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Quantitative Social Science

Working Paper No. 25-01

June 2025

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Abstract

This paper examines evidence from a number of large-scale empirical studies looking at the impact of Covid-19 on hate crimes against Chinese and East-Asian populations in different locations around the globe. Grounding this evidence in theories of hate and prejudice, and empirical work on how other significant events such as wars, terrorist attacks and political events have triggered increased hate and hate related crimes this paper discusses potential mechanisms that may help us better understand the reasons Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes and what lessons we can learn for the future.

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Introduction

SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus disease (or Covid-19), although not officially named by the World Health Organisation (WHO) until February 2020, first appeared at the end of 2019, with a number of people showing pneumonia like symptoms in Wuhan, China. The disease quickly spread beyond China, so by the time the world knew it as Covid-19 the disease had already spread to other countries. The WHO made a conscious decision not to reference the disease by its virus strain SARS-CoV-2 to avoid creating unnecessary fear of Asia, which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003², and to avoid any stigmatisation of individuals or groups of people associated with that geographical area. Despite this, the fact that the pandemic was widely believed to have originated in Wuhan, China, and was commonly believed to be associated with Chinese wet markets, it was not long before we started to see reports of Chinese people being discriminated against, subject to abuse and even violence in a number of different countries.

In the UK, a well-publicised incident was that of Jonathan Mok a student from Singapore who was attacked in Oxford Street, London on February 24th by perpetrators who shouted 'coronavirus' at him (Guardian, 2020; Independent, 2020). In the US there were more extreme examples: on March 10th, a Korean American woman in midtown Manhattan was grabbed by the hair, shoved, and had her jaw broken by a punch in the face, by an assailant who yelled "you've got coronavirus, you Asian ****" and "where is your mask?" (Miles, 2020). On March 14th in Midland, Texas, a family from Myanmar including a 2-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy, was

² [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it).

stabbed by a perpetrator who thought the family were Chinese and feared they would spread Covid (Aziz, 2020). A month later, on April 5th, an Asian-American woman in Brooklyn, New York, had acid thrown at her, causing second degree burns to her body, face, and hands (Moore & Cassady, 2020).

Although there is not an abundance of large-scale empirical evidence examining the impact of Covid-19 on hate crimes, the existent evidence suggests that these are not isolated events but reflect an increase in hate crime experienced more generally by Chinese and East-Asian populations in different locations around the globe. Moreover, there is some evidence of spillover effects, with a number of studies showing an increase in hate crimes against other minority groups. This paper provides an overview of the evidence and locates it within theories of hate and prejudice, and empirical work on how other significant events such as wars, terrorist attacks and political events have triggered increased hate and hate related crimes. Finally, this paper discusses potential mechanisms that may help us better understand the empirical evidence showing Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes.

Background

Hate crime is a crime directed at a particular group because of their membership of that group. A lot of research has used this concept to empirically examine crimes against the LGBTQ+ community (Berrill & Herek, 1992), different racial or ethnic groups (Hanes & Machin, 2014), religious groups (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ivandic et al., 2020); or to generate theories that focus on hate crimes as violence directed towards marginalised groups (Chakraborti, 2010; Perry, 2009; Walters, 2011). Prior

to Covid-19, research has tended not to focus on hate crimes against Chinese people who, as a group, have often been referred to as a 'model minorities' both in the UK (Gilborn, 2008) and US (Wong et al., 1998).³ In the UK, the Chinese community has a record of high academic achievement, and the second highest household income among demographic groups, after British Indians (UK Gov, 2020).

