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Asian Americans In Chicago Feel The Bite Of Prejudice During The Spread Of The Coronavirus

By [Esther Yoon-Ji Kang](#)

Mar. 31, 11:12 AM UTC

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Soukprida Phetmisy, pictured here with her dog, Wilbur, says she has experienced more anti-Asian attacks during the past two weeks of the COVID-19 crisis than she has in 10 years. Esther Yoon-Ji Kang / WBEZ News



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Soukprida Phetmisy and her dog, Wilbur, have avoided taking long walks in their Logan Square neighborhood lately. It's not Illinois' stay-at-home order that's been keeping her and Wilbur confined to their backyard, but rather the rash of anti-Asian attacks that have shaken up the 31-year-old as of late.

"I have experienced more of these incidents, back to back, in the last two weeks than I have in the entire last decade of my life," Phetmisy said. "[I'm] scared every day and feeling anxious every day, even to just walk my dog."

Earlier this month, before her employer, Teach for America, began asking workers to telecommute, Phetmisy was at the airport on her way out of town for a conference. She's the managing director of Asian American and Pacific Islander community alliances for Teach for America.

While in line waiting to board her flight, Phetmisy let out a cough, and a man behind her said, "Watch it, chink."

"I immediately was like, 'Oh my gosh, somebody is being racially attacked.' And I turned and looked around, and there was no one other than me who was Asian," said Phetmisy, a Laotian American.

Back in Chicago a few days later, she was walking to her office in the Loop when two men in business suits walked by and said to her, "Go home." And not long after that, she was walking Wilbur around the neighborhood when she passed by some kids playing at an elementary school. A child said, "Cough, cough, corona."

Read more: [All of WBEZ's coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Chicago and the region.](https://www.wbez.org/news/asian-americans-face-attacks-during-covid-19-pandemic)



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Phetmisy says her Asian American friends in Chicago have experienced similar attacks.

“Folks have been spat on, folks have gotten on public transit and the car immediately clears — everyone either goes to the other side or just leaves,” she said. “I’ve heard people be yelled at to ‘go back home’ or asked if they eat bats.”

The trend extends to the suburbs. On March 21, a 60-year-old Chinese American man was [attacked](#) by two women while jogging in west suburban Naperville.

The man’s 31-year-old daughter, who asked not to be named fearing additional attacks, said her father was running along a trail when one of the women threw a log at him, accused him of being sick, told him to “go back to China,” and spat at him.

She said her father is “doing fine physically, but emotionally, he is more scared that a similar thing will happen to me and my brothers.” Currently an allergy/immunology fellow at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, she and her Korean American husband — also a doctor — will soon be deployed to the front lines treating patients with COVID-19.

“It’s definitely an extra layer of stress,” she said, on having to worry about her parents in the Chicago area as she tends to patients in New York City, the nation’s hotbed for COVID-19 cases. “Naperville is considered pretty safe,” she added. “If anything, my parents were telling me and [my husband] to be careful in New York City.”

