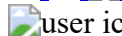


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The sign was posted on Atlanta businesses and streets. (Credit: Krystle Rodriguez)

## ‘Wuhan Plague’ plaques found on Atlanta businesses, streets

[News](#)

By

- [Raisa Habersham](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Hodgepodge Coffeehouse owner Krystle Rodriguez received a text from her employee about the sign: a round plaque glued to her Moreland Avenue building outside her restaurant depicting Winnie the Pooh eating a bat with chopsticks below the words “Wuhan Plague.”

The signs have been popping up around East Atlanta on a variety of buildings and fixtures. Atlanta Police Department’s Homeland Security Unit, which investigates bias-motivated crimes, has been notified about the signs but so far no arrests have been made.

"It's doing nothing but reinforcing really awful stereotypes," said Rodriguez, who [posted a photo of the sign on her social media page](#) to mixed reactions. "I have Asian American friends that said it's allergy season and they're afraid to sneeze in public because of all of the hate speech."

Asian Americans have reported increased harassment around the globe since [the novel coronavirus originated in Wuhan, China](#). Asians make up 4% of Atlanta's population, [according to U.S. Census data](#).

[Advancing Justice-Atlanta](#), a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the civil rights of Asian American communities in Georgia and the Southeast, called the signs "hateful and dangerous rhetoric (that) has consequences."

"Chinese Americans and those perceived to be are now victims of violence," the organization said in a statement. "These plaques are the latest incident to harass the Asian American community and it is important we all condemn it. Hate has no place here."

For the past week, Atlanta police have received calls about the signs, which appear to be small, bronze-colored plaques that are glued in place. According to three police reports, the first was seen April 13 on an electrical box in front of 188 Waverly Way in Inman Park. Another was found on April 16 on a city lamp post near the intersection of Wylie and Flat Shoals in Reynoldstown. A third was found on the Candler Park Market on April 18.

Owners for One Moreland, the building where Hodgepodge is located, turned in a video of the sign to Atlanta police.

Atlanta police spokesman Carlos Campos said the department's Homeland Security Unit has been notified about the plaques, but added they don't appear to meet the criteria for a bias crime.

"If someone were to be identified as placing them, any charges would have to be looked at on a case-by-case basis, depending largely on whether any damage was done to the property to which the medallion is being affixed," Campos said.

For the plaques to be considered a bias crime, there must be evidence the crime was committed based on the victim's race, religion, sex, or another identifier. Because Georgia doesn't have a hate crime statute, police would have to confer with the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office before they could prosecute the case under federal hate crime laws.

Animator and muralist Rod Ben, 35, of Tucker, said the plaques overt Asian metaphors invite people to place blame for the coronavirus on those from Asian countries and Asian American residents.

"No one feels safe," said Ben, who is Cambodian and Vietnamese. "I'm worried for my parents going to the grocery store. Even older people are being harassed and attack, and if you're not going to leave old people alone, where is (the harassment) going to stop?"

Ben also took his daughter out of daycare because he was worried about the way people looked at her during the pandemic.

"Yes, we're Asian, but we're Asian Americans. I've never been to China," he said. "To make these connections based on what someone looks like is crazy. It's the first time some of us have considered buying a gun because we don't feel safe."

"People have gotten on me for not wearing a mask and some immediately see me and move, which is good because you should be social distancing," Ben said. "But when I see other people walking past them and they don't react that way, I can only come to the conclusion that they're scared of me."

While no arrests have been made in the incidents, Rodriguez and Ben both hope the culprits get more education about xenophobia and how it affects people.

“We need to have more of a nuanced conversation about what’s really going on,” Rodriquez said. “I think more than anything there needs to be a real conversation about how powerful words and ignorance can be.”

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