However, it is clear that world events can influence attitudes towards different groups (Sheridan & Gillett, 2005). Indeed, history has shown us that particular events have led to the stigmatization of whole nations, religions, ethnic, racial or other identifiable groups. Jacob et al. (2011) showed the Israeli conflict in Gaza in the 2000s led to an increase in antisemitism and a number of studies of the aftermath of wars showed unfavourable attitudes and behaviours to the losing sides (Dudycha, 1942; Poynting, 2002; Sinha & Upadhyaya, 1960; Zelig, 1954). Research on acts of terrorism found unfavourable treatment of people of the same race, religion or nationality as the terrorists (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001; Hage, 1991; Hanes & Machin, 2014; Ivandic et al., 2020; Newell, 1990; Panagopoulos, 2006; Poynting et al., 2004; Swahn, et al., 2003) and even other minority groups not perceived responsible for the acts of terror (Echebarria-Echabe & Fernandez-Guede, 2006).

Others have shown how political events can play a role in increasing hate crimes. For example, Carr et al. (2020) showed the Brexit referendum in the UK led to an increase in racial and religious hate crimes, while Davine (2021) found the increases in hate crime due to Brexit to be of a similar magnitude as acts of terror.⁴ In the US Gianni and Meon (2019) found the election of Donald Trump triggered

³ There are many scholars who disagree with the model minority and argue instead that Asians have been marginalised throughout history to the present day (among them are Chou & Feagin, 2025, Gower et al., 2020 and Yang, 2020).

⁴ Brexit led to a 19–23 percent increase in hate crimes, a magnitude on par with terror attacks (Davine, 2021).

racist behaviour and attitudes while Rushin and Edwards (2018) showed that States where Trump won by a larger majority saw the biggest increases in hate crimes.

Clissold et al. (2020) and Muzzatti (2005) offer important insights on how xenophobia has historically increased after disease outbreaks and pandemics, especially when they involve major loss of life. Research on other global health crises including the bubonic plague (Markel, 1999), the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Herek & Capitanio, 1993; Herek & Glunt, 1988) and the 2014 Ebola outbreak (Prati & Pietrantonio, 2016) provides support for the link between disease and prejudice. And as Lantz et al. (2023) point out, there has been a longstanding association between Asian people and disease, reflected in stereotypes like the “Yellow Peril”. Research by Barde (2004) supports this view by showing how the bubonic plague outbreak in San Francisco, California, in the 1900s, was met with a race-based response aimed at the Asian community. More recently, the 2002-2004 SARS epidemic was linked to an increase in racist behaviour towards Asian people in North America (Sorenson, 2003; Washington Post, 2003) and across the globe (Eichelberger, 2007).

Since 2020, there is a growing evidence base that suggests the Covid-19 pandemic led to an increase in anti-Asian prejudice. In the US, Vachuska (2020), analysing Google Trends data, found that attitudes toward minority racial groups had been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Lu and Sheng (2020) and Nguyen et al. (2020) found similar results with the latter showing negative tweets referencing Asian people increased by 68 percent over this period. In contrast, the proportion of negative tweets referencing other racial or ethnic minorities (including Black and Latino people) remained relatively stable during this time (Nguyen et al., 2020).

The empirical evidence on the link between significant trigger events and hate crimes coupled with the increase in on-line hate we have seen around Covid-19⁵ suggests we would expect to see an increase in hate crimes against Chinese people and East-Asian populations, possibly even with spillover effects to other groups, due to the pandemic. A number of descriptive analyses have presented evidence that would suggest this may well be the case. In the US a website created to track bias against the Asian-American/Pacific Islander population (Stop AAPI Hate) indicated a surge of 3,800 reports of anti-Asian discrimination and harassment in March 2020 ([Jeung et al., 2021](#)). A web based survey of over 4000 people, broadly representative of the American population, showed that 29 percent of Asian respondents reported having experienced discrimination and 16 percent reported being a victim of hate crime during the early months of the pandemic ([Lantz & Wenger, 2020](#); Lantz & Wenger, 2023). Police data from 16 US cities showed increases of 145 percent in officially recorded anti-Asian hate crimes during 2020 ([Centre for the Study of Hate & Extremism, 2021](#)). In the UK, police forces received reports of 267 incidents of hate crime from Chinese minorities during the first quarter of 2020, compared with 375 incidents during the entire year in 2019 (Mercer, 2020), and police reports from Vancouver, Canada showed a 50 percent increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in March 2020 compared to the same period the previous year (Crawford, 2020).

