

Busting the “Model Minority” Myth: Academic Performance and Substance Use Varies Widely Across Asian American Youth Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation

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Asian Americans are often characterized as uniformly high-performing and hardworking people who have achieved success despite systemic racism and disenfranchisement. This “model minority” stereotype influences the way people think about Asian American youth, who are seen as “problem free,” and therefore assumed to be high achieving and less likely to use substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana.

The model minority stereotype obscures diversity within Asian American groups. It also overgeneralizes the experience of some high-achieving Asian American youth to all Asian American youth.

But the model minority stereotype is a myth. In reality, Asian American youth are part of a diverse ethnic group with national origins in East Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Korea), South Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), and Southeast Asia (e.g., Laos, Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam), each with unique histories and cultures. They also speak diverse languages with their families, come from a range of social classes, and have diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Despite this wide diversity, the model minority myth of problem-free youth dominates how Asian Americans youth are perceived, which contributes to a lack of support and resources for Asian American youth who may be struggling.

Asian American youth also experience high rates of racial harassment from peers. Moreover, a youth’s national background may have an impact on bullying: Southeast Asian Americans are more likely to be refugees and speak English as a second language relative to East Asian and South Asian Americans.

Bias-based bullying, or bullying based on prejudice due to perceived or real race, ethnicity or sexual orientation, may negatively impact youth. Extensive evidence shows that the racial or ethnic bullying undermines academic achievement among non-White youth and sexual orientation bullying contributes to lower academic achievement and elevated substance use among LGB youth.

This brief reports on a recent study [1] that explored how the multiple identities and experiences of Asian American youth intersect to impact their academic performance and substance use. These intersecting identities and experiences include their national origins, sexual orientation, and whether they experienced bias-based bullying.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Academic performance and substance use for Asian American youth varied widely across their ethnicity and whether they identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) or heterosexual (see *Box*). These differences demonstrate that the “model minority” stereotype for Asian American youth is a myth because not all are high academic achievers who are “problem free.”
- ▶ Differences in academic performance and substance use by ethnicity and sexual orientation are partially explained by bullying because of race and ethnicity and bullying because of sexual orientation (see *Box*).

BOX: Academic Performance and Substance Use Results for Asian American Youth

NUMBERS

Asian American youth in the study: 65,091

- Southeast (SE) Asian=46%; identified background as Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Laotian, or Vietnamese
- East Asian=37%; Chinese, Japanese, or Korean
- South Asian=17%; Asian Indian

Sexual orientation: Overall, lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB)=6%; heterosexual=94%

- LGB for each group: SE Asian=8%; East Asian=5%; South Asian=4%

Bullied because of race or ethnicity: SE Asian=23%; East Asian=22%; South Asian=20%

Bullied because of sexual orientation: SE Asian=8%; East Asian=5%; South Asian=5%

RESULTS

Across ethnic subgroups. Compared to South Asian American youth:

- East Asian American youth had similar grades.
- SE Asian American youth had lower grades.
- East Asian American youth were more likely to smoke cigarettes, vape, and drink alcohol.
- SE Asian American youth were more likely to vape, drink alcohol, binge drink, and use marijuana.

By sexual orientation. Compared to heterosexual youth:

- LGB youth had lower grades.
- LGB youth were more likely to use all types of substances.

Across ethnic and sexual orientation subgroups. Compared to heterosexual South Asian American youth:

- All other subgroups had lower grades, except for heterosexual East Asian American youth
- Heterosexual and LGB East Asian American and Southeast Asian American youth were more likely to use substances.
- LGB East Asian American youth reported the highest use across all substances.

Impact of bullying. Compared to those not bullied:

- Students of all ethnicities who were bullied because of their race or ethnicity had lower grades.
- LGB students who were bullied because of their sexual orientation had lower grades. In fact, bullying because of sexual orientation largely explained why many LGB students had lower grades.
- Youth who were bullied because of their race or ethnicity and sexual orientation had lower grades. Youth who were bullied because of their race or ethnicity were twice as likely to use all types of substance; there were no differences in patterns of substance use based on national origin.
- LGB youth who were bullied for their sexual orientation were more likely to use all substances. Further, bullying because of sexual orientation largely explained why many LGB students had higher rates of substance use.
- Youth who were bullied because of their race or ethnicity and sexual orientation were more likely to use substances across all subgroups relative to heterosexual South Asian American youth. The two forms of bullying combined accounted for part of the differences across ethnicity and sexual identity subgroups.

Academic performance and substance use results from generalized linear models that account for sociodemographic factors (i.e., parents' highest level of education, household income, language spoken at home, sex, gender identity, and grade level); as well as ethnicity and sexual orientation. See original article for more details.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These results illustrate the wide variation among Asian American youth in terms of their ethnic and sexual identities, academic achievement, and substance use behavior. They also show that the role of bias-based bullying varies among Asian American youth. Given these wide differences, it is important to stop treating Asian American youth as a homogeneous group that is problem-free; many groups of Asian American youth need support for academic success and health behaviors that they do not currently receive.

This study also contributes to a large body of evidence that documents the role of bias-based bullying, and in particular racial and homophobic bullying, in undermining student well-being. To minimize the negative impact of bias-based bullying, schools should implement or strengthen school practices and policies that promote school safety and the well-being of LGB and all students. In particular, to improve students' lives, schools could target interventions to reduce racial and ethnic bullying and sexual orientation bullying.

DATA AND METHODS

Data from this study come from the California Healthy Kids Survey conducted in California schools during 2015–2017. Included were 65,091 Asian American youth in grades 6–12. Youth reported on substance use in the last 30 days, and grades and bias-based bullying experiences in the past 12 months. The authors estimated generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) with fixed effects for covariates and social positions and a random intercept for school to account for the clustered survey design (i.e., that students were nested in schools).

REFERENCE

[1] Russell, S.T., & McCurdy, A.L. (2023). Examination of the “model minority” stereotype through ethnicity and sexual orientation heterogeneity among Asian American youth. *Journal of Adolescence* 95: 1258–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12200>

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