPI communities. In March 2021, the California School Boards Association (CSBA) issued a statement calling out the violence, assault, and murders of Asian Americans that have harmed the community. In conjunction with the statement, CSBA provided a [sample resolution](#) that school districts can use to support their Asian American communities and condemn the harassment and violence towards people of Asian descent.²¹ The resolution acknowledges the rise in hate crimes and the historical discrimination the AAPI community has faced in the United States. For reference, several samples are included in the Resources section of this brief. In addition to the sample resolution, the association has also provided a list of CSBA's sample policies that address bullying and hate.

Beyond resolutions, school districts and county offices of education have mobilized resources to help educators and school leaders confront anti-Asian sentiment. Members may also consider encouraging their LEAs to create resources for educators and district leaders. The Los Angeles County Office of Education provided resources for educators to help them address anti-Asian racism, including guides for reporting incidents for victims or bystanders, guides to help support conversations about race, and lesson plans that confront racism and teach understanding.²² Similarly, Belmont-Redwood Shores Elementary School District put together a set of resources for its community that included a link to the [Learning for Justice](#) website, which provides resources to help parents talk to their students about racism. It also had tools for teachers to create lessons [on anti-racism](#) and [xenophobia for kids](#), documentaries on [the history of discrimination against Asian Americans](#), and the [Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit](#) to help talk to youth about social justice issues. Other LEAs, such as the San Diego County Office of Education and Vista Unified School District, have put together workshops and web series to address multiple dimensions of this crisis, including closing educational equity gaps and using social-emotional learning to address anti-racism.

Engaging AAPI student voice and creating student communities of trust among all students in a district are essential in the fight against discrimination. The incidents of racial trauma experienced by many students over the past year have presented school districts with a renewed opportunity to engage students in anti-racist learning and community building. By getting student input, district leaders can better understand the needs of students and their perspectives on health and emotional safety. For instance, in March, Oakland Unified School District hosted a [three-workshop series on "youth solidarity dialog"](#) for high school students of AAPI, Black, Middle Eastern, and North African descent. For AAPI Heritage Month, student activists in Tustin Unified School District [created posters that depict important AAPI leaders and motivational quotes, which are](#)

[displayed throughout the district](#). Creating spaces for students to come together and express themselves and openly share their thoughts on the district's overall climate can generate a greater sense of trust between them, their fellow classmates, and school staff.

Researchers from Stop AAPI Hate have also compiled a list of recommendations and best practices for school districts to stop hate-related incidents and better support AAPI students. Research-based best practices and community input inform these recommendations. The recommendations are:

- ▶ Intervene and investigate promptly and equitably all allegations and any form of harassment;
- ▶ Provide anti-racism training for teachers and administrators specifically addressing the current rise in anti-Asian hate and stereotypes of AAPI students. Integrate that training with social-emotional learning;
- ▶ Educate staff and students about anti-bullying policies that encourage safe and accessible reporting systems and restorative justice approaches and consistently apply them at school sites;
- ▶ Implement ethnic studies and integrate AAPI history and representation throughout the curriculum so that students learn the historicized roots and impacts of racism, develop agency and empathy, and commit to racial solidarity and justice;
- ▶ Provide AAPI students with culturally sustaining and responsive wellness services and;
- ▶ Empower AAPI students through affinity groups, student coalitions, and collective action towards educational and racial equity.²³

The complete youth report, which goes more in-depth into each of these recommendations, can be found in the Resources section.

In line with the youth report recommendations, Assembly Bill 2291 of 2019 required that LEAs adopt anti-bullying policies that should be used to encourage a safer school district environment and to confront [bullying and hate-motivated behavior](#). In addition to these policies, CDE provides a substantive body of [bullying prevention trainings and resources](#) to help districts prevent, identify, and respond to bullying. These resources include [bullying prevention training courses](#), [a guide for teachers to address cyberbullying](#), [model anti-bullying plans from other states](#), and links to other anti-bullying organizations that provide support and training to LEAs. Additionally, the [Health Education Framework](#), adopted by the State Board of Education in 2019, addresses bullying throughout the K-12 curriculum, so board members can consult with district staff to understand how anti-bullying content is integrated into the curriculum.

