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Why Are Asian Americans Being Attacked and What Can You Do About It?

The Greater Good Science Center suggests science-backed ways we can reduce hatred and division.

In recent weeks, we've seen a series of high-profile violent attacks against Asian Americans, ranging from brutal robberies to fatal assaults. This week, a 21-year-old man killed eight people, most of them Asian-American women, in Atlanta, GA.



When 76-year-old Xiao Zhen Xie was attacked on March 17 by a stranger in San Francisco, she fought back and sent him to the hospital.

How many of the attacks were racially motivated? In order for an act of violence to be legally classified as a hate crime, the perpetrator has to explicitly mention or signal that they are committing this crime in the name of hatred for that group.

In many of the most recent attacks on Asian Americans, the perpetrators made no such declaration. Over the past year, we've seen a huge surge in violent crime, for reasons criminologists are still trying to understand. In some cases, Asian Americans were probably caught up in the wave of murder and assault without being specifically targeted.

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However, Asian Americans are often stereotyped as being meek, passive, or well-to-do—all qualities that would make them more attractive targets, according to [research](#). That kind of passive form of racial prejudice can still harm Asian Americans even if explicit hatred is not the reason they are being targeted.

That being said, there is quite a lot of evidence suggesting that people of Asian descent are becoming special targets of violence. Take, for instance, a January attack in Seattle where a man slugged an Asian-American woman after yelling that "Asians need to be put in their place." The Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, recently released a [fact sheet](#) that claims anti-Asian hate crimes spiked by 149% in America's largest cities during 2020.

What is the source of this animosity? Though hate crimes against Asian Americans have been slowly rising since 2016, some evidence suggests that the past year's surge was driven by racist reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Former President Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus," which may have strengthened the association of Asians and disease in the minds of his followers, expressed through social-media hate speech.

This rhetoric tapped into a history of anti-Asian racism and violence in the United States. In the late 19th century, a rise in Chinese immigration triggered the "yellow peril" stereotype. This justified policies that ranged from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to Executive Order 9066, which interred Americans of Japanese descent in isolated camps during World War II.

In January of this year, a team of researchers published a [study](#) where they used data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System to analyze hate crimes against Asian Americans that occurred between 1992 and 2014. Their analysis allows us to see how hate crimes against Asian Americans differ from those against other groups. For example, Asian Americans are more likely to be victimized by members of other minority groups: 26% of offenders in anti-Asian hate crimes are non-white, compared to about 1% of those who commit hate crimes against African Americans.

One of the authors of that study, Dr. Yan Zhang at Sam Houston State University, says that Asian Americans are often painted with a wide brush, considered to be members of a “model minority” that is economically successful. Despite the fact that Asian Americans are actually quite economically diverse—with both very poor and relatively successful ethnic subgroups—some people do not see them as anything but as stereotypes of wealth or privilege.

“Many Asian immigrants operate small retail stores or restaurants in economically depressed, predominantly minority neighborhoods,” noted the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1992. “The entry of small businesses owned by Asian Americans into these neighborhoods and their apparent financial success often provokes resentment on the part of neighborhood residents.”

Zhang says that economic stresses of the kind we experienced in 2020 can aggravate tensions. “When the economic situation is getting worse or it’s getting bad, that is how and why [Asians] become the target of these types of crime,” she says.

So, what can we do? Drawing on social psychology research, at right are a few science-backed ways we can reduce hatred and division, which should, in the long run, reduce violence, too.

The acts of violence over past weeks have rightly shocked the nation’s conscience. But by mobilizing social and political forces to embrace minorities, protect the vulnerable, and promote respect, we can roll back this tide of violence and build a safer, more unified country.

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- **Elevate Asian Americans as Americans:** A [2019 paper](#) found that more diverse cities with more Asian Americans in positions of power—like overseeing government offices or businesses—were more likely to associate Asian Americans with being American. Thus, public officials and other civic leaders should embrace Asian Americans and make them highly visible in order to break down stereotypes and encourage people to adopt an inclusive definition of American identity.
- **Promote intergroup contact between Asian Americans and others:** The 20th century social psychologist Gordon Allport theorized that increased contact between people of different groups could reduce prejudice and social tension—provided that certain conditions are met, such as having the support of legitimate authorities, establishing common goals and a sense of interdependence, and having a sense of equal status. Public leaders should promote positive intergroup contact between Asian Americans and others via cultural events and forums that meet these conditions. The 2003 book *No Fire Next Time: Black-Korean Conflicts and the Future of America’s Cities* argues that seeing Black-Asian violence in Los Angeles in the early 1990s led New York City to restructure its institutions to build bridges between the groups.
- **Seek and promote counter-stereotypical information:** Did it surprise you to learn that not all Asian-American ethnic groups are wealthy? Don’t be ashamed—the “model minority” stereotype is commonly promoted in American society. One way we can battle these inaccurate stereotypes is by promoting counter-stereotypical information. We can, for instance, ask that media organizations cover the nuances of being Asian American. [Research](#) has consistently shown that television is a powerful medium for breaking down stereotypes and promoting tolerance.
- **Focus on individuals, not group identity:** One of the best ways to reduce the brain’s natural tendency to categorize people and see them through stereotypes is to get to know them as individuals. There are over 20 million Asian Americans, and they are far from a monolith. If you’re not Asian American and meet someone who is, it’s unwise to assume you know everything—or even anything—about them just from their ethnic ancestry. If you get to know them as a person, what you learn may surprise you.
- **Engage in perspective taking and giving:** As a part of intergroup contact, it is important that civic leaders encourage perspective taking and giving. That means letting Asian Americans tell their stories and letting people from other groups tell theirs. Research shows that members of more dominant or majority groups tend to benefit more (in terms of reducing prejudice) by hearing the perspective of minority groups, while members of minority groups tend to benefit more from being able to give their perspective. Storytelling is an important way to build connections and break down social barriers.

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