



image source: <https://futuress.org/stories/on-caste/>

Caste is a Public Health Issue:

A Resource Guide for Advocacy & Action

Key Overview

This digital toolkit examines the intersection of caste, health, and human rights within South Asian communities in the United States. It aims to reframe caste as a critical social determinant of health, while providing resources, highlighting key organizations, and encouraging engagement in caste abolition efforts.

Designed for a broad audience—including community members, policymakers, public health professionals, healthcare providers, students, advocates, and faith-based leaders—this toolkit serves as a guide to promote health equity and advance human rights by addressing caste-based discrimination in the U.S. context.

Language & Definitions

South Asian American: *“The South Asian community in the United States includes individuals who trace their ancestry to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora – past generations of South Asians who originally settled in other parts of the world, including the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, Canada and the Middle East, and other parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands.”* (SAPHA)

Caste: *“Caste is a social reality experienced by South Asians and the South Asian diaspora. While caste systems are often strongly associated primarily with South Asia, similar systems exist in regions including, but not limited to South America, Asia, and Africa”* (Equality Labs).

Dalit Community: *“The term Dalit means ‘oppressed’, ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’ to the extent of losing original identity. However, this name has been adopted by the people otherwise referred to as Harijans, or ‘Untouchables’, and has come to symbolize for them a movement for change and for the eradication of the centuries-old oppression under the caste system.”* (Minority Rights Group)

Adivasi communities: *“Indigenous people of South Asia. For self-determination and political/cultural autonomy, they fight against the stripping of their ancestral land and its natural resources.”* (Equality Labs)

Social determinants of health: *Social determinants of health are non-medical factors that influence an individual's health such as access to nutritious food, income level, educational attainment, access to affordable healthcare, discrimination, racism, and more.*

Structural determinants of health:

Structural determinants include the governing process or socioeconomic policies that affect pay, working conditions, housing, and education (IDPH).



Public Health Implications

Caste operates as a **structural determinant of health**, with public health outcomes differing across geographic regions. In India and Nepal, Scheduled Tribes and Dalit communities experience a disproportionate burden of illness and death. For example, affected communities experience poorer self-rated health outcomes (Mohindra et al, 2006) and levels of hypertension (Uddin et al, 2020). In Pakistan, communities experiencing caste discrimination have limited access to maternal health services such as antenatal care or trained home-birth attendants (Mumtaz et al, 2022).

The health impact of caste discrimination plays out less obviously in diaspora countries like the UK, US and Canada, but nonetheless exists. Issues such as discrimination (Badrinathan et al, 2021) in the workplace, schools and while receiving health care often play out in states that do not have the legal framework in which to properly address transnational discriminatory practices (Mégret et al, 2023). These differing public health outcomes due to caste discrimination can be attributed to large-scale cultural stigma, systemic discrimination, cyclical poverty and barriers accessing healthcare, education and stable employment.

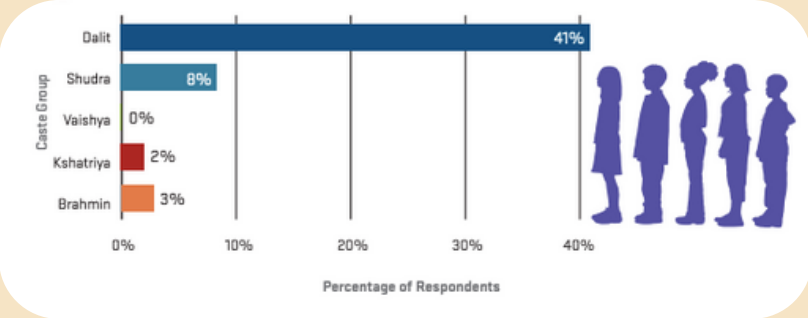
Personal narrative from survivor of Caste Apartheid:

*“Everything is savarna (“upper” Caste) – dominant. Everything everyone knows about South Asian culture is savarna. So being from a Muslim Adivasi background, the erasure of my experience is something I am very used to. Erasure is just something I deal with. Otherwise, I would not even have the community I have now, the Muslim South Asian community. Socially, it’s very difficult, it’s a struggle. My culture and language are dying and my “community” has no clue and no desire to learn about it. **There is no one to relate to. It is a huge reason why I suffer from depression**”.*

(Equality Labs, 2018)