Experiencing a hate crime, having a loved one experience a hate crime, or just having one's larger community targeted is traumatic for students. Hate crimes can have adverse effects on youth mental health. California school districts and county offices of education are receiving recovery funds from both the federal American Rescue Plan

and state's Assembly Bill 86 (the California Legislature's COVID-19 relief and school reopening aid package). According to the U.S. Department of Education, one way these funds may be used is to implement strategies to meet the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students hit hardest by the pandemic.²⁴ AB 86's Expanded Learning Opportunities Grant encourages LEAs receiving funds to provide integrated student supports that address barriers to learning, including health, counseling, or mental health services.²⁵ Both federal and state aid for socioemotional health could be critical for students of color, including AAPI students, if school districts use it to confront the mental and social stresses of both the pandemic and of this year's rise in hate crimes.

Conclusion

Emerging data on the pandemic has shown that COVID-19 disproportionately impacted communities of color across the nation. Data indicating lower case rates for the broader Asian American community hide exceptionally high case and death rates in the Pacific Islander and Filipino communities. The pandemic's impacts combined with the recent traumatic rise in hate crimes which ties back to instances of historical discrimination in the United States has understandably made AAPI families hesitant about sending their students back to in-person instruction. School board members should keep in mind that AAPI students may be carrying the distress of not just the disparate impact of COVID-19 on their communities but also the looming specter of bullying and hate directed at them and their families.

Questions for Board Members to Consider

- 1) What types of data does the district currently have on AAPI students and their experiences over the course of the pandemic? Is that data disaggregated by specific AAPI racial/ethnic groups to better identify student need?
- 2) How can the district address the concerns of AAPI families when considering a return to in-person instruction? What communication strategies can help AAPI families feel comfortable sending their children back to on-campus instruction?
- 3) What types of emotional, academic, or other supports do different segments of the district's AAPI community say would help them feel safe and learn effectively?
- 4) How can the district use incoming federal and state aid funding to help support students' mental and physical health?
- 5) What resources do teachers and staff need to address bullying and targeted harassment in the district effectively?

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Resources

CSBA offers applicable sample policies for subscribers of GAMUT Policy at <https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Index.aspx?S=36030855>. Some sample policies that might be useful for addressing the needs of AAPI students include:

- ▶ 5131.2 – Bullying
- ▶ 5131.4 – Student Disturbances
- ▶ 5137 – Positive School Climate
- ▶ 5145.3 – Nondiscrimination/Harassment
- ▶ 5145.9 – Hate-Motivated Behavior (*updated policy to be released in mid-June 2021*)

[Sample resolution from the Asian Pacific Islander School Board Members Association \(APISMBA\)](#) — This resolution provides space for districts to enter their local data on hate-related incidents and denounces contemporary and historical occurrences of discrimination against the Asian American community.

Many school districts have developed resolutions against AAPI hate. The following links contain sample resolutions from three California school districts:

- ▶ [Davis Joint Unified School District](#)
- ▶ [Palo Alto Unified School District](#)
- ▶ [Glendale Unified School District](#)

[Stop AAPI Hate Youth Report](#) — This report focuses on the experiences of discrimination of AAPI youth. It contains a list of research-informed recommendations to help combat rising incident rates.

[California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum](#) — Adopted by the State Board of Education in March 2021, the model curriculum includes a wealth of sample lessons, instructional resources, and UC-approved course outlines addressing a wide range of topics about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

[CSBA School Boards in Action: Equity Takes Center Stage](#) — This blog post highlights the work of several LEAs and includes resolutions, examples of equity workshops, and toolkits. These resources are designed to combat anti-Asian discrimination and promote anti-racism in districts.

[Confronting COVID-19 Related Harassment in Schools — A Resource for Families](#) — The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education jointly released a fact sheet that addresses ongoing harassment and discrimination stemming from the pandemic. The fact sheet contains examples of the kind of incidents that the Office of Civil Rights can investigate and what families should do if their student experiences discrimination.

Endnotes

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