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# We Are Living in a Nightmare: Asian Americans Speak Out Against Rising Violence

Event professionals respond to the attacks in Atlanta and discuss the dire need for greater diversity within the industry.

by [Elise Schoening](#)

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The attacks in Atlanta last week, which left eight people dead including six Asian Americans, horrified many in the nation. The tragedy has also drawn attention to the skyrocketing Anti-Asian sentiment and associated hate crimes seen in the U.S. since the pandemic began.

[Stop AAPI Hate](#), a nonprofit organization which tracks incidents of hate and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the U.S., [reported nearly 3,800 incidents](#) from March 19, 2020 to Feb. 28, 2021. This includes verbal harassment and name calling, being coughed at or spat on, physical assault, workplace discrimination, vandalism/graffiti and more. According to AAPI Hate, reported incidents represent only a fraction of the number of hate crimes that actually occur.

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Michelle Dunnick, director of events and investor relations for United Way of Southeast Louisiana and treasurer of the National Association for Catering and Events

"This past year has been difficult for everyone in the hospitality, events and wedding industry. But with the rise in violent attacks against Asian American and Pacific Islanders, this past year has forced me to have tough conversations with family members and relive memories that I had tried to forget," said [Michelle Dunnick](#), director of events and investor relations for [United Way of Southeast Louisiana](#) and board member of the [National Association for Catering and Events](#). "With the uptick in violent acts against the AAPI community, it was only a matter of time until something like this happened."

[Kevin Iwamoto](#), chief strategy officer of the meeting-building platform [Bizly](#), agreed. "I don't think I've ever been this upset or concerned in my 30-plus years of being in the industry," he said. "In times of adversity, it brings out the best in people, but it can also bring out the worst in people."

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**Kevin Iwamoto, Bizly**

Iwamoto said the recent rise in violence against Asian Americans has left him with a variety of emotions, ranging from vulnerability and sadness, to anger and disgust.

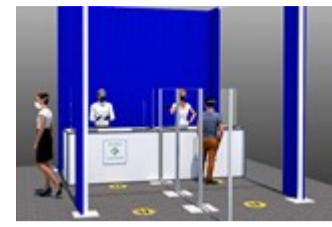
"As a third-generation Asian American, I am really saddened that the country where I was born is so polarized and our political leaders have created a hostile environment for all people of color," he continued. "We are in a living nightmare where it is OK to be rude, to lie without any remorse, to lack compassion and humanity towards everyone, to disrespect diversity and pander to violence against our own citizens. This is so far removed from the country that our founding fathers and patriots fought and died for; it is all so surreal and incredibly sad."

## Prioritizing Safety

As the meetings and travel industry looks to rebound in 2021, making sure Asian Americans feel safe traveling and attending events must be a priority — on par with following and enforcing Covid-19 health protocols.



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Amanda Ma, CEO, Innovate Marketing Group

"I have heard in my community that some are even scared to leave their house or go to crowded places," said [Amanda Ma](#), CEO of live and virtual event planning company [Innovate Marketing Group](#). "Safety has always been at the top of our list as event professionals. It's not just about feeling physically safe, but mentally and emotionally safe as well."

Iwamoto echoed similar concerns and noted that Asian-American business travelers will have to factor in fear of violence or discrimination when deciding whether to travel or attend events. He expects that Asian Americans will be less likely to travel to higher-risk destinations, where crimes against Asian Americans and people of color have been documented and featured in the media.

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For event professionals who want to address the issue of rising violence and make sure that Asian Americans feel safe and welcome at future meetings, Iwamoto suggests making sure the company has strong policies against discrimination, bigotry and violence. These policies and the consequences for those who violate them should be clearly communicated both internally with staff members and externally with attendees, vendors and speakers. He also advises planners to vet and source destinations and venues that are of like mindset when it comes to traveler safety and discrimination.



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Enforcement is key, according to Dunnick. "Create a zero-tolerance, nondiscrimination policy for your venue, conference, services, etc. Share this policy on your websites, registration platform, social media, in your program and on-site at the event," she said. "But the most important part is to enforce this policy on-site. If it isn't enforced, then it doesn't matter what you had on your website or on social media."

Another good way to make sure members of the Asian-American and Pacific-Islander community feel welcome at an event or conference is through representation.

"If you want a conference attendee to feel comfortable, then let them see themselves in a conference speaker,

whether it be an AAPI and/or Black speaker, a plus-sized woman, a disabled veteran or a transgender rock star," said Dunnick. "Show initiative and seek out diverse conference speakers ... And of course, promote all of your amazing speakers on your website, registration platform and social media, so everyone knows they are welcome at your event."

## Time's Up on Lack of Diversity

Over the past year, the meetings industry has been forced to [reckon with its lack of diversity](#) but there is still much work to be done.



Kevin Iwamoto, chief strategy officer, Bizly

"Frankly, I have been dealing with the lack of diversity in our industry for over three decades. I cannot even tell you how many times and years that I have sat in board and executive meetings where I was the only Asian-American person in the room," said Iwamoto. "It never bothered me when my career was ascending, but the lack of diversity has increasingly weighed on me over the past 10 years. Think about it, for an industry that has many African American, Asian, Latin X and other nationalities working in lower- and mid-

level jobs, why aren't they ascending to the leadership levels that I have been privileged to participate in for decades?"

Just putting out a statement supporting the Asian-American community, or committing to improving your diversity efforts isn't enough, says Ma.

"While many organizations have declared a commitment to diversity and inclusion, few have reportedly found ways to put those strategies into action. It is time we change this," said Ma. "Talk is inspiring, but action is what drives change. Come up with a real action plan and be accountable."

Reviewing the organization's strategic plan and bringing in a diversity consultant to better educate and serve all members are some of the steps that the National Association for Catering and Events is taking, and Dunnick encourages other event companies and associations to do the same.

She noted that she too is often the only Asian American in the room, but that seeing marginalized groups band together and advocate for greater diversity, equity and inclusion within the industry over the past year has been encouraging.

"The AAPI community has been standing with our Black industry brothers and sisters the entire time and they are standing with us now as we fight to stop Asian hate," she said. "There is no one-sidedness in this fight. Marginalized groups are each other's allies, and we are stronger together."

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Despite the horrors of last week's attack and rising violence across the nation, Ma issued words of encouragement for other Asian Americans. "Yes, we're in pain and anger. Yes, we're in fear. But we're fired up, resilient and we will come out of this stronger."

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