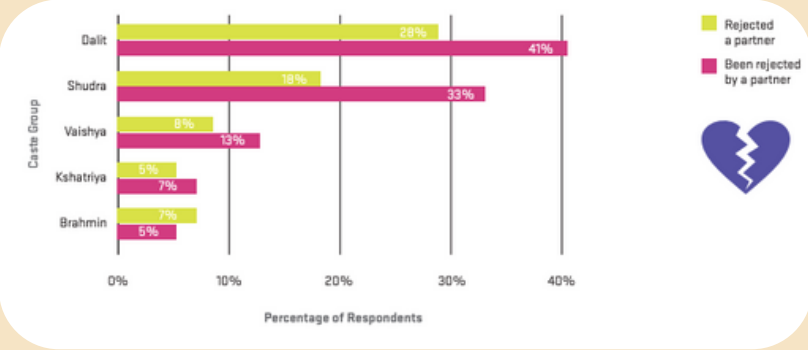
In 2016, Equality Labs conducted a survey to examine the impacts of caste on South Asian communities in the US. Here are some of the findings from that report:

Figure 1: Caste Discrimination in Schools



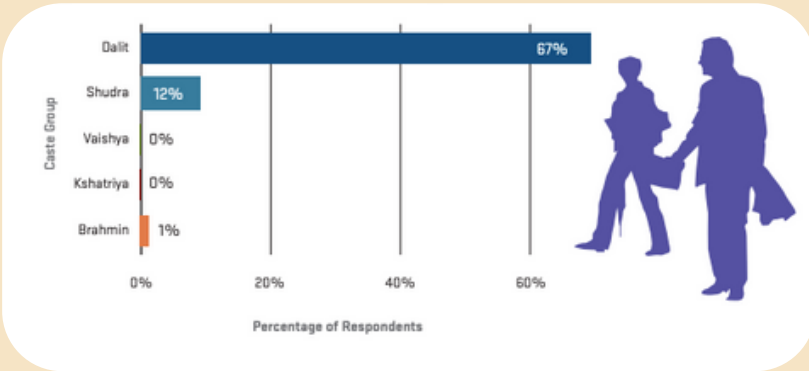
“One in three Dalit students report being discriminated against during their education”

Figure 2: Caste in Romantic Partnerships



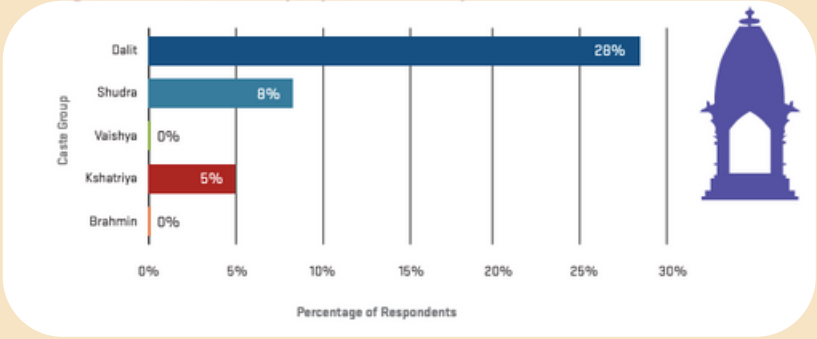
“Over 40% of Dalit respondents have reported being rejected in a romantic partnership on the basis of caste”

Figure 3: Caste Discrimination in the Workplace



“Two out of three Dalits surveyed reported being treated unfairly at their workplace”

Figure 4: Denied leadership in faith based organizations



“40% of Dalits and 14% of Shudra respondents were made to feel unwelcome at their place of worship because of their caste”

Public Health Implications

Recommended Research Readings: United States Contexts

Caste Out—Navigating Caste Discrimination in Health Care Employment

<https://www.americanhealthlaw.org/content-library/publications/bulletins/e9710036-8c5d-4fa8-a45e-87aaffdec455/caste-out-navigating-caste-discrimination-in-health>

Caste in the United States A Survey Of Caste Among South Asian Americans Equality Labs

https://clerk.seattle.gov/~cfpics/cf_322573f.pdf

Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/06/social-realities-of-indian-americans-results-from-the-2020-indian-american-attitudes-survey?lang=en>

Caste Discrimination Among Indian Diaspora in the USA

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2455328X231178141?icid=int.sj-abstract.citing-articles.1>

The Myth of Meritocracy: The Indian Caste System's Effect on Indian Immigration and Naturalization in Early 20th Century United States https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/lib_ugrad_research/11/ [Undergrad Research Paper – not peer reviewed – but has some good background]

Global caste; Race and caste; Comparative analysis of global caste systems

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.2021.1924394>

Transnational Discrimination: The Case of Casteism and the Indian Diaspora

https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/utcd6_v1



“You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole.”

-Dr Ambedkar

Public Health Implications

Recommended Research Readings: Pakistan, Nepal & Indian Contexts

Women's health in a rural community in Kerala, India: do caste and socioeconomic position matter?

<https://jech.bmj.com/content/60/12/1020>

Caste Exclusion and Health Discrimination in South Asia: A Systematic Review

[https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8592103/#:~:text=Caste%20is%20one%20of%20the,and%20anemia\)%20and%20maternal%20mortality.](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8592103/#:~:text=Caste%20is%20one%20of%20the,and%20anemia)%20and%20maternal%20mortality.)

