

State lawmakers introduce bills to combat anti-Asian hate crimes

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California lawmakers introduced two bills in the state Legislature Feb. 17 aimed at combating the surge of hate crimes targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The web portal Stop AAPI Hate, which allows victims of hate crime to self report incidents in one of several Asian languages, has logged over 9,000 reports since March 2020. More than 12 percent of the incidents involved physical violence.

Forty percent of the reports came from California, which is home to the largest AAPI population in the US.

Community advocates have blamed former President Donald Trump who targeted China for allegedly infecting the world with Covid-19. Trump repeatedly called coronavirus the “Chinese flu,” “Kung Flu,” and other racial epithets.

Women were the targets in more than two-thirds of reported incidents. In the past four weeks, two fatal attacks have occurred in New York city: Christina Yuna Lee, who was stabbed to death by a stranger who followed her into her Chinatown apartment; and Michelle Alyssa Go, who was pushed in front of a Times Square subway train.

Manjusha Kulkarni, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, said 73 of Asian Americans who responded to a survey expressed more fear of being the target of a hate crime than being infected by Covid.

At a news conference Feb. 8 — organized by Stop AAPI Hate and the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative — Sen. Dave Min, who represents portions of Orange County in the California state Senate,

said: “Violent acts against AAPIs have been skyrocketing since the pandemic. These attacks suggest we are not Americans, even if we have lived here all our lives.”

“We have to take a hard look at why these crimes are happening,” he said, lauding the portal Stop AAPI Hate for documenting such crimes, so that the issue could substantively be addressed with data.

Min has introduced SB 1161, which seeks to protect women riding public transit from facing harassment or violence on 10 of the state’s largest transit agencies, including the Los Angeles Metro, BART, Orange County Transportation Authority, and San Francisco MUNI.

SB 1161 would require transit agencies to collect and study data about harassment commuters face while riding public transport and to develop policies which mitigate such harassment.

Cynthia Choi, co-executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action and co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate said at the Feb. 8 news briefing: “Harassment on public transportation has been normalized. As women walk to and from transit stops, they are often the targets of street harassment which includes whistling, derogatory language, and verbal harassment.”

“This limits our freedom of movement, and limits job opportunities to daylight hours,” she said, adding: “My own experience was that taking public transportation came with risks.”

Annie Lee, director of policy for CAA noted that many transit agencies in California do have policies in place to address harassment, but fewer than 10 percent of such cases are reported. “Women are often embarrassed to report,” she said.

“From the first mile to the last, no Californian should feel unsafe traveling to work, to school, or anywhere,” Min said in a statement. “This bill will help restore confidence in the safety of public transportation so that everyone — especially women and minorities — can ride from one place to the next without fear.”

Assemblywomen Mia Bonta and Akilah Weber discussed their bill, AB 2549, which aims to prevent harassment on the street. Bonta, who represents portions of Northern California’s East Bay Area, said the bill was the first of its kind in the nation.

“Street harassment disproportionately affects women of color; AAPI women have been frequent targets of attack,” she said, adding: “This bill aims to help women feel more autonomous.”

Weber, who represents San Diego, said: “I am especially excited that we are looking at this very real and prevalent issue as a public health issue. Everyone deserves to feel safe.”

AB 2549 would require the California Department of Public Health to conduct research and a 5-year, statewide, public campaign to raise awareness and understanding of street harassment as a public health problem in the state with the purpose of preventing its occurrence.

The bill would define “street harassment” as intimidating or threatening words, gestures, or actions directed at a specific person in a public place, without the consent of that person. CDPH would be required to present

a report and new policy by Jan. 1, 2024.

Lisa Fu, executive director of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative, said: “Street harassment is deeply rooted in systems of patriarchy. It can quickly escalate to more violent forms of harassment.”

Fu personally experienced street harassment daily while walking to middle school and high school. “I was told to brush it off, but it has stayed with me to this day,” she said. “We need broad-based systemic changes.”

“We don’t want to criminalize people; we want to educate them,” said Fu.