Ohio Journal of Public Health, Vol. 8 Issue 2 ISSN: 2578-6180

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Threats: An Exploration of Factors Influencing Threats Among Asian American Youth

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Submitted February 16, 2016 Accepted April 20, 2026 Published October 26, 2026 https://doi.org/10.18061/ojph.7195

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The current research study explores the phenomenon of threatening behavior experienced by Asian American high school students, examining a spectrum of independent variables to unravel the intricate relationships surrounding the dependent variable of being threatened by a peer.

Method: By analyzing sex, grade level, employment status, parental and school factors, engagement in prosocial activities, and participation in risky behaviors, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of threats in the high school context. The current study employed a secondary data analysis of the 2020 Student Drug Use Survey in the Greater Cincinnati area.

Results: The results revealed that 22.6% (n=526) of the 2332 Asian American students reported being threatened by a fellow student. Of these, 53.0% (n=276) were males. The univariate logistic regression analyses yielded involvement in risky behaviors, grade level, student employment, and sex as significant predictors of violence against Asian American adults. The final logistic regression model was significant at $p<0.001$, emphasizing these variables as the risk and protective factors influencing the violence against Asian American youth.

Conclusion: The findings of this study highlight the need for policymakers, educators, and parents to take proactive measures to address the issue of violence against Asian students across the United States. These measures could include increasing parental involvement in schools, improving safety, and promoting prosocial behavior among students. These steps can create a safer and more welcoming environment for Asian students in schools and communities.

Keywords: Underrepresented; Disparity; Discrimination; Asian American; Adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Threatening behavior in school settings can encompass experiences involving threats, intimidation, or physical harm from other students. Such experiences may include being threatened with physical assault or a weapon, fearing that another student may cause harm, or being physically injured by another student. National data indicate that approximately 7% of US high school students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property during the previous 12 months. These experiences are particularly important within the broader context of adolescent well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 37.1% of US high school students reported poor mental health, 44.2% reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 19.9% seriously considered attempting suicide.[1,2] School connectedness has also been identified as an important protective factor for adolescent mental health, with stronger connections to school associated with more favorable mental health outcomes.[1,2] These findings highlight the need to better understand school-based experiences that may affect students' perceptions of safety, psychological well-being, and connection to their school community.

According to recent statistics, 8 out of 10 Asian American students report a marked escalation in violence directed toward them.[3] This alarming trend impacts not only the immediate safety of these students but also their mental well-being and academic engagement. Notably, data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS)[4] reveal that 3% of Asian American students have faced threats involving weapons on school premises, and 5% have been so profoundly affected by such threats that

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they avoided returning to school altogether.[4] Threatening behavior poses immediate risks to youth's physical and psychological well-being and engenders long-term consequences that extend into adulthood.[5,6] The outcomes of threatening behavior on Asian youth are profound and manifold, ranging from diminished academic performance to heightened vulnerability to mental health disorders.[7,8]

The increasing prevalence of threatening behaviors against Asian American youth must be situated within the broader sociopolitical climate, including the surge in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Asian American adolescents, racism may manifest as verbal harassment, intimidation, exclusion, and threats within school settings. These experiences are especially concerning because they can be minimized or overlooked when Asian American youth are assumed to be academically successful, socially compliant, and insulated from structural inequities.[9-11] Emerging evidence demonstrates that Asian American adolescents have experienced heightened discrimination during this period, with significant emotional and behavioral consequences.[9,10] Experiences of racialized hostility are associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms, and other adverse mental health outcomes. These stressors unfold within a sociocultural context shaped by the persistent "model minority" stereotype, which portrays Asian Americans as academically successful, socially compliant, and largely unaffected by structural inequities.[11] This stereotype can obscure experiences of victimization, discourage help-seeking, and minimize recognition of risk, thereby complicating both identification and intervention.