⁵ Which has previously been shown to be positively associated with hate crimes even in the absence of trigger events like Covid-19 (Williams et al., 2020; Williams, 2021).

Evidence from quasi-experimental studies

However, the fact that Covid-19 came as an unexpected shock, which very quickly changed the environment for hate crime, and did so differentially across groups, offers researchers unique opportunities to move beyond descriptive work and use a range of robust, quasi-experimental methods to better establish a causal link between the Covid-19 pandemic and hate crimes against Chinese people and East-Asian populations. Under these conditions, Covid-19 can be seen as a type of 'natural experiment' or 'treatment', which has a different effect on the 'treated' (Chinese people and/or East-Asian populations) than on the 'control' group, whose victimisation rates we expect to remain unaffected by Covid-19. Research in this area then uses a range of methodologies including: difference-in-differences (D-in-D), which allows researchers to look at what happened to hate crimes against Chinese people before and after Covid-19 relative to other groups and other time periods when Covid did not exist; event type approaches which look at the period across Covid-19 as heterogeneous, looking for differences across time, as the virus escalates, receives more media coverage⁶ and claims more lives; regression discontinuity; interrupted time series analysis and ARIMA forecasting, which essentially look for unexpected breaks in hate crime trends. It is the research produced using these methodologies that provides the key empirical evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on hate crimes discussed in this paper.

In the UK, Gray and Hansen (2021) used data from the Metropolitan Police Force in London and utilised a difference-in-differences approach and an event

⁶ See Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004) or Ivandic et al. (2024) for a recent analysis of the role media representation plays in fuelling hate crimes.

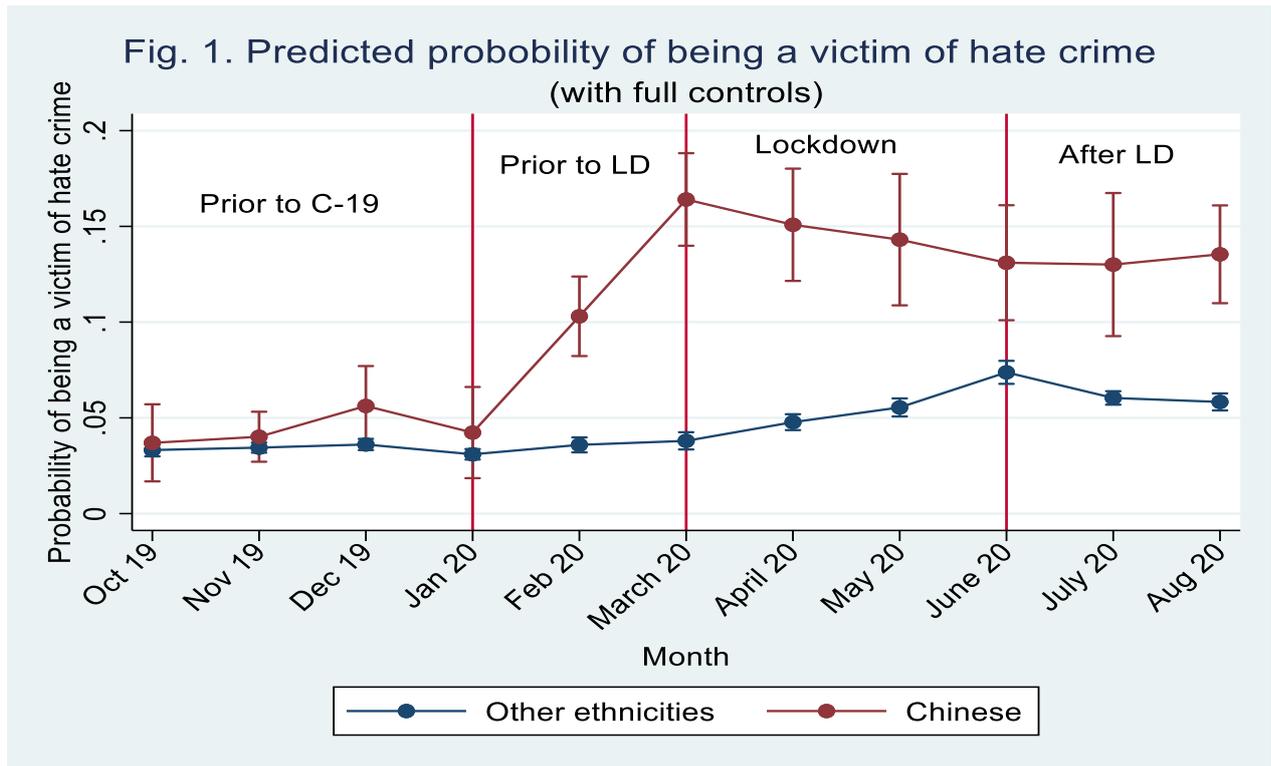
structure methodology to examine the impact of Covid-19 on the hate crime against Chinese people, compared to other ethnicities, whose victimisation rates they found to be unaffected by Covid-19. Their analysis showed that, even after controlling for other factors, Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes against Chinese people in London, rising across the first three months of 2020. They showed the probability of being a victim of hate crime for Chinese people increased by between 4 and 6 percentage points during February 2020 and by between 11-13 percentage points during March⁷ compared to the pre-Covid-19 period. These are sizable changes, taking the probability of being a victim of hate crime from around 3-4 percent prior to Covid-19 up to 10 percent in February, to over 16 percent in March 2020. They found no increase in hate crimes after Covid-19 for any other ethnic group nor for other (non-hate) crimes against Chinese people. When the authors examined changes over the same months but in the previous year (when Covid-19 did not exist) they found no equivalent increase in hate crimes against Chinese people, which allowed them to conclude that Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes against Chinese people in London during the first three months of 2020.

