

Violence against Asian Americans on the rise, but racism isn't new

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A spike in verbal and physical violence against Asian Americans has garnered increased coverage, highlighted by anti-Asian sentiments dating back to the beginning of the pandemic early last year.

University of Michigan assistant history professor Ian Shin, whose teaching focuses on Asian American history, said the verbal assaults and physical attacks against Asian Americans and their businesses being vandalized are not new, but often not given as much attention as assaults on other [minority groups](#).

Why is the violence against Asian Americans getting more attention and media coverage now?

Violence against Asian Americans across the U.S. is getting more attention and media coverage now because these incidents are increasing in both number and severity. The Stop AAPI Hate Project estimates that there have been roughly 3,800 [anti-Asian bias incidents](#) since March 2020, and this number is almost certainly an undercount. These incidents include everything from shunning (i.e., the deliberate avoidance of Asians and Asian Americans) to verbal harassment to, in their most tragic and horrifying forms, physical attacks. The shootings at three Atlanta-area spas that resulted in the deaths of eight people—six of whom were Asian women—are only the tip of a very big and very ugly iceberg.

Celebrities, politicians and others have been promoting the Stop the Hate campaign through social media. As compared to similar efforts for other minority groups, can this support make a difference?

I am a believer that every little bit helps—whether it's celebrities and politicians promoting the Stop the Hate campaign through social media, or individual users posting messages of support for their friends in the Asian American community. Part of what has caused this spike in anti-Asian bias incidents is bigoted and hateful rhetoric that blamed China

and, by association, Chinese Americans for the COVID-19 pandemic, and I see people of all backgrounds now challenging and condemning this discourse.

It's important, however, to make sure that what we say does not reinforce harmful narratives and stereotypes—like the myth of Asian Americans as a "model minority" in contrast to other communities of color in the United States. Expressions of support are most effective when they don't just look after the interests of the Asian American community, but rather build bridges to address the white supremacy and xenophobia that affect all of us.

Violence and hatred against minority groups have been part of U.S. history for centuries. What has been the reason(s) why Asian Americans have been targeted?

People of Asian descent have been targets of violence in the U.S. since their first arrival here in the mid-19th century. Between 1850 and 1906, Chinese were driven out of almost 200 cities and towns on the West Coast because they were seen as economic competitors, and as socially and culturally inassimilable to U.S. society. Japanese, South Asian and Filipino immigrants were similarly affected by racist violence when they began to arrive around the early 20th century. These attacks have spiked especially in times of national crisis: those of us who call Michigan home may know about the case of Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American man who was beaten to death in 1982 because his attackers associated him with Japan, which was challenging U.S. domination in auto manufacturing.

The reason why Asian Americans have been targeted more recently is twofold. First, against the guidance of the World Health Organization

and the Centers for Disease Control, the incendiary rhetoric of President Trump and other public figures blamed China for the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, escalating geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and China in general have cast Chinese and other Asian Americans as potential enemies. These reasons are founded on perceptions of Asian Americans as, on one hand, "forever foreigners" who never truly belong in the U.S. and, on the other hand, a "model minority" that is high-achieving but submissive. Asian American activists have worked against these stereotypes for decades.

Several Asian American/Pacific Islander organizations and scholars have been tracking the rise in attacks, but some police departments and city officials resist labeling them as hate crimes. What impact does that have?

The legal definition of a hate crime cannot fully account for the contextual factors that have contributed to anti-Asian bias and violence over the past 12 months. Even though a perpetrator may not explicitly state that their attack was motivated by racial animus, it's clear that, in many instances, their reasons are rooted in racialized perceptions of Asian and Asian American people. In the case of the Atlanta spa shootings, for example, where the attacker attributed his actions to his sex addiction, we can trace the association of Asian women with sex work back to the history of U.S. wars in Asia where GIs often regarded local women as sex objects. Portrayals in popular culture, especially Hollywood movies, have also fostered an image of Asian women as sexually available and submissive. Considering this deeper context matters enormously in how we understand the root causes of these bias incidents—regardless of how law enforcement may classify them.

It is also important to acknowledge that many Asian American activists

and leaders reject law enforcement as the appropriate solution to the issue of anti-Asian violence and hate. They understand that involving law enforcement can exacerbate the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on Black and Latinx communities, and advocate instead for a restorative justice approach. The Asian American community has faced its own challenges with law enforcement, from the deadly use of force by police against Asian Americans suffering from mental illness to the deportation of Southeast Asian immigrants.

What can Asian Americans, as well as their supporters, do during these difficult times to prevent these attacks, as well as cope with their fears and anxiety?

One reason why these attacks have generated such strong feelings of anxiety within the Asian American community is that they appear to occur randomly and even in areas with large Asian American populations, so that it's very hard to know where you can turn for safety.

In the short term, Asian Americans and their supporters can seek out bystander intervention training so that they know how to effectively and safely step in if they witness a bias incident. There have also been many examples of communities banding together to support and protect Asian Americans without involving [law enforcement](#)—for example, by forming community patrol groups that not only keep a neighborhood safe, but that also provide help for those in need. In the long term, Asian Americans and their allies can advocate for better support for ethnic studies curriculum at the K-12 level that will give students a more inclusive understanding of the history of this country.

Finally, gathering accurate data about these incidents is vital to securing the resources and support that the Asian American community needs

right now. Many who experience these bias incidents may be afraid to report them or may not know how to do so. Organizations and government agencies should make it easier and safer for Asian Americans to come forward. For example, the Stop AAPI Hate Project now allows users to report incidents in 12 different Asian languages. We have the opportunity now to treat both the COVID-19 virus and the virus of intolerance that has plagued the U.S. for far too long.

Provided by University of Michigan

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