An intersectionality framework is essential for understanding these dynamics. Asian American youth occupy multiple, overlapping social positions defined by race, ethnicity, immigration history, gender, socioeconomic status, and generational status.[12,13] These intersecting identities shape both exposure to threatening behavior and access to protective resources. For example, racialized bullying may be compounded by gender norms, employment status, or academic pressures linked to the model minority narrative. Intersectionality highlights that threatening behavior is not merely an individual-level phenomenon but is embedded within systems of power, racialization, and social stratification that influence school climates and peer interactions.[12,13]

Threatening behavior also co-occurs with other adolescent risk behaviors, including substance use, sexual risk behaviors, and bullying involvement.[14-16] These behaviors often cluster, creating cumulative risk. However, the extent to which these patterns operate similarly among Asian American adolescents remains insufficiently examined. Cultural expectations regarding family honor, academic achievement, and emotional restraint may shape both behavioral expression and disclosure. In addition, immigrant family dynamics, language barriers, and intergenerational acculturation gaps may influence communication patterns, monitoring practices, and adolescents' willingness to report victimization.

Family and school connectedness are widely recognized as protective factors against adolescent violence and risk behaviors.[17-19] Yet these constructs may function differently within Asian American communities. Parental involvement, rule-setting, and communication styles are often informed by collectivist values and migration-related stressors. Similarly, school connectedness may be complicated by racialized peer dynamics and experiences of exclusion. Structural racism and anti-Asian sentiment can undermine otherwise protective environments, limiting the buffering effects typically associated with supportive families and schools.[20]

Despite an expanding literature on adolescent mental health, risky behaviors, and school climate during the pandemic,[1,2,17-20] Asian American youth are frequently aggregated into broader racial categories or underrepresented in analytic samples. This lack of disaggregated analysis restricts the field's ability to identify population-specific risk and protective factors. Moreover, studies examining substance use, sexual risk behaviors, and bullying seldom incorporate culturally grounded or intersectional perspectives that account for the model minority stereotype and racialized stress.

Demographic characteristics such as sex and grade level are established correlates of adolescent threatening behavior.[19,20] Engagement in prosocial activities is typically associated with reduced risk.[17,18] Participation in substance use and sexual risk behaviors is linked to increased likelihood of violence involvement.[16,19] Adolescent risk behaviors may occur within broader social and behavioral contexts, including peer influences, bullying and cyberbullying involvement, and the co-occurrence of substance use and sexual risk behaviors.[20-23] However, these associations have rarely been examined specifically among Asian American adolescents, nor have they been interpreted through frameworks that account for racialized stereotypes and intersecting identities.

This gap in the literature hinders the understanding of the nuanced factors contributing to threatening behavior among Asian American youth. It impedes the development of culturally sensitive interventions tailored to this population's needs. To address these gaps in the literature, the current study aims to examine the prevalence and factors associated with threatening behavior among Asian American youth. Hence, the research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of threatening behavior reported by Asian American high school students?
2. Does threatening behavior reported by Asian American students differ based on sex, grade level, employment status, parental and school factors, engagement in prosocial activities, and participation in risky behaviors?

METHODS

Participants

The study participants were adolescents aged 12 to 17 years who self-identified as Asian American, totaling 2332 individuals residing in the Greater Cincinnati area. The demographic characteristics of Asian American youth participants in the study revealed a balanced distribution between biological sex, with 48.8% (n=1126) male and 51.2% (n=1182) female. Regarding age distribution, most participants were aged 13 to 15 years, comprising 35.2% (n=433), 53.9% (n=435), and 71.1% (n=400)

of the total, respectively. In terms of grade level, participants were predominantly in grades 7 to 10, with 20.0% (n=467), 18.1% (n=423), 19.6% (n=458), and 17.2% (n=401) in grades 7, 8, 9, and 10, respectively. Furthermore, most participants reported not having a job (83.4%, n=1917), although a small percentage reported having either full-time (1.6%, n=37) or part-time (15.0%, n=344) employment. Concerning parental employment, most participants reported that their fathers were employed full-time (88.9%, n=2000) and had attained a college degree (70.8%, n=1536). Similarly, most reported that their mothers were employed full-time (61.6%, n=1399) and had achieved a college degree (69.9%, n=1534).

