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Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 23, Number 3, October 2020,
pp. 341-351 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0028>



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STOP AAPI HATE REPORTING CENTER

*A Model of Collective Leadership and
Community Advocacy*

Kara Takasaki

ABSTRACT. The Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center that emerged alongside the COVID-19 pandemic is a model of collaborative partnership between academic researchers and community organizations. The center is a community-driven tool that collects self-reports of racist incidents that Asian Americans have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The center uses the data collected to advocate for policy responses to anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. Recognizing collective effort and prioritizing collaboration for the benefit of the community, instead of competing for individual fame or organizational gains, has been key to the success of this partnership.

Introduction

Since its launch on March 19, 2020, the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center has garnered national media attention for its tracking of hate, violence, adult harassment, discrimination, shunning, and child bullying toward Asians and Asian Americans in the United States. The center's first press release, on March 26, 2020, provided documentation of stories circulating across Asian American communities about the ways people of Asian descent, and Chinese descent specifically, were being targeted abroad and in the United States. The number of documented cases, moreover, raised awareness among media outlets about the backlash.¹

This essay provides a brief overview of how Stop AAPI Hate emerged as a national and global resource for advocacy against anti-Asian racism from a collaboration between university researchers and community activists. As Diane Fujino concludes from her historiography of the Asian American movement, the success of that movement was based in collective leadership, people-powered resources, and ties between the local, national, and international movements.² The success of the Stop AAPI Hate collaboration likewise is based in a tradition of Asian American activism that prioritizes community needs and community experiential knowledge, while also drawing upon the research expertise of Asian American studies scholars.

Establishing the Center

Although Stop AAPI Hate formally began in 2020 as a response to the global pandemic, the three organizations that together founded the project trace their roots to the 1969 Asian American movement in California. Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) was founded in San Francisco in 1969 specifically to “advocate for systemic change that protects immigrant rights, promotes language diversity, and remedies racial and social injustice” for the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.³ The Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (A3PCON) emerged as a federation of new groups forming in the 1970s out of earlier pan-Asian American organizing.⁴ The Asian American Studies department at San Francisco State University (SFSU) was formed as part of the College of Ethnic Studies that resulted from the Third World Liberation Front student strike in 1969.⁵ For this essay, I interviewed the three cofounders of the reporting center, Dr. Russell Jeung, Director Cynthia Choi, Director Manjusha Kulkarni, and a graduate student, Sarah Gowing. I also draw upon my own experience as a volunteer through April 2020. I show that the directors and the work of the center relied on long-standing Asian American organizing tactics such those described in Fujino’s historiographical essay to lay the groundwork for multiple local and national reporting centers that document anti-Asian racism and support for their local Asian American communities.

Professional relationships formed through anti-Asian American advocacy work strengthened the aforementioned connections between organizations and facilitated the rapid response of what would become Stop AAPI Hate. CAA Co-executive director Cynthia Choi previously had worked with Manjusha Kulkarni, executive director of AP3CON, on an initiative to reduce gender-based violence in the Asian American community. Professor Russell Jeung at SFSU had worked with Choi in 2017 to raise awareness

about the racial profiling of Chinese American scientists suspected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the US Department of Justice of spying for the Chinese government.

The political capital accrued in California, as a result of the large Asian American and Pacific Islander population, demonstrated how both organizational and personal relationships were mobilized in January 2020, when the coronavirus began to spread in China. This political capital included a historical awareness of how geopolitical developments in Asia, and US international relations with Asian nations, directly impact Asian Americans. Choi explained,

CAA monitors US-China relations because we know there is a direct impact on Chinese Americans based on the US's relationship with China, and in recent years the relationship has deteriorated. When the coronavirus first hit China, we were monitoring it, because we were concerned about how it was being covered in the US media. Especially the early stories were about the wet market, and consumption of wild animals, and that perhaps this was something the Chinese had brought on to themselves. The reference to the "Chinese virus" or "China virus" worried [CAA] because we were seeing news accounts of hate accidents, where the news reporting was egregious. We thought, "We really need to understand what is happening. What is the extent and magnitude of these incidents?"

With over two-thirds of Asian Americans born outside the United States,⁶ and Asian Americans continually perceived as "perpetual foreigners," Asian American organizations recognized that the spread of the coronavirus in Asia would negatively affect their communities.

Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung first reached out to the State of California to request that it host a reporting center, after learning about a physical assault on an Asian American teenage boy in the San Fernando Valley. The assailant falsely accused the Asian American boy of having the coronavirus because the boy was of Asian descent.⁷ This incident was one of the first hate crimes associated with the coronavirus that was reported widely in the press. In response to this incident, AP3CON set up a local incident report forum, which they shared with their organizations. The widespread media coverage of this assault motivated Choi and Jeung to petition the State's Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to create a reporting center for hate incidents. Choi asked Kulkarni if AP3CON wanted to join this petition. Choi and Kulkarni were familiar with the experience of the government not taking seriously their claims of racial discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans. When the OAG was unable to host the reporting site through

their office, Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung realized that they would need to set up a reporting center themselves.

Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung relied on their previous professional working relationships to mobilize their network of community resources and secure support from their institutions to establish the center. According to Kulkarni, part of the reason they were able to quickly establish a reporting center was because they could quickly access a political infrastructure that the AAPI community had built over the last half-century. Kulkarni explained,

Muslims and Sikhs after 9/11 . . . could not go to their congress members to . . . say we don't want NSA surveillance. It's wrong for you to infiltrate our mosques to get your intelligence . . . If you have that infrastructure, not just 501-c3s but c4s [political action committees] and you're part of that political apparatus . . . they have to take you seriously and you need to mobilize to do that.

In this case, people power and community networks, as opposed to political officials and government agencies, provided the key resources to establish a reporting process and a means to disseminate the reports widely.

Analysis of News Reports

While community organizations, including the Asian American Studies Department at SFSU, relied upon their historical awareness and understanding of community needs to establish the center, Asian American studies scholars also applied their research skills to identify patterns of discrimination and to inform policy decisions. Jeung, a social scientist, recognized that the lack of primary data meant that the center needed to look to news reports to identify acts of racial discrimination. He assembled a team of graduate students to participate in data collection. Sarah Gowing, a master's student in the College of Ethnic Studies at SFSU, and I, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, volunteered with the center. We assisted Jeung with a review of racial discrimination related to the coronavirus in international news coverage. We searched for news stories in English with truncated search terms, including "discriminat*" or "xenophob*" and "COVID-19" or "coronavirus," in ProQuest's Global Newsstream database. From January 28, 2020, to February 24, 2020, we found that government policies and media representations fueled xenophobia, which then led to a spate of attacks against Chinese and other Asian communities.⁸

In the first round of news analysis, we searched for global news coverage of anti-Asian xenophobia related to the coronavirus. We categorized

reports into the following themes: travel bans, school quarantine policy, statements by government or political leaders, objectification of food and masks, canceled events, social media, media framing, a downturn of Asian business, adult shunning or harassment, transportation, child bullying, Asians barred from business. We found 1,034 cases of xenophobia were reported (thirty-seven cases/day). Some high-profile cases were covered by multiple sources. 657 unique cases of xenophobia were identified (twenty-three cases/day).

After seeing a relationship between xenophobic statements from political leaders and the increase of hate incidents, Jeung, Choi, and Kulkarni requested an analysis of US news reports to advocate for AAPI communities in local and state governments. Gowing and I used Newsbank's America's News database with the same search terms from the previous search to run our analysis from February 9, 2020, to March 7, 2020. We found that coronavirus discrimination news increased by 50 percent: from 93 articles in week one to 140 stories in week four. And 471 cases related to xenophobia or discrimination were reported (sixteen cases/day). Asian Americans of all ethnicities, including Southeast Asians and East Asians, faced shunning, harassment, and assaults (12 percent out of all types of hate incidents). We identified 292 new, separate cases of xenophobia or discrimination (ten cases/day). We also identified trends of government and health officials, as well as Asian Americans themselves, speaking out against the high rates of coronavirus-related discrimination. By week four, 29 percent of news articles reported these anti-racism efforts. We also noticed that Chinese and Asian American businesses reported decreases in business (18 percent) presumably from customers afraid that they might contract the coronavirus in Asian establishments or ethnic enclaves.

