

What did Trauma from The Japanese Incarceration Look Like?



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It is well known that the United States has a centuries-long history of racism and brutality. One such event was the Japanese Incarceration, which followed Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. During the incarceration, Americans inhumanely treated the Japanese, leading to lasting effects including multi-generational trauma.

After the United States Pacific Fleet was bombed by the Japanese in 1941, there was a widespread wave of fear and suspicion of the Japanese that soared across America. This fear caused the Roosevelt administration to develop an exclusionary policy towards Japanese Americans, known as Executive Order 9066. This order 110,000 people of Japanese descent—the majority (62%) of whom were American citizens—into years-long detainment.”¹ They were snatched from their homes, leading the Japanese to feel broken inside. *Star Trek* actor George Takei, a then five-year-old boy, remembers seeing the look in his mother's eyes as “they filled with tears when the news of the executive order came to her.”² Mr. Takei stated: “I will never be able to forget that scene. It is burned into my memory.”³ Takei also remembered the moment he and his family walked into his new home, a.”⁴ In fact, “it was a devastating blow. They had worked so hard to buy a two-bedroom house and raise a family in Los Angeles. Now we were crammed into a single, smelly horse stall. It was a degrading, humiliating, painful experience.”⁵ They immediately faced poor conditions when they arrived at the camps.

Their new homes had uninsulated barracks furnished solely with cots and coal-burning stoves. There was also extreme cramming of 25 inmates in a room meant for 4 people. They had

¹ Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, Maya Sen Historical Persistence, (Jan 2023).
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197618608.013.7>

² Taylor, Nicholas (2020) "The American Public's Reaction to the Japanese American Internment," West Virginia University Historical Review: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

³ George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 8-9.

⁴ George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 8-9.

⁵ George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 8-9.

limited hot water access, poor sanitation, and diseases such as typhoid and smallpox were spreading rapidly. The education for children was substandard, and they had inadequate healthcare with minimal. Moreover, there was no air conditioning despite camp temperatures reaching above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. This led to “inhospitable environments”, stated a second-generation Japanese American, Yuri Kochiyama.⁶ Finally, the camps were enclosed with barbed wire fences and guarded with armed guards, ensuring no one could escape. If anyone attempted

These conditions persisted for roughly 4 years until President Truman, once elected, signed Executive Order 9742. This ended the incarceration and allowed Japanese Americans to return to their homes. This was a tremendous relief for the Japanese; However, they had a lot of experiences to unpack. The psychological stress began within 24 hours of the Pearl Harbor attack when they learned that they were to be forced out of their homes in two weeks. They had no choice but to “sell life’s possessions at a fraction of their worth and leave behind homes, businesses, unharvested crops, and family pets.”⁷ This caused a level of fear so severe that “one man committed suicide because he suffered from uncontrollable trembling.”⁸ Their fears were deemed true when approximately 1500 first-generation Japanese immigrants, considered high-risk, were forced out of their homes and sent to incarceration camps without any explanation. The government swept through Japanese houses not only taking people, but stealing cameras, radios, and anything the government believed was being used against America. When

⁶ Yuri Kochiyama, *Fishmerchant’s Daughter: An Oral History*, Vol. 1 (Community Documentation Workshop, 1981), 14

⁷ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

⁸ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

immigrants tried to maintain their belongings, they were “convicted of violating the government’s curfew and removal orders”⁹

Once they became incarcerated, the psychological stressors progressed, making them frustrated and helpless while their bodies became fatigued. Additional anxiety arose when a “mandatory “loyalty oath” questionnaire for all camp inmates 17 years and older” emerged.¹⁰ There were two questions: one about willingness to serve in the United States Military and the other: to promise unqualified allegiance to the US. Most inmates answered “yes” to both questions to prove their loyalty to America, however not all of them felt so compelled. Some were “outraged at being asked to declare allegiance to a country that unjustly imprisoned them” and others “worried that forswearing allegiance to Japan could be misused as evidence that one had prior fealty to the emperor.”¹¹ Inmates who responded “no” to both questions were “segregated into a more restrictive camp” with even harsher conditions.¹² The conditions were so severe indicate that “190 inmates were institutionalized for psychiatric problems and the number of reported on-site suicides was estimated to be four times higher than the pre-incarceration rates for Japanese Americans.”¹³ President Truman’s new order couldn’t come fast enough.