Procedure

The data for this study were derived from a secondary analysis of the 2019–2020 Student Drug Use Survey, a biennial assessment conducted by a substance use prevention agency in a metropolitan area. The survey utilized a self-administered questionnaire distributed to middle and high school students in the Greater Cincinnati region. Its primary objective was to assess attitudes and self-reported behaviors concerning alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. Approximately 40 000 students in 7th grade from 77 public and private schools completed the localized version of the questionnaire between October and November 2019. The survey did not involve sampling; all students on the administration day participated. All data was collected within school buildings, with no external surveys. Because data collection occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and before the widely documented surge in pandemic-related anti-Asian rhetoric in 2020, the current analyses should be interpreted as reflecting pre-pandemic threat experiences rather than direct effects of pandemic politicization.

Instrument

The Student Drug Use Survey for grades 7–12 was used to analyze data. The present study used survey data on specific sections covering threatening behavior, prosocial and risky behaviors, parental and school factors, and sociodemographic characteristics.

Threatening Behavior

A total of 5 questions were analyzed to inquire about experiences related to threats involving handguns, knives, clubs, and physical violence toward Asian American students in the past year. The survey items were categorized based on the frequency of these threatening behaviors, ranging from never (0) to multiple occurrences (>6 times).

Prosocial and Risky Behavior Factors

Five survey items assessed prosocial factors and risky behaviors. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (a lot) gauged the frequency of engagement in prosocial behaviors, such as community involvement, participation in school activities, sports, religious activities, and academic performance. Similarly, the scale was employed to measure the frequency of risky behaviors, including involvement in gang activity, association with friends who use drugs or alcohol, and instances of trouble at school or with the law.

Parental and School Factors

The Parental Factors section was analyzed using 3 items that asked students about parental communication, rules, and enforcing those rules. Similarly, the School Factors section was analyzed using 3 items: school rules, teachers discussing rules, and rule enforcement. Responses to these items were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (a lot).

Demographics

Demographic information encompassed race, sex, age, grade, job (parents and participants) status and parents' education.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS statistical software (Version 28.0) facilitated data analysis, which included dichotomization of data (with "1" indicating involvement in behavior and "0" indicating nonparticipation) and descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, and ranges. Univariate logistic regression analyses were conducted to compute odds ratios, specifically examining the relationship between threatening behaviors and various risk and protective factors. Significant variables identified were retained for inclusion in a final logistic regression model.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Threatening Behaviors

A significant portion of Asian American youth reported being threatened by a fellow student, with 526 individuals, constituting 22.6% of the sample, reporting such actions. Table 1 demonstrates the further bifurcation of each threatening behavior and its relative frequency. Of the 521 students who reported being threatened, 245 were female (47.0%), while 276 were male (53.0%). Among the 1390 students who reported never being threatened, 764 were female (55.0%), and 626 were male (45.0%). Among the 526 students who reported being threatened, 284 (54.0%) were in grades 7 or 8, while 242 (46.0%) were in grades 9 through 12. Overall, students in grades 7 or 8 accounted for 41.3% (797 students) of the sample, while those in grades 9 through 12 accounted for 58.7% (1134 students). Among the 516 students who reported being threatened, 453 (87.8%) were unemployed, and 63 (12.2%) were employed.