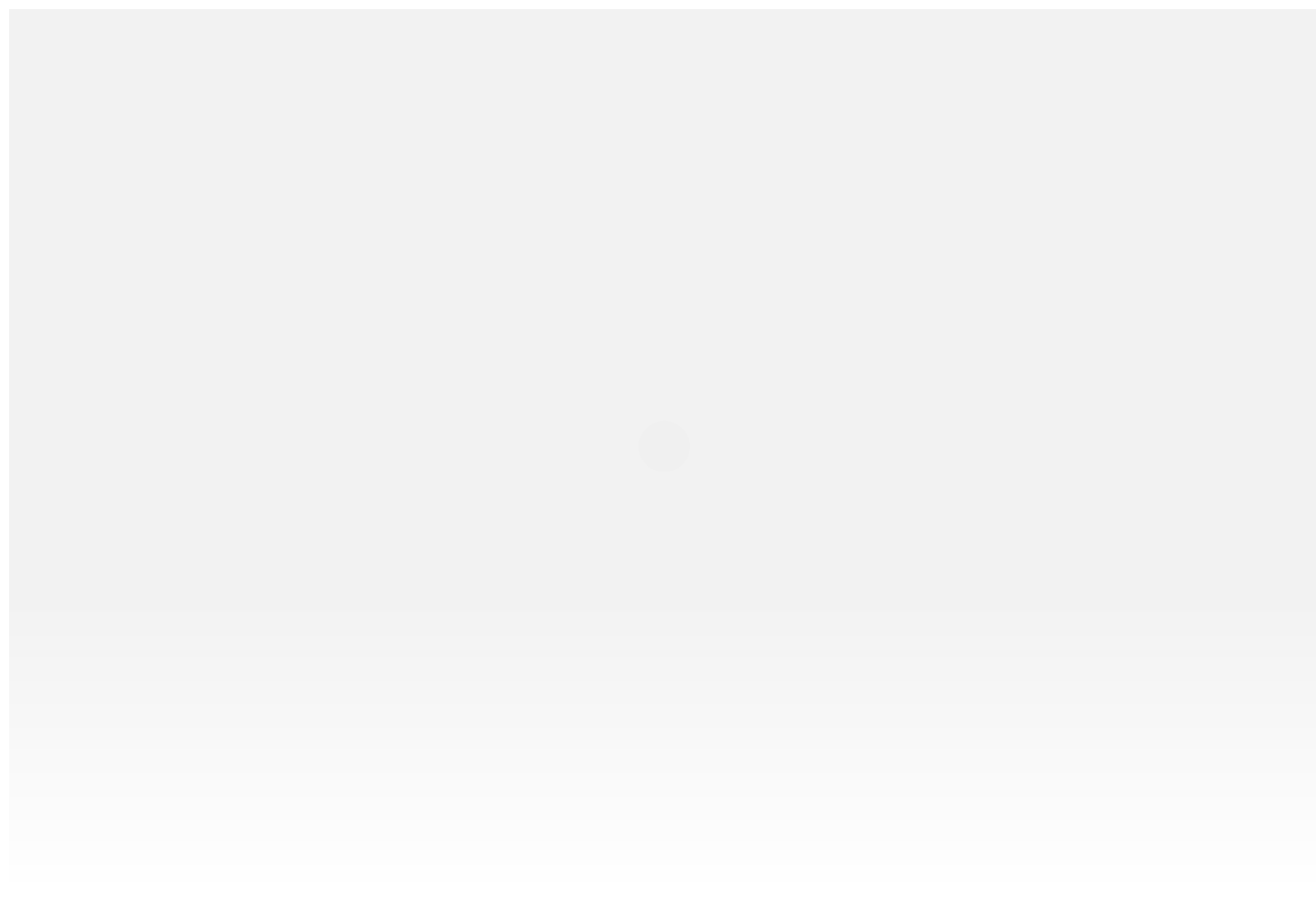
Illinois State Rep. Theresa Mah, D-Chicago, whose district is about a quarter Chinese, said there have been numerous conversations on the Chinese messaging



“There have been expressions of fear — people saying that they're afraid to go out, they don't want to be the subject of an attack,” Mah said. “They don't know what to do; it's really sad and concerning.”

There have been reports throughout the country about anti-Asian attacks since the COVID-19 pandemic began. But the number of incidents began to rise sharply after President Trump started calling the coronavirus “the Chinese virus,” according to Russell Jeung, an Asian American studies professor at San Francisco State University.

Other politicians followed Trump's lead, including U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, (R-Texas, who said China was to blame for the coronavirus because of a “culture where people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.”



President Trump defended calling the coronavirus “the Chinese virus” at a March 18 press conference. Facing backlash, he has since tweeted a statement in support of Asian Americans and stopped using the



After facing backlash, Trump tweeted a statement in support of Asian Americans and has since stopped using the term “Chinese virus.” But last week, when asked what he is doing to stop anti-Asian hate crimes in the country, he [said](#), “I don’t know.”

Jeung said he conducted a news content analysis, which showed that “xenophobic comments by politicians” incited even more racism against Asian Americans.

Even the FBI has taken note of anti-Asian attacks, recently [announcing](#) that the agency is paying close attention to hate crimes during this pandemic.

Jeung said the anti-Asian sentiment has deep historical roots. Asian Americans have historically been portrayed as the “Yellow Peril” — a term used to describe the centuries-old xenophobic fears about East Asians as disease carriers, among other ills. “That is in the back of the racial subconscious of America,” Jeung said.

