

FEATURE

The long, ugly history of anti-Asian racism and violence in the U.S.



Cpl. George Bush, left, holds the youngest child of Shigeho Kitamoto, center, as she and her children are forced to leave Bainbridge Island, Wash., in 1942. They were sent to an internment camp. (AP)

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A gunman [killed eight people](#) at three Atlanta-area spas Tuesday night; six of the victims were women of Asian descent, sparking fears among advocacy groups that the killings may have been racially motivated.

Anti-Asian hate crimes have spiked 150 percent since the pandemic began, according to [a recent study](#).

[Suspect charged with killing 8 in Atlanta-area shootings that targeted Asian-run spas](#)

People of Asian descent have been living in the United States for more than 160 years, and have long been the target of bigotry. Here is a look at the violence and racism that Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have faced since before the Civil War.

People v. Hall

Chinese immigrants began coming to the United States in significant numbers in the 1850s, largely to California and other Western states, to

work in mining and railroad construction. There was high demand for these dangerous, low-wage jobs, and Chinese immigrants were willing to fill them. Almost immediately, the racist trope of “Asians coming to steal White jobs” was born. And in 1854, the California Supreme Court reinforced racism against Asian immigrants in *People v. Hall*, ruling that people of Asian descent could not testify against a White person in court, virtually guaranteeing that Whites could escape punishment for anti-Asian violence. In this case, it was murder: George Hall shot and killed Chinese immigrant Ling Sing, and the testimony of witnesses was rejected because they were also Asian.

Chinese massacre of 1871

On Oct. 24, 1871, following the murder of a White man caught in the crossfire between rival Chinese groups, more than 500 White and Hispanic rioters surrounded and attacked Los Angeles’ small Chinese community, centered in a red-light district known as Negro Alley. At least 17 Chinese men and boys were lynched, including a prominent local doctor. They were hanged across several downtown sites, anywhere the rioters could find a beam to string a noose. Eight of the rioters were eventually convicted of manslaughter, but their convictions were overturned. No one else was ever punished.

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

Economic woes in the 1870s spawned another spike in anti-Asian racism and scapegoating. In 1882, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese immigration for 20 years. President Chester A. Arthur vetoed it, but then signed another version with a 10-year ban. The first law placing a restriction on immigration to the United States, it was extended for more than 60 years before it was repealed in 1943.

[‘Cheap slaves’: The ugly history of the Chinese Exclusion Act](#)



An 1885 print depicts Chinese immigrant miners working for the Union Pacific Coal Company fleeing from armed White miners who blamed the Chinese miners for taking their jobs. (Library of Congress)

Rock Springs massacre, 1885

In Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, long-standing aggression against Chinese miners exploded in September 1885, when 100 to 150 vigilantes surrounded and attacked Chinese mineworkers, [killing 28 people](#) and burning 79 homes. Hundreds fled to a nearby town, then were tricked into boarding a train they were told would take them to safety in San Francisco. Instead, it took them back to Rock Springs, where they were forced back into the mine. Federal troops stayed for 13 years to impose order.

San Francisco plague outbreak

In 1900, an outbreak of bubonic plague struck San Francisco. It is likely that the outbreak began with a ship from Australia, but since the first stateside victim was a Chinese immigrant, the whole community was blamed for it. Overnight, the city’s Chinatown was surrounded by police, preventing anyone but White residents from going in or out. Chinese residents were also subjected to home searches and property destruction by force. The episode was a prelude to the racism that has been aimed at Asian Americans during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, which former President Donald Trump frequently called “the China virus,” “the Wuhan virus,” and the “Kung Flu.”

U.S. government film sought to justify Japanese internment camps during World War II

The 1943 film "Japanese Relocation" tried to justify the government's decision to move people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast to internment camps. (U.S. Office of War Information)

Japanese internment during World War II

By the 1940s, tens of thousands of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans had built lives in the United States. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II, the U.S. government forced all of them into internment camps for the duration of the war over suspicions they might aid the enemy. Conditions in the camps were extreme, blazing hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. No spies were ever found. When they were freed, many returned to find their homes and businesses vandalized or confiscated. In 1988, survivors received a presidential apology and \$20,000 each in [reparations](#).

[Secret use of census info helped send Japanese Americans to internment camps in WWII](#)

Vietnamese shrimpers and the KKK

At the close of the Vietnam War, the United States resettled many Vietnamese fleeing the communists. In Texas, many of those immigrants took up shrimping. "We like the weather, we like the shrimping, we like a chance to start our own businesses," Nguyen Van Nam told The Washington Post in 1984. As they worked hard and began to dominate the industry, the trope of Asians coming to take White jobs returned, and this time it was wearing a white hood. Ku Klux Klan leader Louis Beam trained his members in [commando-style attacks](#); they patrolled the waters in their regalia and set boats owned by Vietnamese people on fire.

The murder of Vincent Chin



Lily Chin holds a photograph of her son Vincent, 27, who was beaten to death on June 23, 1982. Richard Sheinwald/AP Photo

Vincent Chin was out on the town. On June 19, 1982, the 27-year-old Chinese American was about to marry and was celebrating with friends in Detroit. Then two White men picked a bar fight, blaming Chin for "the Japanese" taking their auto-industry jobs. Outside the bar, the men beat Chin with a baseball bat. He died several days later. His assailants took a manslaughter plea bargain, which carried a possible sentence of 15 years. Instead, the judge gave the men probation and a \$3,000 fine. The lenient sentence outraged and galvanized the Asian American community, helping to unite them across ethnic lines and work for civil rights.

The L.A. riots

Tensions had been building between the Black and Korean American communities in Los Angeles for years. Then came the April 29, 1992, acquittal of the police officers caught on camera beating Rodney King. As the city erupted in riots, Korean American businesses became targets; thousands were damaged during the unrest.

[*'Burn, baby, burn': What I saw as a black journalist covering the L.A. riots 25 years ago*](#)

9/11-inspired hatred

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, hate crimes spiked against Muslims and

those perceived to be Muslim, including people of South Asian descent. Only four days after the attacks, aircraft mechanic Frank Silva Roque murdered Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American gas station owner originally from India, whom Roque mistook for Muslim. The post-9/11 period led to greater awareness and advocacy between the South and East Asian communities.

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