Univariate Logistic Regression

The analysis aimed to explore the prevalence and correlates of threatening behavior among Asian American youth. Univariate logistic regression and odds ratios were utilized to examine the associations between threatening behavior and various demographic and psychosocial factors (Table 2). The univariate logistic regression analysis examined the relationship between threatening behavior and psychosocial factors. Significant findings include sex, grade, job status, and engagement in risky behaviors. Females had 1.375 times higher odds of reporting threatening behavior than males (95% CI: 1.124–1.682, p=0.002). Students in grades 7 and 8 had significantly lower odds of engaging in threatening behavior than those in grades 9 through 12 (OR=0.490, 95% CI: 0.400–0.600, p<0.001). Employment status was also significantly associated, with students who were not employed

Table 1. Frequency and Percentages of Different Threatening Behaviors Reported by Asian American Youth

Threatening Behavior	Frequency	Percentage
Been threatened with a handgun, knife, or club		
Never	1893	97.1
1 time	34	1.7
2-5 times	13	0.7
6 or more times	9	0.5
Had a student threaten to hit, slap, or kick you		
Never	1577	80.5
1 time	174	8.9
2-5 times	124	6.3
6 or more times	84	4.3
Been afraid a student may hurt you		
Never	1656	84.8
1 time	155	7.9
2-5 times	88	4.5
6 or more times	53	2.7
Been hurt by a student using a handgun, knife, etc		
Never	1942	99.2
1 time	7	0.4
2-5 times	3	0.2
6 or more times	6	0.3
Been hurt by a student who hit, slapped, or kicked you		
Never	1698	86.9
1 time	134	6.9
2-5 times	77	3.9
6 or more times	45	2.3

Table 2. Univariate Logistic Regression of Threatening Behavior Against Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial Factors	*OR*	χ^2	*p-value*	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Sex (Female/Male)	**1.375**	**9.584**	**0.002**	**1.124**	**1.682**
Grade (7th/8th / 9th-12th)	**0.490**	**48.245**	**<0.001**	**0.400**	**0.600**
Job (No/Yes)	**0.738**	**3.940**	**0.047**	**0.547**	**0.997**
Parent Factors (High/Low)	1.081	0.527	0.468	0.876	1.333
School Factors (High/Low)	1.101	0.828	0.363	0.895	1.355
Prosocial Activities (High/Low)	1.199	2.912	0.088	0.973	1.47
Risky Behaviors (Low/High)	**2.247**	**54.158**	**<0.001**	**1.806**	**2.795**

Bold signifies the values significant at p<0.05.

having lower odds of threatening behavior (OR=0.738, 95% CI: 0.547–0.997, p=0.047). Risky behaviors were strongly associated with threatening behavior, with students exhibiting high-risk behaviors having 2.247 times higher odds than their low-risk counterparts (95% CI: 1.806–2.795, p<0.001).

Final Logistic Regression Model

The final regression model included the significant variables identified in the univariate analysis (Table 3). The logistic regression model was significant (p<.001), indicating that a student's odds of being threatened significantly differed from zero when all predictor variables were held constant. The classification table for the initial block showed that 73.6% of cases were correctly classified. The omnibus tests of model coefficients were χ^2=131.278, *df*=4, p<.001. The model explained a small but significant amount of variance: Cox & Snell R^2=.071 and Nagelkerke R^2=.103. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test showed good model fit (χ^2=3.737, *df*=6, p=.712), indicating adequate fit of the model to the data. In the final model, sex, grade, and risky behavior scores were significantly associated with being threatened by a student. Females were 1.281 times more likely to be threatened than males (Adjusted OR=1.281 [95%CI (1.030, 1.594)], p=.026). Higher grade levels were

Table 3. Final Logistic Regression Model Predicting Being Threatened by a Student Among Asian American Youth

Predictor	Adjusted OR	95% CI	*p*
Sex (Male/Female)	1.281	[1.030, 1.594]	.026
Grade level (Lower/Higher)	0.402	[0.318, 0.508]	<.001
Job status (No/Yes)	0.751	[0.538, 1.048]	.093
Risky behavior score (Low/High)	3.053	[2.395, 3.892]	<.001

Outcome=being threatened by a student. Model statistics: omnibus $\chi^2(4)=131.278$, $p<.001$.

associated with lower odds of being threatened (Adjusted OR=0.402 [95%CI (0.318, 0.508)], p<.001), having a job was not associated with being threatened (Adjusted OR=0.751, p=.093). Additionally, higher risk behavior scores were associated with a significantly higher odds of being threatened (Adjusted OR=3.053 [95%CI (2.395, 3.892)], p<.001).

