

The long history of anti-Asian hate in America, explained

Anti-Asian racism is nothing new in America. The pandemic, and Trump, just made it worse.

By Li Zhou | li@vox.com | Updated Mar 5, 2021, 5:45pm EST



Portrait of the Tape family in 1884. In the California Supreme Court case *Tape v. Hurley*, the Tape family successfully won the right for their daughter Mamie to attend public school, which was a major civil rights victory for Chinese American immigrants. | Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images

Harassment toward Asian Americans has spiked in the last year: **According to Stop AAPI Hate**, an organization that's been tracking these reports, over 2,800 incidents were documented in 2020. **And more recently**, a wave of violent attacks against elderly people has renewed focus on this issue.

These incidents — which include everything from getting shunned at work to physical assaults — have been wide-ranging.

In February, **a 27-year-old Korean American man** was assaulted in Los Angeles and targeted with racial slurs. Last winter, **a 16-year-old student** in the San Fernando Valley was beaten so badly by his classmates that he had to go to the emergency room. **And this past March**, a restaurant in Yakima, Washington, was vandalized with racist language.

The reports to Stop AAPI Hate describe other forms of harassment, too, such as getting spat on at a restaurant, verbally attacked at the park and denied service at different establishments. “I was in line at the pharmacy when a woman approached me and sprayed Lysol all over me,” one account reads. “She was yelling out, ‘You’re the infection. Go home. We don’t want you here!’”

Among these attacks, there are notable patterns: Women were more likely than men to say they were targeted, several assaults involved children, and harassment was more likely to occur at retail stores and pharmacies since people have been limiting their activities during the pandemic.

“So many of us have experienced it, sometimes for the first time in our lives,” says Manjusha Kulkarni, the executive director of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, a group that helped set up this tracker. “It makes it much harder to go to the grocery store, to take a walk, to be outside our homes.”



Kyle Navarro, a school nurse, says he was unlocking his bicycle when an older white man called him a racial slur and spat at him in San Francisco. The FBI predicts attacks on Asian Americans will increase as coronavirus infections grow. | Jeff Chiu/AP

This rise in anti-Asian harassment has occurred as the US continues to grapple with Covid-19, and it follows months of xenophobic rhetoric by former President Donald Trump, who frequently **used racist names for the virus** and associated it with Asian Americans.

The broader uptick in racism, however, isn't just fueled by the pandemic. Although the uncertainty of the outbreak — coupled with the former president's rhetoric — has amplified it, this prejudice is rooted in longstanding biases toward Asian Americans that have persisted since some of the earliest immigrants came to the US generations ago.

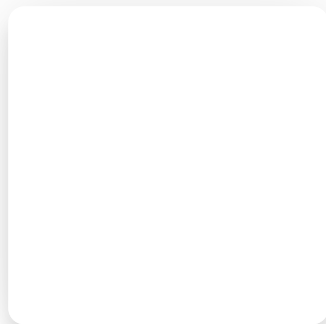
"I think this surge is [driven by] the rhetoric that political leaders have been using ... but I don't think we would have seen the spike in anti-Asian bias without a pretty strong foundation rooted in the 'forever foreigner' stereotype," says University of Maryland Asian American studies professor Janelle Wong.

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The "forever foreigner" idea Wong references is one that's been used to "other" Asian Americans in the US for decades: It suggests that Asians who live in America are fundamentally foreign and can't be fully American. Enduring tropes that have associated Asian Americans with illness and the consumption of "weird" foods, which have reemerged in relation to the coronavirus, are among those that play into this concept.

The revival of these stereotypes and the recent spike in harassment are having a pointed effect: They're forcing a reckoning about the existence of anti-Asian racism in the US.



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The current xenophobia is built on deeply rooted racism toward Asian Americans

Racism toward Asian Americans goes back a long time.

In fact, it was enshrined into law when some of the earliest generations of Asian Americans were immigrating to the United States in the 1800s. The Page Act of 1875 and **the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, two of the country's first immigration laws, were designed explicitly to bar Chinese American laborers from entering the country because of widespread xenophobia and concerns about workplace competition.

