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Kids In the Shadow:

**Bullying of Asian-American students more prevalent
than in other racial groups**

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Bullying of Asian-American students more prevalent
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Report

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Abstract

Kids In the Shadow: Bullying of Asian-American students more prevalent than in other racial groups

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Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that in 2013 almost one out of every five high school students in the United States reported being bullied on school property. And of that number, 21.7 percent are Asian American. 17.8 percent are Hispanic and 12.7 percent are African American. Bullying of Asian-American students is more prevalent than in other racial groups and national survey finds the rate is increasing rapidly. Last year, The White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders launched the AAPI Bullying Prevention Task Force to proactively address bullying in the AAPI community. This story depicts the phenomenon and reasons of the rampant bullying among Asian-American students and how the federal government, local organizations, schools and individuals work together to address this issue.

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Tin Dang was lonely. As the only Asian-American student during his middle school and high school years in Amarillo, Texas, he didn't have friends to hang out with. He described himself as "an easy target to pick on."

He switched high schools after years of bullying and being called racial slurs, hoping things would get better. But they didn't change as much as he thought.

"Slightly, but I still faced the same thing," said Dang, now a senior majoring in social work at The University of Texas at Austin.

Dang is not alone. He represents a large and rapidly growing population: Asian-American students targeted for bullying.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that in 2013 almost one out of every five high school students in the United States reported being bullied on school property. Of that number, 21.7 percent were Asian American, 17.8 percent were Hispanic and 12.7 percent were African American. According to the Federal Office of Management and Budget, "Asian" refers to people from the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent.

The study also found the rate of Asian-American students being bullied increased more than any other racial group over the previous two years, rising 6 percent.

“Unfortunately, when it comes to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, they have the highest rate of bullying,” said Linda Phan, a commissioner with The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

A national report from 2010 shows that almost one out of every 10 Asian-American students in the United States are subjected to race-related hate words, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Only three percent of white students, six percent of Hispanic students and seven percent of black students say they are subjected to the same thing.

“If you look at studies that have been conducted by outside groups, the numbers are much higher,” said Alice Yao, who works for the AAPI Bullying Prevention Task Force launched in late 2014 by The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

In a 2012 survey of 163 Asian-American students in New York City public schools, published by The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and The Sikh Coalition, half of the students reported experiencing bias-based harassment in school, a greater than 20 percent increase from 2009.

“Because they have linguistic barriers, and also cultural and religious issues, that’s what makes bullying of AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) students kind of a more unique issue,” Yao said.

Being different

Sonia Kotecha, a 39-year-old Indian American and cofounder of The Asian Behavioral Health Network in Austin, still remembers what happened when she was a toddler in Vermont.

“My first incident of knowing I was different was in primary school when the kids called me ‘poo-poo,’” she said.

In kindergarten, Kotecha was always teamed with another South Asian student. “As a kid, I thought, ‘Why am I being imposed on a friend?’ They are just like, ‘You guys are gonna be friends.’ They kind of picked me out,” she said.

She knew other children who suffered the same thing. “A lot of bullying is like herd mentality,” she said. “Herds stay together with people who are like them, so if there are people that are not like them, they’ll try to dominate those people.”

Kotecha said the bullying caused her to lead separate lives. “I didn’t want my American friends in my home to see the Gods, the food. I wanted to fit in,” she said. Kotecha decided to have two birthday parties: one at McDonald’s with her American school friends and one at home with her Indian friends.

The pressure of being different bothered Tin Dang as well. At his school, the majority of students were white or Hispanic. He picked up basketball and other hobbies he was not very interested in or good at -- just to fit in.

However, bullying can lead to more severe consequences than isolation. Sixteen-year-old Teddy Molina, part Korean and part Hispanic, took his own life in 2012 after years of bullying at Flour Bluff Intermediate School in Corpus Christi, Texas.

On Dec. 3, 2009, close to 30 young people were attacked during a daylong assault specifically targeting Asian-American students at South Philadelphia High School in Pennsylvania. Just a year earlier, five Chinese students at South Philadelphia High School were attacked by more than two dozen students in a subway station one block from school.

Besides physical and verbal attacks, bullying can also happen in cyberspace. Rumors are sent by email or posted on social networking sites. Embarrassing pictures, videos, websites or fake Facebook profiles are also considered bullying. CDC statistics show that in 2013 one out of every 10 high school students that were cyberbullied were Asian American.

Allen Wong, a senior at UT-Austin, said he was once cyberbullied on Facebook by a Hispanic student at Shepton High School in Plano. “He called me racial names like ‘chink, stupid Asian,’” Wong said.

