

Coronavirus: What attacks on Asians reveal about American identity

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Attacks on East Asian people living in the US have shot up during the pandemic, revealing an uncomfortable truth about American identity.

Though she was not born in the US, nothing about Tracy Wen Liu's life in the country felt "un-American". Ms Liu went to football games, watched Sex and the City and volunteered at food banks.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the 31-year-old didn't think anything of being East Asian and living in Austin, Texas. "Honestly, I didn't really think I stood out a lot," she says.

That has changed. With the outbreak of the pandemic that has killed around 100,000 people in the US, being Asian in America can make you a target - and many, including Ms Liu, have felt it.

In her case, she says a Korean friend was pushed and yelled at by several people in a grocery store, and then asked to leave, simply because she was Asian and wore a mask.

In states including New York, California, and Texas, East Asians have been spat on, punched or kicked - and in one case even stabbed.

Whether they have been faced with outright violence, bullying or more insidious forms of social or political abuse, a spike in anti-Asian prejudice has left many Asians - which in the US refers to people of east or southeast Asian descent - wondering where they fit in American society.

"When I first came here five years ago, my goal was to adapt to American culture as soon as possible," says Ms Liu.

"Then the pandemic made me realise that because I am Asian, and because of how I look like or where I was born, I could never become one of them."



Image copyright Tracy Wen Liu

Image caption Tracy (centre) went to graduate school at the University of Southern California in 2015

After her friend's supermarket altercation, she decided to get her first gun.

"I hope the world never comes to a day when we have to use that," she says, adding: "That would be a very, very bad situation, something I don't even want to imagine."

Authorities in New York City and Los Angeles say that hate incidents against people of Asian descent have increased, while a reporting centre run by advocacy groups and San Francisco State University says it received over 1,700 reports of coronavirus-related discrimination from at least 45 US states since it launched in March.

Police in at least 13 states, including Texas, Washington, New Jersey, Minnesota and New Mexico, have also responded to reported hate incidents.

Critics say those at the very top have made things worse - both President Donald Trump, and Democratic hopeful Joe Biden have been accused of fuelling anti-Asian sentiment to varying degrees with language they've used while talking about China's role in the outbreak.

And for many Asian Americans, it can feel as though, in addition to being targeted, their identity as Americans is being attacked.

How serious is anti-Asian prejudice in the US?

Large numbers of Asian Americans, and Asians in the US - have described a sharp change in their experiences following the outbreak.



Image copyright Ted Nghiem

Image caption Ted Nghiem, who is Vietnamese American, was spat at

Kimberly Ha, 38, says she noticed the difference in February, after a stranger began shouting at her as she walked her dog in New York.

"He yelled: 'I'm not scared of radioactive Chinese people' and started pointing at me, shouting 'you people shouldn't be here, get out of this country, I'm not scared of this virus that you people brought over,'" the Chinese Canadian, who has lived in New York for over 15 years, said.

In the weeks that followed, she also noticed that "about one in 10" people she encountered in public appeared angry when they saw her. "I've never felt that level of hostility before," she says.

On the opposite side of the US in California, Madison Pfrimmer, 23, had heard about anti-Asian attacks, but "didn't think it was as prevalent as everyone made it seem".

Then, in April, she helped translate for an elderly Chinese couple in a supermarket in Los Angeles when they were confronted by an angry woman who swore at them at length, threw water at them and sprayed them.

"She yelled 'how dare you come to this store where my family shops, how dare you come and ruin my country. You are why my family is not able to make money,'" Ms Pfrimmer, who is half-Chinese, recalls.



Image copyright Madison Pfrimmer

Image caption Madison Pfrimmer reported the incident to the police

Ms Pfrimmer says she tried to reason with the woman, who berated her for translating for the couple and hurled water from a bottle at her, soaking her legs and feet.

The woman walked by them again when they were waiting for the cashier, spraying them with something that appeared to be air freshener or disinfectant - and then followed the elderly couple to their car, where she took photos of them while shouting "it's your fault", and directing expletives at "China", "all those dirty people" and "communism".