Looking beyond the early months (Figure 1), the authors showed there was no significant decline in the predicted probability of being a victim of hate crime for Chinese people, which remained high throughout lockdown and after lockdown, never falling significantly from the March high point. This compared to probabilities of around 5-6 percent for people from other ethnic backgrounds.⁸ Their results showed

⁷ As Covid cases emerged around the globe, appeared in the UK (Jan 29th) and escalated, restrictions were placed on movement and the UK entered formal lockdown on March 23rd.

⁸ With the exception of June (pp=7%), these probabilities are not significantly different from one another in the later stages and only 1 percentage point higher than in the previous months, indicating that the probability of being a victim of hate crime for the other ethnic groups shifted very little over entire period we are looking at. It

that the rise in hate crimes against Chinese people in London was not a short-lived phenomena provoked by immediate fear of the pandemic, but that the pandemic led to an increase in targeted hate crime against Chinese people that had endured throughout lockdown in the UK (March 23rd - June 23rd) through to the end of August 2020 when their data ended.



Source: Gray and Hansen, 2021.

Using data collected through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from UK police forces, Carr et al. (2022) adopted similar methodology to Gray and Hansen (2021), but used non-racial hate crimes as the ‘control’ group. Their results showed that Covid-19 led to increased hate crime against East-Asians in different areas of the UK but that the increase was larger and more enduring in London than elsewhere.

is worth noting the rise in June is solely amongst Black victims of hate crime, a rise which coincides with the Black Lives Matters protests which occurred in London throughout June 2020.

Looking at data to the end of November 2020 they showed that Covid-19 had a longer impact on hate crime than terrorist events or political shocks.

Examining hate crime in four US cities that have large Asian-American populations (New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington D.C.) and using ARIMA forecasting and Interrupted Time Series Analysis, Han et al. (2022) found that hate crimes against Asian-Americans increased significantly in 2020 compared with 2019 in 3 out of the 4 cities examined, but that the spiked increase was short lived. The authors suggest this may be due to the pro-active way the police responded to hate crime, especially against Asian-Americans. For instance, NYPD deployed plain-clothes officers to Asian-populated areas in order to prevent hate crime. In addition, there were police departments that launched new taskforces/teams to deal with hate crimes and introduced new ways to make it easier for victims to report hate crimes.