Wong did his own social media project on cyberbullying and discovered “a lot of (bullies) tend to apparently feel insecure. They kind of want to make themselves feel better and superior by putting everyone below them,” he said.

The Absence of Asian-American parents

Tin Dang said during all those hard years, he kept his suffering secret from his parents until the he transferred schools. “I honestly think that they didn’t take it seriously when I wanted to transfer schools,” Dang said. “They didn’t understand. They thought everything was fine.”

Dang’s parents pushed him to make good grades, while he kept his own emotions inside. “Before college, I just tried to focus what I needed to do instead of the main problem at my hand,” Dang said.

In May 2015, Dang will graduate from UT-Austin, but his experiences in middle and high school still haunt him. “Me being cynical, me not trusting a lot of people, me having relationship problems, a lot of them came from back then. Sometimes I get flashbacks of those moments. It has had a significant effect on me,” Dang said.

Victims of the bullying can suffer for years.

“There is an increased chance of anxiety disorders, depression as well as low self-esteem,” said Dr. Richard Yuen, a clinical psychologist at Lonestar Psychological Services in Austin.

Yuen said the effects of bullying could be so subtle that sometimes many people overlook them, but over time they can transform into something more severe for the victim. The American Psychiatric Association found that among all ethnicities, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the least likely to seek help for mental disorders. Experts say a cultural value of self-reliance and a fear of shaming the family may keep many of those being bullied from seeking assistance with emotional problems.

“If parents are not supportive of students’ emotional health, then the students have no place else to turn, so they turn more inside,” said Vincent Cobalis, the vice chair of the Austin Asian American Quality of Life Commission.

“The Asian culture is very reluctant to admit to mental health issues . . . they don’t seek out help. We need to break out of that perception that dealing with mental health issues is negative,” Cobalis said.

Kotecha struggled with post-traumatic syndrome after being bullied. “That kind of stuff in the past can really haunt you,” she said. However, Kotecha’s mother was very open to seeking mental health care, which she said helped her through that hard time.

Kotecha is now a social worker. Her work touches on race, ethnicity and children and family support. She believes that family plays a crucial role in addressing bullying and racism.

“We don’t get a lot of protective messages from our families about potential racism and discrimination in the mainstream society, because I think our families don’t know the history of race in America,” Kotecha said. “They don’t know how deeply rooted that is. They are coming here focusing on education, good quality of life. They didn’t grow up in the context.”

Kotecha says parents should not simply try to avoid confrontation. “Many Asian parents just told their children to go to school, focus on studies and ignore everything else. They should know it’s more complicated than that. Kids have pressure to fit in and learn social skills, which can also be productive in the real world too,” she said.

On the website of the American Psychiatric Association, it says that the conflict between traditional family values and mainstream culture may cause additional stress and exacerbate anxiety for some Asian youth.

“I’m not saying it’s the Asian-American parents’ fault because they come from a very different culture,” said Charles Lu, who works in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin. “But I actually think it’s important for Asian parents to learn what the predominant culture looks like here.”

He said that some Asian-American parents, like his, don't let their kids participate in things that are more socially acceptable. "I'm actually a pretty athletic person, but my parents made me focus my energy on school and after-school math classes, or things like the violin and piano, as opposed to letting me play soccer," he said.

Growing up in the suburbs of Washington D.C., Lu said he experienced bullying during sixth and seventh grades. "I'm 30 years old, but I can remember something that happened to me when I was 11," he said. However, Lu didn't tell his parents because he thought they wouldn't understand. "If their children get bullied, they need to identify that it's a problem. A lot of the Asian-American parents would just say things like 'Oh, ignore it and it'll go away,' or 'Why don't you tell the teacher?'"

Lu said it is of equal importance to educate the bullies' parents. "A lot of times kids who are bullies see their own parents being bullies within their social circles. They think that's OK," Lu said. "The people who need to get talked to aren't necessarily getting talked to. If the bullies' parents can't even stand up, I don't know how much a teacher or principal can really do."

"It's not about who beat whom"

The Department of Education revealed that in school year 2008-2009, more than half of bullied Asian-American students say it occurred in the classroom. The bullying-at-school rate is 20 percent higher than for whites.

"Why are the victims at school less valuable than if you are victimized out of school?" said Irwin Tang, a licensed counselor in Austin. "If a child's beaten up on the street, then the person is arrested. If a child's beaten up in school, the bully goes to the office or maybe miss couple days of school. I think the system is inherently flawed."

Tang insisted that bullying should be prosecuted in the criminal courts, and kids who beat others up ought to be put in juvenile detention. However, no federal law currently addresses bullying directly.

