

Chapter 8

On Anti-Asian Hate as an Ego-Based and Social-Political Force in a Time of COVID-19: Mixed Roles of the U.S. Leaders and Social Web

Shalin Hai-Jew

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8863-0175>

Kansas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in late 2019 and continues through the present, has resulted in the scapegoating of Asians globally, according to crime reports and journalistic reportage. This chapter explores the phenomenon of anti-Asian hate both as a personal (ego-level person-related) and social-political (group or population-level) force during a pandemic. This focuses more specifically on the mixed roles of some U.S. leaders and politicians and the communications on the Social Web. In the 2020-2021 timeframe, U.S. political leaders have evoked the “China virus” to garner votes and political contributions and political loyalty, even as the legislature put into place laws against anti-Asian violence and law enforcement stepped up to prevent more race-on-race violence. Concurrently, there were incidences of racial strife expressed on the Social Web. This work is comprised of a review of the journalistic and academic literature and includes the extraction of related social media expressions (such as #stopasianhate and #stopaapihate).

INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, but earlier known as “coronavirus 2019”) emerged from Wuhan, Hubei Province, in the People’s Republic of China. By early 2020, the human-to-human airborne-transmissible pathogenic virus had already started sparking

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3380-5.ch008

COVID-19 (coronavirus 2019) disease and resulting illnesses and deaths. The pathogen spread rapidly around the world from there, causing fear and panic even as public health professionals, researchers, scientists, and others moved to mitigate the threat and the losses. During the early days of a pandemic, there is apparently a lot of focus on trying to learn about the biological agent (SARS-CoV-2) and its abilities. For example, the mortality rate of those infected was thought to be between “1.3 and 18.3%” and a R_0 at 4 – 5.1 in France (Le Maréchal, Morand, Epaulard, & Némov, 2020, p. 639), so the data span was a high one. In a time of threat and confusion, humanity responded to the pandemic with “a collective paranoia...driven by...psychic anxiety...the irrationality of the crisis and the failure of global governance” (Liu, 2021, p. 1). From very early on, COVID-19 “very quickly changed the environment for crime, and did so differentially across ethnicities” based on police data in London, an international city. They found an increase in hate crimes against Asians in the Jan. – Mar. 2020 period as compared to the Oct. – Dec. 2019 data (Gray & Hansen, 2020, p. 0), in a context of sharp rises in hate crime statistics nationally (Carrega & Krishnakumar, Aug. 30, 2021). There were some 4,533 hate incidents reported in the first six months of 2021 (Carrega & Krishnakumar, Aug. 30, 2021). One study compared the differences between the reporting of hate crimes by Asians vs. non-Asians in the first few months of the pandemic, with the findings that “Asian victims are significantly and substantially less likely to report victimization to the police than other victims” (Lantz & Wenger, 2021, p. 1), with approximately 54.1% lower odds of reporting a hate crime to the police than white victims...” (Lantz & Wenger, 2021, p. 12). One cited study of anti-Asian hate crimes had jumped 145% in 16 large U.S. cities in 2020 (CSU Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021, as cited in Lantz & Wenger, 2021, p. 2). The reported hate crimes are likely an undercount, indicating serious “inequitable access to the criminal justice system” (Lantz & Wenger, 2021, p. 3). The lower rates of reporting crimes by Asians due to a sense that “the crime was minor, or not serious enough” or the inconvenience of reporting or other factors (Lantz & Wenger, 2021, p. 18). An evaluation of FBI data in Fall 2021 found that hate crimes against Asians in the U.S. jumped 73% (Venkatraman, Oct. 25, 2021).

Researchers also found growing hatred over time: “the probability of being a victim of hate crime for Chinese people increases by between 4 and 6 percentage points during February 2020 and by between 11 – 13 percentage points during March compared to the pre-Covid-19 period” (Gray & Hansen, 2020, p. 17). Discrimination was found to start low early in the pandemic but intensifying in the March-April 2020 time frame with discrimination related to “race/ethnicity and wearing face masks” (Liu, Finch, Brenneke, Thomas, & Le, 2020, p. 481). A study of hate communities that arose during COVID-19, researchers found growing organization around March 2020, in both the U.S. and the Philippines, as the pathogen spread more broadly:

While average hate scores remain fairly consistent over time, hate communities grow increasingly organized in March, then slowly disperse in the succeeding months. This pattern is robust to fluctuations in the number of network clusters and average cluster size. Info-demiological analysis demonstrates that in both countries, the spread of hate speech around COVID-19 features similar reproduction rates as other COVID-19 information on Twitter, with spikes in hate speech generation at time points with highest community-level organization of hate speech. Identity analysis further reveals that hate in the US initially targets political figures, then grows predominantly racially charged; in the Philippines, targets of hate consistently remain political over time. Finally, we demonstrate that higher levels of community hate are consistently associated with smaller, more isolated, and highly hierarchical network clusters across both contexts. This suggests potentially shared structural conditions for the effective spread of

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