

**Statement before the House Ways and Means Committee**

**On “The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color”**

## **COVID-19 Impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander Mental and Physical Health**

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Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Brady, and members of the committee. Thank you for conducting this hearing on the disparate health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an important issue as Congress moves forward rapidly to ensure safety for tens of millions of unemployed American workers and financially unstable families. At the same time, Asian American communities around the country have experienced an alarming surge in anti-Asian sentiment and hate incidents since the start of the outbreak. Therefore, my testimony primarily covers the negative impact of hate incidents on Asian American mental and physical health outcomes. **First**, hate incidents against Asian Americans have risen tremendously in number and severity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Second**, stress and fear caused by hate incidents is proven to impact mental and physical health outcomes, especially as they are linked to generational trauma. **Third**, to minimize hate incidents, Americans need strong coordination at the federal level in issuing guidance to schools, employers, local law enforcements, and public administrators to prevent and react to hate incidents.

### **Unprecedented Rise in Hate Incidents Against Asian Americans Since Start of Pandemic**

Asian American communities around the country have experienced an alarming surge in anti-Asian sentiment since the start of the outbreak.<sup>1</sup> Asian Americans report being subjected to hateful tirades, being refused service in public areas, assault, and worse. OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates and partner organizations have received over 1,900 individual reports of hate incidents and crimes against Asian Americans since January alone.<sup>2</sup> These incidents range in severity and are markedly widespread, having been reported across 46 states.

For example, on March 14th, a 47-year-old father and his 10-year-old son were followed and attacked in Queens, NY at a bus stop.<sup>3</sup> The assailant struck the father on the head in front of his son. On the same day, an Asian American family fell victim to a knife attack while shopping at a Sam's Club in Midland, TX.<sup>4</sup> In the San Fernando Valley, CA, a 16-year old Asian American boy was physically assaulted at school after being accused of having the coronavirus.<sup>5</sup> And at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, two Chinese international students were attacked with raw eggs thrown from a moving vehicle.<sup>6</sup> We know these incidents to be merely the tip of the iceberg, as hate crimes have long been severely under-reported and inadequately defined. As these racially-motivated attacks accelerate in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, it becomes increasingly imperative that this nation's leadership ensures the safety and wellbeing of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs).

Hate incidents have been primarily driven by the stigma associated with COVID-19 (as it originated in Hubei Province, China). Assailants may assume that anybody with perceived Asian ancestry might carry the disease. However, *the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) maintains that ethnicity is not a risk factor for transmission of COVID-19.*<sup>7</sup> But continued associations between COVID-19 and Asian people perpetuate age-old stereotypes of Asian people and culture being “dirty” and “diseased” directly enables further attacks on Asian Americans. The renewed prevalence of these stereotypes also contributes to lowered self-esteem and higher stress levels, resulting in negative mental health outcomes across Asian American communities.

## **Hate-Related Health Outcomes**

These hundreds of reported hate incidents, as well as the likely hundreds unreported, create a climate of real and perceived danger and unwelcomeness in one's own home, a common experience among Asian Americans worsened by COVID-related hate. In a time when everyone's mental health is already impacted,<sup>8</sup> many Asian Americans have already reported feeling unsafe walking in their own neighborhood or even leaving their home.<sup>9</sup> Multiple studies demonstrate a link between racial discrimination against Asian Americans and their increased risk of developing mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>10,11</sup> Additionally, it is well documented that Native Hawaiians and Asian Americans, among other people of color, experience higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>12</sup> It is likely that pandemic-related stress will continue to exacerbate existing mental health disparities, as Asian Americans are continuously bombarded with news of businesses and neighborhoods vandalized,<sup>13</sup> hate incidents disproportionately targeting Asian American women,<sup>14</sup> and attempted murders.<sup>15</sup>

We further know that the stress caused by racism and hate incidents can have a cumulative effect on the physical health of people of color on both individual and structural levels.<sup>16</sup> Researchers identify racism and discrimination as one of the root causes of racial health disparities.<sup>17</sup> With Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders already facing significant health inequities due to language barriers,<sup>18</sup> fear of public charge classification,<sup>19</sup> cost barriers, prevalence of diabetes and other chronic diseases,<sup>20</sup> and cultural stigma,<sup>21</sup> it is now more important than ever to reduce the burden of health disparities on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

## **Federal Action is Required**

In addition to directly addressing impacted AAPI mental and physical health outcomes, Congress must also take action at the root of the issue: COVID-driven hate incidents and discrimination targeting Asian Americans. It is clear that Asian American communities around the country need a coordinated effort on the federal level, best achieved through an interagency task force. The task force would prioritize hate incidents against Asian Americans and address the rise in discrimination by issuing clear guidance to schools, employers, local law enforcement, and public administrators. Additionally, the task force would publish ethnicity- and geography-specific disaggregated hate crimes data so that local jurisdictions and allied organizations can best prioritize funds. Federal employees would collaborate across Departments of Health and Human Services, Commerce, Justice, Education, and more to build a comprehensive response to the rise in hate incidents. OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates and hundreds of allied organizations have been advocating for such a task force since March.<sup>22</sup> It is also a priority that House members prioritize the Jabara-Heyer NO HATE Act (Division S, Title X) in the final HEROES Act bill.

On behalf of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders around the country experiencing health disparities due to structural and interpersonal racism, we urge the House Ways and Means Committee to make anti-discrimination provisions a top priority for future federal appropriations.

## Endnotes

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