

Asian Americans, Advocacy & the “Model Minority Myth”

An Article of the OVWA Monthly Highlight Series

“The Model Minority Myth”

Asian Americans, like many minorities in the United States, have been labeled, oppressed, and stereotyped to a detrimental level. The OVWA Highlight Topic for this month focuses on how these stereotypes and the “Model Minority Myth” have impacted Asian Americans in ways other minorities have not experienced.

Sarah SoonLing Blackburn, Professional Development Trainer for Teaching Tolerance (a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center), describes,

“The myth of the model minority is based in stereotypes. It perpetuates a narrative in which Asian American children are “whiz kids” or musical geniuses. Within the myth of the model minority, “Tiger Moms” force children to work harder and be better than everyone else, while nerdy, effeminate dads hold prestigious—but not leadership—positions in STEM industries like medicine and accounting. This myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” immigrant striving.”

When others assume knowledge and level of intelligence, Asian Americans, in daily encounters, may not have the level of knowledge assumed, yet feel the need, due to pressure inside and outside of their community, to maintain the appearance they meet these elevated expectations. While these daily encounters may be small, the cumulative effect can be large, within an individual, their family, and the community as a whole. Conversely, other groups in our society may view the Asian American community as having an inherent privilege due to the nature of these stereotypes, yet fail to understand the harmful effects the myth of the “Model Minority” creates.

In regards to psychosocial affects, the myth creates a narrative that places Asian Americans under the expectation of unattainable goals for success while at the same time reinforcing social stigma limiting access to mental health counseling and social services, which can be seen as a failure within the community. The fact that “Asian American college students are 1.6 times more likely than all others to make a serious suicide attempt, and 3 times less likely to seek out professional therapy or counseling” (Qiao 2017), is rarely discussed.

Lived Experiences within the Model Minority Myth

In an effort to correctly represent Asian Americans in this article, OVWA consulted with sisters Leigha So-Yeon Shoup, M.S., R.A. and Lesley Yu-Jung Kim, Ph.D. Leigha and Lesley have summarized their experiences, acknowledging the impact the Model Minority Myth has had on their lives.

“As Asian Americans, my sister and I have spent our entire lives being subjected to other people’s ideas and stereotypes of what it means to be Asian. We have experienced people saying, “You are Asian and there are no negative stereotypes about you. People see you and automatically think you are a doctor or the smartest one in the room.” This idea of Asians being an “elite” minority group might seem empowering, however, this can be a difficult mindset for someone to have when interacting with others. The sad truth behind that stereotype is that there are tremendous pressures to live up to other people’s unattainable expectations, both within and outside of the Asian culture. These pressures can cause burnout, insecurities, self-esteem issues, shame, and minimal self-care practices. It’s important to remember that stereotypes, even if seemingly positive, promote negative interactions and thoughts of others.

Asian American stereotypes can be dangerous in personal relationships as well. It is a stereotype of the culture that Asian women are exotic, over-sexualized, and seen as subservient/ obedient. Partners seeking these types of women will often seek out Asian women, treating them as objects and cultivating circumstances of abuse. Additionally, Asian Americans who identify as LGBTQ+ may experience difficulty in personal relationships as well due to the deep-rooted cultural and religious importance of gender roles within the family and the importance placed on having male children. Although there have been significant strides in acceptance of LGBTQ+ members within some Asian communities, it continues to be a barrier from acceptance for many Asian Americans.

Asian cultures can propagate tight knit communities. Outsiders are rarely allowed in and that includes people belonging to groups that are trying to advocate for them. Many Asian Americans feel that ethnic outsiders do not understand the pressures and expectations put on them and therefore do not seek help from them. This is the importance of representation in advocacy roles and how it may relate to access to services.”

Immigration and the “Model Minority Myth”

“The number of undocumented Asians has more than tripled since 2000, and they now account for an estimated 1.6 million of the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States”, said Karthick Ramakrishnan, founder and director of Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Data. “One out of every seven Asian immigrants is undocumented. That is a figure that shocks many people, including Asian Americans,” Ramakrishnan said.” (As cited in Williams, 2017)

The [demographics](#) of the Asian American community may be far different than the “Model Minority” stereotype suggests:

- There are over 19.4 million Asian Americans in the U.S. and it is the fastest growing ethnic group
- Chinese is the largest Asian ethnic group, while Indian is the fastest growing
- AAPI community-based organizations report serving survivors from 56 distinct ethnic groups
- Roughly three quarters of Asian Americans speak a language other than English at home
- Roughly one third of Asian Americans are limited English proficient
- AAPI community-based organizations report providing services in 75 AAPI languages
- Approximately 66% of Asian Americans are foreign born, the highest of any racial group nation wide
- 16% of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders are foreign born

Victims of Crime within the “Model Minority Myth”

“There has been much research conducted in the area of family violence, however, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing family violence in Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Because AAPIs are regarded as the model minority, many have the misconception that family violence does not exist in this population.” (Weil, Lee, 2004) Asian American women largely underreport interpersonal violence (IPV). According to research conducted in 2018, a few reasons that AAPI women underreport IPV are because of the stigma attached to being a victim, internalized traditional gender norms, and fear of culturally significant consequences.

