 CORONAVIRUS GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Seeking place to blame, Trump uses term for COVID-19 that advocacy groups say is connected to anti-Asian bias

There have been dozens of bias incidents against Asian Americans, groups say.

By **Ben Gittleson**

March 18, 2020, 2:55 PM • 10 min read



'Chinese virus' not racist: Trump

President Trump attempted to shift blame for the spread of coronavirus to China by using the phrase 'Chinese virus.'

Kevin Dietsch/EPA via Shutterstock, FILE

President [Donald Trump](#) attempted to focus blame for the spread of the [novel coronavirus](#) onto [China](#) this week by using a name for the virus that advocacy groups say has been associated with dozens of bias incidents against Asian Americans.

The president in a tweet on Monday started calling [COVID-19](#) the "China Virus," repeating the term on Twitter and to reporters over the next two days.

He said he started using the phrase to counter Chinese misinformation that the U.S. military initially spread the virus, a conspiracy theory not borne out by evidence.

"China was putting out information, which was false, that our military gave this to them, that was false," Trump said at a press conference on Tuesday. "And rather than having an argument, I said I have to call it where it came from. It did come from China. It is a very accurate term."

+ [MORE: Government response updates: Trump promises 'total victory' in 'war' as Pentagon increases role](#)

The World Health Organization, though, [said in 2015](#) that geographic locations "should be avoided" when naming infectious diseases, in order to avoid "stigmatizing certain communities or economic sectors." Disease names can "provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities," a WHO official noted at the time, and [the organization noted](#) amid the current pandemic that certain names "can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations."

Asian American groups in the United States said that term "Chinese virus" - and others like it -- has been associated with some of the reported [incidents of discrimination](#) against Asian Americans nationwide connected to COVID-19.

There have been [physical assaults](#) reported in New York, [vandalism](#) in California, and many more incidents of name-calling and similar discrimination, according to the civil rights coalition Asian Americans Advancing Justice, which created a website where Asian Americans could report bias incidents related to COVID-19.

"We've heard of dozens of different instances anecdotally," Gregg Orton, the national director of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, told ABC News. "We know anecdotally that this is happening all across the country."


+ [MORE: Backlash against Asians could hinder efforts to contain coronavirus, expert says](#)

He said it was difficult to get the full number of incidents because people are often reluctant to come forward when they think the incident does not necessarily qualify as a crime. But those incidents are no less concerning, he said.

+ [MORE: Concerns over preparedness mount as VA hospitals brace for new coronavirus wave](#)

Pressed by a reporter Tuesday on the criticism he is creating a stigma, Trump disagreed and pushed back at China's misinformation.



 President Donald Trump, joined by members of the Coronavirus Task Force, speaks about the coronavirus outbreak in the press briefing room at the White House on March 17, 2020, in Washington. Drew Angerer/Getty Images, FILE

"I don't think so," Trump said. "I think saying that our military gave it to them creates a stigma."

Asked by ABC News senior White House correspondent Cecelia Vega on Wednesday if his use of the term "Chinese virus" was racist, Trump said, "It's not racist at all."

"It comes from China, that's why," Trump said. "It comes from China. I want to be accurate," he continued. "China tried to say at one point that -- maybe they've stopped now, that it was caused by American soldiers. That can't happen. It's not going to happen. Not as long as I'm president. It comes from China."

What to know about Coronavirus:

- *How it started and how to protect yourself:* [**Coronavirus explained**](#)
- *What to do if you have symptoms:* [**Coronavirus symptoms**](#)
- *Tracking the spread in the US and Worldwide:* [**Coronavirus map**](#)

Secretary of Health and Human Services [Alex Azar](#) said last month that he thought a similar term, "China coronavirus," could lead to discrimination and as such, he would avoid using it.

"We must ensure nobody's discriminated against based on ethnicity," Azar told lawmakers during a hearing on Capitol Hill on Feb. 27. "Ethnicity is not what causes the novel coronavirus."

CBS News reporter Weijia Jiang, who is Chinese American, said Tuesday that a White House official had used the term "Kung-Flu" to her face.

This morning a White House official referred to [#Coronavirus](#) as the "Kung-Flu" to my face. Makes me wonder what they're calling it behind my back.

— [Weijia Jiang \(@weijia\)](#) March 17, 2020

Asked Wednesday during a news conference about that incident, Trump first repeated the term to cameras and added that he was not concerned

terms like it and "Chinese virus" put Asian Americans at risk, despite the evidence otherwise.

"No, no, not at all," Trump said. "No, not at all. I think they probably would agree with it, 100%. It comes from China, there's nothing not to agree."

Trump initially praised China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, in January [saying](#) the country had "been working very hard to contain" the virus, and in February [applauding](#) Chinese leader Xi Jinping for being "strong, sharp and powerfully focused on leading the counterattack on the Coronavirus."

"Great discipline is taking place in China, as President Xi strongly leads what will be a very successful operation," [Trump tweeted](#) on Feb. 7. Asked by ABC News' Karen Travers that same day whether he was concerned China was covering up the full extent of the outbreak, Trump replied: "No. China is working very hard."

But on Wednesday, Trump told ABC News at a press conference that China "could have given us a lot earlier notice," although he said he did not believe China was "inflicting" the disease on the United States.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice originally created its tracking website, standagainsthater.org, in 2017, but recently tailored it to the coronavirus.

Editor's Picks



Timeline: How coronavirus got started



How to prepare for coronavirus in your community



Coronavirus symptoms: Answers to your COVID-19 questions


There has been a "significant uptick" in reports of attacks against Asian Americans in recent weeks, John Yang, the executive director of the coalition's Washington office -- called Asian American Justice Center -- told ABC News.

He said many of the dozens of incidents across the country consists of "what you might call micro-aggressions," like name-calling.

+ [MORE: How the US military may be utilized in responding to coronavirus](#)

"There's definitely a strain of, 'Look at what you brought from China,'" Yang said.



 Police officers salute as a medical worker from outside Wuhan arrives at the Wuhan Railway Station before leaving the epicenter of the novel coronavirus disease outbreak, in Hubei... [more](#)

Reuters

Phrases like "China virus" and "Kung Flu" have been connected to these incidents, he added.

Both groups were monitoring social media for incidents.

This report was featured in the Thursday, March 19, 2020, episode of "Start Here," ABC News' daily news podcast.



**Our Reporter Got COVID-19. Here's What Happened Next.**
ABC News (US) >

TUNE IN



"Start Here" offers a straightforward look at the day's top stories in 20 minutes. Listen for free every weekday on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), the [ABC News app](#) or wherever you get your podcasts.

 Comments (0)



[ABC News Network](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Your CA Privacy Rights](#) | [Children's Online Privacy Policy](#) |

[Interest-Based Ads](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Do Not Sell My Info](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Copyright © 2020 ABC News Internet Ventures. All rights reserved.