

A group of people, many wearing face masks, are kneeling on a city street, painting large yellow letters that spell out "ROAD TO FREEDOM". The scene is set in an urban environment with tall buildings in the background. The foreground is dominated by a large, textured orange and yellow graphic overlay.

2021-2022

Reflections on a Year of Community Healing and Solidarity

華人
進步會
CHINESE
PROGRESSIVE
ASSOCIATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO WE ARE	3
The Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)	3
The Coalition for Community Safety and Justice (CCSJ).....	3
OUR ANALYSIS	4
Community safety requires deep engagement with working-class people of color.	4
WHAT WE DID	5
METHODOLOGY	7
WHAT WE HEARD	10
Working-class Chinese tenants, workers, parents, and young people grapple with contradictions.	10
Cross-racial member exchanges penetrate barriers and surface tensions.	12
Cross-organizational conversations reveal the importance of honest dialogue and relationship-building.	14
Discussions with Black leaders highlight economic factors, unrelenting trauma, and the need to build deep and mutual care.....	15
Culturally relevant content and trusted relationships foster breakthroughs in learning about restorative justice.	17
LESSONS LEARNED	19
What We Heard From Tenants, Workers, Parents, And Youth.....	19
The Role Of Organizing	19
What Our Communities Want	20
OUR NEXT STEPS	21
CONCLUSION	23

WHO WE ARE

The Chinese Progressive Association (CPA)

Founded in 1972, the Chinese Progressive Association educates, organizes, and empowers the working-class immigrant Chinese community in San Francisco to improve living and working conditions for all people. For fifty years, CPA has worked to build a base of working-class leadership, connect our leaders and community to other movements, and build unity for collective power and justice for all people.

The Coalition for Community Safety and Justice (CCSJ)

In 2019, five organizations founded the Coalition for Community Safety and Justice (CCSJ) – Chinese for Affirmative Action, Chinatown Community Development Center, Chinese Progressive Association, Community Youth Center, and New Breath Foundation. CCSJ focuses on long-standing safety issues within the Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) community and works to address and prevent violence, racism, and xenophobia. It identifies and develops community-centered programmatic solutions to mitigate violence and hate across all communities of color. CCSJ recognizes that carceral solutions are not the most effective way to resolve violence. Community building and cross-racial dialogue are necessary to prevent violence at the root source and yield sustainable short- and long-term solutions.

For the last four years, CCSJ has been leading a city-wide holistic model to reimagine personal and community safety. We do three things: 1) respond: support victim wrap-around services and community engagement to victims and survivors of violence, 2) restore: programming that builds toward cross-racial community healing and solidarity, and 3) reform: strengthen critical public safety systems to stabilize health and safety of all SF communities.



OUR ANALYSIS

Community safety requires deep engagement with working-class people of color.

Over the past few years, high-profile, violent incidents targeting Asian elderly and women have sparked fear and outrage in the Bay Area and nationally. Burglaries and vandalism of Asian-owned businesses, and harassment have also increased. Such violence is part of a larger structure of dire inequities affecting poor and working-class communities of color. Anti-Asian bigotry is real and urgent, a core feature of U.S. racism dating back centuries that has intensified with a resurgence of xenophobic political speech blaming China for COVID and the economy.

CPA has identified a troubling gap in responses to anti-Asian violence. Between business-as-usual law-and-order politics on the one hand and abolitionist calls to defund the police on the other lies an unmet need for deep and honest conversations among affected working-class people of color. This leaves communities vulnerable to ongoing violence and divisive racial appeals that pit people of color against each other. There is a false yet widespread belief that most who commit anti-Asian violence are Black and that Asian American communities are overwhelmingly pro-police. This is not just inaccurate; it undermines the multiracial solidarity we need to build lasting community safety. The lack of direct engagement with working-class communities of color on issues of safety, harm, and accountability is a grave political deficit that leaves more people in danger of violence and keeps serious solutions out of reach.

Conservative forces have exploited the rise in anti-Asian violence by using Asian American victimhood to build popular support for a pro-carceral agenda. Leveraging sympathy for Asian Americans to justify tough-on-crime policies is an old political tactic dating back to the Cold War Era origins of the model minority myth. Conservatives fashioned the stereotype of Asian Americans as hardworking, law-abiding, and compliant to criminalize protest movements generally and Black communities specifically. Today's conservative media focuses excessively on crimes with Asian victims and Black suspects to the exclusion of other systemic crises that plague communities of color, like poverty, racial and religious bigotry, police brutality, and gender-based violence. Such distortion lures well-intentioned people who want to feel safe into an orbit of toxic propaganda that promotes failed tough-on-crime policies and undercuts multiracial solidarity. This gets in the way of organizing for common political goals, including community safety. Conservatives seize on the opportunity to use anti-Asian violence to drum up interracial conflict, even as they propagate the very anti-China rhetoric that puts Asian Americans in peril.

