

## The US's hidden minority hit hard by Covid

Asian Americans suffered disproportionately on many fronts in the pandemic

PATTI WALDMEIR



Unemployment rose faster in Chicago's Chinatown in the early pandemic months than anywhere else in the state © Kamil Krzaczynski/Reuters

Patti Waldmeir YESTERDAY

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*The writer is a contributing columnist, based in Chicago*

We have all suffered during the pandemic — but some of us much more than others. Black and Latino populations in the US have borne more than their [fair share](#) of the agony. But there is another “hidden minority” that has been hurt out of all proportion, too: Asian Americans and other Asians living in the US.

Covid-19 hit those of Asian descent quicker and harder than white Americans. In the first three months of the pandemic, Chinese patients had the [highest mortality rate](#) of all racial and ethnic groups in New York City public hospitals.

With up to 30 per cent of Asian Americans living in intergenerational households, and 17.7 per cent living in a home with at least one healthcare worker, Asian Americans bore a [higher risk of exposure](#) to Covid-19, according to a study from the NYU Centre for the Study of Asian American Health. Chinese Americans also suffered more [racist attacks](#) during the pandemic, which former president Donald Trump blamed on China. And Asian-owned businesses have been hit hard because a quarter of US food and accommodation businesses are owned by Asians, while many poorer Asians are frontline workers like restaurant, grocery or laundry workers.

Tang Cuimei, 49, is one of them. She emigrated to Chicago's Chinatown from Guangzhou

in southern China 13 years ago. Lockdown deprived her of a \$25-an-hour job working at a local convention centre; now she has been forced to take work with lower wages and longer hours at a local hotpot restaurant.

Tang is part of America's [fastest growing minority](#): Asians. The 2020 US census found that 19.9m people, or [6 per cent of the population](#), identified as Asian, up 35.5 per cent from 14.7m in 2010. Asian-American advocacy groups say it's important not to gloss over the hurdles faced by what is often seen as a "model minority". Many Asians in America are highly educated, with well paying jobs — but many more are, like Tang, dependent on low wages and long hours to survive.

With limited English, Tang couldn't figure out how to apply for Illinois unemployment payments. She turned to the Pui Tak Center, a Chinatown landmark and community organisation, which helped hundreds of local residents to claim unemployment, and thousands to get vaccinated against Covid.

David Wu, Pui Tak executive director, says Chicago's Chinatown "had a head start" in dealing with the pandemic because local leaders saw what happened in New York and were able to prepare. But unemployment rose faster in Chinatown in the early pandemic months than anywhere else in the state, he says — and applying for unemployment could only be done in English, Spanish or Polish, not in Asian languages.

Now, as next week's lunar new year holiday approaches, Chicago Chinatown is bustling and jobs are plentiful, but restaurant owners are stressed by lack of staff and changing health regulations, and some businesses have shut permanently. Grace Chan of the [Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community](#), says all Chinatown's bookstores have closed, many "mom and pop" shops have gone out of business and some seniors "haven't set foot outside for two years". "I'm hoping the pandemic doesn't end up being the beginning of the end for Chinatown."

Wu doesn't think so. Chicago's Chinatown went into the pandemic with its population growing when other US Chinatowns are shrinking, he says. Chicago Chinatown's population more than doubled from about 11,000 in 1990 to over 28,000 in 2020, he says. Other Chinatowns have been gobbled up by gentrification, but Chicago's has fared better because it is farther from downtown — it was moved south of the city in 1912. "There is less gentrification pressure being three miles from downtown," says Wu.

Tang Cuimei certainly isn't moving out any time soon. "There are two sides to the pandemic," she tells me by phone. "I lost my job — but the government gave me benefits to survive." Though her lunar new year gatherings this year will be much smaller than before Covid, Tang says "we all need to enjoy life despite the pandemic". Perhaps there is a lesson in that for all of us.