Knowing what we know now, how do we effectively advocate for Asian American victims of crime given the barriers to service they face? The sheer number of countries, cultures, and religions within the Asian American Pacific Islander category necessitates research into the specific culture in which your client identifies. The Asian Pacific Islander Institute of Gender Based Violence has an extensive

[resource library](#), which includes fact sheets on many different countries and cultures, and advocacy information for specific cultures.

It is important to have both a fact-based knowledge of the AAPI community and to seek out education on specific cultural differences and barriers to accessing advocacy services for the clients you are serving. The information provided is intended to provide a basic understanding of some of the challenges faced by Asian Americans and Immigrants, but OVWA encourages all service providers to further research and educate yourselves on the many different populations we all serve.

State and National Resources

Directory of Domestic & Gender Violence Programs for Asians & Pacific Islanders, 2019

<https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/directory-api-services/>

Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS) – Central Ohio

<https://www.crisohio.org/>

- Refugee Resettlement Agency through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State
- Crime victim advocacy, information, and referral services with the goals of empowering victims and strengthening communities.
- Assistance in filing victims compensation claims
- Strengths-based case management
- Safety Planning
- Counseling referrals
- Assistance during court appearances and victims impact statements
- Referrals to legal services
- Community outreach
- Advocacy for refugee and immigrant interests in local task forces, committees, coalitions, and collaborations with other victims services agencies.
- Services are available in Nepali, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, and Kirundi, with interpretation available in many more languages.

Asian American Community Services (AACS) – Central Ohio

<http://www.aacsohio.org/home>

Our services include:

- Crisis intervention
- Client education and empowerment
- Safety planning
- Assistance connecting victim services and other resources
- Referrals to shelters and other housing arrangements
- Legal referrals
- Court accompaniment and accompaniment to law enforcement agencies
- Assistance in applying for public benefits
- Cultural humility trainings for service providers and community partners

Asian Services in Action, Inc. (ASIA) – Northeast Ohio

<http://www.asiaohio.org/>

ASIA, Inc.'s Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Program provides:

- Free representation and support to victims of domestic violence, and sexual assault across Northeast Ohio.
- Holistic, comprehensive, multilingual and culturally-responsive services
- Counseling, support groups, and shelter/housing assistance.
- Accompaniment of victims to court
- Safety Planning & Protection Orders
- Immigration Assistance & Housing Assistance

Asian Community Alliance – Southwest Ohio

PROJECT HOPE HELPLINE: (513) 535-4976

For all questions on Project HOPE or Domestic Violence, please contact Project HOPE Coordinator”

hopecoordinator@asiancommunityalliance.org

<https://asiancommunityalliance.org/>

Relevant Articles:

[The Truth About “The Asian Advantage” and “Model Minority Myth”](#)

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-is-the-model-minority-myth>

<https://psmag.com/social-justice/asian-americans-are-not-your-model-minority>

[Asian/Americans, Education, and Crime](#)

[I am Asian American](#)

References

Williams, V. 2017. “*You feel invisible: How America’s fastest-growing immigrant group is being left out of the DACA conversation.*” [The Washington Post, Post Nation]. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/08/an-asian-daca-recipient-reminds-us-that-not-all-immigrant-families-are-from-south-of-the-u-s-border/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4798863434c7

Weil JM1, Lee HH. J Community Health Nurse. 2004 Winter; 21(4):217-27. [Abstract.] “*Cultural considerations in understanding family violence among Asian American Pacific Islander families.*” Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15537547>

Hu, C. 2018. “*What we know about intimate partner violence in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.*” [Urban Wire Crime and Justice the Blog of the Urban Institute] Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/what-we-know-about-intimate-partner-violence-asian-american-and-pacific-islander-communities>

Qiao, G. 2017. “*Why Are Asian American Kids Killing Themselves?*” [Plan A Magazine] Retrieved from <https://planamag.com/why-are-asian-american-kids-killing-themselves-477a3f6ea3f2>