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The Impact of COVID-19 on AAPI Businesses: An Attack on All Fronts

By Rebecca Tran

As Chiling Tong, the President of the National AAPI Chamber of Commerce, states, “There are two illnesses attacking AAPI small business: One is COVID. The other is hate.”¹ Hate crime, which is characterized by the hostility toward the group to which the victim belongs,² has become an imminent and ever-present cause of fear in the AAPI community. Within months of the first COVID-19 case, anti-Asian hate crimes rose by 150%, shutting down numerous AAPI businesses. Coupled with Trump presidency’s labeling of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and “Kung Flu,”³ anti-Asian sentiment became increasingly legitimized. By April 2020, three in ten Americans blamed Chinese people for the pandemic.⁴

Although discriminatory rhetoric surrounding COVID-19 was explicitly anti-Chinese, all AAPI businessowners reported a statistically similar number of anti-AAPI incidents, indicating that this hostility was broadly racialized and indiscriminately affected all AAPI businesses, regardless of ethnicity.⁵ Despite encompassing a wide diversity of ethnicities, “Asian Americans” have historically been monolithically categorized. In times of economic prosperity, AAPI people are portrayed as the “model minority,” a group of high achieving and rule-following individuals. In times of instability, Asian people have been “othered” and scapegoated, as evidenced by the imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. The deceptively positive connotation of the Asian stereotype has permitted the downplaying of AAPI

¹ Tracy Jan, “Asian American Businesses Are Defending Themselves against Rise in Anti-Asian Violence,” The Washington Post (WP Company, March 26, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/03/25/asian-owned-businesses-hate-crimes/>.

² Jeannine Bell, “Deciding When Hate Is a Crime: The First Amendment, Police Detectives, and the Identification of Hate Crime,” *Rutgers Race and the Law Review* 4 (2002): pp. 33-76.

³ Li Zhou, “Asian American Communities Grapple with Whether Police Are the Right Answer to Recent Attacks,” *Vox* (Vox, March 15, 2021), <https://www.vox.com/22308407/attacks-asian-americans-police>.

⁴ “New Center for Public Integrity/Ipsos Poll finds most Americans say the Coronavirus Pandemic is a Natural Disaster,” April 28, 2020. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/center-for-public-integrity-poll-2020>

⁵ Paul Ong, Alycia Cheng, and Jonathan Ong, “Asian American Businesses: The Impacts of Anti-Asian Racism, 2021,” eScholarship, University of California, March 28, 2022, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1x62v28m>.

challenges.⁶ It wasn't until after the COVID-19 pandemic that anti-AAPI discrimination gained significant media and policy attention.⁷

What Does This Mean for AAPI Businesses?

Over a third of reported anti-AAPI discrimination occur at businesses. Not only do storeowners combat the health and financial effects of the pandemic, but they are also burdened with protecting employees and customers from hate crime and harassment.⁸ AAPI businesses take precautionary strategies to appear "less Asian" by removing cultural decorations and signage. As Sacramento AAPI businessowner Kelly Shum laments, "You have to minimize yourself in hopes that nobody notices you and attacks you. It's...a miserable half-existence."⁹

Chinatowns, which were once bustling centers of tourism and business, are now unrecognizable as ghost towns. Many customers feel unsafe, with heads turned on a swivel for fear of becoming the next hate crime target. With an 80% drop in foot traffic and 150% increase in hate crime rates, San Francisco Chinatown businessowners lock their doors before sundown and are fortunate to make \$100 on a good day.¹⁰

Sentiment Toward Police Intervention

The immediate reactionary response to the surge in hate crimes included the considerable increase in police presence in Chinatowns.¹¹ When I visited Oakland Chinatown in May 2022, I spotted police vehicles patrolling every block and officers roaming one in every five stores.

⁶ Russell Jeung, Manjusha P Kulkarni, and Cynthia Choi, "Op-Ed: Trump's Racist Comments Are Fueling Hate Crimes against Asian Americans. Time for State Leaders to Step In," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, April 1, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-04-01/coronavirus-anti-asian-discrimination-threats>.

⁷ Angela R. Gover, Shannon B. Harper, and Lynn Langton, "Anti-Asian Hate Crime during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Reproduction of Inequality," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 45, no. 4 (July 2020): pp. 647-667, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>.

⁸ Vignesh Ramachandran, "Asian-Owned Businesses Say They're Reeling from Hate and Violence, Operating in Fear," PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, April 19, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/asian-owned-businesses-say-theyre-reeling-from-hate-and-violence-operating-in-fear>.

⁹ Tracy Jan, "Asian American Businesses Are Defending Themselves against Rise in Anti-Asian Violence," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, March 26, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/03/25/asian-owned-businesses-hate-crimes/>.

¹⁰ Vivian Ho, "'Please Visit Chinatown': Coronavirus Fears Empty San Francisco District," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 27, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/chinatown-san-francisco-coronavirus-fears-empty-district>.

