

Risk and Protective Factors: Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander Populations

People who are descended from the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent are referred to as *Asian*. People who are descended from any of the original populations of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands are referred to as *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander*.¹ However, in some cases the Native Hawaiian population is included in the term *Pacific Islander*.

This information sheet covers the common risk and protective factors for Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander populations. For data on suicidal thoughts and behaviors and suicide deaths in these populations, go to the web page “Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander Populations.”

Risk Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant risk factors are:^{2, 3}

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders
- Access to lethal means

For individuals who are already at risk, a “triggering” event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include relationship problems and breakups, problems at work, financial hardships, legal difficulties, and worsening health.

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant risk factors in Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander populations.

Family conflict: High levels of family conflict, such as witnessing family violence or experiencing low levels of family support, have been associated with suicide risk in Asian and Native Hawaiian populations.^{4, 5}

Among Asian youth and college students, family problems and conflict, especially parent-child conflict, play a very significant role in increasing risk for suicidal ideation.^{6, 7}

Family conflict created greater risk for suicidal behavior among less acculturated Asian adolescents compared to those who were very acculturated.⁸

Acculturation: A study of Native Hawaiian youth found a small but statistically significant risk for attempting suicide in adolescents who had greater affiliation with Hawaiian culture. This may be due to increased cultural conflict and stress associated with being culturally Hawaiian in a Western environment.⁹

One 10-year study of high school youth found that the high rate of suicidal behavior among Pacific Islander populations, including Native Hawaiian people, may be related to cultural conflict and stress from acculturating. Non-Hawaiian Pacific Islander populations living in the United States have had to deal with cultural barriers that cause loss of ethnic identity. Like other native peoples, Native Hawaiian people have had to deal with colonialism, which has led to a significant change in values and a negative effect on family structure, health, and well-being.¹⁰

Discrimination: Asian people reporting that they are racially discriminated against have been found to be more likely to have a psychiatric disorder.¹¹

Immigrant Asian populations may be hampered in the U.S. mental health system by discriminatory attitudes and language proficiency issues.¹²

Asian college students who perceive discrimination report higher rates of suicidal ideation¹³ and suicide attempts,¹⁴ and Asian adults who perceive discrimination have also reported higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempts.¹⁵

Mental health services access and use: Due in large part to their cultural beliefs and values, Asian people are less likely to seek professional help for psychological distress, and they are less likely to disclose suicidal thoughts. Two studies found that Asian adults and college students were less likely than other racial groups to seek professional psychological help for suicidal ideation^{16, 17}

Asian people also are less likely to receive a diagnosis of mental health problems because many tend to experience their problems through physical rather than emotional symptoms. Lack of access to treatment that is sensitive to their culture is also a barrier. When they do obtain professional help Asian people generally drop out of treatment sooner than White people.¹⁸ Asian people are more likely to use informal support systems than formal services for help with mental health problems.¹⁹

In a large national survey, people of Asian/Pacific Islander descent who reported suicidal thoughts or attempts were less likely than Hispanic, Black, or White people to seek or receive psychiatric services.²⁰

Percentages of Adults Who Did Not Seek or Receive Any Psychiatric Services in the Year Prior to Having Suicidal Thoughts or Attempts

	Asian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Black	White
Suicidal Thoughts	84.1%	61.6%	59.7%	42.8%
Suicide Attempts	70.1%	45.7%	57.8%	24.1%

The “model minority” myth that Asian people are the most successful (academically, economically, and socially) of all the racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States not only hides the racism and discrimination that many experience, but it also masks psychological issues among Asian people and perpetuates the stigma that keeps them from seeking mental health services.²¹

Poor academic achievement: Two studies of Asian college students in the United States found that poor academic performance and anxiety about performing well enough was a major risk factor for suicidal ideation.^{22, 23}

Protective Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant protective factors are:^{24, 25}

- Effective mental health care
- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Problem-solving skills
- Contacts with caregivers

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant protective factors in Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander populations.

Cultural identification: Among Asian people, higher levels of identification with Asian culture, such as a sense of belonging and affiliation with spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of Asian culture, have been associated with a 69% reduction in the risk of suicide attempt.²⁶

Family relationship: Among youth of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander backgrounds, strong and supportive family relationships and higher levels of family cohesion, family organization, and parental bonding have been related to lower risk of lifetime suicide attempt.²⁷

Among Asian people, family cohesion and parental support were associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation.^{28, 29}

Help seeking with native healers: Although Native Hawaiian youth do not seek help for their mental health problems from physicians as often as other groups, they do seek help from Native Hawaiian healers more often than other groups.³⁰ Youth who had stronger Hawaiian cultural identification were more likely to use Native Hawaiian healers for mental health issues.³¹

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