In Slovakia, Piatkowska and Whittington (2024) used pooled cross sectional monthly data to run random effects binomial regression models and found evidence of a spike in racially motivated hate crimes one month after the Covid outbreak in the region but found no increase in the month of the outbreak or in any of the subsequent months after the first. This research does not identify the race of the victim, but it is unlikely the increase is restricted to Asian victims, as the authors note, Asians make up only 0.2 percent of the Slovakian population. This evidence supports the case that Covid related hate crime may have impacted other groups in addition to East-Asian population (Goldberg, 2020; Romano et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2020). Elsewhere the evidence is limited on spillover effects to other groups. In the UK Carr et al. (2024) found some evidence of a small increase in hate crimes

against Asians more generally, in addition to East-Asians, however Gray and Hansen (2021) found no increase in hate crimes against any ethnic groups other than Chinese people in London.

Potential mechanisms

Although this body of research effectively establishes that Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes against Chinese people and East-Asian populations, it is not, in most cases,⁹ able to unpick the processes behind the increase. To better understand the mechanisms driving these relationships it is helpful to situate these findings amongst theoretical work in this area, and empirical evidence of the impact of Covid-19 in closely related fields. Taken together, this will enable us to draw connections that better clarify the rise in hate crimes associated with Covid-19.

At an individual level many researchers have used group threat theory (Blumer, 1958) to predict or explain the rise in hate crimes due to Covid. Group threat theory posits that in instances where people feel under threat – in this case due to the Covid pandemic – people group together for protection. While this brings clear advantages to those in the in-group - such as increased support and reduced stress (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015), reduced uncertainty, and enhanced feelings of control (Fritsche et al., 2013; Guinot et al., 2006), and increased protection against external threats (Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009) - it can have negative impacts on anyone excluded from the group. These “outsiders” are perceived as a threat to the dominant in-group (Quillian 1995). In the case of Covid-19, driven by fear of the disease and the threat posed by any potential carriers of the disease, the in-group

⁹ See Carr et al. (2022) for exception.

become anxious and feel threatened (Disha et al. (2011) and fall back on stereotypical beliefs and attitudes (Bodenhouse,1993; Smith,1993) which they apply without careful consideration or assessment (Bar-Tel & Labin, 2001). Part of this "othering" process is the apportioning of collective blame, which applies to all the out-group perceived to be responsible for the threat. Groups members thereafter become convenient targets for retribution, where abuse and violence is justified as a form of revenge or "vicarious retribution" (Lickel et al., 2006). In support of this, Carr et al. (2023) found protectionism and retaliatory behaviour key drivers behind the rise in hate crime against the East-Asian population during the Covid period in the UK.

But, if anti-Asian sentiment and hate crime is motivated by fear or perception of threat then, on average, those who are more fearful of the disease, or perceive themselves or their family as more at risk may be more likely to exhibit more anti-Asian prejudice. Lantz et al.(2023) tested this in their analysis of factors associated with anti-Asian prejudice and showed that even after controlling for other factors, individual perceptions of risk were positively associated with greater anti-Asian attitudes.

However, not everyone responds to perceived threat with prejudice and hate. There are important contextual variations that have been identified in the research: including the size of the out-group (which may explain why Carr et al. (2023) found larger, and more enduring, effects in London (which has by far the largest Chinese population in the UK) than other areas); economic conditions (Piatkowska & Whittington (2024) found hate crimes increased more in areas with higher male unemployment and higher levels of immigration); and police responses to hate crimes (Han et al. (2022) suggest increasing police presence in Asian-populated

areas, new teams to deal with hate crimes and making it easier for victims to report hate crimes may all have played a role in reducing hate crimes).

