



# Anti-Asian Hate Crimes in the Covid-19 Era

*January Report*



# Table of Contents

- 1. Aim of the Report**
- 2. Introduction**
- 3. Spike of Anti-Asian Hate Crimes**
  - 3.1 Case 1
  - 3.2 Case 2
  - 3.3 Case 3
- 4. The Issue From Multiple Perspectives**
  - 4.1 Create fear
  - 4.2 Name the virus
  - 4.3 Forever foreigners
- 5. Governments' Regulations**
- 6. Conclusion and Suggestions**
- 7. Sources**

## Aim of the Report



Protesters at a rally in Los Angeles against Anti-Asian hate crimes on February 20, 2021.  
Source: Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times.

In early 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 crisis as a pandemic of international extent due to the rising concern over the severity of the novel coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the overwhelming public health concerns around the world, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries have reported a rise in hate crimes against people of Asian descent.<sup>2</sup> In most cases of Anti-Asian hate crimes, there has been a strong link to the pandemic. As the virus is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China, many Asian immigrants, and ethnically Asian people have become the targets of racist attacks.

In order to understand and tackle this problem, it is important to identify possible implications of such attacks, as well as the causes. Therefore, this report aims to look at the issue in depth by analyzing it through case studies. Moreover, in the following sections, there will be an overview of political and societal tendencies, and views towards the issue. To overcome the situation, it is necessary to encompass the question in detail; the present report serves precisely this purpose. At the end of the report, there will be suggestions and recommendations provided.

1. World Health Organization (27 May 2021).  
2. Venkatraman (25 October 2021).

## Introduction

Thousands of Anti-Asian incidents are still happening around the world despite recent movements and legislation aimed at dealing with such events. Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, roughly ten thousand anti-Asian incidents have been reported, according to a report released by the non-profit coalition Stop AAPI Hate.<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 has been seen to facilitate the spread of racism, creating false concerns around national security, fear of foreigners, and general xenophobia

Indeed, racism and physical attacks on Asians and people of Asian descent have spread with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, they have been targeted with derogatory language in media reports and statements by politicians, as well as social media platforms. At the same time, hate speech related to COVID-19 also appears to have spread extensively. Moreover, in some cases, government leaders and senior officials directly or indirectly promote hate crimes, racism or xenophobia using anti-Chinese rhetoric. Several political parties and groups, including those in the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, France, and Germany have taken advantage of the Covid-19 crisis in order to continue anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultranationalist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories that demonize refugees and foreigners.<sup>4</sup>

3. Powel (12 August 2021).

4. Human Rights Watch (12 May 2020).

## Spike in anti-Asian hate crimes



Michelle's LinkedIn account profile picture.  
Source: NBCNews/LinkedIn.

In the past two years, many news articles have been published about the sharp increase in Anti-Asian hate crimes in many countries.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning of the pandemic up to December 2021, hate crimes against Asians rose by 361 percent.<sup>6</sup> Some of them have become widely known due to their severity, where people died as the result of a brutal attack. Such cases brought light to the issue and a few of them will be discussed in this section.

### Michelle Go Case

A tragic incident took place in the New York City subway, in January 2022. An Asian-American woman was pushed from a subway station platform on 42nd

Street on Times Square directly before an incoming train. The case is believed to be an Anti-Asian hate crime, although the attacker was charged only with homicide. The woman passed away instantly.<sup>7</sup>

Michelle Go was 40 years old and worked at a consultancy firm in New York City. She worked as a volunteer for a local women's organization. Her tragic death is a shock not just for her family, but also for the Asian-American community, and spiked general fear among its members. Women of Asian descent, in particular, experience fear and are vulnerable to harassment on a daily basis. Michelle's horrific death symbolizes another alarming case to Asian women but unfortunately, it is one among many.<sup>8</sup>

The man who pushed Ms. Go from the platform is homeless: Simon Martial, 61. He initially fled after the incident, but later turned himself in to the police. No personal connections between the attacker and the victim have been found, and according to the official statement, it was an "unprovoked" crime.<sup>9</sup>

5. Fadel (22 October 2021).

6. Yam (10 December 2021).

7. Acevedo and The Associated Press (15 January 2022).

8. Yam (19 January 2022).

9. Supra note 7.



A group of people holding a photo of Yaopan Ma, who was brutally beaten in an Anti-Asian hate attack.  
Source: Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images.