These reports—put together by a collaboration of the center directors and academic researchers—informed legislative actions, showing how collective leadership galvanizes people-powered labor. Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung made a few preliminary recommendations to the State of California's Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus (APILC). They suggested that elected and government officials advocate for anti-racism efforts and encourage support for a statewide Stop AAPI hate center to monitor and address emerging trends of discrimination. On March 19, 2020, the APILC condemned racist framing of the pandemic and urged California Governor, Gavin Newsom, to have state agencies proactively combat anti-Asian coronavirus discrimination. Six assemblymembers, including David Chiu (D-San Francisco), Rob Bonta (D-Oakland), Ed Chau (D-Monterey Park), Todd Gloria (D-San Diego), Evan Low (D-Silicon Valley), and Phil Ting (D-San Francisco), issued press statements to encourage their constituents to report to the

Stop AAPI Hate Center.⁹ Moreover, Governor Newsom denounced racism against Asian Americans in a press conference the same day.¹⁰

The Reporting Center

During the first week, and with little publicity, the reporting center collected about 100 incidents per day.¹¹ In the first month, the center received almost 1,500 reports.¹² Even as shelter-in-place policies were implemented across the country and AAPIs interacted less with others, reports came in from forty-five states and Washington, DC. Incidents from California and New York constituted over 58 percent of all reports. People reported vandalism, spitting, coughing, stalking, and verbal harassment, especially from people passing each other in transit, in cars, on bikes, or as pedestrians. In places like grocery stores and big-box retailers,¹³ people reported incidents of discrimination from other shoppers and employees. Parents and grandparents with children, elderly adults, and women reported being stalked and verbally harassed, even by other parents with children.

Asian American women were harassed 2.3 times more than Asian American men. Nine percent of respondents were seniors (over the age of sixty). The much higher rate of reported incidents from women than men may show that people already vulnerable due to intersections¹⁴ of age and gender may be easier targets for explicit discrimination. Men may not report as frequently as women because reporting these incidents would be counter to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity¹⁵ that is not subordinate to femininity or other masculinities.

Civil rights violations involving workplace discrimination and being barred from businesses and transportation made up almost 10 percent of all incident reports; 44 percent of incidents took place at private businesses. Choi emphasized the importance of holding people accountable for punishable offenses, like civil rights violations, urging:

Just like the pandemic is a public health crisis addressed with urgency, we need to prepare for the surge in anti-Asian hate . . . because people are limited to going to grocery stores, discrimination and hate are showing up at big-box retailers, grocery, pharmacies . . . Training their employees when witnessing a customer harassing another customer—this would be helpful to everyone for all racist incidents . . . We have reports of employees mistreating AAPI customers and businesses should be held accountable.

One of the difficulties of developing policy responses to the incidents from the reporting center is that most of the incidents did not meet the defini-

tion of a civil rights violation. According to Kulkarni, “hate crimes are hard to prove and harder to prosecute.” Kulkarni explained that

the vast majority of these reports are not actionable. They are hate incidents; they are not crimes. Even a relatively small fraction, around 10 percent that are civil rights violations . . . are going to be in the verbal harassment realm. We have to think long and hard about what the right policy prescriptions are for that—they are not necessarily criminal or civil enforcement.

Choi, Kulkarni, Jeung, and Gowing agreed that the discrimination observed in reports was not new, but that the coronavirus was exposing the racist foundations of a society that had always been present. Gowing said, “If coronavirus is gone, it doesn’t mean anti-Asian racism is not happening. Coronavirus did not create racism; it just exposed what was there.” Reports from the center additionally demonstrated how racial profiling threatens public health. Asians and Asian Americans said that they were afraid both to wear masks and not to wear masks in public because of being racially profiled. AAPI communities must adjust their priorities to build a political infrastructure against racism that manifests itself via pandemics, economic recessions, and geopolitical conflicts. As Jeung cautions, “this anti-Asian hate will only grow as China-bashing becomes a presidential campaign issue, as the economy tanks, as people shelter-in-place longer and as COVID deaths mount . . . Politicians are making China the scapegoat . . . therefore Asian Americans are the innocent bystanders that get victimized.”