¹¹ Vivian Ho, "Police Patrols Have Increased in Asian Areas. Not Everyone Is Feeling Safer," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 19, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/19/atlanta-shooting-asian-police-violence>.

Despite Oakland Chinatown being two blocks away from police headquarters and the substantial funding invested in increasing police presence, there is still a high level of violence that terrorizes the AAPI community.¹²

Businessowners have taken matters into their own hands by installing security cameras, hiring security guards, and training their employees in self-defense. Shum spends \$5,000 a month for a security guard after having to interfere with a baseball bat after calling the police on a customer who tried to attack her younger sister but receiving no response.¹³ Instances such as Shum's are not uncommon. Norm Leong, Deputy Chief of the Sacramento Police Department, attributes the inadequacy of police response to the issue of understaffing, which pressures the department to be selective in which calls to send officers to. Situations with weapons present and a physical threat take precedent. Officers are unlikely to be sent to circumstances that only involve verbal threats.

Alternatives To Police Intervention

Chinatown businessowners have begun to pursue other solutions to protect their communities. Firstly, locals are looking to establish third-party community ambassadors who are educated in de-escalation skills and community outreach.¹⁴ This strategy would especially benefit elders, who are the most common targets of anti-AAPI hate crime, but often struggle to communicate with police who do not speak their native language. Additionally, the establishment of community organizations centralizes resources that enables the compilation of data that can promote awareness of issues surrounding the AAPI community.¹⁵

Secondly, AAPI community members advocate for infrastructural and community-building investments to increase the appeal of visiting Chinatowns and promoting the development of AAPI businesses. As Cynthia Choi, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, articulates,

¹² Vivian Ho, "Police Patrols Have Increased in Asian Areas. Not Everyone Is Feeling Safer," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, March 19, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/mar/19/atlanta-shooting-asian-police-violence>.

¹³ Tracy Jan, "Asian American Businesses Are Defending Themselves against Rise in Anti-Asian Violence," The Washington Post (WP Company, March 26, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/03/25/asian-owned-businesses-hate-crimes/>.

¹⁴ Li Zhou, "Asian American Communities Grapple with Whether Police Are the Right Answer to Recent Attacks," Vox (Vox, March 15, 2021), <https://www.vox.com/22308407/attacks-asian-americans-police>.

¹⁵ Russell Jeung, Manjusha P Kulkarni, and Cynthia Choi, "Op-Ed: Trump's Racist Comments Are Fueling Hate Crimes against Asian Americans. Time for State Leaders to Step In," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, April 1, 2020), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-04-01/coronavirus-anti-asian-discrimination-threats>.

“Do we put our limited dollars into policing? Or do we put it back into communities that are under resourced?”¹⁶ To end cycles of generational violence and systemic racism, AAPI leaders such as Alvina Wong, the director of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, advocate for long-term investments focusing on enhancing the “vibrancy and vitality of our neighborhoods,” with safety serving as the “byproduct.”¹⁷

Lastly, it is important to consider relations between the institution of policing and other minority communities.¹⁸ Recent conversations concerning the defunding of police have emphasized institutional law enforcement flaws that disproportionately affect black and brown communities.¹⁹ Accordingly, AAPI community leaders are seeking to communicate and collaborate with communities who have faced systemic barriers and discrimination in vastly contrasting ways.²⁰ Given that public safety is an issue that affects various minority groups in distinct ways, it is vital to involve the communities who are being directly affected by public safety and infrastructural policies in policy-making conversations.

¹⁶ Li Zhou, “Asian American Communities Grapple with Whether Police Are the Right Answer to Recent Attacks,” Vox (Vox, March 15, 2021), <https://www.vox.com/22308407/attacks-asian-americans-police>.

¹⁷ Li Zhou, “Asian American Communities Grapple with Whether Police Are the Right Answer to Recent Attacks,” Vox (Vox, March 15, 2021), <https://www.vox.com/22308407/attacks-asian-americans-police>.

¹⁸ Kellen Browning and Brian X. Chen, “In Fight against Violence, Asian and Black Activists Struggle to Agree,” The New York Times (The New York Times, December 19, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/black-asian-activists-policing-disagreement.html>.

¹⁹ Fabiola Cineas, “Protests for Black Lives Are Still Happening,” Vox (Vox, July 16, 2020), <https://www.vox.com/2020/7/16/21325275/black-lives-matter-protests-are-still-happening>.

²⁰ Mallory Cheng and Yiwen Lu, “Anti-Asian Violence Stirs Conversation on Policing and Abolition in Chicago's AAPI Communities,” South Side Weekly, April 29, 2021, <https://southsideweekly.com/anti-asian-violence-stirs-conversation-on-policing-and-abolition-in-chicagos-aapi-communities/>.