## Yaopan Ma Case

Another horrific case took place last year. In April 2021, a Chinese immigrant, Yaopan Ma, 61, was attacked in Harlem, New York City, while collecting returnable cans and bottles. He was brutally beaten by Jarod Powell, 49, who stomped on Ma's head several times. After the attack, Ma was hospitalized, and since then has been fighting for his life in intensive care. He was transferred to numerous health care facilities for eight months and eventually succumbed to his wounds on 31 December 2021. Powell has now been charged with homicide and the police have continued the investigation.<sup>10</sup> Yaopan Ma, together with his wife, immigrated from China to the United States in 2018. Before that, he worked as a chef. When they arrived in the US, Ma was employed in the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. Due to the lockdown provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the restaurant closed and Ma lost his job. Experiencing financial hardships, Ma and his wife turned to collecting recyclable bottles to earn money for food.<sup>11</sup>

According to Powell, Ma robbed him a day prior to the attack. However, Karlin Chan, the spokesperson of Ma's family and a community activist, says that the two men had never met before. Chan and the police believe the case to have been an Anti-Asian hate crime, instances of which, as aforementioned, have increased with the current pandemic. Chan now advocates for a life sentence for Powell.<sup>12</sup>

10. Associated Press (8 January 2022).

11. Haigh (9 January 2022).

12. Ibid.



Jonathan Mok's self-portraits show his injuries after the attack.  
Source: BBC/Jonathan Mok's Facebook.

### Jonathan Mok Case

It is imperative to note that Anti-Asian hate crimes are experienced by people of different genders and age groups. The young man who suffered the following attack may be considered more lucky compared to the victims in the previous two cases, and fortunately made it out alive. Moreover, the situation as described by him, serves as a warning sign and shines the light on the seriousness of the issue. Shortly after the rise of Covid-19 cases around the world, Jonathan Mok, 23, a student from Singapore, was attacked on 24 February 2020 on Oxford street, in London. A group of teenagers severely beat the young man, causing a fracture in his nose and a complicated injury to his cheekbone. Although denying the attack was a hate crime and the result of racist objectives at first, a 16 year old teenager (who remains anonymous) involved in the attack and later caught by the police, was accused of racism and committing a hate crime based on pledges made by witnesses to the crime.

According to those who were passing nearby during the time of the attack, the teenager had shouted phrases such as "You are diseased, don't come near me" and "was quick to get involved in the group attack".<sup>13</sup>

According to the decision made by the Highbury Corner Youth Court, the teenager was given a 18-month youth rehabilitation order, an electronic tag with a curfew between 8pm and 7am, as well as an order to pay compensation amounting to 600 pounds to Mr. Mok. As the attorney of the case brought to light, if the attacker had been an adult and not a teenager, the legal consequences for his actions would have been very different.<sup>14</sup>

13. BBC (27 January 2021). Coronavirus: Boy sentenced for racist street attack. Available online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-54048546>.

14. Ibid.

## The issue from multiple perspectives

### Creation of fear

With the sharp rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes since the beginning of the pandemic, some people have shown their growing concerns through protests and political discourse on the current situation.<sup>15</sup> Most of the grievances are expressed with regards to the increasing fear among the Asian community, who now fear a rise of similar tragic attacks and aggressive treatment. As cases of hate crimes are mostly based on appearances, Asian men and women around the world now feel more vulnerable, which, in turn, affects their daily lives and mental state.<sup>16</sup>

### Name of the virus

One of the most alarming incidents that has occurred during the pandemic is the naming of the virus. Despite frequent internet attacks made by aggressive netizens, one of the most aggravating comments was made by none other than the former US President, Donald Trump.

