

INSTITUTE FOR
DEMOCRACY &
HIGHER EDUCATION

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Dear Colleagues:

We at IDHE are horrified and deeply saddened by *yet another* mass shooting and hate crime, this time aimed at Asian Americans and women. For too long, violence against Asian Americans has been simultaneously visible and erased. We refuse to view this act of violence as so isolated or so commonplace that it fails to shock us. Sadly, while we want to believe, as President Biden said, that “this is not who we are” as a nation and people, violent acts like this week’s reflect what [Stacey Abrams described](#) as persistent and deep “malignancies” in our social and political systems.

We believe that education is the nation’s best hope for eradicating these malignancies. As we have said many times, [colleges and universities have the academic freedom to name, critique, study, teach and offer solutions to critical public problems](#) and to do so without fear of censorship or political influence.

To aid educators, we offer resources for understanding some of the major social problems that underlie the threats to AAPI communities, women, and our inclusive democracy. This list is not comprehensive, but it does help deconstruct some of the intersecting factors behind this week’s violence:

1. **The recent surge in violence against Asian Americans** has a long [history behind it](#). The U.S. has routinely institutionalized anti-Asian racism over its history, including the [Chinese Massacre of 1871](#), [the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#), and [Japanese imprisonment in internment camps during the Second World War](#) (to read the actual texts of these and other discriminatory laws, see the [Avalon Project](#) at Yale University). That history is repeating itself. Donald Trump [defended his characterization of the COVID-19 as the “China virus” as “not racist at all.”](#) But it was exactly the kind of racialized political rhetoric that researchers [have found to promote more hateful and threatening speech and racial violence](#). The advocacy group [Stop AAPI Hate](#) tracks hate incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and has reported significant increases since the beginning of the pandemic.
2. **The [myth of the model minority](#)** reinforces stereotypes against Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. It perpetuates the idea that all Asian-descended students have genius-level intellects, particularly in STEM fields, and that they are not only hard workers but also law-abiding. Not only does this myth create [unrealistic expectations for students](#), but it also fosters harmful stereotypes that [Asian Americans do not experience racism, that they are culturally monolithic, and that they are not “real” American citizens](#). This myth also renders invisible [ethnic subpopulations that are socioeconomically disadvantaged and also attain college degrees at much lower rates](#) than other racial and ethnic groups.
3. **Violence against women remains commonplace in the U.S. and around the world**. Ironically, only hours before this violent attack, the House of Representatives reauthorized the [Violence Against Women’s Act](#) (VAWA). Originally passed with bipartisan support in 1994, VAWA was viewed as landmark legislation, but it was not without loopholes. The Act was reauthorized in 2013 but then lapsed in 2018 due to partisan

disputes over provisions preventing people with a history of violence against women from owning guns and provisions protecting transgender communities. [While 172 members of Congress voted against VAWA](#), it nonetheless passed and is moving to the Senate.

Researchers at Boston University's Institute for Health System Innovation and Poverty are tracking the connection between gun violence broadly and violence against women. Among their preliminary findings: [nearly half of mass shooters between 1996 and 2000 had histories of violence against women](#). And violence against women is on the rise. According to national trend data, AAPI women reported hate incidents [2.3 times more frequently than AAPI men](#) in 2020.

Of course, colleges and universities must get their internal houses in order. In 2019, the [Association of American Universities \(AAU\) reported](#) that one in four women on campuses experience non-consensual sexual contact and two in five report being sexually harassed. Rates of violence and harassment against LGBTQ communities are equally disturbing.

4. **Understanding mass shootings and gun violence** in the U.S. can be difficult due to the lack of consistent reporting standards and even a lack of agreement over what constitutes a mass shooting. For an [excellent compilation of articles, research, and resources on mass shootings, see the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino](#). Sadly, national shock and grief after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting of 20 children and 6 teachers and staff failed to catalyze sufficient change to prevent subsequent school shootings (for data on school shootings, [see this 2019 compilation by the New York Times](#)). [Gallup has tracked public opinion about gun ownership and controls since the mid-1990s](#) and while the public supports more controls, broadly, regulating guns became less popular over the past few years despite the corresponding increase in incidents.
5. **Long before the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, scholars, civic organizations, and government officials had sounded alarms over the rise of hate-driven domestic terrorism.** In September 2019 hearings before the U.S. House of Representatives, [FBI Director Christopher Wray identified "homegrown violent extremists" as the "top threat" to national security](#), motivated by racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and misogyny, as well as perceptions of government overreach and reactions to legislation. His testimony was chillingly predictive of the January 6 insurrection. Civic organizations like the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and the [Anti-Defamation League](#) track growing hate groups, their objectives, and their locations. In [her 2020 book, Hate in the Homeland](#), American University professor Cynthia Miller Idris provides data and insight on how hate groups flourish, including among the nation's youth. [Facing History and Ourselves](#) offers teaching resources for teaching about hate in the U.S.

Hate groups thrive on the Internet. Although Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube famously banned hate groups following the January 6 insurrection, these groups have migrated to other social media sites. These digital enclaves reinforce anger, and promote [radicalization](#). Online, [individuals and groups that spread hateful and violent messaging show international growth](#), and a cascading effect of real-world violence is the end result.

6. **Scholars debate whether there is a connection between terrorism and mental health.** [Most social scientists discount this connection; psychologists and terrorist scholars sometimes see more of a connection](#). Unfortunately, these questions have become political weapons as pro-gun advocates maintain

that mental illness, not guns, kill. For an excellent review of the many angles to this debate, see [this 2015 article in the American Journal of Public Health](#).

In 2019, the [American Psychological Association issued its first-ever guidelines for working with boys and men](#). The introduction to the guidelines notes that while men dominate professionally and politically, “something is amiss for men as well.” Noting statistics on men and crime, homicide, suicide, harsher punishments for misbehavior in schools, and even their shorter life expectancy, the APA urges practitioners to examine the patriarchal context for men and how it affects their mental health.

This is not a comprehensive list, of course. But it highlights many of the complicated dimensions of racist and misogynistic violence. We believe that educating citizens about these phenomena are more effective than the mere condemnation and partisan fighting that prevent real change.

IDHE has published many [recommendations for educating for a more inclusive democracy](#), with [recommendations for building social cohesion on campus](#), [reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between inclusion and excellence](#), [improving politically charged discussions](#), [using election seasons as opportunities for political learning, activism, and participation](#), [balancing speech and inclusion on campus](#), and [invoking academic freedom to educate students](#), without political interference, about undemocratic practices and conditions in American society. We have also advised on [how to shift campus culture to prioritize democratic learning](#), with an emphasis on the role of institutional leaders, campus climate assessment, coalition building, and interdisciplinary participation.

As a team, we debated whether to limit this statement to a rejection of hate and violence aimed at Asian Americans. Although those are the sentiments that prompted us to write a statement, we decided to share a more proactive vision for responding to evil. Real problems in society are complex, and interdisciplinary. Education happens when people confront these problems by sharing their experiences and ideas. We would like to see a more visible effort from within the academy to use research on hate and the problems underlying it as a catalyst for bringing about that kind of productive confrontation among students and the public.

We view higher education as the nation’s think tank. Perhaps if we rally colleges and universities and tackle these deep social and political malignancies together, we can protect rights and humanity and build a more inclusive democracy.

Sincerely,

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