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Correspondence

Xenophobia due to the coronavirus outbreak – A letter to the editor in response to “the socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19): A review”


Dear Editor,

I read with great interest the article by Nicola et al. on the socio-economic consequences of the 2019 novel coronavirus outbreak [1]. They highlighted key economic implications such as the direct impact on primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. Socially, they illustrated the impact on domestic abuse and the gaming industry. This letter builds on the social impact of coronavirus by covering the important global rise in xenophobia towards people of Chinese and East Asian ethnic origin. Similar phenomena have occurred in other disease pandemics; pogroms against Jewish communities during the bubonic plague in the 14th century, stigmatisation of the LGBTQ + community in the HIV outbreak of the 1980s and recently, xenophobia towards African and Caribbean communities during the 2014 Ebola outbreak.

Xenophobia has spread much like the virus itself, affecting those not just of Chinese descent but to those of any East Asian origin or nationality. Although this has been a global phenomenon, there has been a particularly large surge of racist incidents towards East Asian people in the Anglosphere where there are large Asian minority groups. This letter highlights some examples of overt physical hate crimes, as well as more subtle incidents of stigmatisation faced by people of various East Asian ethnicities and nationalities.

One of the first reported incidents in the United Kingdom was in early March 2020, when a *Singaporean* international student was physically assaulted in central London; this was a completely unprovoked attack that the perpetrators justified by saying "we do not want your coronavirus in our country". The victim required reconstructive surgery for his injuries. In the same week, a *Vietnamese* art curator in London was dropped from an art exhibition, having been told that her presence alone would increase anxiety to those attending the event. She was told that her Asian ethnicity meant that she would be perceived as a carrier of coronavirus [2]. Given that these incidents happened *before* lockdown measures were introduced, it suggests that repeat incidents will likely occur when lockdown measures are gradually eased.

In the United States of America, attacks have occurred to Asians as a whole regardless of whether they are Chinese or not. Several incidents have occurred throughout the country since *January*, including defacement of *Korean* and *Vietnamese* restaurants, as well as a rise in physical assaults and verbal slurs [3]. Anti-Chinese sentiment in the USA was significantly exacerbated when President Trump described the coronavirus as a “Chinese virus”; secretary of State Mike Pompeo has also made claims that the virus was released from a lab in Wuhan [4].

Ostracisation of East Asian minority groups from wider society has manifested from this rise in xenophobia. Whilst this letter has highlighted just a few of many cases in the Anglosphere, these incidents

have occurred all over the world. In order to reduce stigma to Asian minority groups, wider education must be a governmental priority to decrease the spread of misinformation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Many people have sought to blame Asian communities for the huge economic ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic; this has been illustrated by the 900% rise in cyber abuse to both Chinese and non-Chinese Asian people [5]. When lockdown measures are eased, this anti-Asian sentiment will still be prevalent. Due to the rapid escalation of the coronavirus outbreak and the implementation of lockdown measures across the world, almost no formal statistics have been released on racially motivated hate crimes specifically due to coronavirus. Future analysis of these statistics will prove vital in order to combat the stigma faced by Asian minority groups. The mental and physical health of Asian communities will continue to be at risk as a consequence of racial prejudice surrounding the coronavirus outbreak. It is therefore especially important for healthcare and social services to adequately prepare for a spike in admissions as a manifestation of racially motivated hate crime towards Asian minority groups.

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Shuliang Oliver Cheng
University College London Medical School, London, United Kingdom
E-mail address: oliver.cheng.15@ucl.ac.uk.