These laws — **along with others** that made it impossible for immigrants to reenter the country if they visited China — were among the earliest that tagged Asian American immigrants as foreigners who didn't belong in the US. "Whereas in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof," **read the first lines of the Exclusion Act.**



In addition to limiting immigration, the act guaranteed that Chinese Americans could not become US citizens for decades. “Very early on in the history of this country, Chinese Americans were seen as a group of people we wanted to keep out,” says Yale sociology professor Grace Kao.

And immigration policy wasn’t the only place where such discrimination was apparent. As illnesses, including smallpox and the bubonic plague, spread in the late 1800s, San Francisco’s Chinese residents were repeatedly used as “medical scapegoats,” **according to San Francisco State public health researcher Joan Trauner.**

When the city grappled with a smallpox outbreak in 1875-’76, for example, officials blamed the “foul and disgusting vapors” — and “unwholesome” living conditions of Chinatown — for fueling it, **according to Trauner.** Even after the epidemic continued following the city-ordered fumigation of all the homes in Chinatown, the blame persisted.

“I unhesitatingly declare my belief that the cause is the presence in our midst of 30,000 (as a class) of unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen, who have disregarded our sanitary laws, concealed, and are concealing their cases of smallpox,” city health officer J.L. Meares wrote at the time.

Similarly, when the city encountered cases of the bubonic plague in 1900, one of which was detected in Chinatown, San Francisco attempted to quarantine roughly 14,000 Chinese Americans who lived in that part of the city. At one point, city officials proposed sending Chinese residents to a detention camp where they could be cordoned off from other members of the public, though a circuit court rejected this plan.



Two girls cross the street in front of a vase store in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1899. | Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

In both cases, the vitriol toward Chinese Americans was driven by explicit racism, a fundamental lack of medical knowledge, and pushback toward the influx of Chinese laborers competing with white workers for job opportunities. Policy prescriptions were actively informed by assumptions that Chinatowns were a “laboratory of infection,” Trauner explains.

“A common trope in American popular culture was that the Chinese ate rats and lived in filthy, overcrowded quarters,” says Princeton University history professor Beth Lew-Williams. “In the 19th century, San Francisco routinely banned Chinese from public hospitals.”

The recurring association of Chinese Americans with the ideas of being “dirty” or illness-ridden is inextricably tied up with xenophobia — **and as Nylah Burton writes for Vox**, it’s an association that’s been used to “other” many people of color, including Mexican Americans and African Americans.

The coronavirus exposes the history of racism and “cleanliness”

And now, because the origins of the coronavirus **have likely been traced back to a wet market in Wuhan, China**, where people purchase groceries, this information has renewed racist jokes and statements about the type of food that Asian Americans eat. It's a sentiment that's so common, it was a plot line of the ABC television show *Fresh Off the Boat*, when a young Eddie Huang, the Asian American protagonist of the show, is shunned after consuming his lunch in front of his white classmates because they see the noodles in it as “gross” and “nasty.”

This treatment of Asian foods is simply another plank of the othering of Asian American people: By deeming anything that's different or unfamiliar as exotic or disgusting, the idea that Asian people are fundamentally foreign is further reinforced.

The effects of the “forever foreigner” trope, briefly explained

While the Chinese Exclusion Act was ultimately repealed in the 1940s, the racism it embodied played a central role in shaping how the United States continues to view Asian Americans.

The idea that Asian Americans are “forever foreigners” helped lay the groundwork for **Japanese internment during World War II**, when Japanese American citizens were sent to detention camps solely on the basis of their ethnicity, due to suspicions that they were abetting the Japanese government in some way. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Islamophobia toward Muslim Americans and prejudice toward South Asian Americans was similarly fueled by assumptions that people were not loyal to the United States because of their religion, ethnicity, and external appearance.

have suggested that Asians can combat this prejudice by proving their patriotism and commitment to their community.

It's a misguided argument founded on "respectability politics" that further puts the onus on Asian Americans to demonstrate how American they are — and it's revealing of how much some people still think Asians need to compensate for looking "different."

“VERY EARLY ON IN THE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY, CHINESE AMERICANS WERE SEEN AS A GROUP OF PEOPLE WE WANTED TO KEEP OUT”

Political pushback toward China, including its handling of the virus, has also been conflated with hostility toward Chinese Americans in a way that historic US tensions with Asian nations have been projected onto people of Asian descent in the past.

