

BREAKING NEWS

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Coronavirus: Bay Area officials, advocates look to get in front of COVID-19 hate crimes

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Accounts of assaults and harassment, especially against Asian Americans, are rising nationally, and authorities believe that incidents are underreported

By **ROBERT SALONGA** | rsalonga@bayareanewsgroup.com and **ANGELA RUGGIERO** |

aruggiero@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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With reports of incidents increasing across the country, Bay Area officials and advocacy groups are encouraging people who have suffered harassment because of prejudice fueled by COVID-19 fears to report these incidents to authorities, and are warning those responsible will face criminal consequences.

There has been no shortage of stories. A San Jose woman of Chinese descent told police that she was waiting in line to enter the Whole Foods on The Alameda near downtown Saturday when she was accosted by a man who began yelling obscenities at her.

“I (expletive) hate Asian people ... go somewhere else,” the woman, who asked not to be named out of safety concerns, recalled him saying.

“I never met him, never saw him before, I did not do anything to offend him,” she told this news organization. “This wasn’t right.”

Monday, Santa Clara County District Attorney Jeff Rosen released a public-service announcement video featuring a multi-ethnic slate of his prosecutors including two who have ancestry from China and Italy, countries hard hit by the virus before it began spreading in the United States.

Right off the top of the 1-minute video, Supervising Deputy District Attorney Charlotte Chang says, “This is not a Chinese virus.”

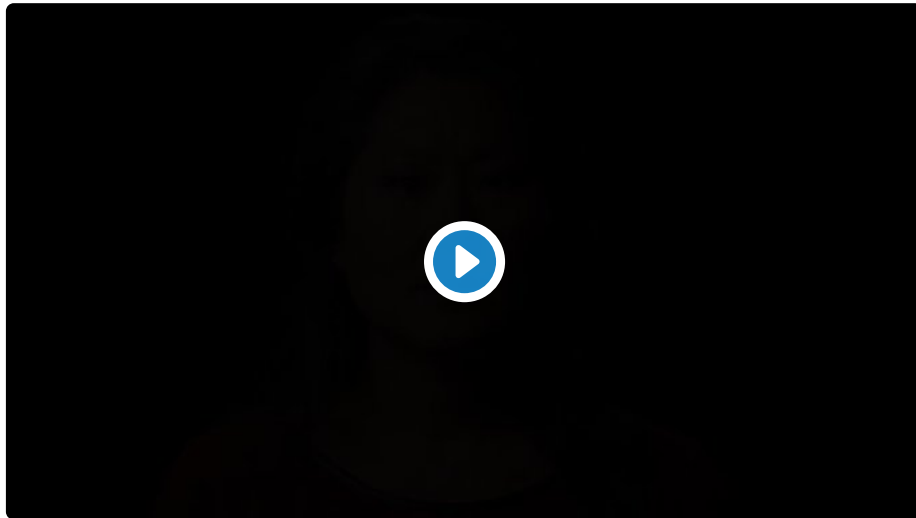


Santa Clara DA
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This Virus has no ethnicity. We do - and we are in this together. If you are a victim of a hate crime, please contact your local law enforcement agency.

(Chinese, Vietnamese, and Spanish versions will be available soon.)



♡ 150 10:56 AM - Mar 30, 2020



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The remark is an allusion to how the new coronavirus was initially widely referred to as a “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus,” referencing the city in China where the first major outbreak occurred. World health officials later adopted COVID-19 as the term for the disease, as it became evident it had become prevalent all over the globe. The United States now has the highest number of confirmed cases in the world.

But the coining and usage of “Chinese virus” — including by President Trump until recently — has helped fuel widespread anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment. Last week, ABC News reported on an internal [FBI intelligence report](#) that stated, “The FBI assesses hate crime incidents against Asian Americans likely will surge across the United States, due to the spread of coronavirus disease ... endangering Asian American communities.”

The online reporting site [Stop AAPI Hate](#), run out of San Francisco State University, has amassed at least 1,000 self-reported cases of discrimination against Asian Americans since March 19. That includes at least 63 cases in the Bay Area between March 19 and 23.

Professor Russell Jeung, chair of San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies department, said he hopes the data will be used to advocate for better policies on the state level, and give voice to concerns. He added that the data suggests to him that Asian Americans could face harassment akin to that during the SARS epidemic in 2003, and what Muslim Americans faced after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

"Those big concerns are that because of the political rhetoric, that this anti-Asian hate will be deeper ingrained," he said.

Jeung is joined by Rosen in the belief that such hate incidents are largely underreported because of a lack of confidence that authorities will follow up or that they don't believe that instances of harassment meet the bar for a crime.

"Often victims in these situations think this is not a community issue, that it's just something that happened to me," Rosen said. "We not only want to discourage would-be perpetrators, but empower victims to report it."

Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley echoed the sentiment, saying "harassing conduct grounded in xenophobia, is spreading as rapidly as the COVID-19 pandemic," and that her office will aggressively investigate hate-crime incidents against Asian American residents.

Richard Konda, executive director of the Asian Law Alliance, said people who experience harassment because of their ethnic background don't always see it as something to tell authorities.

"We know there are instances where people don't recognize it. There's a line between someone looking at you funny, and someone saying something to you, and physically assaulting you," Konda said. "But any of it should be reported. It's important to establish trends that are occurring."

Hate crime prosecution typically involves an underlying crime — like threats, vandalism or assault — but in the absence of that, prosecutors have latitude to charge someone with a misdemeanor hate crime, which can carry a potential penalty of a year in jail, a fine and community service.

Rosen said his office has been made aware of at least recent two incidents, one involving an Asian American woman at a Cupertino grocery store who was reportedly told by a cashier, “I can’t believe you’re shopping here and spreading the virus,” and “You should get out of here and go back to where you came from.” The cashier was later fired. The second incident was reported by the woman in the San Jose Whole Foods encounter.

Those two anecdotes also highlight a trend that Jeung has noticed so far in his data: Women are three times more likely than men to suffer this kind of harassment. The reports collected by his department describe instances ranging from slurs and verbal harassment to physical assaults and attacks.

Some instances have gotten more extreme: the FBI report detailed a March 14 case in Midland, Texas describing “three Asian American family members, including a 2-year-old and 6-year-old, were stabbed ... The suspect indicated that he stabbed the family because he thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with the coronavirus.”

Rosen said concern about escalation is why he wants people who experience hate-driven harassment and threats to make them known to authorities.

“If we don’t address yelling with a strong message, then we get sticks, then we get knives, and then we get guns,” he said. “It’s important to report so things do not get worse.”

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Robert Salonga | Criminal Justice and Public Safety Reporter Robert Salonga is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter covering criminal justice and public safety for The Mercury News. A San Jose native, he attended UCLA and has a Master's degree in journalism from the University of Maryland. He previously reported in Washington, D.C., Salinas and the East Bay, and is a middling triathlete. Reach him the low-tech way at 408-920-5002.

rsalonga@bayareanewsgroup.com

[Follow Robert Salonga @robertsalonga](#)



Angela Ruggiero | Criminal Justice Reporter Angela Ruggiero covers criminal justice and the Alameda County Superior Court. She previously covered the Tri-Valley cities of Pleasanton, Dublin, Livermore and Danville.

aruggiero@bayareanewsgroup.com

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