Health and the Indian caste system [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60147-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60147-7/fulltext)

Intersection of class, caste, gender and unmet healthcare needs in India: Implications for health policy

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590229621000113>

Health and the Indian caste system [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60149-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60149-0/fulltext)

Health is Wealth: Health Care Access for Dalit communities in Saptari, Nepal

https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/migrated/migrated/documents/Samata%2520Foundation%2520Final%2520Report_31May2012.pdf

Maternal and Child Health in Nepal: The Effects of Caste, Ethnicity, and Regional Identity

<https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FA73/FA73.pdf>

Social determinants of health and the double burden of disease in Nepal: a secondary analysis

<https://bmcpublikehealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-022-13905-3>

Caste Differences in Hypertension Among Women in India: Diminishing Health Returns to Socioeconomic Status for Lower Caste Groups <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/S40615-020-00723-9>

Caste and Consequences: Looking through the Lens of Violence: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48644566?seq=2>

The Consequences of Social Inequality for the Health and Development of India's Children: The Case of Caste, Sanitation, and Child Height <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11211-019-00323-x>

Cross-Disciplinary Rapid Scoping Review of Structural Racial and Caste Discrimination Associated with Population Health Disparities in the 21st Century <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/14/9/186>

Caste in Muslim Pakistan: a structural determinant of inequities in the uptake of maternal health services

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9067991/>

Policy Advocacy | Key Areas

Advocacy to dismantle the caste system and address the harms of caste-based discrimination has existed for centuries within the subcontinent (Abraham & Janarthanan, 2024). Even in the United States, groups like Equality Labs and the International Commission of Dalit Rights have worked to advance the rights of Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan South Asians. Through political advocacy, community engagement and education, legal support, and more initiatives, these organizations have worked to bring an end to the caste system and other forms of oppression. The public health implications of caste-based discrimination can be both prevented and alleviated by the following policy and practice recommendations:

🗣️ **Passing state legislation and local policies such as city ordinances to protect individuals from caste-based discrimination**

- Seattle CB 120511: In 2023, Seattle became the first city to outlaw caste-based discrimination by passing a successful local ordinance that added caste as a protected class within anti-discrimination laws. Following in their footsteps, the city of Fresno, California banned caste-based discrimination later that same year.
- California Senate Bill 403: At the state level, a coalition of local organizations pushing for caste equity advocated for the eventual introduction of Senate Bill 403 in 2023. This landmark piece of legislation would have clarified the definition of “ancestry” within anti-discrimination laws by adding and defining caste. Governor Gavin Newsom ultimately vetoed the legislation citing that existing law already protects against caste based discrimination. Proponents of the bill, however, remain hopeful that, given the grassroots organizing and advocacy that allowed for the bill to move quickly through the legislature, similar legislation will be successful in the future.

Policy Advocacy | Key Areas

🗣️ Ensuring caste is included in anti-discrimination policies within the workplace and at educational institutions.

- Silicon Valley Tech Company Lawsuit: In 2020, the state of California filed a lawsuit against Cisco, a well-known technology conglomerate based in San Jose for caste-based discrimination towards a Dalit engineer. This lawsuit highlights the necessity of developing anti-discrimination procedures in the workplace through employee manuals, training modules, and more to be able to prevent incidents like this.
- Rutgers University: At the beginning of 2025, Rutgers University released a statement prohibiting caste-based discrimination on campus. This statement was a result of year long labor union negotiations which resulted in the creation of the University Task Force on Caste Discrimination which conducted an investigation into issues of caste based discrimination experienced by students and faculty, compiling their findings into a report published in August of 2024. Additionally, the report also puts forth several recommendations to address this issue such as: adding “caste” to existing anti-discrimination policies, providing education about the impact of caste based discrimination, and collecting further data on caste-based discrimination. Other universities have adopted some of these measures such as California State University, Brandeis University, University of California-Davis and more.

🗣️ Pushing for funding of research looking into the impact of caste-based discrimination within the United States:

- Much of the scientific literature that exists examining health outcomes and caste based discrimination are international studies such as from the subcontinent or the UK. As a result, more research is needed to understand the health implications of caste-based discrimination on South Asians living in America.

II PAUSE, Reflect:

✗ DON'T say: "Oh caste doesn't exist in the US! That's an old, outmoded system now"

💡 This kind of commentary invalidates the experiences of individuals who have been affected by caste based discrimination and oppression in South Asia and the diaspora

✓ DO advocate for the inclusion of caste in your workplace or educational institution's anti-discrimination policies.

