

Proposal for Supporting Pittsburgh's Asian American Pacific Islander Community

Author's Statement

This proposal was written for my final paper in my Writing about Public Problems class (76-108), instructed by Dr. Barbara George. The assignment challenged students to propose feasible solutions to a real-world issue they cared about. As a member of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community that grew up around many Asian families dedicated to maintaining a thriving community through cultural activities and events, I was dismayed to find that the Asian American citizens and students in Pittsburgh hardly had a voice. After the disastrous effects of the pandemic on racial issues associating AAPI with COVID-19, there were upticks in hate crimes and abuse, none of which were addressed with active solutions by the City of Pittsburgh. After surveying fellow AAPI students at Carnegie Mellon, it was clear that there was a lack of awareness and resources for connecting with their cultures and dealing with targeted hate. I chose to write up this proposal in hopes of shining a light on these issues while bringing up possible solutions that could improve the lives of everyone involved with or are part of the AAPI of Pittsburgh.

- Vivian

Action Items

The city of Pittsburgh should communicate specific goals to actively curb or stop Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate crimes and abuse. Without dedicated Asian community organizations in the city of Pittsburgh, reporting hate crimes and connecting with others of Asian descent can be difficult. This is especially unsatisfactory during COVID-19, where dealing with anti-Asian hate was as difficult as handling the pandemic itself (Tessler et al. 637). Due to the ever-rising Asian community in Pittsburgh, I'm proposing that, along with the eventual establishment of AAPI community spaces, the city of Pittsburgh must take initial steps to continuously raise awareness about anti-Asian hate and increase accessibility to resources for its AAPI population.

Background and Context

A Community Lacking Support

Across the country, there is an issue with the increase of racially-motivated hate against members of the AAPI community as COVID-19 spread through the United States. Hate crimes and abuse increased by 339% in 2021 compared to 2020, while many cities in the country surpassed record numbers of total hate crimes (Yam). However, these only made up around 11% of reported hate crimes. Compared to the incredibly negative sentiment against AAPI, this relatively low statistic shows the lack of national resources for reporting abuse.

While data on targeted hate crimes in Pittsburgh isn't available, there are 17,000 AAPI who currently lack the necessary resources to deal with racially-motivated hate, implications of hate crimes, and scarcity of a supportive Asian community and awareness. This metric is only growing as more AAPI move into Allegheny County, specifically to Pittsburgh, its largest city: in fact, the Pittsburgh Asian community has grown 47.3% since the last census in 2020 (Akintola).

Reports in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* from interviewed AAPI undergraduate and graduate students, professors, and other adults regarding bad-mouthing or hate crimes show that all attacks came from strangers approaching AAPI in public (Wyman). This implies that aggression and crimes were solely based on appearance, not personality or gender. It's blatant racism, and Pittsburgh hasn't done enough to address it or take actions against it.

Law and Policy

While there are existing groups who advocate against these issues such as Stop AAPI Hate, they are centered around cities with large AAPI populations, which doesn't include Pittsburgh. Without a centralized and organized group in Pittsburgh specifically dealing with AAPI hate crimes, there isn't a push for activism at a local level beyond Welcoming Pittsburgh, an initiative of Pittsburgh focused on inclusion of foreign residents (Akintola and Kline-Costa). This newer initiative is well-intentioned, but is a small strategy for various immigrant groups, and the Office of Immigration Affairs has yet to focus on expanding its reach beyond spreading awareness.

Resolutions and laws passed at national levels, such as H Res 151 and HR 1843 (of COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, S 937) from Representative Grace Meng that condemned anti-Asian sentiment,

don't have a huge impact on Pittsburgh specifically, which is a historically segregated and white-dominated city ("Grace Meng"). This, in addition to the fact that the City of Pittsburgh hasn't yet established a racial equity partnership for AAPI, shows that Pittsburgh hasn't quite condemned anti-Asian sentiment the way federal resolutions intended.

