

# Asian Americans report biggest increase in serious incidents of online hate and harassment during COVID pandemic

March 24 2021, by Jessica Guynn and Aleszu Bajak

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Asian Americans reported the single biggest increase in serious incidents of online hate and harassment as racist and xenophobic slurs blaming

people of Asian descent for the coronavirus pandemic spread over the past year, according to a new survey shared exclusively with U.S. TODAY.

Some 17% of Asian Americans reported [sexual harassment](#), stalking, physical threats and other incidents, up from 11% last year.

Half of them said the harassment was spurred by their race or ethnicity, according to the survey from anti-hate group ADL. Overall, 21% of Asian-American respondents said they were harassed online.

CEO Jonathan Greenblatt says the survey's findings, which come amid a growing outcry over the rapid rise in attacks on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders nationwide, show that efforts to curb surging anti-Asian sentiment by [social media platforms](#) like Facebook, Twitter and Google's YouTube have fallen short.

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Google's Sundar Pichai and Twitter's Jack Dorsey are slated to testify on Capitol Hill on Thursday about their handling of misinformation, disinformation and other harmful content. The vast majority of those polled by ADL—81%—agreed with the statement that social media platforms should do more to combat online hate.

In a statement, Facebook said it does not allow hate speech and removes content that attacks someone for who they are, their race, ethnicity or national origin.

"Over the past year we've updated our policies to catch more implicit hate speech," Facebook said. "Thanks to significant investments in our technology we proactively detect 95% of the content we remove and we continue to improve how we enforce our rules as hate speech evolves over time."

## Fatal shootings of women of Asian descent in Atlanta escalate concern

The fatal shootings of eight people, including six women of Asian descent, at Atlanta-area massage parlors, have escalated concern that racist and xenophobic rants online are spilling over into real-world violence.

Though police say the suspect said he did not target the women because of their race, the crime touched a nerve with the sharp increase in anti-Asian incidents in recent months. Experts say the killings were inextricably linked to racism and hate.

"Hate and stigma against Asian-American populations have gone viral during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Anahi Viladrich, a professor of sociology at Queens College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York, who recently published a paper in the *American Journal of Public Health* exploring the rise of anti-Asian language.

"Social media has significantly contributed to the pandemic of prejudice and hate against Asian populations globally," she said. "With its power to freely move across time zones and social geographies, social media has turned terms such as 'Chinese virus' and 'Wuhan virus' into race-based stigma against Asian groups in the United States and overseas."

Researchers at University of California at San Francisco traced the rise of anti-Asian hashtags on Twitter to Donald Trump's tweet in March 2020 referring to the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus."

"The use of racial and ethnic terms to describe the coronavirus is an important contributor to the record-breaking level of severe online harassment against Asian Americans over the past year," John

Brownstein, an epidemiologist at Boston Children's Hospital and co-author of the study, told U.S. TODAY.

Anti-Asian sentiment rose 85% after Trump was diagnosed with COVID-19 last fall, the ADL found at the time. Trump used the term "China virus" in a recent Fox News interview.

## **How Trump, 'China virus' fueled hate speech**

Jeremy Blackburn, a professor of computer science at Binghamton University, is studying Sinophobic, or anti-Chinese, terms on 4chan and Twitter.

What he and his colleagues witnessed was the evolution of anti-Chinese hate speech in real-time.

"One slur many people are probably familiar with is 'Wuhan Flu,' which did not exist in the lexicon until COVID-19," he said. "But we also found not only dozens of new slurs, but more importantly that previously benign words like 'pangolin' were increasingly used as slurs."

Blackburn points out how difficult it is to measure the scope of the problem given how much the language has changed—even in the time since the pandemic started.

"One of the major challenges in measuring Sinophobic content is that it has rapidly evolved," he said. "Although it is quite easy to look for occurrences of well known slurs, we've seen all sorts of new Sinophobic terms arise."

Advocates for the Asian American community have warned for months that inflammatory online rhetoric about COVID-19 from political leaders including Trump could lead to violence.

## **Hate crimes against Asian Americans jump during coronavirus pandemic**

Hate crimes against Asian Americans rose 149% from 2019 to 2020, even though hate crimes overall decreased 7% during the pandemic, according to findings released in early March by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University.

Stop AAPI Hate, a group that tracks discrimination and xenophobia against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, received nearly 3,800 reports of hate incidents during the year-long pandemic.

These numbers are probably a fraction of actual incidents. One in 4 Americans, including nearly half of Asian Americans, in recent weeks have seen someone blame Asian people for the coronavirus epidemic, a U.S. TODAY/Ipsos Poll found.

Recent attacks include multiple violent assaults on elderly people of Asian descent.

"Racially motivated violence and other incidents against Asian Americans have reached an alarming level across the United States since the outbreak of COVID-19," a United Nations report released last year found, citing sharp rises in vandalism, physical assaults and robberies against Asian American people, businesses and community centers.

President Joe Biden denounced the attacks as un-American in his first prime-time address. During his first week in office, Biden condemned racially motivated harassment and violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and directed federal agencies to explore ways to counter the attacks.

Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Tuesday the Senate will take up legislation on anti-Asian hate crimes.

The ADL survey of 2,251 individuals also found:

- Nearly 6 in 10 African Americans reported a sharp rise in racially motivated online harassment, up from 42% last year.
- American adults who were harassed said they were exposed to the most harassment on Facebook, the world's largest social media platform, (75%), followed by Twitter (24%), Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, (24%) and YouTube, owned by Google, (21%).
- More than a quarter—27%—experienced severe online harassment over the past year which includes incidents of swatting, in which false police reports are made in hopes of getting a SWAT team sent to someone's home, and doxing, which is leaking personal information online.
- Overall, 41% of Americans said they had experienced some form of online hate and harassment.
- A third of those surveyed attributed the harassment to an identity characteristic, which was defined as sexual orientation, religion, race or ethnicity, gender identity, or disability.
- LGBTQ respondents reported disproportionately higher rates of harassment than all other identity groups at 64%.
- Twenty-eight percent of respondents say they were targeted because of their race or ethnicity.

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Citation: Asian Americans report biggest increase in serious incidents of online hate and harassment during COVID pandemic (2021, March 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-asian-americans-biggest-incidents-online.html>

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