

# The Experiences of Chinese Older Immigrants During COVID-19 in New York City: A Qualitative Study

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## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected older adults, who were at heightened risk for COVID-19 morbidity and mortality, and social isolation. Challenges to accessing health information and vaccine resources were amplified for older immigrants due to language barriers, lack of established social networks, and experience of systemic discrimination.

## Objective

Considering the surge of anti-Asian violence across the country and the high-profile violent incidents targeting Asian older adults in NYC, this research focuses on the lived experiences of Chinese older immigrants during the pandemic in NYC. This research aims to describe the support they need during an ever-changing pandemic to inform future practices.

## Method

Data were obtained from a larger qualitative study of how race and ethnicity were associated with older adult attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccination, mitigation efforts, and sources of trusted health information in partnership with one of the largest senior service providers in New York City.

We conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with 77 older adults over, including 9 Chinese immigrants. It is noteworthy that majority of the Chinese participants hailed from mainland China and immigrated to the U.S. later in life. Informed by literature review, we crafted interview guides to explore various facets, such as general health information sources, vaccination experiences, the impact of messages and messengers, specific concerns and motivations related to COVID-19 vaccination, the vaccination process, and participants' overall experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Findings

### 1. *Global perspectives helped mitigate the impact of information overload*

Although participants reported widespread frustrations with information overload and the politicized pandemic landscape in the U.S., Chinese participants were able to gather information beyond the U.S. context, thereby mitigating the impact of constant influx of inconsistent information.

- **“We Chinese at the time were already wearing masks in the subway...when foreigners [referring to Americans] said there was no need.”**

### 2. *Adherence to the COVID-19 mitigation efforts and vaccine guidelines driven by the prevailing sentiment about the importance of following and adhering to social norms*

- **“At the time, we knew so little about it. They told us that we needed to take it, so we took it. We did not understand it”**

### 3. *The senior service providers staff played a crucial role in relying information*

Given most of the Chinese participants immigrated to the U.S. later in life, hence, lacked established networks, they depended more on the guidance from their providers.

- **The staff at our apartments informed us. Since it is a senior apartment, they informed us well.**

### 4. *Fear of Anti-Asian violence led to concerns in navigating public spaces and self-isolation*

The high-profile anti-Asian attacks targeting older Asians in NYC caused a lot of anxiety.

- **“Asians have been bullied so badly. Earlier, we Asians were beaten for wearing masks, and now they are beaten for not wearing masks. I am scared now! I saw someone being beaten to death on the sidewalk. I don't even dare to take the subway.”**

Facing overlapping discrimination due to growing age and Asian identity, these participants felt vulnerable, isolated, fearful for their personal safety, and hopeless for the future.

- **“What can the government do? What can our apartment do? Those who beat people to death were caught and released within a few days and continued assaulting other people. Some people's only child was beaten to death, and those who beat others have not yet been sentenced because they are said to be mentally ill. That is why they do not need to be sentenced. Under this legal system, no one even cares about young Asian people being killed, let alone the older adults like us. I think the only way for us older people to stay safe is to hide! Not going out is the best way.”**

## Lessons Learned & Policy Implications

1. **Senior service providers have an opportunity to be a trusted authority on COVID and other health promotion/disease prevention campaigns.**
2. **People actually want to be told what they should do. Therefore, clear and unambiguous messages are needed**
3. **Senior service providers should consider additional proactive services and support for clients/residents who are Chinese immigrants, particularly those with limited English proficiency.**

Fear of contracting COVID-19 due to perceived vulnerability associated with older age and fear of anti-Asian violence amplified one another. Senior program leaders in NYC should initiate discussions about perceived safety and implement peer buddy systems to enhance quality of life for Asian older adults.