When the inmates left incarceration, the effects of the camps were displayed further. A minority went on to live normal lives while most suffered hardship. Those suffering displayed “symptoms of avoidance and detachment associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),

⁹ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

¹⁰ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

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¹² Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

¹³ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

mirroring the “conspiracy of silence” observed in trauma survivor groups across the world.”¹⁴ Results from a survey of over 400 ex-inmates indicated that “more than 12% never spoke with their families about their experiences.”¹⁵ This represented a form of “social amnesia.”¹⁶ Their physical health suffered too because chronic stress raises inflammation levels in the body. They had “nearly twice the risk of cardiovascular disease, mortality, and premature deaths than their nonincarcerated counterparts.”¹⁷

The Japanese also felt betrayed by America. One inmate stated: “Being labeled as an enemy alien and incarcerated in a concentration camp was the most traumatic experience of my life. My thoughts at the time were, this country which I loved and trusted had betrayed me.”¹⁸ In addition, instead of processing that the abusers were the problem, many inmates turned to self-blame. An ex-inmate exclaimed: “I felt like a second-class citizen, but it really confirmed, it really emphasized that I didn’t belong in this country, that my face, my yellow face made the difference, and I will never belong.”¹⁹ The self-blame was so severe that their “sense of humiliation and shame has been seen as paralleling the feelings reported by rape victims.”²⁰

One factor that influenced the level of trauma was demographics, which revealed a negative correlation between age and level of trauma. Young inmates were much more likely to be traumatized because their brains were not as developed. Given that “the average age of

¹⁴ Loo CM (1993). An integrative-sequential treatment model for posttraumatic stress disorder: A case study of the Japanese American internment and redress. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 13, 89–117. 10.1016/0272-7358(93)90036-L

¹⁵ Nagata DK (1995). *Nisei communication about the internment*. Unpublished manuscript

¹⁶ Kashima T (1980). Japanese American internees: Return, 1945–1955: Readjustment and social amnesia. *Phylon*, 41, 107–115. 10.2307/274964

¹⁷ Jensen GM (1997). *The experience of injustice: Health consequences of the Japanese American internment* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO

¹⁸ Nagata DK, Kim JHJ, & Nguyen TU (2015). Processing cultural trauma: Intergenerational effects of the Japanese American incarceration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71, 356–370. 10.1111/josi.12115

¹⁹ Nagata DK, Kim JHJ, & Nguyen TU (2015). Processing cultural trauma: Intergenerational effects of the Japanese American incarceration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71, 356–370. 10.1111/josi.12115

²⁰ Hansen AA, & Mitson BE (1974). *Voices long silent: An oral inquiry into the Japanese American evacuation*. Fullerton, CA: Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program at California State University.

inmates²¹ Older members, while not showing as much lasting distress, “did not have any positive memories from the camps 50 years later”, according to a sample of over 150 ex-inmates from King County, Washington.²² Regardless of age, if the trauma is severe enough, it can cause long-term effects such as “family legacy” to future children through parent-to-child interactions.²³

Many ex-inmates were aware of this intergenerational trauma, so they kept the bulk of memories to themselves. One ex-inmate noted: “I want them to grow up straight and tall and as beautiful as they can, without all the sadness, sort of branding them that they are different.”²⁴ The ex-inmates were aware of their actions and while they believed they were helping their children, “parental silence about trauma can have negative consequences for the next generation”.²⁵ This is because it distances the children from their parents as they never hear a lot of the things going on in their parents’ minds. This is disadvantageous for children because running away from Incarceration-related trauma will limit their exposure to Japanese culture. This exact issue caused “an accelerated loss of Japanese language and cultural practices” because the parents “wouldn’t do anything Japanese.”²⁶ The children missed out on Japanese culture but also believed that becoming “super American” was the goal. This need for approval stemmed from their parents being incarcerated: “Compared with those whose parents were not

