COVID-19 Pandemic and Anti-Asian Racism & Violence in the 21st Century

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Abstract
Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have experienced major pandemics and epidemics. However, we believe the COVID-19 pandemic was the first time a certain racial/ethnic group or nationality was blamed for the pandemic/epidemic. Anti-Asian racism and violence worldwide are not new, but they are on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the crimes against Asians during the pandemic received substantial media attention, there has been a paucity of empirical research in social science that addresses xenophobic sentiments, racism, and violence against Asians. To bridge the gap, the Korean Society of Criminology in America (KOSCA) invited papers to address the current global issue of anti-Asian racism and violence in mid2021. It was challenging to conduct empirical research because of the lack of data availability, time restrictions, and the narrowed research scope (e.g., Asians). This editorial introduction introduces six articles in this Special Issue of Race and Justice, “Anti-Asian Racism & Violence.” We call for further, continuous attention to anti-Asian racism and violence, and we hope this special issue creates more scholarly discussion on this understudied, often-neglected topic.

Keywords
Asian, race, ethnicity, racism, hate, violence, COVID-19

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, we have experienced major pandemics and epidemics including the H1N1 Swine Flu Pandemic (2009–2010; infected about 1.4 billion people), West Africa Ebola Epidemic (2014–2016; 28,600 reported cases), Zika Virus Epidemic (2015–present), and COVID-19 Pandemic (2019–present; infected roughly 627 million people and killed over 6.5 million people by October 20, 2022; see COVID-19 Data Explorer, 2022; Our World in Data, n.d.). Regardless of the seriousness related to the number of infected people and deaths as well as the location of the first virus that was found and spread, we believe the COVID-19 pandemic was the first time that a certain racial/ethnic group or nationality was blamed for the issue.

Anti-Asian Racism and Violence around the world are not new but are on the surge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, in the United States, such issues have been spotlighted, and many innocent Asians have been ambushed by other citizens. Related to that, on January 21, 2021, President Joe Biden addressed “xenophobic sentiments through the actions of political leaders” that “have stoked unfounded fears and perpetuated stigma about Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and have contributed to increasing rates of bullying, harassment, and hate crime against AAPI persons” (Biden, 2021, para. 2) and passed the 2021 COVID-19 Hate Crimes Acts on May 20, 2021 (see S.937 – 117th Congress, 2021–2022). Although the crimes against Asians have received a considerable amount of media attention during the pandemic, we did not know to what extent and how anti-Asian racism and violence occur due to the limited amount of existing literature. There has been only a paucity of empirical research to address xenophobic sentiments, racism, and violence against Asians in current social science literature.

To fulfill the gap, the Korean Society of Criminology in America (KOSCA) called for scholarly attention and invited papers to address the current global issue of anti-Asian racism and violence in mid-2021. It was challenging for both editors and contributors to conduct empirical research to examine the issue because of lack of the data availability, time limitation, and the narrowed research scope (e.g., Asians). As well known, researchers could not rely on the official hate crime statistics and other officially collected relevant data due to their accuracy and underestimated/under-reported issues and because of not enough variables available in the datasets to examine anti-Asian racism and violence. Nevertheless, the contributors to this special issue put valuable efforts to collect and examine their own data to address the critical issue in our contemporary society in a timely manner. We are so honored to introduce each piece of their valuable research outcomes through this editorial introduction.

**Articles Published in This Special Issue**

Aforementioned, not much scholarly attention has centered on this topic, although hate-motivated crimes against Asians in America have started to receive some attention from general populations via media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic. To overview the current status of scholarly attention toward hate-motivated crimes
against Asians, Kim et al. (2023) systematically examined peer-reviewed articles that have explored hate-motivated crime/incidents against Asians in the United States of America between 2000 and 2020. They identified that only 23 articles were published over the past 21 years, and no studies examine hate crimes, but focus on microaggressions and/or discrimination. In addition, although Asian groups are heterogeneous groups in terms of language and culture, most studies lumped all different Asian subgroups into “Asians.” The results of this systematic review show very important aspects of the little scholarly attention currently focused on Asian hate crime research. A lack of scholarly attention contributes to scholars’ misunderstanding of the phenomenon, and this hampers efforts to develop appropriate policies to prevent crime. To prevent hate-motivated crimes against Asians, more scholarly studies involving different subgroups of Asians should be conducted.

