

# The Impact of Vicarious Racism on Mental Health

## OVERVIEW

During the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences of vicarious racism—or hearing about racism directed toward one’s racial group—and vigilance about racial discrimination—the sense of being “on guard” for racial threats—were common and increasingly visible. Videos of George Floyd’s killing were shared widely online and sparked widespread protests, while media reported on the rising racial insults, harassment, and attacks, including a 77% increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans.

In *Public Health Reports*, IPR developmental psychologist **Onnie Rogers** and her co-authors investigate how this vicarious racism and vigilance about being a target of racial discrimination affects the mental health of Asian and Black Americans. They show that when Asian and Black Americans experienced increased vicarious racism and vigilance about racial discrimination in 2020, they were more likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety. This study provides evidence that racism during the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased levels of depression and anxiety in Asian and Black communities. The findings reveal the urgency of implementing anti-discrimination efforts to improve mental health.

## POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- Racism is a social toxin that has widespread, adverse health effects.
- Implementing anti-racist policies across institutions should be prioritized as part of a public health strategy.
- Leaders in business, government, and education must acknowledge and work to address traumatic racist events, including their implications for mental health.



IPR developmental psychologist **Onnie Rogers** studies racial identity and is interested in social and educational inequities.

## FINDINGS

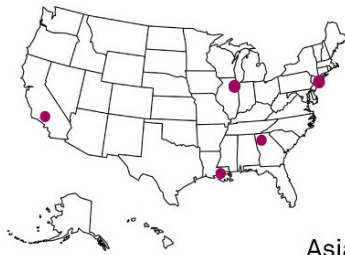
**Half or more of Asian American (51%) and Black participants (61%) stated they experienced vicarious racism during the COVID-19 pandemic at rates that were “more than usual” compared to before it.** Among those who reported any vicarious racism, nearly three quarters of Asian American and 87% of Black Americans said they thought about these experiences at least “sometimes.” Roughly 90% of both groups reported that they were at least “somewhat” distressed by these experiences.

**More than two-thirds (67%) of Black participants and 40% of Asian participants said they experienced some form of vigilance “about once a week” or more during the pandemic.** The vigilance item chosen the most was “I fear that I will be discriminated against because I am [race]” among both Asian and Black Americans.

**Both Asian and Black Americans who reported greater vicarious racism and vigilance about racial discrimination also reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety.** The results suggest that distress in response to hearing about racism and heightened attentiveness to avoid or prepare for personal victimization can increase the risk of depression and anxiety.

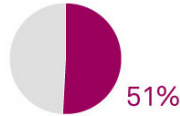
# Experiences of Vicarious Racism and Vigilance During the Pandemic

Between May 21 and July 15, 2020, the researchers surveyed 604 Asian American and 844 Black American adults from five U.S. cities about their experiences with vicarious racism and vigilance.



Asian American adults

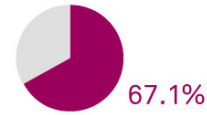
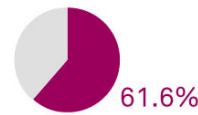
Experienced vicarious racism "more than usual"



Experienced at least one form of vigilance "about once a week" or more



Black American adults



## METHODOLOGY

The researchers used data from a cross-sectional study—the Uncovering COVID-19 Experiences and Realities (UnCOVER) study—of 604 Asian American and 844 Black American adults over the age of 18. They came from Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York City and were surveyed between May 21 and July 15, 2020. The researchers then used multivariable linear regression models to examine levels of depression and anxiety based on the participants' self-reported experiences of vicarious racism and vigilance.

## REFERENCE

Chae, D., T. Yip, C. Martz, K. Chung, J. Richeson, A. Hajat, ... O. Rogers, and T. LaVeist. 2021. [Vicarious racism and vigilance during the COVID-19 pandemic: Mental health implications among Asian and Black Americans](#). *Public Health Reports* 136(4): 508–17.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- Among Asian American participants who reported experiencing any vicarious racism, 72.8% reported that they thought about these experiences at least "sometimes," 89.6% said they were at least "somewhat" distressed by them, and 68.7% said they were concerned about these experiences "somewhat" or more.
- Among Black American participants reporting any vicarious racism, 87.2% said they thought about these experiences at least "sometimes," 91.2% reported they were at least "somewhat" distressed by them, and 85.1% were concerned "somewhat" or more by them.