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The DRAM, Vol. 19(6) – Discrimination, Distress, and Drinking Among Asian Americans

Editor's Note: Today's review is part of our month-long [Special Series on Asian American/Pacific Islander \(AAPI\) Addiction Research](#). Throughout May, The BASIS is examining forms of addiction among AAPI communities.

Rates of alcohol use, high-risk drinking, and alcohol use disorders are [rising among Asian American young adults](#), with those born in the U.S. [reporting greater alcohol consumption](#) than those born in another country. [Increased racial discrimination](#) against Asian Americans may play a role, as [previous studies](#) have found [positive associations](#) between discrimination and drinking in other racial/ethnic minority groups. This week, as part of the [Special Series on Asian American/Pacific Islander Addiction Research](#), The DRAM reviews a [study by Derek Kenji Iwamoto and colleagues](#) that investigated the relationships between racial discrimination, psychological distress, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related problems among Asian American college students.

What was the research question?

Among U.S.-born Asian American college students, what are the associations between racial discrimination, psychological distress, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related problems?

What did the researchers do?

Derek Iwamoto and colleagues asked 1,432 U.S.-born Asian American undergraduate students about their experiences with [everyday racial discrimination](#), [psychological distress](#), and [drinking to cope](#). Students also [self-reported](#) their typical daily alcohol consumption and [past-year alcohol-related problems](#). The researchers then analyzed relationships between these measures using [structural equation modeling](#).

What did they find?

Every participant reported experiencing at least one incident of racial discrimination, with 59% reporting two or more incidents. The average score for psychological distress was within the clinical range for mild disorders, and 30% of scores indicated high risk for moderate to severe distress. Racial discrimination, psychological distress, and drinking to cope were all associated with alcohol-related problems (see Figure).



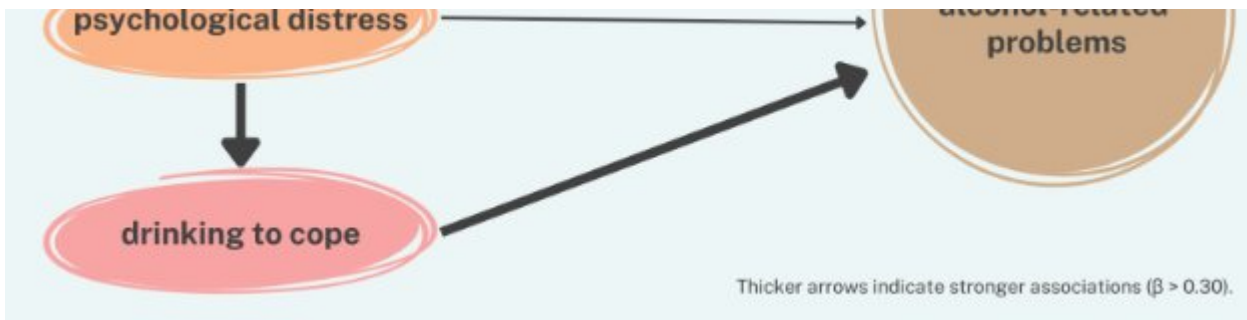


Figure. Associations between racial discrimination, psychological distress, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related problems among U.S.-born Asian American college students. Thicker arrows indicate stronger associations ($\beta > 0.30$). Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Among U.S.-born Asian American college students, experiences of racial discrimination can [indirectly](#) influence alcohol-related problems via increased psychological distress and drinking to cope motives. This suggests that racial discrimination, psychological distress, and drinking to cope are all risk factors for negative alcohol-related problems among this population. To reduce discrimination and improve mental health among students, college professors should consider using [cooperative learning practices](#) in the classroom. Outside of the classroom, college health education programs, such as peer health educators, should address [culturally relevant barriers](#) to seeking mental health care among Asian Americans.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

The term “Asian American” includes [numerous ethnicities](#) who each may have their own nuanced experiences related to racial discrimination, psychological distress, drinking to cope, and alcohol problems. Due to unequal sizes of ethnic subgroups in the [sample](#), the researchers were unable to examine potential ethnic group differences. Academic majors, which were not included in analysis, may also play a role in drinking outcomes, as some majors are more stressful than others.

For more information:

The [National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association \(NAAPIMHA\)](#) emphasizes the important role that mental health plays in promoting positive health and well-being among Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities. The [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism](#) has tips and resources for people struggling with problem drinking. For additional drinking self-help tools, please visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

-- Caitlyn Matykiewicz, MPH

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