"I ran to the couple, told them in Mandarin to just get in their car, and loaded their groceries for them - I handed the man the eggs through his window," says Ms Pfrimmer. The woman followed her in her car - until Ms Pfrimmer purposefully drove near a police station.

Asian rights groups and San Francisco State University teamed up to start the STOP AAPI HATE database, which records reports of Covid-19 discrimination directed at Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the US. They received examples from 45 states, with California and New York making up the bulk of cases.

The incidents recorded fall on a broad spectrum. Verbal harassment is by far the most common, but shunning, physical assault, workplace discrimination, being barred from establishments, and vandalism also feature in the database - with women more likely to be targeted than men.



Image copyright Larissa Lim

Image caption A poster for the Disney film Mulan was vandalised

Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University who has been running the database, says he found so many incidents of people "being coughed or spat upon" that he added it as an additional category.

That's what happened to Ted Nghiem, a Vietnamese American in Philadelphia. He says in March, a man swore at him, yelling "get out of here, you caused coronavirus" - but it didn't particularly bother him.

However, later that month a man spat at him as he walked past, which got him "really down for a day or two".

"I did inform the cops but I don't know if anything happened... luckily I didn't catch anything," says Mr Nghiem, 37.

The STOP AAPI HATE database is based on online self-reporting. A separate BBC analysis of interviews and US media reports found coverage of more than 100 alleged incidents since January that appeared to target Asians.

About 70% of those incidents had a clear link to the pandemic, and about 40% of cases were reported to police.

BBC data on reported anti-Asian incidents in the US

Some incidents reached the bar of hate crimes. New York City police say they have investigated 14 hate crimes related to Covid-19, involving 15 Asian victims. There have been at least nine physical attacks in the state.

In California, an elderly man was attacked with an iron bar, and a teenager was taken to hospital after being physically assaulted.

In Texas, an Asian family, including a two-year-old and six-year-old, were stabbed in a supermarket. An FBI report obtained by ABC news said that "the suspect indicated that he stabbed the family because he thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with the coronavirus". The family was Southeast Asian.

Statistics on Anti-Asian incidents in the US:

- One third of people surveyed said they had witnessed someone blaming Asian people for the pandemic
- 1,710 incidents reported to STOP AAPI HATE - 15% of those cases involved physical assault or being coughed on or spat at
- More than 100 individual incidents reported in the media
- 133 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination recorded by the New York City Commission on Human Rights - compared to 11 in the same period last year. The commission has intervened in 91 cases.
- 14 Asian-bias hate crimes investigated by police in New York
- More than 100 alleged hate incidents reported to civic groups and police departments in Los Angeles
- Six reports of bias incidents reported to police in Seattle
- There has been a surge in anti-Asian hate on extremist web communities

Sources: Ipsos, STOP AAPI HATE, New York City Commission on Human Rights, New York City Police, Los Angeles County Commission on Human Rights, Seattle Police, Network Contagion Research Institute, BBC research

Some Asians have also reported being refused service from hotel rooms, or Uber rides, as a result of their ethnicity.