In some cases, the inaction of school administrators acts as tacit consent to the rampant bullying. Wei Chen, who emigrated from China in 2007, said that in his first month at South Philadelphia High School, he was punched from behind by two students. After he reported the assault, school security officers asked him to track down his attackers. “As a new immigrant student, I didn’t know what to do,” Chen said.

The case was never followed up. Later in his school years, he witnessed some students throw food at Asian students in the lunchroom; some school staff turned their heads away when they saw Asian students being bullied.

In some extreme cases, he said, some students would wander the school grounds and look for their targets. “Why would teachers let them walk around during class?” he asked.

He says that school administrators didn’t protect the attacked Asian students, instead they told the students to go home. “Which means that it’s none of my business, if something happened outside of campus,” Chen said. School officials did not visit the injured students in the hospital, he claimed.

In a 2013 New York report by The Sikh Coalition and The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, less than half of the victims’ parents were notified after kids reported harassment to their school.

For Kotecha it is all about education – educating teachers and students to be more attuned to bullying and to be more open to different cultures, races and ethnicities. In the last couple of years, she has seen the Indian community grow in Austin and she has seen more schools teaching about different cultures.

“It brings tears to my eyes when I see that, because I grew up not having that,” she said. “Back in the day I used to be so ashamed of wearing Indian clothes and being seen in any Indian clothing. If we go to a wedding and put Henna on our hands, I wanted to scrub it off before I get to school,” Kotecha said.

But for Noreen Rodriguez, a bilingual elementary teacher who taught in Austin Independent School District for nine years, celebrating diverse cultures is simply not enough. Rodriguez said she noticed that when people talk about Asia now in school, it’s often through 3“F”s: Food, Festival and Fun.

“You celebrate a holiday one time a year and that’s it. So what the students know is ‘Oh, the Chinese people have this holiday and it’s fun, and I made a lantern in school,’” Rodriguez said.

For Rodriguez, these superficial celebrations of holidays cover up the real problem: the absence of Asian American history in textbooks. She says there is basically nothing about Asian America history taught from kindergarten to eighth grade, and the only time Asians are mentioned in Texas high school textbooks are references to the Chinese building railroads – or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

“The two instances where you talk about Asian groups, it was a very long time ago,” Rodriguez said.

On Rodriguez's bookshelf is a children's book called "Paper Son," which tells a story of Chinese immigrants. She hopes teachers can teach Asian American history using this kind of children's literature, especially when there is so little in the textbooks.

She is now working closely with a historian at UT-Austin to develop a curriculum in Asian American studies for elementary school students -- and she would also like to see more training for AISD teachers.

"It's hard to teach the things you don't know," said Rodriguez. "I'll expose them (teachers) to these books and tell them about the history that is not part of what they themselves learned."

Other than the ignorance of school administration and educators, Lu pointed out that language proficiency could also serve as a major reason for the bullying. People who can't speak English, or speak fractured English, got bullied more.

"Recently we asked our freshmen how many of them got annoyed by international students, and about half of the class raised their hands," said Lu. He worried that if college students with higher maturity level get annoyed with language skills, then what would happen with high and middle school students?

Lu's concern is valid. A 2007 research led by Belle Liang revealed that Chinese American middle school students in Boston reported frequently experiencing race-based verbal and physical harassment because of their language or accent. According to Chen, Asian immigrant students in South Philadelphia High School were sometimes made fun of because of their accents -- and sometimes the harassment came from staff in the lunchroom.

Noreen Rodriguez also saw many students were made fun of because their English wasn't fluent. "When you don't speak English fluently, there's a tendency for children and adults to make a lot of assumptions about where you belong," Rodriguez said.

Experts also say that mass media has begun touching on the bullying, stereotypes and racial profiling.

Last year there was the bestseller "Everything I Never Told You" which tells a sad story of every member's spiritual struggle in a Chinese-American family. In ABC's new show "Fresh Off the Boat," which shows the life of a Taiwanese family in Florida, a kid is bullied for bringing noodles for lunch instead of a sandwich. The little boy shouts to his mom, "I need white-people lunch!"

While growing up, Kotecha said she really wanted blond hair and blue eyes so that she could fit in. "I just picked that up unconsciously," she said.

Rodriguez's daughter, who is in a pre-kindergarten school where there are a lot of white kids with blond hair, once told Rodriguez that she wanted to have "clear hair." Rodriguez's husband is Mexican, and she is Pakistani and Filipino. The construction of an identity for her daughter is something she always tries to figure out.

"You can build it up and encourage it as much as you want at home, but if they go to school or other places where no one looks like them, it makes your work harder," Rodriguez said.