The media’s role in shaping individuals’ perceptions and attitudes toward certain groups of people has been studied widely, but the media’s portrayal of Asian-American crime victims has rarely been examined, other than in specific high-profile cases. For that reason, Powers et al. (2023) examined national news coverage of anti-Asian hate crime incidents in comparison to anti-Hispanic hate crime incidents in a timely manner. They found that crimes against Asian Americans were portrayed as a new phenomenon due to COVID-19, and incidents against Asian Americans were less likely to be acknowledged as hate crimes than incidents against Hispanics. In addition, it was rare to offer policy recommendations to address violence against Asian Americans. As this study’s findings show, the media portrays hate crimes against Asian Americans and crime victims in somewhat distorted ways, and this distorted portrayal can have negative social consequences such as discrimination or hate toward a certain group. More scrutiny of media coverage of certain phenomena, such as COVID-19, should be performed.

In “Anti-Asian Discourse in a Community-Driven Knowledge Site: Comparison between Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic with a Deep Learning Approach,” Jang et al. (2023) compared anti-Asian discourse before and during the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing data (2010–2021) on Quora, the popular community-driven knowledge site. Using topic modeling and word embedding, they collected both user questions and answers by using relevant terms such as “Asian(s)” or “Anti-Asian(s)” and discovered a substantial difference between pre- and mid-pandemic sentiments. Although it was found that physical differences and racism were prevalent in both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic discourse, new topics have come to the fore, such as the issues surrounding hate crime and the Asian solidarity movement. Quora was selected as the most suitable platform because it is a widely used, community-driven, and informational website. The study under discussion has contributed to the literature by comparing anti-Asian discourse changes before and during the pandemic on the immensely popular Quora platform.

To examine the impact of COVID-19 on xenophobia against Asians, Lantz et al. (2023) analyzed individuals’ fear of COVID-19 (perception of risk), exposure to COVID-19 information, and support for Trump, who legitimatized anti-Asian prejudicial attitudes through political agenda focusing on xenophobia against Asians. They found that fear of disease and support for Trump was associated with increases in xenophobia, and exposure to more COVID-19 information was associated with a
decrease in prejudice. Although Lantz et al. (2023) could not differentiate between the consumption of correct information and misinformation about COVID-19, this study’s results showed the importance of information consumption on people’s attitudes toward a certain group, including Asians, along with the powerful role a high-profile politician can play.

There is an understudied yet existing belief that there is clear phenotypical prejudice and discrimination toward Asian Americans. Choi et al. (2023) proved this phenomenon by examining the influences of victims’ Chinese phenotypicality (CP) and observers’ individual differences on COVID-19-related prejudice and discrimination. Participants were presented with a mock news story detailing a restaurant employee (varying in CP) who tested positive for COVID-19 but went to work despite warnings to quarantine and allegedly spread COVID-19 to other employees and customers. CP was manipulated through photographs embedded within the mock news story, showing observers White faces (control), faces with Low CP, and those with High CP. In turn, the participants completed prejudice and discrimination endorsement measures as well as individual difference measures after reading the news story. Results revealed that higher CP influenced prejudice and boosted discrimination, but only for individuals with certain characteristics (e.g., low-income backgrounds). In addition to proving that phenotypic variations may lead to hate crime victimization related to COVID-19, the findings highlight individual differences among perpetrators of prejudice and discrimination against Asian Americans.

The accordance of political blame on China has increased to unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. This context is addressed in “Perceived China Threat, Conspiracy Belief, and Public Support for Restrictive Immigration Control during the COVID-19 Pandemic” by Kim and Park (2023). While there is some empirical evidence that perceived outgroup threats lead to support for policies that control those outgroups, the impact of a threat posed by a foreign country is relatively unstudied. As such, this study advances previous research by focusing on the independent effects of a perceived China threat on public support for stricter immigration control during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim and Park (2023) analyzed the data from the 2020 American National Election Studies, which showed substantial public support for restrictions on immigration linked to fears of China. In particular, a higher threat perception linked to the conspiracy theory that a Chinese lab leaked the coronavirus increased demand for restrictive immigration controls. The findings provided insights into popular attitudes on social control during the COVID-19 pandemic through the analysis of politically constructed threats and conspiracy beliefs. The authors critically showed that the perceived China threat, particularly belief in the lab-leak conspiracy theory, strongly swayed public attitudes on immigration control.

**Conclusion**

Initiating this special issue was under the deep concern about the anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents and from the negligence, ignorance, and regret as an Asian criminologist who has not paid attention to the topic. Directly facing and experiencing anti-Asian sentiment during the pandemic, we, Asians, are now fully aware that
being silent and being referred to as a model minority is not the best virtue to be out of problems. At this moment, finalizing this special issue, we are so excited to share this special issue with readers in the field of criminal justice and criminology as well as whoever looks for empirical studies on anti-Asian racism and violence. Finally, we appreciate the Chief Editor of the *Race and Justice: An International Journal* (Dr. Jacinta Gau) for offering us this opportunity to address the critical issue in a timely manner and for her prompt assistance to process this special issue. Furthermore, we thank the contributors and scholars who dedicate their time and effort to develop and/or review these manuscripts.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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