Of key importance in shaping peoples' beliefs and understanding of Covid and alleviating any perceived threat of the disease is access to accurate information about Covid. For example, people who consumed more factual information about Covid-19 showed less anti-Asian prejudice than others (Lantz et al., 2023). During Covid the main sources of information about the disease came from governments, mainstream media and social media outlets.¹⁰ And while access to accurate information helped alleviate fear and reduce hate, misinformation, anti-Asian rhetoric and blaming in the public domain (either by politicians or media) had the opposite effect - increasing fear and biased behaviour towards that group (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Rubinstein et al., 2018). In this case anti-Asian rhetoric is interpreted as a signal that serves to legitimise negative attitudes, including xenophobic and racist attitudes, emboldening members to act upon those feelings (Gagnon, 1995; Kalmoe, 2014; Kteily et al., 2015; Müller & Schwarz, 2020).

A high-profile example of this kind of behaviour was President Trump who referred to Covid-19 as the "Chinese virus" on Twitter for the first time on March 16th.¹¹ This was then discussed widely across the mainstream media and social media platforms who often referred to Covid-19 by this term or similar monikers (Schwartz, 2020). Scholars have shown that in the week after Trump's tweet there was a significant increase in anti-Asian sentiment on Twitter compared to the

¹⁰ See Gentzkow & Shapiro (2004) who show, not all information is accurate and increased exposure to information is not necessarily correlated with more accurate perceptions of world events. And Gentzkow & Shapiro (2006) for information on bias reporting by information providers to manipulate public perceptions. Della Vigna et al. (2014)

highlight an example of the impact of media on racial hate crime against Serbians in Croatia.

¹¹ Trump has over 82 million followers on Twitter.

previous week (Hswen et al., 2021) which Williams (2021) demonstrates was not confined to online hate against Asian-Americans but also included physical harassment. Jeung et al. (2020) also found a sharp rise in hate incidents in general (not just against Chinese people) which coincided with the president's use of the term "Chinese virus". This may indicate the xenophobic political language used by Trump provoked racial hatred and associated violence against the Chinese population which potentially had spillover effects, legitimising similar behaviour against other groups.

The use of xenophobic and racist rhetoric was in no way confined to the US, in the UK Carr et al. (2023) found the increase in hate crimes in the UK coincided with announcements from the UK government that China posed a health risk to the UK. Such behaviour was mirrored around the globe with key figures publicly blaming Chinese, East-Asians and other marginalised groups (Matache & Bhabha, 2020).¹² Some of whom were already at increased risk during Covid due to structural inequality that meant they had a higher probability of contracting the disease and dying from Covid-19 (Karan & Katz, 2020; Public Health England, 2020).

Some scholars argue that the political rhetoric used against Chinese, East-Asians and other marginalised groups was intentional, used to shift focus away from governmental failures in responding to the pandemic (Kim & Kreps, 2020; Lantz et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2021). In some cases, politicians may have deliberately incited violence as a means of increasing social conflict because conflict tends to serve as a distractive function (Gagnon, 1995).

¹²It is worth noting that just prior to the emergence of Covid there had been a rise in support for right wing nationalist parties across Europe (BBC, 2019) and there is a well-documented relationship between being right wing and being more prejudice and intolerant (Crawford and Pilanski, 2014), increased nationalism and anti-immigration (Hartman et al., 2021).

While these mechanisms operate in different ways, they have similar objectives: to place collective blame for the Covid-19 pandemic on a racial out-group or out-groups. These mechanisms are unlikely to work in isolation but work together in a non-additive way to produce increases in hate and hate crimes observed in the empirical evidence. So for example, as Nguyen et al. (2020) demonstrated, when examining the interaction between xenophobic or racist rhetoric and factual information about Covid-19, those who were exposed to racist rhetoric, but consumed more information regarding the disease were less likely to act on the racist rhetoric. Lantz et al. (2023) also found an interaction between individual levels of fear, information and the racist rhetoric of Trump in the US, where people who felt more vulnerable to Covid-19 also show increased susceptibility to racist rhetoric and were less likely to be protected by the consumption of accurate information about the disease.