At the national level, a memorandum from President Biden condemning racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against AAPI stated that "the Federal Government must recognize that it has played a role in furthering these xenophobic sentiments" and that the government must work to actively combat hate to "ensure that all members of AAPI communities are treated with dignity and equity" (Biden). As both Meng and Biden note, the nation must protect AAPI and actively combat racism that's risen specifically against them.

Why Awareness and Resources Matter

There is an absence of tackling hate crimes against AAPI, which has factored into the statistic that the highest rates of non-reported attacks are from AAPI. As seen in Figure A, reported anti-Asian attacks are lowest in comparison to other racial groups.

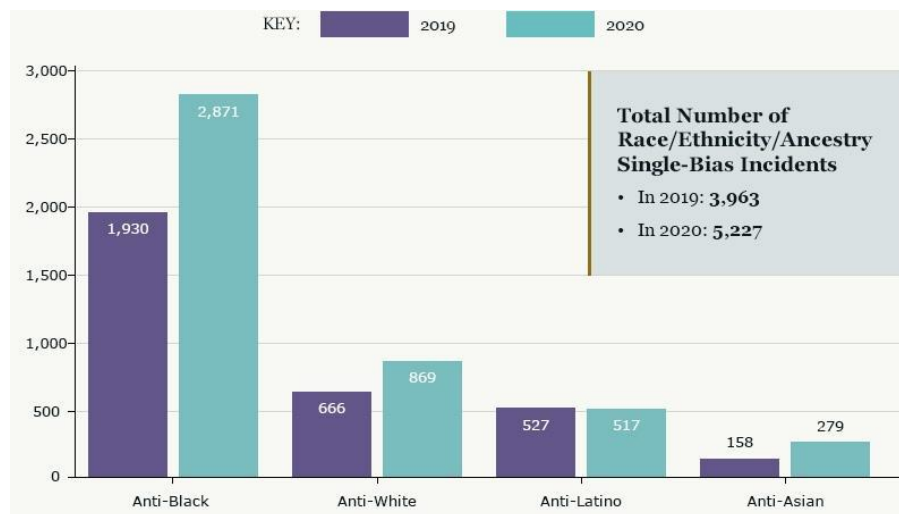


Figure A: The United States Department of Justice, 2020 Hate Crimes

However, in correlation with the way some have unfairly framed Asian populations as causing COVID-19, it's clear that the national tally of anti-Asian attacks should be high. Figure A isn't exactly a true number of attacks, but a representation of which groups are most likely to report, which the FBI has already acknowledged. Many Asians know that "these crimes are often significantly underreported and under-prosecuted," and because of this sentiment, some are already pushing for heavier prosecution if an attack is identified as a hate crime (Ladika 1).

Pittsburgh has a much smaller AAPI demographic than other large American cities, which is a reason there's no official movement for change and advocacy. This can be compared to a city like New York City (NYC), which sports a diverse racial demographic and larger AAPI population than Pittsburgh. NYC has had multiple movements, groups formed, and legislations advocating for AAPI, even utilizing the New York City Office for Preventing Hate Crimes (OPHC), which created the Stop AAPI Hate Interagency Working Group in response to the

rising hate crimes and negative sentiment against AAPI in 2020 (NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice). With protests, specific Asian advocacy groups, and mayor-sanctioned spreading of awareness, NYC improved in AAPI solidarity and reports for total hate crimes, showing that awareness and resources indeed helped AAPI in NYC, implying that it would help AAPI in Pittsburgh as well.

Across the country, the Asian American Research Initiative facilitated the data collection of implementing Asian American Studies (AAS) and Ethnic Studies including AAS in the K-12 curriculum throughout American schools. With the administration of awareness-specific education, the root cause for hate crimes (basic racist ideals) will hopefully diminish and lead to the lack of hate crimes. This would be a huge resource that helps facilitate not just today's AAPI, but future generations of AAPI as well.

Primary Issue

The issue I aim to address is the lack of support, resources, and community spaces for the AAPI community in the city of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh lacks the numbers in AAPI that other cities like NYC and San Francisco (where a protest is shown in Figure B below) have.