Prioritizing Collaboration and the Community

Ironically, the increased visibility of the center threatened to obscure the collective community efforts that made the center possible. Kulkarni described how journalists covering the reporting center wanted to limit the coverage of its collaborative effort of many people. She described a news outlet wanting to diminish the importance of the community partners in its news coverage. Just as with the hate incidents, media framing sought to individualize each event, asking about the personal motivations behind one person’s actions and describing how one person chose to respond. However, Choi, Kulkarni, Jeung, and Gowing all reiterated the importance of giving voice to collective efforts. Gowing noted, “The reporting center would not have been possible without all the help and collective effort of the community organizations, their members, and the larger research team. The goal is to support the AAPI community, not for research purposes but to provide awareness, policy, and educational materials.”

After the reporting center launched, Choi, Kulkarni and Jeung had the opportunity to expand the scope of the center. They ultimately decided to prioritize local community needs, collaboration, and collective recognition over other types of goals. Initially, Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung considered expanding the scope of the center to include resource sheets and a public education and awareness campaign. However, they subsequently discovered that other organizations already had developed successful social media awareness campaigns and produced informational resources with infographics, videos, discussions, and hashtags. Instead of competing with these other organizations, the reporting center maintained its scope and collaborated with whoever wanted to work with them. Jeung described the community-based advocacy as key to the reporting center's success:

This is a great partnership of university resources and community organizations that are grounded in local communities . . . the universities provide the communities with research analysis and the communities help give a voice of the Asian American population to the government. Without the data I don't think we would have gotten the hearing that we've gotten but if we didn't have the community partners, we wouldn't have the access to the community or the government that we've been able to get.

Kulkarni echoed Jeung's sentiment and explained why their community-based partnership was probably more effective than a reporting center housed at the OAG:

Number one is that we're a trusted source. Between our three groups, we've been around for over a hundred years combined . . . Number two, we also know how to do outreach to our communities. It was very important early on for us to do it in their languages. [Law enforcement agency] outreach is poor or nonexistent or they don't do it in their language. They expect everyone to do it in English. Number three, they're not always trusted . . . because when you have public charge, when you have targeted deportations and detention, when you have the backlash of 9/11,¹⁶ when you have internment in concentration camps, those people are not going to trust you.

While prioritizing local needs, the reporting center decided to collaborate to help start other local reporting centers. For example, the reporting center analyzes all reports it receives, but promotes itself primarily in California. Choi, Kulkarni, and Jeung have worked with organizations from other cities and states to start their own local reporting centers because they believed that having local reporting centers would increase reporting

by working with trusted local partners, and that local partners would best know how to address local constituent needs. By being a people-powered center instead of housed in a government entity, the center enjoys a flexibility that allows it to use its local knowledge to address community needs in the state, but also engages Asian American advocacy nationally by helping other states create their own centers in generating national reports.

Next Steps

The success of Stop AAPI Hate as a clearinghouse for reports about pandemic-related anti-Asian racism has resulted in expansion of the center's reliance on people power and national networks of Asian American studies scholars. Although the AP3CON website initially housed the website, the constant media coverage of the center, the demand for its reporting, and the growth of its research team indicated that the center would need its own website to represent the collaborative nature of the center accurately. Encouraged by the national media coverage of the reporting center, California funders and other organizations, like the Jeremy Lin Foundation,¹⁷ offered financial support to sustain and expand the center's advocacy efforts.

The research team also has expanded beyond California into a national endeavor that draws upon a national network of Asian American studies scholars and their expertise.¹⁸ At the time of writing this overview, Professor Melissa Borja at the University of Michigan and Professor Karen Umemoto at UCLA, along with fifteen student researchers scattered throughout the United States, split up the tasks of data analysis from the reporting center, continued news reports, and social media analysis. Since May, even more Asian American studies researchers across the United States have joined the center to assist with data analysis and advocacy efforts. National reports also reflect changes nationwide in responding to the pandemic. For example, before states reopened, and because Asians and Asian Americans still needed to access certain businesses during stay-at-home orders, Jeung and Gowing began to study how businesses were managing racist incidents and whether and how law enforcement was involved in these reports.

Conclusion

By choosing to be responsive to local community needs and relying on people power, the center's long-term sustainability is based on the ability of its volunteers and community to keep investing in the center's purpose. The multiple impacts of Stop AAPI Hate are not yet fully known, but its

success reminds us of what can happen when community organizations, academic institutions, and Asian American studies scholars work together.

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