Discussion and conclusion

The quasi-experimental studies on the impact of Covid-19 on hate crimes presents robust evidence on the link between the pandemic and the rise in hate crime. In particular, the studies use high-quality data with methods that aid causal inference to understand the impact Covid-19 had on hate crimes against Chinese people and East-Asian populations. The data used in these studies provided daily, weekly and monthly observations over a relatively long period of time, which means the models used could take into account both long-term trends as well as instantaneous responses to the Covid pandemic.

Despite the clear advantages of these quasi-experimental methodologies there remains surprisingly few published papers utilising these techniques. This is in stark contrast to the number of published papers looking at the impact of Covid-19 on other types of crime.¹³ This is likely to be related to the absence of hate crime data. Data on hate crimes are not collected in all jurisdictions and the data that are collected are not always available in the public domain, or they are not made available at the speed needed to produce a robust response to the issue in a timely fashion. Additionally, there may be concerns about under reporting of hate crimes (Pezzella et al., 2019) when using official crime statistics, exacerbated by the fact that Asian victims are some of the least likely to report such incidents (Lantz and Wenger, 2023). However, as long as there is no difference in the likelihood of reporting over the Covid period this will not pose a problem for the methods used in the body of research discussed in this paper.

Although limited in number, the studies concur that Covid-19 led to an increase in hate crimes against Chinese and East-Asian populations both in the US (Han et al, 2022) and UK (Carr et al., 2022; Gray and Hansen, 2021) and potentially against other vulnerable groups in the UK and other parts of Europe (Carr et al, 2022; Piatkowska and Whittington, 2024). These findings are in line with other research that suggests world events have the power to change the way particular groups are perceived (Sheridan & Gillett, 2005) and empirical work that shows that after an event whole nations, races or religions can become the subject of violent hatred (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001; Hage, 1991; Hanes & Machin, 2014; Ivandic et al., 2020;

¹³ The impact of Covid-19 on domestic abuse for instance has generated much more evidence from around the world – see Gray and Hansen (2024) for an overview.

Newell, 1990; Panagopoulos, 2006; Poynting, 2002; Poynting & Nobel, 2004; Sorenson, 2003; Swahn, et al., 2003). The results are also consistent with the theoretical work suggesting that people fall back on stereotypical, xenophobic or racist views in times of heightened perceptions of threat (Bodenhouse, 1993; Dish et al., 2011; Smith, 1993) which ultimately resulted in the increase in hate crimes.

The timing of the increases in hate crimes across the different areas coincided with the increase in local cases of Covid, the imposition of restrictions and the use of xenophobic and racist comments made by world leaders which then appeared in mainstream and social media. Evidence on the duration of the increase is less clear but is likely to depend on local factors including the size of the Chinese or East Asian population (Carr et al. 2022), local socio-economic conditions (Piatkowska and Whittington, 2024) and police responses to hate crime (Han et al. 2024). In the UK the rise in hate crime due to Covid was relatively long term (Gray and Hansen, 2023) and longer than spikes produced due to acts of terror (Carr et al., 2023).

The evidence presented in this paper contributes to the growing literature showing Covid-19 and racism were intrinsically linked (Egede & Walker, 2020; Godlee, 2020; Newburn 2020) and has clear policy implications: In times of crisis the government should expand public outreach, promote tolerance, counter hate-speech. and send a strong message that racist attitudes and behaviours have no place in today's society, even in times of crisis. If governments, and those in power, take a clear anti-racist stance they can address the perceptions of threat among the population, by providing clear facts about the causes of public health threats and by taking a hard line against those who attempt of apportion collective blame to entire groups of people. Yet, after Brexit, the re-election of Donald Trump, and the spike in

popularity of anti-immigration and extreme-right parties across Europe I fear the prospect of this happening in future is looking more bleak than ever.

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