

## Anti-Asian hate crimes, biases escalate amid virus; Officials on alert but cautious of free speech

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### Body

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In California's Alameda County, a Chinese American man was screamed at while mowing his lawn. The local prosecutor said the man was told to get out of America.

In neighboring Santa Clara County, a Vietnamese couple was threatened while in a grocery store. Officials said the man turned his hand into the shape of a gun.

In New York City, people of Asian descent were assaulted, kicked, pushed and accosted on subway trains.

The theme: This virus is your fault.

People of Asian descent have reported being shunned, verbally abused, name-called, coughed and spat on, even physically assaulted as the coronavirus pandemic continues to upend American life. As the political rhetoric blaming China for the pandemic escalates, law enforcement officials and human rights advocates have seen an increasing number of hate crimes and incidents of harassment and discrimination against Asian Americans.

New York City, for example, has seen 16 coronavirus-related hate crime incidents; many of which involved Asian victims. The city's human rights commission has received hundreds of harassment and discrimination complaints since February, the majority of which involved anti-Asian sentiments.

Police and prosecutors are on high alert, releasing public service announcements, holding town hall meetings and opening hotlines to ask people to report hate crimes and hate speech that, while not criminal, could escalate to violence.

"We have a large Asian population, and we have a lot of elderly Asian population who are getting scared to death about being preyed upon by somebody who's willing to resort to that behavior," said Nancy O'Malley, the district attorney of Alameda County, where Asians are 32% of the population. "You have one ethnic group that's targeted ... and ignorant people who think they can just scream at somebody because of their ethnicity. ... We cannot tolerate that."

O'Malley said there have been no hate crimes in her county, but there have been several incidents of verbal assaults and harassment that don't rise to the level of a crime. Still, O'Malley's office has encouraged people to report such incidents.

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"Speech is not a crime," she said, "(but) we want to make sure we're intervening before it becomes a crime, to educate somebody about cultures and diversity."

In Seattle, schoolteacher Kert Lin was driving into a Home Depot parking lot when another driver screamed at him: "Open your eyes! Go back to China!"

Lin said the incident, which happened not far from Seattle's international district, rattled him. He told the Seattle Police Department what happened, but he said because no crime was committed, there's nothing police can do.

"This is also our city," he said. "We just want to be safe."

In Stevens Point, Wisconsin, about 21/2 hours from Milwaukee, police arrested a man who they said harassed Asian customers for wearing a mask inside a grocery store. In Santa Clara County, the man who threatened the Vietnamese couple by turning his hand into the shape of a gun has been charged with a misdemeanor hate crime.

"I wish we didn't have the one case, but the fact that we only had one case is a testament to the people that live here," Santa Clara District Attorney Jeff Rosen said, although he added that hate crimes are historically underreported. Asians are about 38% of the county's population.

Rosen's office recently published a public service announcement calling on people to not assign places and nationalities to the pandemic. The World Health Organization has urged scientists, government officials and the media to avoid using geographic locations as names for public health crises.

"This isn't the fault of Chinese Americans that are here. ... Asian Americans are very well integrated into our society," Rosen said.

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