Being the "minority among minorities" as Tang described, Asian Americans struggle more with self-identity. In his book "How I Became a Black Man and other Metamorphoses," Tang, a Chinese American, wrote about his student years in College Station, Texas, as a "neither-kid," neither white nor black. He was teased and bullied by

four white students and rescued by a black student. He then self-identified himself as black, as he describes in his book:

“I’m not black,” said my mother, “And neither is your father. Why are you black?”

“Because being black is the best. It’s better than being white. By far.”

“Why don’t you be Chinese?”

“Give me a break, ma. I’m an American.”

Anti-bullying campaign across the nation

The tales of harassment and the staggering statistics have prompted action nationwide, including Austin, where a group formed to deal with the bullying of Asian Americans.

The team was composed of Vincent Cobalis, the vice chair of Austin Asian American Quality of Life Commission; Thao Phao, licensed professional counselor and therapist; Peteria Chan, research associate at the Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health at UT Austin; and Nicole Williams, a teacher from St. Andrew’s Episcopal School.

“There is expectation among Asian cultures that if the rule is there, then people should be fine,” said Cobalis, “But . . . I don’t think that you can rely just on rules and policies. You have to get people to care about you.”

In Austin, the team is trying to launch a mentorship program. “The idea is to get college students that have been bullied to talk about their experience and share their experience with high school students, and then high school students can share their experience with middle school students,” Cobalis said.

Dr. Richard Yuen said this kind of communication is vital.

“The first and foremost component of any anti-bullying measure is that we have to have an honest, open and friendly dialogue about aggression and bullying behavior,” Yuen said. He suggested that stakeholders including youth, parents, teachers and principals should all be involved.

Last year, various groups nationally launched a Google+ Hangout discussion on ways of dealing with the bullying of Asian Americans. A federal survey for those who interact with Asian youth is under process. And The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is holding listening sessions across the country, according to Linda Phan, commissioner in the initiative.

The federal task force is also looking at various groups.

“The AAPI Bullying Prevention Task Force covers Asian and Pacific Island students, which are a very broad group that includes Muslims, Sikhs, as well as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Laotians, Burmese and Pacific islanders,” Yao said.

Experts say that the term “Asian” is so broad that it makes studies and surveys difficult, especially if some students are inside isolated pockets. If someone is from a small tribal area, it’s hard to reach out to him or her, says Phan.

And each group faces special problems. “For example, the Sikh community has experienced a lot of hate crimes and also bullying, because people may misperceive them as terrorists,” Yao said.

Sikhs are religiously mandated to wear turbans, and some people link the headwear with some form of terrorist garb. In 2012 and 2013, over half of Sikh students surveyed in Massachusetts, Indiana, Washington and California reported enduring school bullying. And the numbers are worse for turbaned Sikh children, more than two-thirds reported bullied in

school. In response, the Sikh Coalition has been conducting an annual report on school bullying to call for attention from the government, school administrators and teachers.

Besides the effort from government, grass-root organizations and activists, Asian-American students are also taking actions.

Wei Chen organized an eight-day boycott of South Philadelphia High School after the attack on Dec. 3, to call for awareness and responses from school staff to the ongoing violence and racism on campus.

Rather than going back home alone, Chen and other students gathered in another school. “We discussed our difficulties and struggle as immigrant students and what we need the school to do to support us,” Chen said.

“It’s not about who beat whom, it’s about who let this happen,” said Chen, who is now serving on the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations.

On April 29, the White House initiative teamed up with Canyon Vista Middle School in Austin to hold a “listening session.” Almost four of every 10 students there is Asian American.

More than a dozen students showed up with their parents. A 60-second video called “Lost and Found Heart” was played for the participants. In the video, an Asian girl holding a bunch of red balloons would let go one whenever she was bullied, and when she was about to give up all of them, a friend reached out and saved her. According to the White House initiative staff, the video sent out a message that students going through bullying shouldn’t simply let it go, there are resources for them.

The listening session was aimed at learning what the kids' experiences were like. "When they are being bullied, who are they getting help from? Do they know where to get help? Do they feel that their teacher and parents are good sources?" Phan said.

Kids from primary school to high school were divided into three age groups to talk with facilitators, and there was also a separate discussion group for parents.

"Before we are able to provide prevention, we have to get the baseline data...the listening session is for us to listen, to the kids and the parents," Phan said. The Austin listening session was approximately the 20th in the country, and the first in Texas. The next destination is Houston.

Kotecha is also organizing a panel discussion in May, when a panel of mental and behavioral health professionals will provide examples and lessons from real life experiences, as well as foster a collaboration to address the issue.

However, experts say it's hard to get people talk about these experiences and for action groups to collect data among the Asian community. To get kids out of shadow, there is still a long way to go.

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