



## Identity

# LGBTQ Asian Americans Brace for a 'Double Whammy' as Hate Crimes Rise

“Those who were already vulnerable – whether you’re an immigrant, undocumented, or because of your gender identity and sexuality – the pandemic has amplified that.”

by Nico Lang

Apr 22 2020, 6:22pm



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Kyle Navarro almost started to cry as he remembered how he felt that day.

On March 24, the 25-year-old was unlocking his bicycle when an older white man approached him. Navarro, a registered nurse for the San Francisco Unified School District, rode his bike to drop off prescription glasses that needed to be exchanged for one of his students, and initially he ignored the sullen stranger who shot him a glowering stare as he walked past.

But then the man turned and spat in Navarro's direction and called him a "gook."

Navarro, who is queer and Filipino American, wanted to scream at his assailant but stopped himself out of fear for his safety. "I took a breath and realized if I had gotten hurt or worse, I have a partner to worry about," Navarro told VICE. "If I were to be incapacitated, things could get worse for a lot of other people in my life."

Since the incident, Navarro said it's been difficult to shake the fear that it could happen again. "Every time my partner and I go out," he said, "we give each other hugs, we hold each other, and tell each other to be safe."

Stories like Navarro's have become increasingly common in the weeks since COVID-19 began spreading across the United States. On April 11, the FBI warned that "hate crime incidents against Asian-Americans likely will surge across the United States," predicting that a rise of harassment and violence would result from "a portion of the U.S. public" associating the novel coronavirus "with China and Asian American populations," as President Donald Trump has repeatedly done.

While the FBI, which tracks hate crimes, has yet to release official data on the subject, Asian American community groups have reported a "flood of incidents related to anti-Asian hate" following the COVID-19 outbreak. The reporting center

Stop AAPI Hate, which was founded by the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies Department, received more than 1,100 complaints between March 19 and April 3.

Chinese for Affirmative Action Co-Executive Director Cynthia Choi said there are already patterns in the data coming in. Choi said that those most likely to be targeted were “individuals who live in the intersections” and were “already living in situations where their safety has been an issue.” For instance, Asian American women were twice as likely as men to report being harassed or physically assaulted.

“Those who were already vulnerable—whether you're an immigrant, undocumented, or because of your gender identity and sexuality—the pandemic has amplified that,” Choi told VICE. “Those who were suffering before the pandemic, their situation is worse off.”

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Although Stop AAPI Hate has just begun to collect data on hate crimes against LGBTQ Asian Americans, organizations that provide resources and support for queer and trans people told VICE their staff and members have, indeed, been targeted in the wake of COVID-19. One member of the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance was hit with a shopping cart in the grocery store, while a board chair was threatened by a man who came to her home with a machete. Others, meanwhile, said they have been harassed on the street by passersby screaming at them, “You brought this here!” or witnessed fellow riders on the bus switch seats after they sat down.

According to NQAPIA Executive Director Glenn Magpantay, these incidents make it clear to him that LGBTQ Asian Americans “have experienced an uptick in racism and discrimination as a result of COVID-19.”

“The ignorance has come to bear on our community,” Magpantay told VICE. “It's enormously challenging and difficult.”

While racist messaging surrounding COVID-19 impacts Asian Americans of a broad swath of identities, multiple people who spoke to VICE said LGBTQ communities are uniquely affected because they have already faced decades of stigma regarding disease transmission. Until 2015, men who have sex with men were barred from giving blood due to fears that they would spread HIV through the blood supply. Though testing can easily detect the presence of HIV in blood, gay and bisexual donors must remain celibate for three months before donating.

According to Hieu Nguyen, founder of the Viet Rainbow of Orange County, being LGBTQ and Asian under COVID-19 is a “double whammy.” “When you’re LGBTQ and an ethnic minority, there’s already a sense of not feeling safe in the environment that you’re in,” Nguyen told VICE. “It just adds a heightened level of anxiety for folks, and it challenges their sense of safety.”

Many LGBTQ Asian Americans who spoke to VICE said they have avoided leaving their house during the COVID-19 pandemic and put off going to the grocery store in fear of being attacked. Michael Nguyen, chair of the San Francisco-based community group GAPA, estimated that he has gone to the store “maybe twice in the past 30 days” and has instead relied on deliveries to subsist. “Am I going to be gawked at?” he wondered. “Will I be the victim of a hate crime?”

When he does need to get food, Nguyen drives to an Asian grocery store all the way in neighboring Daly City just so he can feel safe.

Nguyen admitted it can be difficult for LGBTQ Asian Americans to talk about the “anticipation of hate” that keeps them indoors because of a “culture of silence” that many have struggled with all their lives.

“A big part of Asian culture is blending into the background and not being seen,” he said. “They say the nail that sticks out will be the first to be hammered. Culturally, you don’t want to [rock] the boat; everything is OK and everything is normal. Being an American is very being loud and being individualistic,” traits that he said don’t square with many Asian cultures.

Community groups across the country have been organizing digital support spaces where LGBTQ Asian Americans can find support and have a safe space to discuss the discrimination they are experiencing. These spaces include everything from writing workshops and virtual happy hours to playing video games together. Viet Rainbow of Orange County has started offering painting classes through Zoom; for those who can't afford supplies because they are out of work, its members have dropped off paint and brushes to their doors.

Those programs are not limited to the internet, however. Shortly after California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued a shelter-in-place order in March, API Equality - Northern California, started the Dragon Fruit Project Phone Tree to check-in with community members who may need food or other essential supplies. Executive Director Sammie Ablaza Wills told VICE that the program's purpose is "to connect with people, but especially those who might not have access to internet, people who cannot leave their houses, and people who live alone." These groups include LGBTQ older adults and individuals who are immunocompromised, such as people living with HIV.

But Magpantay said that providing enough resources to meet the needs of a large, geographically diverse community would be a challenge for organizations that operate on limited budgets and are primarily run by volunteers.

"We're doing more than we ever have before," Magpantay said. "As soon as coronavirus hit and young people had to go back to their homes—with many going back to unsafe conditions or back into the closet because they're not out to their folks—we've run a large series of online peer support groups. We don't even do social services, and yet we are doing support groups so that people know that even though we are socially distant, the community is not far."

But LGBTQ Asian Americans said that what gives them hope has been seeing the community come together, despite the odds. When Navarro tweeted about his experience being harassed by a stranger, he said people DMed him their phone numbers in case he needed someone to talk to. Even right after the incident, an elderly Filipina woman came up to Navarro and asked if he was OK.

“It’s terrible that this had to happen, but it’s been uplifting that Asian American folks and queer folks of color have reached out and thanked me for the work that I’m doing,” he said. “I feel so rooted in the communities that I’m a part of, more so than before.”

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