



Language Has Consequences

Violence against Asian Americans comes from the same place as discrimination against people living with HIV.

February 16, 2021 By [Paul Kawata](#)

As the executive director of NMAC, I believe my job is to stand up for all people of color. To not show bias, my alerts usually don't focus on Asians. However, as an old Asian Gay man, I am deeply concerned about the substantial increase in violence against Asian Americans. I lay blame at the feet of former President Trump who insisted on calling the COVID-19 virus the China virus. Asian Americans Advancing Justice just reported more than 3,000 Asian hate incidents since April 2020, mostly targeting the elderly.

As we know all too well in the HIV community, stigmatizing language has real consequences. HIV stigma puts people in prisons, stops people living with HIV from seeking medical care, and is a barrier to asking for PrEP. For too many people, only fags get AIDS (fags is used for illustrative purposes only). Our efforts to end HIV seem to be prioritizing a medical solution and misses too many of these challenges. The communities we need to reach to end HIV daily face levels of stigma and discrimination that are unimaginable. They/we live in a world that hates us because of the color of our skin, our accent, gender or gender identity, or who we love.

Violence against Asian Americans comes from the same place as discrimination against people living with HIV. It's about fear of the unknown that turns to hate. It's about too many "dog whistles" from politicians with rhetoric that turns people who are different into people who are bad. White Americans can never fully comprehend what it means to be walking while Black, driving while Asian, standing on the corner while transgender, or talking while Latinx, to be hated not because of anything you've done, but because you exist.

Trauma from the last four years cannot be underestimated. Hopefully, we are on the other side, but the pain and hurt are still very real. There is little trust in government. As a result, solutions must come from the communities we are trying to reach. Our work must be more than sensitivity trainings. We are way past helping White people learn how to talk to People of Color. That is why NMAC is pushing our movement to hire leaders from the communities hardest hit by HIV. There is a huge difference between a sensitivity training on race versus hiring a person of color to be the new CEO, health department director, or to lead the federal efforts to end HIV. How many "out" transgender leaders work in the federal government? Dr. Rachel Levine's nomination is historic and hopefully will translate into a significant increase in the diversity of federal HIV leaders.

The January 6th riots showed how easy it is to manipulate the masses in numbers that I still can't

comprehend. Truth doesn't seem to matter. I wonder if it is worth the time and effort to try and change the hearts and minds of people who hate us. Can we convince MAGA believers that Asians are not responsible for the COVID pandemic? What about convincing them that gay men are not responsible for the AIDS epidemic? Both epidemics started with a virus, but ended with stigma, discrimination, and death. It's time to build real solutions that aren't window dressing and come from the communities we need to reach.

Yours in the struggle,

Paul Kawata

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