DISCUSSION

The current study contributes to the limited literature of public health research examining threatening behavior among Asian American adolescents. Nearly 1 in 4 Asian American students in this regional sample reported being threatened by a peer. This prevalence is notable given the persistent narrative of Asian American youth as uniformly high-achieving and socially well-adjusted, a perception reinforced by the model minority stereotype.[11,22,24] The model minority construct may obscure vulnerability, minimize recognition of victimization, and reduce institutional urgency to address safety concerns affecting this population.[11,22,24]

The findings must also be interpreted within the broader sociopolitical context marked by heightened anti-Asian sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.[3,9,10] Racialized discrimination has been linked to emotional distress and behavioral coping responses among Asian American youth.[9,10] The intersection of racialized stigma and adolescent developmental stressors may increase susceptibility to peer victimization. From an intersectionality perspective,[12,13] Asian American adolescents navigate overlapping identities shaped by race, gender, immigration history, and socioeconomic position. These intersecting identities influence both exposure to threatening behavior and access to protective resources. In the final logistic regression model, female students had higher odds of experiencing threatening behavior than male students. This gender difference may reflect broader social and interpersonal factors that shape vulnerability to threatening behavior among Asian American youth.[5,21]

Grade level emerged as a significant predictor, with younger students demonstrating higher odds of being threatened. Developmentally, early adolescence is characterized by heightened peer influence and evolving social hierarchies, which may increase vulnerability to victimization.[22] Younger adolescents may also possess fewer coping strategies to navigate racialized teasing or intimidation. Within an intersectional framework, these developmental processes unfold in racialized school environments that may not fully acknowledge biases.

Risky behavior demonstrated the strongest association with threatening behavior. Adolescents reporting higher engagement in risky behaviors were more than 3 times as likely to report being threatened. This aligns with literature demonstrating clustering of substance use, sexual risk behavior, and peer victimization.[14–16,23] However, these behavioral patterns should not be interpreted solely as individual-level risk. Adolescent behavioral outcomes are embedded within broader school, social, and structural environments, including disciplinary contexts, racialized stereotypes, and structural conditions that shape opportunities and exposure to risk.[24-26] Thus, threatening behavior may reflect the intersection of individual behavioral profiles with the social and structural environments in which adolescents develop.

Interestingly, parental and school factors did not remain statistically significant in the final model. Although family communication and school connectedness are established protective factors,[17–19] their effects may operate differently among Asian American youth. Cultural norms emphasizing academic achievement and emotional restraint may limit disclosure of victimization.[11,22] Additionally, structural racism and racial stereotypes may undermine the protective influence of school connectedness if institutional responses fail to acknowledge anti-Asian discrimination.[20] Overall, these findings challenge assumptions embedded within the model minority narrative and highlight the need for disaggregated, culturally grounded public health research.

PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

From a public health perspective, the findings support multilevel intervention strategies. First, school-based violence prevention initiatives should explicitly address racialized bullying and anti-Asian bias. Anti-racist school climate policies may reduce the normalization of racialized threats and improve reporting mechanisms.[3,9,20] Second, interventions targeting co-occurring risk behaviors may indirectly reduce exposure to threatening behavior. Integrated prevention programs addressing substance use, peer networks, and school engagement have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing clustered risk behaviors.[16,23] Screening protocols in school and community health settings should incorporate culturally responsive approaches that consider stigma and help-seeking barriers influenced by the model minority stereotype.[11] Third, gender-responsive programming may be warranted given the higher odds observed among females. Prevention strategies should consider how racialized gender stereotypes shape vulnerability, coping, and peer dynamics.[5,21] Fourth, policies should encourage data disaggregation within state and local surveillance systems. Aggregated racial categories can conceal population-specific disparities. Disaggregated data are essential for identifying risk patterns among Asian American youth in Ohio and similar Midwestern contexts. Finally,

