



## HEALTH

# Asian Americans Are Blamed By Some For COVID-19 Outbreak

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Heard on Morning Edition

NPR's Steve Inskeep talks to Russell Jeung, professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, about harassment of Asian Americans during the coronavirus pandemic.

## STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

Along with all the other forms of stress and fear that Americans feel right now, Asian Americans feel one more - prejudice driven by the news that the virus was first detected in China. Russell Jeung is a professor of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, and he set up a website to compile reports of discrimination. When we reached him - at home, of course, in Oakland, Calif. - he told of an incident in a local park.

RUSSELL JEUNG: So my wife was walking on a trail in a regional park, and this person was approaching her. And they could see each other. She moved to the side, but the person moved in front of her. She called out, and he didn't respond. But when she passed him, he coughed at her. So we don't know if it's intentional or unintentional, but this type of coughing at people and spitting at people, it's something that Asians are actually experiencing a lot more.

INSKEEP: So the spitting is pretty obviously a hostile act. And I suppose in a time when people are worried about contagion, coughing on someone would probably be

seen just the same way.

JEUNG: Yeah, it is. And so if you do get spit on you, that's actually a physical assault. And in San Francisco, we're getting reports now on our reporting center. And 10, 15% of the reports are about physical assault of people getting either physically attacked or being spat upon or coughed at.

INSKEEP: What is the database that you've been gathering, and why did you start?

JEUNG: So we've recognized early on that people were experiencing a lot of bullying, a lot of shunning, a lot of avoiding when the coronavirus outbreak occurred. And we didn't have any hard data to document what was going on. So the first thing we did is we looked at news trends, and we counted news stories that had coronavirus and discrimination or xenophobia in it. We found hundreds of articles about policies that people thought were xenophobic - economic boycotts of Asian businesses - and then later on about interactions that Asian Americans were having where people were bullying, taunting, harassing and now attacking.

We had hundreds of accounts to go to the state Legislature and say, this is happening; we need to get it documented; we need to proactively address these trends. And since the government didn't have the capacity in California, we started our own website as a reporting center. And it just was launched last week, and we've been getting over a hundred reports every day.

INSKEEP: A hundred reports every day - what are some of the things that - I don't know - have come in today or the last time you looked?

JEUNG: Most are verbal harassment, name-calling, that people would just be walking by, and people would yell out, coronavirus is because of you. Or they would fake cough in front of people. So name-calling and just verbal harassment, microaggressions were the most common. It moves up to people having bottles and cans thrown at them, their homes being vandalized. And then regularly, maybe three times a day, we have people actually being physically attacked, assaulted, being hit or punched, pushed on subways.

We've noticed that women, for example, are three times more likely to be attacked than men. And so this is a very gendered experience. And we wouldn't - well, I wasn't expecting that. It's clear now that - we can see through the trends that people are now getting into conflict a lot more at grocery stores because every other place is locked down, so grocery stores are where we're interacting with other people.

INSKEEP: Do you think about this trend when you go out of the house, and you're moving around and someone's approaching you on the street? Do you think about what that encounter might be like?

JEUNG: Yeah, now more than ever. I think Asian Americans are hyperaware and sensitive of how other people perceive them. I think what's sad is a lot of children and youth are afraid of being bullied. And that type of racial profiling and that experience of having people not trust you, having people look at you as a disease carrier, I think that's on a lot of people's minds in the Asian American community.

INSKEEP: Do you feel you understand why people are doing this?

JEUNG: Oh, it's easy to understand. This has - it's been part of Americans' racist history. It's easy to understand if you take into context how President Trump has incited and fomented xenophobia. It's easy to understand when people have heightened fears because of the disease. It's part of a person of color's experience already. And so we call it coronavirus discrimination. And racial profiling is to be expected, actually.

INSKEEP: Are there things that have happened that have made it worse, though?

JEUNG: You know, after 9/11, people were attacking Muslim Americans. And President Bush came out and said, we have to not discriminate or mistreat Muslim Americans. What President Trump did was he insisted on calling it the Chinese virus and labeling coronavirus as a racial disease. And by othering Asians - and it's not just Chinese, anybody who looks Chinese - where just - it just gave people license to attack us, to blame us for the disease, to say we're the source of it. And it's not the people who are the source of the disease. It's just, you know, a virus that doesn't discriminate.

INSKEEP: Did the president help at all this week by insisting at a briefing that it is not the fault of Chinese Americans, whatever has happened?

JEUNG: Yeah, we appreciate that. And I think that was due to the pressure that we exerted and the complaining. But I think it's a little too late. He's already opened the door to this racism. It was already starting even before he made the China virus remarks, and he just sort of exacerbated the situation. But, you know, he still uses this us-versus-them binary that argues that, oh, we're really working with them; we're protecting them, that we're still outsiders and foreigners and not part of the American fabric.

INSKEEP: What do you want from political leaders and from your fellow citizens?

JEUNG: From our political leaders, it starts from the top. We need to say we don't condone prejudice in any forms. So we want the government to actually be proactive and address racism rather than responding to it. And from our fellow citizens, you just have to check your biases when you approach an Asian American. You have to be aware that, oh, I may automatically assume something that I shouldn't automatically assume. Yeah. Treat people with the space now and then also the dignity and courtesy that we all need to have during this public health crisis.

INSKEEP: Russell Jeung is a professor of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, and he joined us via Skype. Thank you so much.

JEUNG: Thank you.

(SOUNDBITE OF FEDERICO ALBANESE'S "THE CRADLE")

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