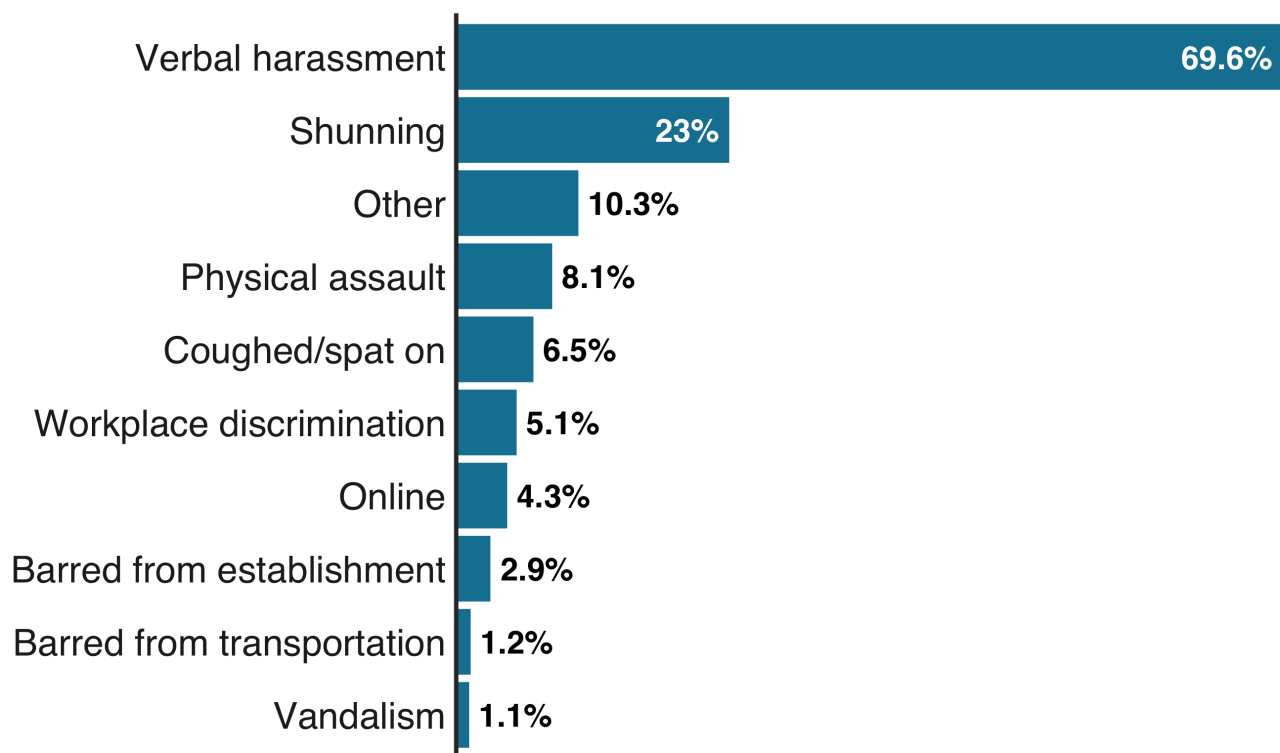
Matt (not his real name), a Chinese American emergency room doctor in Connecticut, noticed that several patients asked to be admitted to hospital because they said an Asian person had coughed near them.

He experienced what appeared to be anti-Asian bias more personally, when he tried to treat a patient thought to have Covid-19.

"I had my protective equipment on, walked in and introduced myself. Once they heard my surname, they were like 'don't touch me, can I see someone else - can you just not come close to me'."

Verbal harassment the most common form of discrimination

Percentage of 1,710 reported coronavirus-related incidents



Source: Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center (19 Mar-29 Apr)



Many other minorities face more "overt types of discrimination which are worse", Matt says - but he fears that incidents such as what he experienced would be demoralising for medical workers.

"This is a pretty stressful time - we're working a lot more, wearing very uncomfortable equipment all the time, and a lot of us are getting exposed to Covid-19."

'If he looks Chinese, he gets attacked'

The virus originated from Wuhan, China, and much of President Trump's rhetoric has focused on what he calls the country's failings to contain the outbreak.

Earlier this year, he regularly referred to the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus" - a term that critics said did not distinguish between China, the Chinese government, and people of Chinese ethnicity.

He later called for Asian Americans to be protected, saying "the spreading of the virus is not their fault in any way shape or form".

But that hasn't stopped Chinese Americans from being blamed - or other East Asians from being targeted.



Image copyright Getty Images

Image caption Members of the Asian American Commission gather in Massachusetts to condemn racism

Prof Jeung says about 40% of the reports he received were from ethnic Chinese people - but a majority of cases were from people of other East Asian ethnicities.

"That's an example of racial profiling - that 'if he looks Chinese, he gets attacked'."

Back in February - before cloth masks were recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Dahyung Oh, 23, remembers a woman staring at her in a hostile manner on a New York subway platform.

"She started approaching me, pointing at me and saying 'Why aren't you wearing a mask, you should be wearing a mask'," the university student, from South Korea, says.

