

## **AHA Statement on Violence against Asians and Asian Americans**

*Approved by AHA Council, March 2021*

The American Historical Association deplores the recent incidents of violence and harassment aimed at Asians and Asian Americans. This hostility against particular groups because of their ethnic origins—expressed via cultural stereotypes, scapegoating, physical aggression, and bloodshed—has deep roots in our nation’s past. To stem this persistent form of inequity and hate, we would do well to understand its history.

Asians in the United States have been subject to discriminatory legislation since large numbers of Chinese immigrants began arriving in the 1850s. The false charge that they were responsible for the loss of white people’s jobs sounds eerily familiar to accusations leveled against current immigrants from around the world. In 1850 and 1852, California imposed a foreign miners’ tax on Chinese immigrants to exclude them from a “Gold Rush” that attracted prospectors from many other countries as well. During the same decade, California also passed a law prohibiting Chinese witnesses from testifying against whites in court. The Chinese men who helped build the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s performed dangerous labor for long hours at low pay, using explosives to blast tunnels and smooth mountain grades. Yet they were considered expendable and deemed unworthy of wages and working conditions that would meet even the very low standards of the era. Across the American West, Chinese immigrant communities in this period were vulnerable to vicious attacks in which victims were killed and their homes burned (e.g., Los Angeles in 1871 and Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, in 1882) amid claims that Chinese immigrants willing to work for starvation wages were thereby taking jobs that would otherwise go to white men.

Anti-immigration legislation served not only to block Chinese hopefuls from entering the country but to promote dangerous stereotypes that gave whites license to assault them with impunity. The 1875 Page Act prohibited entry by Chinese women—portrayed in the legislation as “prostitutes” or women imported for illicit purposes—severely reducing the immigration of Chinese women and fueling stereotypes that their inherent immorality invited sin.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the only immigration restriction in US history based solely on a specific racial group (as the Chinese were considered at the time), remained on the books until 1943. Its immediate effects included the Tacoma/Seattle expulsion campaigns that targeted Chinese immigrants in 1885–86, attempting to drive out any who dared remain in the region after passage of the 1882 law.

Hostility to immigrants from Asia and their descendants is not limited to Chinese Americans. California passed legislation in 1913 prohibiting Japanese immigrants from owning land. A decade later, federal legislation barring immigration to all “aliens ineligible to citizenship” effectively extended the Chinese Exclusion Act to emigrants from Japan, Korea, and South Asia. During World War II, through Executive Order 9066, the federal government incarcerated approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans (two-

thirds of them US-born citizens) in internment camps and seized their property in a blatant abrogation of due-process and civil-rights guarantees.

These moments of crisis punctuated the continued targeting of Asian Americans on the grounds of local business competition and allegations of employment displacement. When this misdirected sense of economic competition turned international, violence followed once again. In 1982, automobile workers in Detroit murdered Vincent Chin, a Chinese American 27-year-old whom they assumed was Japanese, and hence culpable for the declining fortunes of the region's auto industry. During the same decade, Vietnamese immigrants found their shrimping boats burned off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. By the time Korean Americans' shops were destroyed in Los Angeles in 1992, popular media had been promoting vicious stereotypes for more than a century, while depicting Asian American women in hypersexualized ways that left them more vulnerable to abuse.

The racialized misogyny explicit in the Atlanta killings is the product of generations-long stereotyping and cultural denigration against Asian American women in particular. A study conducted by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, has concluded that hate crimes in the United States declined overall by 7 percent in 2020 compared to 2019. At the same time, such crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders increased by 150 percent.

For months, high-level federal officials in the United States referred to COVID-19 as the "China virus" and the "Kung Flu." This baseless and irresponsible scapegoating evokes the assaults in San Francisco 121 years ago, when members of the Chinese community were blamed for an outbreak of an epidemic, their property seized and homes destroyed. Indeed, the spurious association of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community with COVID-19 is another example of Americans blaming their fellow Americans for larger social ills. The murder in Atlanta of eight people on March 16, including six women of Asian descent, suggests that we have not transcended this history.