²¹ Fugita SS, & O’Brien DJ (1991). *Japanese American ethnicity: The persistence of community*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press

²² Fugita EH, & Fernandez M (2004). *Altered lives, enduring communities: Japanese Americans remember their World War II incarceration*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

²³ Danieli Y (1998). *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 10.1007/9781-4757-5567-1

²⁴ Nagata DK, Kim JHJ, & Nguyen TU (2015). Processing cultural trauma: Intergenerational effects of the Japanese American incarceration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71, 356–370. 10.1111/josi.12115

²⁵ Wiseman H, Barber JP, Raz A, Yam I, Foltz C, & Livne-Snir S (2002). Parental communication of Holocaust experiences and interpersonal patterns in offspring of Holocaust survivors. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 26, 371–381. 10.1080/01650250143000346

²⁶ Nagata DK (1993). *Legacy of injustice: Exploring the cross-generational impacts of the Japanese American internment*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 10.1007/978-1-4899-1118-6

incarcerated, adults who had a parent in the camps were significantly less confident in.”²⁷ Just the children knowing that their parents were incarcerated greatly affected their confidence in America.

These examples of post-incarceration trauma reveal the situation’s severity. However, it remained unaddressed for decades until Congress formed the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to “assess the circumstances surrounding the incarceration” in 1980.²⁸ The commission collected testimonies from “over 750 witnesses in 20 cities across the country.”²⁹ Many of those who testified were former inmates who, for the first time since the war, explained the suffering they endured. The commission stated that the incarceration was a “grave injustice” and urged Congress to send an apology to each living ex-inmate along with a \$20,000 payment.³⁰ In 1988, the Civil Liberties Act was administered, granting redress and following the commission's recommendations. The payments and apologies were just the beginning of the redress movement which was followed by an “acknowledgment of wrongdoing” and “group pilgrimages journeying to former camp locations and holding annual ceremonies to remember the incarceration.”³¹ These pilgrimages allowed the children of inmates to “vicariously witness their parents’ traumatic past” and allowed survivors to “revisit traumatic memories amid positive support and respect.”³² These services showed thoughtfulness, and remorse yet would fall very short of fixing the mess. Most ex-inmates would require professional psychotherapy to try and improve their symptoms, as post-traumatic stress disorder is difficult to

²⁷ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

²⁸ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

²⁹ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

³⁰ U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (USCWRIC). (1997).

³¹ Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

³² Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

treat. This was not common though, as most of them were unaware of such treatment or couldn't afford it.

Psychologists encourage most patients nowadays to look inward to view the root of their mental health condition. However, the conditions that occurred during the Japanese Incarceration prove how social events and events outside oneself can cause problems as well. Events such as these need to be studied more to expand psychology's knowledge, allowing the field to more successfully treat racial injustice and trauma. It is also important for United States citizens to be aware of this history, as it remains as trauma in peoples' minds today.

Bibliography

1.) Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell, Maya Sen Historical Persistence, (Jan 2023).

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197618608.013.7>

This source helped explain the more exact quantities and dates of events to help me prove my arguments. This source is peer-reviewed, so I know it's reliable and that it is very different from any other source I found. This will help shape my argument because using exact dates and quantities helps back up arguments.

2.) Taylor, Nicholas (2020) "The American Public's Reaction to the Japanese American Internment," West Virginia University Historical Review: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

This source helped me by providing primary source examples from the Japanese Incarceration. It cited stories from ex-inmates from the events in the 1940s. This source is peer-reviewed, so I know it's reliable and that it is very different from any other source I found. This will help shape my argument because using primary sources as evidence is one of the strongest ways to build an argument.

3.) George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 8-9.