On multiple occasions, Trump publicly declared Covid-19 as the “China virus”, supposedly referring to the origin of the virus.<sup>17</sup> Despite the negative reaction of the public to such comments, there were further accusations made by Trump to journalists of Asian descent, on multiple occasions, during press conferences.<sup>18</sup> Such wording, in turn, further creates negative sentiment towards the Asian community on a global scale.<sup>19</sup>

### Forever foreigners

The ongoing pandemic has helped disseminate anti-Asian xenophobia by fueling public hysteria and racist attacks based on the premise that Asians and people of Asian descent will “always remain foreigners”. The rise of hate crimes and discrimination against people of Asian descent is exactly what will lead Asians to feel like outsiders. For most of them, “being Asian-American means living in a country that treats you as a perpetual foreigner”.<sup>21</sup>

15. Pedersen (2021).

16. Wu, Qian, Wilkes (2020), pp. 822-823.

17. Gover, Harper, Langton (2020), pp. 653-655.

18. Gabbatt & Smith (12 May 2020).

19. Chen, Trinh, Yang (2020), pp. 556-557.

20. Cheifetz (20 March 2021).

## Government regulations

Too many Asian Americans have been walking up and down the streets and worrying, waking up each morning the past year feeling their safety and the safety of their loved ones were at stake. They have been attacked, blamed, scapegoated, and harassed. They've been verbally and physically assaulted, killed... The conversation we had today with the AAPI leaders, and that we are hearing all across the country, is that hate and violence often hide in plain sight. And it is often met with silence. That has been true throughout our history, but that has to change — because our silence is complicity. We cannot be complicit. We have to speak out. We have to act, President Joe Biden, March 19, 2021.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the support from the chambers of Congress, the president of the United States, Joe Biden, signed legislation that aimed to address hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislation explicitly addressed the increase in violence against Asian Americans. During an event in the White House, Biden said that he is standing against hatred and racism, which he named “the ugly poison that has long haunted and plagued our nation.”<sup>22</sup>

The legislation is introduced by Rep. Grace Meng, D-N.Y., and Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, who aim to make reports of hate crimes more accessible at the local and state level by enhancing public outreach and ensuring available reporting resources online in multiple languages. Moreover, it also instructs the Ministry of Justice to designate a person to expedite the review of hate crimes related to COVID-19 and authorises grants to State and local authorities to conduct crime reduction programs, to prevent and respond to hate crimes.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the President announced additional actions to combat Anti-Asian violence by re-establishing and extending the original mandate of the coordination initiative among federal agencies to combat anti-Asian bias and violence, especially against Asian violence that intersects with gender-based violence. The initiative will have a prolonged directive to promote inclusion, affiliation, and opportunities for all communities of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander origin.

21. “FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Additional Actions to Respond to Anti-Asian Violence, Xenophobia and Bias”. The White House. 30 March 2021. Available online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/30/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-additional-actions-to-respond-to-anti-asian-violence-xenophobia-and-bias/>.

22. Spunt (20 May 2021).

23. Ibid.

Additionally, on 21 January, Biden created the COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, through his Executive Order, to ensure an adequate response to the pandemic and its recovery. The Task Force's mandate includes the power to recommend that the President eliminate health and social disparities that have led to disproportionately higher levels of exposure, disease, hospitalisation, and death associated with COVID-19, and prevent similar inequalities in the future. Furthermore, to tackle bias and xenophobia against Asian American communities, the subcommittee will promote health equity for specific Asian American communities, including Pacific Islander and Hawaiian communities, that have made up an excessive number of Covid-19 infections and deaths. The subcommittee will lead policy sprints to advance relevant recommendations for improving cultural competence, language access, and inclusion for Asian Americans, Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders as the United States paves its way out of and recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Supra note 21.

## Conclusion and suggestions

This report demonstrated that the rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes due to the Covid-19 pandemic is not a minor issue. There has been an alarming increase in brutal attacks that are believed to be associated with racism and the start of the pandemic. Some of the attacks described in the present report resulted in death or severe injuries to the victims. Moreover, in these cases, the attacks were all unprovoked.

The sharp rise of unprovoked attacks on people of Asian descent has caused strong fear among many and a feeling of unfair treatment. Thus, it is important to ensure legal mechanisms that will offer adequate redress and support, and moreover give peace of mind, to Asian communities around the world. There are multiple ways to address the issue and create awareness. It can be done through legal mechanisms. Among possible actions that could potentially improve the situation are the following a stricter and more rigid punishment for hate speech; severe punishment for brutal physical attacks; holding everyone, including officials, who used/use negative or hateful terms legally accountable; bringing the issue to public attention on multiple media platforms and by officials; and providing faster reaction to suspicions of attacks.

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