

IMMIGRATION

# Family believes Phoenix man who died after being punched in the face was targeted because he was Asian

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After retiring as an overseas telecommunications worker, Juanito Falcon loved to attend church, spend time with his wife, dote on his four grandsons and go for daily walks.

On the morning of Feb. 16, Falcon, who is originally from the Philippines, was walking home when, according to witnesses, a man came up and punched the 74-year-old Falcon in the face.

Falcon fell to the ground, striking his head on the pavement near 17th Avenue and Bethany Home Road, near the parking lot of the Christown Spectrum Mall in Phoenix, according to court records. The man who punched Falcon got in a silver Nissan Altima and drove off.

Falcon fractured his skull and was rushed into surgery with bleeding on his brain, according to court records. He died two days later as a result of head injuries.

On March 3, Phoenix police arrested Marcus Williams, 41, of Tempe, and charged him with second-degree murder in connection with the death.

His family strongly believes Falcon was targeted because he was Asian.

Sgt. Ann Justus, a Phoenix Police Department spokesperson, said the department does not have any evidence or information to indicate the homicide was motivated by bias.

Even so, family members say a string of recent racially motivated attacks against elderly Asian Americans across the country tied to anti-Asian sentiment surrounding the coronavirus pandemic suggests to them that Falcon may also have been targeted because he was Asian.

"The police said there is no indication of it being a hate crime, but the family can't ignore it," said Jacklyn Lozada, Falcon's niece. "He had no motive to attack him and there's been attacks across the nation especially on the elderly. So we can't help but know this is a very strong possibility. We feel that it is a hate crime."

There has been an increase in attacks against Asian Americans since the COVID-19 pandemic started a year ago. Advocates have been alarmed by a string of recent attacks against older Asian Americans, among them a 75-year Asian man who is now brain dead after being assaulted and robbed Tuesday in Oakland.

Experts say it's unclear whether some of the older victims in the recent attacks were targeted specifically because of anti-Asian sentiment surrounding the coronavirus situation or were targeted by criminals who saw them as easy prey.

But they say there is no question Asian Americans have experienced an increase in attacks including microaggressions, being spat and coughed upon, shunned, racist slurs and violent physical assaults that have resulted in serious injuries and even death.

Asians historically have been scapegoated during public health crises and economic downturns, experts said, which has led to upsurges in violence and discrimination against Asians in the past.

The recent attacks have been fueled in part by xenophobic rhetoric by former President Donald Trump and other political leaders, experts say. Trump frequently referred to the new coronavirus, which causes COVID-19 and was first detected in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, as the "China virus" and the "Kung Flu."

"Microaggressions that have been directed against people of Asian descent or people who look like they're Asian, which could include Pacific Islanders, and even people of other groups, has been in part encouraged and facilitated with the federal government and the former president beginning to link this to Chinese people in March of last year," said Karen Leong, a professor of Asian Pacific American Studies at Arizona State University's School of Social Transformation.

As the pandemic drags on, there is concern that the attention some of the recent attacks have received may have inspired more attacks against Asians. The recent attacks also seem surprising since Trump is out of office, the number of coronavirus cases in the U.S. waning and a greater number of Americans getting vaccinated.

"It does seem like the level of violence has increased and that might be due to greater frustration with the length of the pandemic," Leong said.

Even though Trump is no longer in office, he continues to refer to COVID-19 as the "China virus" in speeches and "his politicization of wearing masks still continues among those who share similar ideology," Leong added.

Advocates have called on political leaders to do more to denounce the attacks.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden condemned the attacks against Asians, while pointing out that many Asian Americans "are on the frontlines of this pandemic trying to save lives."

"And still, still they are forced to live in fear for their lives just walking down streets in America. It's wrong, it's un-American and it must stop," Biden said during his first primetime address to the nation.

Biden signed a proclamation on Jan. 26, days after his inauguration, disavowing "inflammatory and xenophobic rhetoric" by political leaders, without specifically naming Trump. The rhetoric, Biden said in the proclamation has "stoked unfounded fears and perpetuated stigma about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and have contributed to increasing rates of bullying, harassment and hate crimes against AAPI persons."

## **More than 3,000 anti-Asian hate incidents reported**

More than 3,000 incidents of anti-Asian hate, including 43 in Arizona, have been reported since March 19, 2020, according to Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University who oversees the Stop AAPI Hate Campaign.

