



## **The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Expresses Concern Over Growing Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak**

**March 20, 2020**

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, by majority vote, expresses grave concern over recent demonstrations of violence and hate toward people of Asian descent provoked by misplaced fear over the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the nation's civil rights watchdog, the Commission has long recognized that xenophobia wears many faces. In recent weeks, we have seen those faces surface in the form of ignorance and misinformed assumptions, hateful remarks, and violent acts. In one case, a man riding a New York subway train sprayed a fellow passenger, an Asian American man, with air freshener while yelling at him to move away.<sup>1</sup> In Washington, D.C., a woman was accosted by a fellow passenger on a Metro train, who told her "Get out of here. Go back to China. I don't want none of your swine flu here." A man riding a public bus in Boston, upon seeing a woman sneeze into her sleeve, began making comments about "diseased Chinese people."<sup>2</sup>

The list of similar incidents across the country grows longer by the day. A food sample vendor at a Seattle Costco told a Korean woman to "get away" from the samples, questioning whether she had come from China. A thirteen-year-old girl from Connecticut said that classmates at her middle school had begun calling Asian American students "corona," while a nine-year-old boy in New Jersey was told by a classmate "you're Chinese, so you must have the coronavirus."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Coronavirus Fear? Suspected hate crime targeting Asian man caught on camera," *ABC 7 NY*, Mar. 6, 2020, <https://abc7ny.com/coronavirus-fear-video-shows-suspected-hate-crime-on-subway/5989856>.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Escobar, "When Xenophobia Spreads Like a Virus," *NPR*, Mar. 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811363404/when-xenophobia-spreads-like-a-virus>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* We note with approval that the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights has issued a bulletin to school communities about the need to guard against "stereotyping, harassment, and bullying directed at persons perceived to be of Chinese American or, more generally, Asian descent, including students." Letter from Kenneth L. Marcus, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, to Education Leaders, dated Mar. 4, 2020, available at <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USED/bulletins/27f5130>.

While racially-charged slurs and hateful comments are deeply troubling and unacceptable under any circumstances, the Commission is particularly alarmed by the increasingly frequent reports of physical violence resulting from prejudice against Asian Americans. An Asian man in New York was kicked in the back earlier this week, before the attacker spat in his face, angrily retorted “F-king Chinese coronavirus,” and told the man to go back to his country. The same day, another attacker in Midtown New York punched an Asian-American woman in the face while yelling “where is your corona mask, you Asian b—h.”<sup>4</sup>

These incidents dangerously undermine the fundamental equality principles espoused within the United States’ Constitution and its laws. This latest wave of xenophobic animosity toward Asian Americans should not be normalized or encouraged by public officials characterizing COVID-19 as the “Chinese coronavirus” or “Chinese virus.”<sup>5</sup> These characterizations contribute to unnecessary stigmatization associated with what all now recognize to be a global pandemic that threatens human beings on every continent. Therefore it is misleading and harmful to characterize COVID-19 as a “Chinese” or Asian disease.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the racist remarks and violence, this wave of anti-Asian bias has had economic repercussions. In a hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on March 12, prior to the governmental closing of dining in at restaurants in certain jurisdictions, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) emphasized that “this painful rhetoric has consequences,” further noting that “restaurants across Boston’s Chinatown have seen up to an 80% drop in business, and I believe this has everything to do with the rapid spread of misinformation and paranoia.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Chinatowns across America experienced rapid drops of business

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<sup>4</sup> Tina Moore, “Asian man is victim in latest coronavirus-fueled hate crime,” *New York Post*, Mar. 11, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/03/11/asian-man-is-victim-in-latest-coronavirus-fueled-hate-crime/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kimmy Yam, “Trump tweets about coronavirus using term ‘Chinese Virus,’” *NBC News*, Mar. 16, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-tweets-about-coronavirus-using-term-chinese-virus-n1161161>; Laura McGann, “Trump’s coronavirus speech was laced with xenophobia,” *Vox*, Mar. 11, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/11/21175987/trump-travel-ban-europe-coronavirus-speech>; Carla Marinucci, “Pelosi joins Asian American lawmakers in demanding McCarthy apology for ‘bigoted’ tweet,” *Politico*, Mar. 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/states/california/story/2020/03/10/pelosi-joins-asian-american-lawmakers-in-demanding-mccarthy-apology-for-bigoted-tweet-1266349>.

<sup>6</sup> Austa Somvichian-Clausen, “Why outbreaks like coronavirus drive xenophobia and racism –and what we can do about it,” *The Hill*, Mar. 5, 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/486092-why-outbreaks-like-coronavirus-drive-xenophobia>; “UN human rights chief: racism and xenophobia are ‘contagious killers’ too,” *UN News*, Mar. 11, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059361>.

<sup>7</sup> Hearing before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Coronavirus Preparedness and Response, Day 2, Mar. 12, 2020, <https://youtu.be/qoqnStj3hE4> (questioning by Rep. Ayanna Pressley beginning at 1:10:02).

well prior to the recent shelter-at-home declarations, or even the first report of a COVID-19 infection in their communities.<sup>8</sup>

Anti-Asian violence has a bitter legacy in the recent history of our country. In 1982 a Chinese American, Vincent Chin, was beaten to death by two white autoworkers in Michigan who blamed their economic difficulty on the importation of Japanese-made cars. On September 15, 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American, was killed in the gas station he owned in Mesa, Arizona by a man who believed he was an Arab Muslim. In these and other cases, there is no distinction as to whether someone has heritage from Japan, China, or any of the many countries and ethnicities of Asia. To someone of bad intentions, inspired by anti-Asian rhetoric, there is no difference.

In our recent report on hate crimes, the Commission discussed research findings that hate crimes “are fueled by racial anxieties or social changes that are perceived as threatening,” like the attacks on September 11, 2001.<sup>9</sup> In the current circumstances, people are frightened for their health, and the health of their families, and their economic security but that makes it all the more imperative that no American is ostracized solely because of their race or national origin.

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*The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: in our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For information, visit [www.usccr.gov](http://www.usccr.gov) and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).*

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<sup>8</sup> Julie Chang, “San Francisco Chinatown Affected By Coronavirus Fears, Despite No Confirmed Cases,” NPR, Feb. 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/26/809741251/san-francisco-chinatown-affected-by-coronavirus-fears-despite-no-confirmed-cases>; Lauren Aratani, “‘People are scared’: New York City’s Chinatown takes hit over coronavirus fears,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/21/nyc-chinatown-coronavirus-fears-business>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *In the Name of Hate: Examining the Federal Government’s Role in Responding to Hate Crimes*, Nov. 2019, <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2019/11-13-In-the-Name-of-Hate.pdf> at 63.