This source helped me by providing an exact story by a famous actor, George Takei, who was 5 when the events began. This will help shape my argument because using a primary source such as this one is direct proof of what happened during the events. This also brings the emotional side of the events into consideration, strengthening my argument with pathos.

4.) Yuri Kochiyama, *Fishmerchant's Daughter: An Oral History*, Vol. 1 (Community Documentation Workshop, 1981), 14

This source helped me by providing another exact story by a second-generation Japanese American immigrant, Yuri Kochiyama. This will help me with my argument by adding more emotion and personal perspective to my paper.

5.) Taylor, Nicholas (2020) "The American Public's Reaction to the Japanese American Internment," *West Virginia University Historical Review: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8*

This source helped me by providing an extremely detailed range of knowledge and sources about the trauma of the Japanese Incarceration. This source was the most helpful by far, as it gave me so many ideas about what to write about and how to back up my claims. It is also peer-reviewed, so I know it is reliable.

6.) Nagata, D. K., Kim, J. H. J., & Wu, K. (2019). The Japanese American wartime incarceration: Examining the scope of racial trauma. *The American psychologist*, 74(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000303>

This source helped me tremendously as well because it provided me with a bunch of examples and quote-worthy material to use in my research paper. This helped me provide

evidence to make my arguments stronger. This source is also peer-reviewed, so I know it is reliable.

- 7.) Loo CM (1993). An integrative-sequential treatment model for posttraumatic stress disorder: A case study of the Japanese American internment and redress. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 13, 89–117. 10.1016/0272-7358(93)90036-L**

This source helped me by providing detailed and scientific information about Post-traumatic stress disorder. I mentioned PTSD in my argument, so this source helped me back up my claim about it. It is also peer-reviewed so I know it is reliable.

- 8.) Kashima T (1980). Japanese American internees: Return, 1945–1955: Readjustment and social amnesia. *Phylon*, 41, 107–115. 10.2307/274964**

This source helped me greatly by providing me with tons of knowledge about trauma, especially, war-related trauma. This helped me back up my arguments with claims about trauma-related thoughts and terminology. It is also peer-reviewed so I know it is reliable.

- 9.) Jensen GM (1997). *The experience of injustice: Health consequences of the Japanese American internment* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO**

This source helped me when I needed to find the exact information about the ex-inmate's improved risks of heart disease because of the trauma they endured. This source helped me a lot with backing up my argument. It is peer-reviewed so I know it is reliable.

- 10.) Nagata DK, Kim JHJ, & Nguyen TU (2015). Processing cultural trauma: Intergenerational effects of the Japanese American incarceration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 71, 356–370. 10.1111/josi.12115**

This source helped me by providing me with primary sources about Japanese Incarceration, helping me formulate and quote my arguments better. It is peer-reviewed.

- 11.) **Hansen AA, & Mitson BE (1974). *Voices long silent: An oral inquiry into the Japanese American evacuation*. Fullerton, CA: Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program at California State University.**

This source helped me by providing evidence of how severe the trauma was for the inmates. It compared the trauma to rape trauma. It is peer-reviewed.

- 12.) **Fujita SS, & O'Brien DJ (1991). *Japanese American ethnicity: The persistence of community*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press**

This source helped me by explaining the situations by directly speaking with ex-inmates. This source was very accurate and was peer-reviewed.

- 13.) **Danieli Y (1998). *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 10.1007/9781-4757-5567-1**

This source helped me specifically with intergenerational trauma. It is peer-reviewed as well.

- 14.) **Danieli Y (1998). *International handbook of multigenerational legacies of trauma*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 10.1007/9781-4757-5567-1**

This source helped me by explaining how it is nonbeneficial to hide memories from your children, as it distances them from the parent. It was very useful in my paper. It is also peer-reviewed.

- 15.) **U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (USCWRIC). (1997)**

This source helped me specifically with the Redress Movement. It provided me with dates and quantities of payments. It was very helpful. It is peer-reviewed.