The actual number of anti-Asian incidents is most likely much higher, because many incidents go unreported, Jeung said.

The documented cases represent "just a small sliver" of what is happening, Jeung said.

The campaign was launched a year ago by the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and Asian American Studies Department of San Francisco State University to track anti-Asian incidents during the pandemic.

The campaign has grouped the incidents into categories: 9% involve civil rights violations, including workplace discrimination and refusal of service; 68% involve verbal harassment; 21% involve shunning; 7% involve being coughed and spat upon; 7% involve

online harassment; and 11% involve physical assaults, Jeung said. The numbers do not add up to 100% because some incidents fall under multiple categories.

The incidents have been reported in all 50 states, but there have been higher numbers of incidents in states with higher numbers of Asian Americans, including California, New York, Washington and Texas, Jeung said.

In February, the campaign reported that it had received more than 126 accounts of anti-Asian hate involving Asian Americans older than 60 after a string of attacks against older Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay area.

In one shocking attack captured on surveillance video, a man walks up behind a 91-year-old man in Oakland's Chinatown and violently shoves him to the ground.

Arizona, with 43 reported incidents, ranks 14th among all states, Jeung said.

The national Stop AAPI Hate campaign documents incidents where anti-Asian comments were made. For example, in one incident in Arizona, a woman reported that while she was at a neighborhood park in Buckeye with her two children, a teenager repeatedly said, "corona, corona, corona" and "they are Chinese, Chinese, Chinese."

In some of the recent physical assaults, some of the perpetrators have not made explicit anti-Asian comments, making it difficult to ascertain whether the attacks were motivated by hate or some other reason, Jeung said.

"Last year, we knew that a lot of the incidents were racially biased and motivated because people would say things like 'Go back to China you f----- c-----' and 'It's because of you we got the coronavirus,'" Jeung said. "But in a lot of the cases we are seeing this year, we don't know if they necessarily are racially motivated. We can't say they are hate crimes even though they are heinous crimes."

There are many reasons for people to commit crimes during the pandemic, Jeung noted.

"There's a lot of economic insecurity, there's a lot of housing insecurity. And so we see violence and crime overall. And it's not just Asians (being targeted) during this period, it's a lot of groups. So we don't want to stoke up racial animosity between groups," he said. "We can't accuse everyone of racism."

Since October, a team of researchers at the University of Arizona has been interviewing Asian students to understand how they perceive and experience anti-Asian discrimination related

## **'Voices to be heard':** UA researchers document harassment against Asian students

Preliminary findings show some Asian and Asian American students have experienced physical and verbal attacks during the pandemic and that they are aware of an increase in negative views toward Asians.

## **Phoenix police: No evidence of bias in attack**

The Phoenix Police Department investigated three incidents involving bias against Asian Americans, up from two incidents in 2019, said Justus, the Phoenix police spokesperson.

Justus said investigators have not found any evidence that Falcon was attacked because he was of Asian descent, but that possibility is being investigated.

"Unfortunately, no motive has been discovered as of this point and absent evidence, we can't make that jump to say it was because of his descent," Justus said.

Williams had eight prior felony convictions, according to court records. In 2011, Williams pleaded guilty to two felony charges, including a charge of misconduct involving weapons and a charge of unlawful discharge of a weapon inside city limits, according to court records. In 2017, Williams pleaded guilty to a felony charge of dangerous drug possession/use, according to court records.

As of Friday, Williams remained in jail, according to the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office. A judge set bail at \$500,000, according to court records.

A detective has reached out to Asian American community leaders about the incident, she said.

FBI spokesperson Jill McCabe said in a written statement that "we want to remind everyone that any violent criminal act against any person because of their race, ethnicity or national origin is a hate crime. This includes violence toward Asian Americans or individuals from East Asian countries."

## **Falcon was loving and God-fearing**

Falcon was born and raised in the Philippines, said Lozada, Falcon's niece. He worked in Saudi Arabia as an overseas telecommunications worker before moving to Arizona with his wife to live closer to his one daughter and four grandsons.

Lozada remembered Falcon as a very loving and God-fearing man who was easy to talk to.

When nieces and nephews would visit, Lozada said Falcon's home "was always open. They allowed us to play the piano even though we didn't know how, and they would make us feel good by complimenting our piano playing skills. He offered his home even though we were so noisy."