That kind of racism was reflected in a video one Chicago man posted to his Instagram stories earlier this month. The man filmed himself walking down an empty street in the Andersonville neighborhood. He was lamenting the closing of his favorite record store and restaurants.

“China, when all this passes, I hope your [expletive] country burns to the ground and then sinks into the ocean,” the Chicago man said. “Why, you ask? ... Just so that I know it’s sterile before it sinks into the water and poisons all of our water for the rest of the world, you filthy, [expletive] maniacs.”

In order to give Asian Americans a voice to report these attacks — and also to track trends and effect policy, Jeung joined with some groups in California and created a [reporting site](#) for anti-Asian incidents.

Since the form went up on March 19, there have been more than 100 reports being submitted daily — “without even publicizing [the site] through our community channels,” Jeung said.



While the effort was initially focused on California, about 60% of the cases are coming from outside that state, including 2.5% from Illinois, Jeung said. Illinois ranks third behind California and New York.

Jeung said some key trends have emerged: almost two thirds of the people reporting cases are not Chinese, but of other Asian ethnicities; women are three times more likely to be harassed than men; and, recently, there's been a lot of coughing and spitting at Asian Americans.

"I was sort of shocked and surprised by that," said Jeung, noting that coughing and spitting at someone is a public health hazard. "So we actually made that a special category, because it's happening so often."



One way to help the Asian American community during this crisis, Southeast Asian American Resource Center is to support



Amid the disturbing reports, Jeung said there are signs of hope, too. The fact that Asian Americans are even reporting these cases is a positive development, given the community's reputation for not speaking up, he said. Jeung encouraged individuals and groups in Chicago and throughout Illinois to call on elected officials to condemn anti-Asian bigotry and establish hotlines and reporting centers.

Jeung also said these experiences can lead to greater empathy among minority groups.

"As Asian Americans begin to see how they're racially profiled, and how people don't trust them or how people perceive them ... [they] are developing a greater empathy for other people of color who are similarly racially profiled," he said.

Phetmisy, in Logan Square, agreed.

Referring to her line of work, Phetmisy said, "As somebody who's been in diversity, equity and inclusiveness work for a while, I always thought I could empathize with that on a very real level, and I realized, like in the last two weeks, sometimes you're empathizing on just an intellectual level."

The anti-Asian attacks she's experienced during the pandemic have deepened her empathy for others who've experienced similar forms of racism.

"It is easier for me to empathize with folks within the black community, folks within the Latino community, our Muslim community, too," she said.

Phetmisy said bigotry often happens because of a lack of relationships with people of different races. She said people should speak out against the anti-Asian attacks.

"I would like to see other folks who don't identify as Asian American, actually saying this is not okay, and I want to see that happen on a very public stage," she said.



Phetmisy suggested that people support local Asian businesses, in light of reports of customers avoiding well-stocked Asian grocery stores and once-popular restaurants, and check on their elderly Asian neighbors.

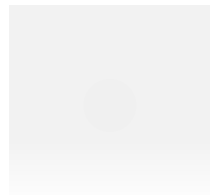
In particular, she worries about her aging parents in Michigan. “Look out for our elders who, potentially, are alone right now going through this or not understanding what's happening,” Phetmisy added.

Esther Yoon-Ji Kang is a reporter on WBEZ's Race, Class and Communities desk. Follow her on Twitter [@estheryjkang](https://twitter.com/estheryjkang).

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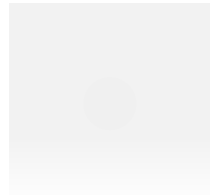
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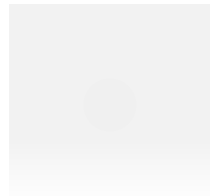
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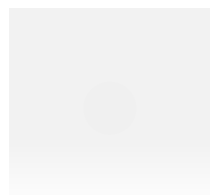
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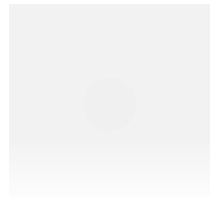
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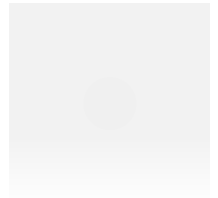
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