Figure B: Getty, San Francisco CA - February 29

Pittsburgh has never seen this amount of support for its Asian residents, even at a smaller level. To residents that came from cities like San Francisco, Pittsburgh was “a totally different world” when it came to Asian communities (Kline-Costa). The city hasn’t garnered enough awareness for the traumas of the AAPI community in response to the rise of hate crimes and discrimination during and post-COVID.

Enduring “pervasive stay-at-home orders and calls for social distancing, as well as the disruptions to every facet of our lives of COVID-19” means it’s difficult to connect with others, and this rings true for AAPI who may want to seek help in a time when the world seems to be against them (Tessler et al. 636-637). The absence of a sense of community is detrimental to general safety for AAPI in Pittsburgh as well, and had there been people dedicated to solving this in Pittsburgh, the population would feel considerably safer.

Survey of AAPI Carnegie Mellon University Undergraduates

In my survey administered to several anonymous AAPI students at Carnegie Mellon University, responses held sentiment of benefitting from establishing community spaces (like Chinatown, Koreatown, or Little Saigon) or additional spaces on campus. A few responses that included keywords fitting a necessity for new and safe physical spaces are:

- *"I would definitely love these new spaces and spend a lot of time in the businesses and communities associated with them."*
- *"Yes; more inclusivity and sense of belonging"*
- *"More Asian restaurants on campus to represent our Asian demographic. If the student body is majority AAPI, I'd argue our food places should be majority Asian cuisine as well, or at least give us more selection."*
- *"Having spaces would be helpful, especially since there is such a small Asian population in Pittsburgh."*

When asked about how they felt about the lack and decline of AAPI spaces in Pittsburgh, responses were upset, acknowledging the hardships of underrepresentation. Some below were chosen with keywords that corresponded to strong emotions:

- *"It has been extremely difficult for me to be able to feel connected to my culture. There is only one store for my food, and even less for other Asian subcultures. It's upsetting to see different parts of our collective Asian heritage disappear outside of campus."*
- *"Awful, I wish there was a space to interact with people like me in Pittsburgh."*
- *"A bit sad to see, especially due to the large AAPI population at CMU."*
- *"It honestly makes me sad, especially since I come from a place (NJ/NYC) that has a lot of spaces like these that I adore."*

Other responses included not knowing about any existing community spaces (as there are none) and wishing there were central spots for their culture's cuisine. This shows that a sense of belonging in Pittsburgh is also a vital issue for AAPI students.

Interview with Akintola and Kline-Costa

For current awareness and resource accessibility, I conducted an interview with the Pittsburgh Manager of Immigration Affairs, Feyisola Akintola, and Sergeant Tiffany Kline-Costa from the Community Engagement Office of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, to discuss possibilities for implementing clear resources for the AAPI community to locate and use.

Akintola emphasized safety for incoming AAPI citizens who "may not know who to turn to in certain traumatic circumstances," and mentioned several microcosms of unofficial Filipinos and Vietnamese groups in Allegheny County. These groups gather for events and discuss happenings in their communities, and their organizations could be the format for future official AAPI groups in Pittsburgh.

There is, however, a generational gap regarding community spaces. According to results from my survey, the desire for AAPI community spaces was high, and I initially proposed the future establishment of concentrated Asian cuisine spaces in downtown Pittsburgh. Yet, Akintola noted that some AAPI community leaders wanted to push their "integration into an American society" and considered the creation of community spaces as isolated rather than inviting. Then, any

proposed Asian cuisine and cultural businesses should be more sparse than an official community space to compromise between AAPI generations of Pittsburgh.

Kline-Costa, who's worked for years to improve the general Pittsburgh population as a liaison between the community and the police department, explained how hate crimes were processed: they abided by the Pennsylvania crimes code, and "all the cases are referred to the FBI... who can bring more imposing federal charges compared to state or local charges." She proposed an informative flier from the bureau with information about the attacks and statistics of hate crimes against AAPI. It would be distributed to their police youth academy and be a page on the City of Pittsburgh website to raise awareness for the lack of attention about this demographic issue. Kline-Costa was aware that "the most unreported hate crimes of any demographic were from Asians," and to combat this and convince citizens that assaults were worth reporting at a local level, this flier would be a start for building trust in police to take action.