Falcon had dropped off his grandsons at school that morning and was returning home from his morning walk when he was attacked, Lozada said.

She believes Falcon was losing his speech because of his head injuries when police and first responders arrived after the attack. Court records show first responders had trouble communicating with him because of a "language barrier."

But Lozada said Falcon was fluent in English and Tagalog.

Lozada said she wants to warn others that attacks against Asian Americans are happening.

"We wanted to show the story of my uncle being attacked and that it can happen to anyone by people he did not even know," Lozada said. "I am still in disbelief that this happened ... it's agonizing."

The family has set up a gofundme site. at: [gofundme.com/f/v9gfnm-remembering-juanito-falcon?qid=80c6805d1af3c8489e10db9d2d3230e9](https://gofundme.com/f/v9gfnm-remembering-juanito-falcon?qid=80c6805d1af3c8489e10db9d2d3230e9)

Arizona's Asian American population is small but fast-growing, said **Aggie** Yellow Horse, a professor of Asian Pacific American studies at ASU.

Arizona's Asian population grew 32% to 233,213 in 2019, compared to 2010 census data, she said.

Asians accounted for 3.3% of Arizona's overall population, up from 2.8% in 2010, Yellow Horse said. She said many Asian Americans are moving to Arizona after initially settling in other states.

Yellow Horse managed the database for the Stop AAPI Hate campaign.

She believes the 43 incidents of anti-Asian reported in Arizona is a "gross underestimation" because advocacy groups in California and other states with large Asian American populations have done more to inform people how to report attacks.

"I don't think the same level of engagement has been present in Arizona. So people might not know where to report, even if they did experience something related to anti-Asian hate and violence," Yellow Horse said.

## **Asian Americans often scapegoated**

Some of the attacks have been carried out by people of other racial and ethnic minority groups. But experts cautioned that, while infuriating, the attacks against Asian Americans should not be used to foment racism against other groups.

"If they interpret these attacks as reflecting the tendency of a particular racialized group to commit violence, that in itself is racism. You cannot fight racism with racism," said Leong, the ASU professor. "It's important to note that this is happening in a climate where anti-Asian sentiments have been articulated and sustained by political leaders."

Throughout U.S. history, there has been a tendency to scapegoat Asian Americans, who are often seen as "not belonging," during economic downturns and public health crises, Leong said.

Chinese immigrants were blamed for taking jobs during the depression of 1877 "and that led to extralegal violence, including lynchings throughout the Western states," Leong said.

In 1934, white farmers whose fortunes dropped with the decline of the cotton market during the Great Depression terrorized Japanese American and other Asian farmers in Arizona who were doing relatively better.

"It began a movement to violently force Asians out of the state," Leong said.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor during World War II, more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated in internment camps in Arizona and other states under an executive order by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"So it's been part of that longer history of irrationally blaming people who appear different for things out of their control," Leong said.

## **Anti-Asian hate increasing**

There has been an increase in attacks and incidents of anti-Asian hate during the coronavirus pandemic documented by the Stop Asian American Pacific Islander Hate Campaign. To

report an incident go to [stopaapihate.org](http://stopaapihate.org). Here are examples of some of the incidents reported by people from Arizona.

— I was at a neighborhood park with my two young children. A Caucasian teen repeatedly said, "corona, corona, corona" as well as "they are Chinese, Chinese, Chinese." (Buckeye)

— Health care employee got mad and said the hospital is for his people not for you, "you stupid Chinese girl" (Pinetop)

— Someone yelled "Go back to china you b----" (Tempe)

— "I was looking through my following stories on Instagram when I saw a story showcasing a video post about racism. In the video, a girl decided to go on Omegle (a free chat room where you talk to strangers) and recorded her encounters with racist strangers. The strangers used disrespectful language such as, "Are you the girl who ate bats?", and "Ling Ling!". One guy even used the Chinese eyes and exclaimed that the US must nuke (bomb) all Asians." (Phoenix)

— "We stopped at a traffic light while a car drove by and two people in that car rolled down the window and called us stupid Chinese. It went on for about half a minute until the traffic light became green and they drove off. I reported to Pima County Sheriff's Office the next day but nothing came back for 3 months." (Tucson)

*Arizona Republic reporter Peiyu Lin contributed.*

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