

WGBH logo

GBH 89.7

Listen Live: Boston's Local NPR

GBH NEWS

LOCAL

Asian Community Leaders Say More Policing Is Wrong Answer To Racist Violence



A pedestrian crosses the street at the entrance to Chinatown in Boston on April 24, 2020.

Michael Dwyer / AP

By Angela Yang

March 19, 2021

SHARE

The killing of six Asian women in Atlanta this week has spurred a national conversation about rising violence against Asian Americans, but community leaders in Boston say they fear the response will be to deploy more police in affected communities, which may do more harm than good.

“We know that the police structure and the police state do not keep our folks safe,” said Carolyn Chou, director of Greater Boston’s Asian American Resource Workshop. “We know that because deportation and [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] is part of the policing infrastructure.”

Asian communities can have large populations of undocumented immigrants, and some local law enforcement agencies work with ICE. Advocacy groups expressed outrage this week after President Joe Biden’s administration deported 33 refugees to Vietnam.

The shooter in Tuesday’s attacks targeted people at three massage parlors, and **many of the women who work** at Asian massage businesses are undocumented

“They really have no protection, nowhere to turn to,” said Angie Liou, director of Boston’s Asian Community Development Corporation. “And I think the fact that the targeted women were all massage parlor workers, it highlights the fact that their position in society is the most marginalized.”

Language access also poses a barrier to successful interactions with the police, according to Chou and Liou. Victims of violence in immigrant communities are already less likely to contact police. They become even more reluctant if they cannot speak English and cannot communicate with officers in their native language.

Chou and Liou said that a better way to protect Asian communities is to address threats with culturally-sensitive solutions, such as language accessibility resources, mental health services and interracial dialog about racism.

The longer-term solution to improving safety is stability, community organizers say.

Many neighborhoods with high Asian American populations, like Chinatown and Dorchester, are also increasingly gentrified. The financial hardships imposed by the pandemic, along with rising property values, threaten to push residents out of traditionally Asian enclaves.

“People are being forced from their homes,” Liou said. “And the loss of jobs that we have seen from the fallout of COVID is devastating to our communities, disproportionately.”

Local governments can help by prioritizing job creation and affordable housing in gentrified areas, Liou said, along with funding grassroots organizations that can work to provide the resources Asian communities need.

In a statement Thursday, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said the women killed in Atlanta on Tuesday were victims of misogyny and racism.

“Let’s be very clear: This wasn’t a man with a sex addiction ‘having a bad day,’” she said. “This was a murderous, horrific hate crime. We need to treat it that way instead of making excuses for white violence and domestic terrorism.”

Arisa Oh, an associate professor of history at Boston College, said Asians have been treated as aliens and outcasts in the U.S. for 150 years.

The first federal law to restrict immigration, the Page Act of 1875, effectively prohibited Chinese women from entering the U.S. It was justified by the assumption that they would be brought in for prostitution.

“Not only are they racially alien, but they’re also totally sexually deviant,” Oh said. “That’s as un-American as you can be, that you’re so different from Americans that there’s no way that you could possibly assimilate and therefore you shouldn’t even set step foot on American soil.”

The Chinese Exclusion Act, signed into law in 1882, shut Chinese laborers out of the U.S. for more than half a century. It remains the only law ever passed in the U.S. to ban a specific ethnic group from entering the country.

In later years, during wars in the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam, U.S. soldiers regularly solicited sex workers in Asia. The association of Asian women with sex work, Oh said, followed servicemen home and continued to be reinforced through stereotypes in Hollywood — contributing to the fetishization of these women.

Oh said non-Asian people who aim to truly help Asian Americans can “take the burden on themselves” to learn about the history of Asian oppression in the U.S., and to listen to Asian voices when they speak about their experiences.

Paul Watanabe, director of the University of Massachusetts Institute for Asian American Studies, said he had braced for a spike in anti-Asian racism as soon as he heard news of an infectious illness that was first discovered in China. To him, these sentiments are simply another turn in the cycle of history.

“It's not at all surprising that people in the United States might take a view that Asian Americans are not welcomed, that they're responsible for actions that are not their own,” Watanabe said.

“And the imposition of collective guilt on a community was reflective of them placing my parents and my brother in a concentration camp during World War II,” he added, referring to the United States' internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Generations after the first wave of Asian immigration hit the U.S., Watanabe said, Asian Americans remain confined to a foreigner status. Regardless of actual family history, he said, the perpetual assumption around a person who appears Asian is that they have just arrived from an Asian country.

“This so-called 'nation of immigrants' set aside a particular status for those who are not white, which included Asian Americans,” Watanabe said. “And that, from the outset, indicated a different status for people who happen to be yellow as opposed to white.”

Angela Yang is a GBH News intern.

Tagged:

RACE

Support for GBH is provided by:
Advertisement