The woman did not wear a mask herself, and Ms Oh felt "singled out, because there were literally 10-20 people around us who weren't wearing masks".

"I felt really angry at the situation, as if I was singled out because I'm Asian, and a small sized woman that could be easier for someone to target."



Image copyright Dahyung Oh

Image caption Dahyung Oh says her case was relatively minor - but she has still started avoiding some parts of New York

That incident didn't end in violence - but Ms Oh was lucky. In two separate incidents in New York in March, Asian women were physically attacked for not wearing masks. Many others have been harassed while wearing masks.

Prof Jeung says face masks can be a lose-lose situation for Asians when it comes to discrimination, because "if they wear a mask, they are suspected of being infected - and if they don't wear a mask, they're suspected of being infected but negligent".

It's not just in the US either - there have been several high profile cases of physical attacks against East Asians in the UK and in Canada. Vancouver's police department has said that 20 anti-Asian hate crimes have been reported in 2020 so far.

Meanwhile, in China, there has been discrimination of African residents - with reports of people being forced into quarantine, and a McDonald's barring African people from entering.

Many say they have been singled out for multiple Covid-19 tests, or been evicted, following online rumours that two Nigerians who had tested positive for the virus escaped.

"I think it is very consistent with past times of crisis, where typically one group is scapegoated," says Carmelyn P. Malalis, head of the New York City Commission on Human Rights. She cites the HIV/Aids crisis and Ebola as past examples.

In the US, there has been "underlying anti-Asian discrimination" even before the pandemic, but little awareness of it, because there are typically lower levels of reporting, and "people often think of racism as a black-white thing, not realising that racism exists in many forms," she adds.

Why are Asian Americans still seen as outsiders?

Asians in the US come from a wide range of ethnicities, countries and backgrounds, and often have different political beliefs and identities.

Some 20 million US residents - or about 6% of the US population - are Asian, according to census data. The figure includes Asian Americans, as well as people from South and East Asia living, studying or working in the US.



Image copyright Kimberly Ha

Image caption Chinese Canadian Kimberly Ha (centre) was told to get out of the US

Some Asian residents, such as Bhutanese Americans, are more likely to be immigrants born abroad, while others, such as Japanese Americans, are most likely to come from families that have been in the US for generations.

About three million tourists from China alone visit the US each year.

But race-based prejudice against Asians in the US is indiscriminate, whether one identifies as Asian American, hopes to become American, or is simply visiting.

Asian Americans have described some common experiences - including that they've been seen as "perpetual foreigners" even before the pandemic.

"Race, like many social categories, [is a] thing that says you're part of this category [that is] plainly visible for everybody to see," says Debbie Ma, a psychology professor at California State University, Northridge.

"Because of that," she adds, "it's very easy to quickly label and assign stereotypes and associations with those categories" - that an East Asian person is foreign, even if they are not, for example.



Image copyright Getty Images

Image caption Who's more American - Kate Winslet or Lucy Liu?

A 2008 study she co-authored found that respondents - US university participants of various racial backgrounds and ages - were more likely to implicitly think of Kate Winslet, the English actress, as "American", than Lucy Liu, the New York-born star of Chinese heritage.

Matt says he is regularly told "you speak great English", and asked where he is actually from, even when he explains he was born in the US.

Meanwhile, Prof Jeung says: "Even though my family's been in the US for five generations, I'm still seen as a foreigner."

Dr Ma notes that these are "specific burdens" that Asian people in America experience differently from other minorities. For example, "nobody is surprised when a black American speaks English really well," though African Americans face other sets of prejudices, she says.

This has made a person's Asian appearance - something "we wear so apparently", as Dr Ma puts it - a reason to target them amid the outbreak.



Image copyright Douglas Kim

Image caption Racist graffiti reading "stop eating dogs" was found at Jeju, a Michelin-starred Korean restaurant in New York, in April

Nor is it the first time race has been used as cover to marginalise or act against East Asians in the US.

Asian Americans were interned en masse in the US following attacks on Pearl Harbour in World War Two, and sweeping caricatures of East Asians were used as racist propaganda to exclude immigration from China and other eastern countries in the 19th Century.

