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Simmering racism against Asian community boils over as hate crimes rise

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[Simmering racism against Asian community boils over as hate crimes rise](#)

by [Wilson Gomez and Sahar Swaleh](#)

April 23, 2020



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**Editor's note: Wilson Gomez and Sahar Swaleh are journalism students in SF State's Journalism 575 Community Media this spring. Taught by professor Jon Funabiki, the class is a collaboration with El Tecolote.*

Hate crimes towards Asian-Americans are nothing new. In the early days of Chinese immigration to the U.S., Chinese immigrants were put into ghettos and scapegoated. In 1871 Los Angeles, a mob comprised of Whites and one Latino lynched 17 Chinese immigrants, including a doctor in what was then L.A.'s Chinatown district. During World War II, Japanese Americans were incarcerated into internment camps and had their businesses and homes taken from them as they were considered a threat to the U.S. President Ronald Reagan officially apologized for the internment camps in 1988 and California issued a formal apology in February, right as hate crimes towards Asian Americans began to skyrocket as a result of COVID-19 (also known as the coronavirus).

As COVID-19 began being taken more seriously in the U.S., Asian businesses were among the first to suffer.

"People are afraid to go outside. It's gotten about 40 percent slower, we've had to cut back a few hours this past weekend and lunch hour has gotten slower," said Felicia Fong, manager of Punjab, a Chinese restaurant in the Mission District only days before San Francisco mayor London Breed ordered businesses to close and residents to stay home in order to curb the infection rate. At the time, taquerias and coffee shops still had customers inside. People sat down in groups, ordered food and chatted the day away while just a few doors down some restaurants stayed completely empty for hours.

In the past few months, the number of hate crimes against people of Asian descent have skyrocketed. In the past few weeks we've seen four people, including a 2 year-old and a 6 year-old, stabbed in a Sam's Club, people getting spit on and verbally and physically assaulted for no other reason than because they are Asian. On March 27, the FBI warned against a potential surge in hate-crimes in the U.S.

"When the news first started reporting what was going on in China and there were early indications that it might spread around the world, I thought to myself, 'Oh no, are we going to be blamed for this again?' And not 'we' as in people from China, but 'we' as a people here in this country... who have contributed greatly to this country," said Randall Yip, news editor of AsAm News, a news organization dedicated to serving the Asian American community.

Russell M Jeung, Chair of the Asian American Studies Department at SF State, has created a database where Asian Americans can report hate crimes and has seen a steady flow of cases being reported on his website. "... We can show trends that like verbal harassment is the most common. And that 10 to 15 percent of the cases are physical, [and] that women are three times more likely to be harassed than men," Jeung said. "It's over a thousand [reported cases] already."

Illustration: Alexis Terrazas

While Jeung's database doesn't track geographic data, making it hard to know which parts of the country are more problematic, the database does track specific places where people have faced discrimination, such as grocery stores, which according to Jeung's data, are where Asian Americans face the highest risk of being attacked.

According to Jeung, fear of COVID-19 alone is not responsible for the increase in attacks against Asian Americans. It starts with politicians and a news media that enables and repeats hateful and hurtful stereotypes against Asians.

"When policies and politicians and the media start representing Asians in a certain way, there is a community response... social media circulates viral, racist memes and jokes. After that comes the uptick in [Asian] businesses being boycotted... and then then comes more interpersonal acts of discrimination," Jeung explains.

In 2016 Arab Americans saw the biggest increase in hate crimes towards them since the aftermath of 9/11 as a result of the rhetoric of then-presidential candidate Trump. Rather than try to calm people and appeal to their better nature, the president has labeled the coronavirus, the "Chinese Virus," going so far as to strikethrough "Coronavirus" in order to write "Chinese Virus" on the script of a prepared speech. A White House official called Coronavirus, "Kung Flu," which Trump later denied was harmful to Asian Americans.

"My daughter was teased at school, every class by a group," said Adam Manhbaoboua, founder of Stop Racism Against Asian Americans. "She said she felt horrible and she said it hurt her feelings. So that was a direct impact on me. Obviously, you know, if something happens to your kid, it hits you twice as hard."

Manhbaoboua's group, based out of San Diego, is already working with city officials to get the San Diego City Council to officially denounce the attacks on Asian Americans, a first step in a much larger plan to have both the state and federal government do the same.

As a response to the increase in hate crimes, former presidential candidate Andrew Yang penned an Op-ed for the Washington Post where he proposed that Asian-Americans act more "American" as a way to avoid being targeted. A similar argument was made in the aftermath of 9/11 where Muslim Americans were told that they should likewise be more patriotic.

"I don't think it's Asian Americans' responsibility to protect ourselves. I think it's other people's responsibility to not attack Asians," Jeung said. "It's other people who have the problem about the racism. And so I think other people need to change. Not Asian Americans."

Yip says one of the best things people can do right now for Asian Americans, aside from calling out racism where and when it happens, is to just smile. "A simple smile would help, you know... if someone were just to smile and nod their head and say, 'Hi... we understand, we hear you. We know of what's going on.' Yeah, little gestures like that."

Even after the lockdown gets lifted, Manhbaoboua says that his group will keep fighting. "You know the Latino community has been affected by [racism]. Obviously, the black community has been impacted by this. So, we're just really trying to bring everyone in and say, 'Hey, you know what? We're in this fight together.'"

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