public health practitioners must adopt an intersectional framework.[12,13] Programs that consider only individual-level risk factors without acknowledging structural racism, immigration-related stressors, and racial stereotyping will be insufficient to address the root determinants of threatening behavior.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference. Although associations were identified, temporal ordering between risky behaviors and threatening experiences cannot be established. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify directionality.[14,23] Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce recall or social desirability bias, particularly within cultural contexts that may discourage disclosure of victimization or behavioral risk.[7] Third, the sample was drawn from a single Midwestern metropolitan area, which may limit generalizability to Asian American populations in other geographic regions. Sociopolitical context, community demographics, and local school climates may influence prevalence estimates. Fourth, the data did not permit examination of ethnic subgroup heterogeneity, generational status, or immigration history. Intersectionality theory emphasizes that Asian American youth are not a monolithic group.[12,13] Future studies should incorporate disaggregated analyses of ethnic subgroups to better capture intra-group variation.

Finally, although the study acknowledges the broader context of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19, direct measures of discrimination or racialized victimization were not included.[9,10] Inclusion of validated discrimination scales would strengthen future analyses.

Future Research

Future research should compare pre-pandemic and post-pandemic cohorts to determine whether threat experiences changed following the politicization of COVID-19 and the rise in anti-Asian racism. Longitudinal designs are also needed to examine how threatening behavior evolves across adolescence and whether early victimization predicts later mental health or behavioral outcomes.[14,15] Incorporating validated measures of racial discrimination and internalized model minority beliefs would allow examination of pathways linking structural racism to peer victimization.[9-11] Intersectional analytic approaches that test interactions among race, gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration-related variables are also needed.[12,13] Mixed-methods research may provide deeper insight into how Asian American adolescents interpret and respond to threats within the context of racial stereotyping and academic expectations. Qualitative inquiry can illuminate barriers to reporting and help-seeking shaped by cultural norms. Finally, state-level public health surveillance systems in Ohio and similar regions should prioritize consistent racial and ethnic disaggregation. Enhanced data infrastructure will support targeted prevention programming.

Conclusion

Threatening behavior among Asian American adolescents represents an underrecognized public health concern. Nearly one-quarter of youth in this regional sample reported being threatened, with higher odds observed among females, younger students, and those engaging in risky behaviors. These findings challenge assumptions embedded in the model minority stereotype and underscore the importance of intersectionality in understanding patterns of vulnerability. Public health strategies must move beyond aggregated racial categories and individual-level risk frameworks. Addressing structural racism, gendered stereotypes, and clustered risk behaviors is essential for promoting school safety and mental well-being among Asian American youth. Culturally responsive, intersectionality informed prevention efforts are critical to advancing equity and reducing violence-related disparities within this population.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no relevant financial or nonfinancial interests to disclose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability. The data can be requested from PreventionFirst! (https://www.prevention-first.org/home/).

Ethics Approval. This study uses secondary data. No ethical approval is required for this secondary analysis.

Ethics Declarations. All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards of the University of Cincinnati institutional review board and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The authors completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “Protecting Human Research Participants” before conducting the study.

Consent to Participate. This study uses secondary data. The PreventionFirst! provided consent to the participants to participate during their data collection period, but this research project did not need it.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Kruti Chaliawala wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and coauthors commented on previous versions. Rebecca Vidourek conducted the data analysis and was responsible for conceptualizing the manuscript. Rebecca Vidouek and Keith King reviewed and revised the manuscript before submission. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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