Today, some Asian Americans still describe feeling "on probation", and needing to prove their status as US citizens - a situation that has significantly worsened amid the outbreak.

Andrew Yang, a former Democratic candidate for president, wrote in April in the Washington Post: "Some level of background disdain or alienation has grown into outright hostility and even aggression."

He called on Asian Americans to "show our American-ness in ways we never have before" by helping neighbours and wearing "red white and blue". However, he was also accused of victim-blaming for appearing to internalise the notion that Asian people, by virtue of their ethnicity, are not American enough.



Image copyright Getty Images

Image caption Andrew Yang became one of the most high-profile Asian Americans when he ran to be the Democratic nominee

Both the Trump and Biden campaigns have also come in for criticism. An advert for the Trump campaign described Mr Biden as soft on China, and showed a montage of video clips of him with Chinese officials.

The montage included a shot of Gary Locke - the Chinese American former Washington governor who served as the US ambassador to China - leading to accusations that the ad was implying Mr Locke was a foreign official.

The Biden campaign came under fire after an attack ad emphasised that "Trump let in 40,000 travellers from China into America" after announcing a travel ban - even though many of those would have been American citizens.

Both campaigns have denied any xenophobia or targeting Chinese Americans.



Media playback is unsupported on your device
Media caption Trump gets in spat with Asian American reporter over "nasty question"

How are Asian people in the US responding to attacks?

For some, the rise in anti-Asian sentiment has felt clear and dangerous.

There is no comprehensive data on race and gun purchases in the US, but reports from gun shop owners suggest that many have seen more Asian buyers amid a general rise in sales.

Chinese American Donghui Zang, 49, has started organising neighbourhood patrols in Queens, New York, where the group's more-than-200 members take turns driving around and reporting suspicious activities to the police. A dozen of members in the patrol group, including Mr Zang, have recently applied for firearms permits.

Mr Zang, who describes himself as socially conservative, believes Chinese Americans should arm themselves "in case of social turmoil and skyrocketing crime".

The view is not shared by everyone.

Max Leung, a co-founder of the San Francisco Peace Collective, says his group conducts patrols in Chinatown to help stop cases of vandalism and theft.



Image copyright San Francisco Peace Collective

Image caption The San Francisco Peace Collective also tries to help vulnerable individuals who may have concerns about their safety

"Although I do believe and am a huge advocate of self-defence, we do not promote our members bearing arms while on patrol," Mr Leung, 49, says. "The culture I want to create within our group is that of promoting peace, not perpetuating violence."

Artists and comedians have also been inspired to speak out - including hip hop artist Jason Chu, who started the campaign Hate is a Virus, and wrote a rap about anti-Asian incidents.

He says the rap aimed to show "the ridiculousness of people targeting Asian Americans", and also "emphasise the fact that Asian Americans belong here".

"We're not guests in America - we were born here - this is where our parents raised us. We're saying that hate has no place in our country."



Image copyright San Francisco Peace Collective

Image caption The San Francisco Peace Collective patrols the neighbourhood

More generally, there are hopes that this new awareness of discrimination will lead to stronger Asian communities in the US - and more solidarity with other ethnic minorities.

Matt recalls hearing negative comments about the African American community as he grew up - including from Asian Americans.

By contrast, "now I see a lot of Asian Americans standing up for Ahmaud Arbery", the black jogger shot dead in a Georgia suburb by two white men now charged with murder.

Matt believes that Asian American communities have become more vocal in recent years about politics and representation.



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Media captionThe film Crazy Rich Asians was seen as an important moment for Asian American representation

"A lot of my friends have seen this anti-Chinese rhetoric going on, and become more interested in talking about the discrimination that other communities face" as a result.

Prof Jeung says he has seen examples of Asian Americans "recognising their common interests, and mobilising as a political group and community".

Asians from different walks of life now "find themselves having a common experience" due to discrimination related to the pandemic.

"We're all facing this process, of racial profiling, together. So hopefully, we'll come together to fight the racism, and develop empathy with other people who are racially profiled."

Additional reporting by the BBC's Xinyan Yu

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