Solutions

Proposed Items

I propose that the city of Pittsburgh should currently put their energies towards bringing AAPI together with the implementation of organized AAPI community organizations. These groups would take input from many ages and Asian demographics (like the Filipino and Vietnamese groups mentioned above) about the future of Pittsburgh from AAPI perspectives.

Addressing hate directly with these groups, distributing Kline-Costa's proposed informative fliers, and spreading awareness about resources and support is of paramount importance in this proposal.

Regarding establishment of community spaces, this is a longer term goal not covered in this proposal. Larger infrastructure and business ventures are harder to detail, though I believe spaces like Chinatown, Koreatown, or Little Saigon, should eventually be created in Pittsburgh. AAPI restaurants and businesses of all cultures should be encouraged by the city.

Implementation and Feasibility

Informational Flier

Kline-Costa's proposed flier is being drafted and will go through multiple rounds of peer review including my input, and will be released when finished. This will comprise of:

- Exactly how to report hate crimes
- The follow up: what happens after you report a hate crime
- Hate crime statistics, local and national

Once this flier is finalized, the main way information can be shared is by communicating current initiatives more clearly with the expectation that more would be planned. For example, the City of Pittsburgh can add information to their website (pittsburghpa.gov) quite quickly, with resources for supporting victims of violent attacks and trauma, such as:

- Month 1: Therapy and support group contacts
- Month 2: Kline-Costa's informative flier
- Month 3: Calendar of upcoming events involving AAPI
- Month 4: Hate crime testimonies/stories

City of Pittsburgh Initiatives

The City of Pittsburgh itself is lacking in partnerships with its AAPI population. For example, they have racial equity partnerships with its relatively larger African American community and a few resources for this community. It's entirely possible to conduct racial equity partnerships with other racial demographics as well, including AAPI. This would likely take around two month's time for establishment and communication.

The NYC initiatives and movements discussed in the Background and Context section are able to be implemented in Pittsburgh as well, including the creation of AAPI organizations working with the NYC mayor's office and the organization of public protests and movements. Based on the movements in NYC, there exists a format for the development of groups in Pittsburgh. This would take months to years for proper establishment, but the City of Pittsburgh can update their website with information about the developing organizations. Then, with a growing population of involved AAPI in these groups, awareness naturally spreads.

Future Plans

Along with the creation of AAPI groups, it may be helpful to create a task force specifically meant to evaluate how NYC and other cities' initiatives worked. Then there may be an implementation of similar methods (education, movements for awareness, legalities) to Pittsburgh. This task force's work can truly begin the conversation of change in our city. After they assess how to properly implement initiatives, AAPI groups can then coordinate with the task force to examine the needs of local communities.

The regional scope of the task force (although out of the range of this proposal) would add to the local scope of the AAPI groups. They would step up to pre-plan and bring a well-rounded perspective to the future of Pittsburgh regarding AAPI hate, racist hate attacks in general, and cultural establishments.

For discussion between age groups regarding community spaces, the creation of established community spaces for AAPI must be considered, but it will ultimately take a much longer time and more awareness for concrete work to begin. Creating these groups can start with the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs led by Akintola (who expressed interest in this idea and can make it happen), and spreading awareness about new AAPI organizations by promoting them through online and in-person means.

Conclusion

The issue of creating a community organization for AAPI in Pittsburgh is important and necessary due to the damage done by hate crimes on the community. Asians are being hurt physically, emotionally, socially, and some even killed, by people in their own city, and they deserve a space within their city to feel safe and deal with their traumas together.

The problematic past influencing historical racism takes generations to decompose, but recognizing that the AAPI community deserves resources and awareness for the effects of hate crimes is important and necessary. With the continuous addition of resources about trauma, reporting hate crimes, and community updates and events, there would hopefully be a rise in reports for racially-motivated hate and a better sense of community and belonging for Asians of all ages in Pittsburgh.

With the help of officials like Akintola and Kline-Costa dedicated to making this happen, there's no doubt that with the increase of AAPI in Pittsburgh, the safety in the city for AAPI and the general population of Pittsburgh will rise as well.

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