Last year, former Washington Gov. Gary Locke — who is Chinese American — was featured in a Trump attack ad against President Joe Biden. Because of the way it's framed, the ad appears to imply that Locke, who once served as the US ambassador to China, is a Chinese official and not an American one.

“Asian Americans — whether you're second-, third-, or fourth-generation, will always be viewed as foreigners,” **Locke told the Atlantic**. “We don't say that about second- or third-generation Irish Americans or Polish Americans. No one would even think to include them in a picture when you're talking about foreign government officials.”

Recent incidents are forcing a dialogue about racism

Although racism toward Asian Americans has persisted for generations, it's rarely explicitly confronted or talked about. “Asian discrimination tends to be overlooked and widely tolerated, even among educated classes,” University of Pennsylvania English professor Josephine Park **told Penn Today**.

There are many reasons for this, according to Asian American studies scholars. Relative to other people of color, including Black Americans and Latino Americans, Asian Americans have faced discrimination of a different degree.

Why Asians in masks should not be the “face” of the coronavirus

Additionally, because of the diversity within the Asian American community — which includes more than 30 ethnic groups — there is a breadth of experience that isn’t always all the same. “It’s rare to see all parts of the Asian American community equally affected by an issue,” says UC Riverside political science professor and head of AAPI Data Karthick Ramakrishnan.

The perpetuation of the “model minority” myth, which was introduced by **sociologist William Petersen in a New York Times Magazine piece in 1966**, further complicated the conversation about Asian Americans and racism.

As part of his piece, Petersen pits minority groups against one another and argues that Japanese Americans were able to attain economic success in the face of injustice and discrimination in a way that other groups, which Petersen dubbed “problem minorities,” were not. It’s a fictitious argument that’s been used repeatedly as a “wedge” between minority groups, **Kat Chow reported for NPR**.

By branding Asian Americans as a “model minority,” writers like Petersen **obscured how systemic injustices** have disproportionately hurt Black Americans. The term, too, reduced the visibility of racism against Asian Americans as well.

“The dominant culture’s belief in the ‘model minority’ allows it to justify ignoring the unique discrimination faced by Asian Americans,” writes Robert Chang, **in his book *Disoriented: Asian Americans, Law and the Nation-State***.

Now, a rise in harassment is sparking a new conversation about the type of prejudice that Asian Americans experience. For some, it marks one of the rare times they are confronting this problem in such an explicit way.

“I haven’t been harassed for my race for years and years. It’s been a really long time, so it felt like it came out of nowhere,” **California resident Julie Kang told Vox’s Catherine Kim**.

Experts see these incidents compelling people to talk about discrimination toward Asian Americans more openly. “I think there is a newfound understanding for a lot of folks,” says Kulkarni. “We hope this will spur more dialogue and more action, frankly.”

Some also think it has the potential to improve solidarity between Asian Americans and other people of color, many of whom deal with racist harassment and violence — including from the police — on a regular basis. “I hope that we realize that this kind of process happens to other groups all the time,” says Ramakrishnan.



Members of the congressional Black, Asian, and Hispanic caucuses speak to reporters to discuss the 2020 census and the concern for getting an accurate count in minority communities on March 5. | J. Scott Applewhite/AP

The response from some lawmakers has helped underscore this solidarity: A few weeks ago, a group of House Democrats **representing the Black, Asian, and Hispanic caucuses** unequivocally denounced anti-Asian rhetoric and violence.

“The Asian American community is facing a crisis of hatred that we cannot tolerate,” said Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY). “We will not tolerate anti-Asian bias, we will not tolerate anti-Asian bigotry, we will not tolerate these hate crimes. All of us stand with the Asian American community until we can put this scourge to an end.”

The attacks Asian Americans are facing across the country are bringing the dialogue about longstanding prejudices to the fore. And as Americans are having more frank conversations about race and institutional biases, they aren’t as easy to ignore as they have been in the past.

“Addressing ... these kinds of dominant stereotypes that are really pervasive, that are so easily activated, requires public education and the broader public committing to understand race in America,” says Wong. “There’s a way that it could be a really potent reminder that Asian Americans are racialized in the US and that we can’t go it alone.”

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