💡 Caste based discrimination exists in the United States. Including caste in anti-discriminatory policies is a crucial step that institutions (i.e. schools, universities, workplaces, faith based organizations, hospitals, etc) can take to mitigate caste based discrimination, create processes for accountability and action, and ensure safety for their community.

✗ DON'T ask "Is that your actual last name or did your parents go by a different last name before?"

💡 This question is asked to out someone's caste. Some caste minority folks would change their last names in an attempt to conceal their caste and preserve themselves from caste discrimination. (Soundararajan & Varatharajah, 2015)

✓ DO examine how caste privileges may have opened up economic and educational opportunities for you and your family.

💡 Caste and class are not the same, however, the structural nature of caste has made it easier for caste privileged folks, compared to caste minority groups, to build generational wealth and social capital. *"It means that whatever your family's dire economic circumstances were at immigration, we can guarantee you the Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi experience was fundamentally more difficult. We had to battle against institutionalized forms of casteism in addition to generations-stretching and violently imposed poverty to be able migrate in the first place."* (Soundararajan & Varatharajah, 2015)

Resources

Caste Abolitionist Organizations in the US

♥ **Equality Labs:** Equality Labs is a transnational South Asian feminist organization working at the cutting-edge intersections of organizing, art, and digital security to end caste apartheid, gender-based violence, Islamophobia, and religious intolerance. We are artists, advocates, healers, technologists and organizers working on intractable systems of oppression through a collaborative solution-making model for movements (www.equalitylabs.org)

♥ **International Commission for Dalit Rights:** ICDR International is a leading global movement of people striving to eliminate Caste or Work and Descent-based Discrimination (CWDD), inequality and injustice. (www.icdrintl.org)

♥ **Ambedkar Association of North American:** AANA work with all Ambedkarite Americans to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and cultural programming. (<https://aanausa.org/>)

Recommended Readings: Books

📖 *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* by Thenmozhi Soundararajan

📖 *Coming Out As Dalit* by Yashica Dutt

📖 *Annihilation of Caste* by B.R. Ambedkar

📖 *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson

📖 *Caste Matters* by Suraj Milind Yengde

📖 *Seasons of the Palm* by Perumal Murugan


📖 *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* by Sujatha Gidla

📖 *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* by Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Moon, and Wandana Sonalkar


📖 Additional reading recommendations compiled by Equality Labs: <https://www.equalitylabs.org/research/reading-list/>

Resources


Recommended Readings: Articles


 [How to Manage Caste Stress and Family Conflict During the Holidays: A Guide by Equality Labs](#)


 [Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged: by Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sinthujan Varatharajah](#)

 [Being An Anti-Caste Ally: 5 Things To Keep In Mind](#)


 [AHLA – Caste Out: Navigating Caste Discrimination in Health Care Employment](#)


 [Preventing Caste Discrimination on Campus | United Educators](#)

 [Key Challenges and Strategic Approaches to Combat Caste-Based and Analogous Forms of Discrimination](#)

 [What Managers Everywhere Must Know About Caste](#)


 [Caste Matters](#)

 [The Fight Against Caste Oppression Comes to US Higher Education – Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly](#)


 [Caste Exclusion and Health Discrimination in South Asia: A Systematic Review – PMC](#)


 [Caste and public health – Frontline](#)

 [CASTE DISCRIMINATION: A Global Concern](#)

 [The Concurrence of Anti-Racism and Anti-Casteism](#)

Recommended Podcasts

 [How To Be An Anti-Casteist \(NPR\)– A podcast explaining caste and how to take an active role in preventing caste-based discrimination.](#)

 [Caste in the USA \(Firstpost\)| hosted by Equality Labs’ Thenmozhi Soundararajan](#)

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The South Asian Public Health Association (SAPHA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the health and well-being of South Asian communities in the United States through advocacy, collaboration, and communication. We strive to address the unique health challenges faced by individuals of South Asian descent through education, advocacy, research, and community engagement. Established in 1999, SAPHA gained formal recognition in 2001 as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and has marked many milestones in promoting the health and well-being of South Asians throughout the years, including the groundbreaking report, "A Brown Paper: The Health of South Asians in the US," in 2002, the publication of "The Health of South Asians in the US – An Evidence-based Guide for Policy and Program Development" in 2017, many successful webinars, publications and invitations to conferences and events, along with White House recognition. SAPHA operates with a dedicated team of volunteer Board members representing diverse expertise in public health, health disparities, mental health, clinical care, health policy, and disease control and prevention.

**Visit our website for more information on how to stay involved
and reach out for partnership opportunities:**

 www.sapha.org

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 [@saphainfo](https://www.instagram.com/saphainfo)

We would love to hear your thoughts on the toolkit as well as feedback on how to improve the content. Please share any new resources, suggestions and comments by emailing: advocacy@sapha.org