Today's resurgence in anti-Asian violence is linked to very old racial ideas that are always at hand – of Asian people as barbaric, disloyal, and disease-ridden. In 2020, then-President Trump squarely cast the blame for COVID and the economic crisis on China. As public health measures like stay-at-home orders, masking, and social distancing took their toll on people's mental wellness, social connection, and economic security, Asian Americans became easy scapegoats. Officials scrambled to explain life-saving public health orders. Meanwhile, Trump exploited growing anger over the perceived loss of "American" freedoms by making China a catch-all scapegoat for the nation's suffering. Today, President Biden's only mildly less inflammatory anti-China policy and rhetoric continue to place Asian Americans at risk of racial violence.

What fuels economic insecurity is not any single nation or race but a more extensive system that benefits the few at the expense of the many. The gears of white supremacy entice poor and working-class people of color to view each other as rivals rather than as allies, especially in times of economic crisis. Seeking to maintain control amid widespread unrest, economic and political elites have long used government and media power to sow division through racial myths like the disloyal Japanese American during WWII, the Black welfare queen during the recession of the 1980s, the job-stealing Mexican undocumented worker amid job losses in the 1990s, and now the Chinese “enemy within” during America’s declining economic and political security.

Against this historically dense backdrop, CPA sought to engage our base and allies in working-class Chinese and Black communities to delve beneath the headlines and political rhetoric in search of people’s genuine perspectives on crime, violence, accountability, and safety. As a Chinese American organization invested in economic and racial justice, building relationships with organizations across communities of color is crucial. However, decades of public disinvestment, racial segregation, and mass incarceration have severely eroded the terrain for this work.

CPA occupies a critical political space within the larger Chinese American population in San Francisco. Racist policies like corporate-led gentrification that have systematically pushed working-class Black and Latinx people out of the city have created conditions so harsh that survival issues and crisis management oversaturate these communities. In a city that is now about 1/3 Asian American (including over 20% Chinese) and only 5% Black, the visibility of affluent Asians (usually Chinese Americans) obscures the overrepresentation of AAPIs living in poverty. This undermines our capacity to fight together for San Francisco’s working families, whose futures are in grave peril. We need powerful multiracial alliances to be effective. CPA cannot realize our mission without massive investment into Black and Latinx communities, organizations, and leadership.

WHAT WE DID

Important notes: Anti-Chinese sentiment endangers anyone perceived as Chinese, which extends to many Asian ethnic groups. This report only represents part of the spectrum of that reality because CPA focused this project on our membership base, which is almost exclusively working-class Chinese American youth and immigrant adults. To reflect this, we distinguish between “Chinese”, “Asian American”, and “Pacific Islander” throughout this report to avoid marginalizing the unique experiences of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) beyond CPA’s base. We are committed to building with other AAPIs in future conversations.

In addition, this report covers work that CPA did with CCSJ alongside the critical roles of our fellow coalition members: CYC’s victim services work, CAA’s policy advocacy, and New Breath Foundation’s lived expertise about carceral systems and violence.

The work and lessons shared in this report reflects work completed in mid-2021 through the end of 2022.

It will take disciplined and steadfast commitment to drill through the layers of systemic oppression and disinformation that have led to this moment. CPA has always rejected divisive and ineffective quick fixes to harm, whether economic, political, or physical. We choose instead to focus on root causes and long-term change. We have organized in San Francisco’s working-class Chinese communities and built strong relationships with Black and Latinx organizations and leaders through multiracial campaigns and coalitions

for decades. In 2021 and 2022, we leaned on this history to launch cross-racial community-building experiments that addressed violence, harm, safety, and accountability in working-class Chinese and Black communities.

Anti-Asian violence and related tensions between Asian American and Black communities predate the recent COVID-related surge, and CPA is no stranger to these challenges. In 2019 we co-founded the Coalition for Community Safety and Justice (CCSJ) along with Chinese for Affirmative Action, Chinatown Community Development Center, Community Youth Center, and New Breath Foundation to address persistent violence, crime, xenophobia, and interracial conflict affecting AAPI communities. We organized community healing and solidarity events and coordinated rapid response and communications strategies in the wake of violence against Asian Americans. Over the last four years, we drew on all of our organizing experience to pilot the initiative for intergenerational community healing, racial solidarity, and restorative justice capacity-building that forms the basis for this report.

To build a holistic approach to violence and racism, we had to be nimble – to try things, learn, and adapt in real-time. We tackled multiple mandates simultaneously: responding to immediate concerns and fears among CPA's working-class Chinese American community; learning about and trying a range of approaches to harm; and investing in people's capacities to repair, heal, and build accountability when harm is done. We learned as we went and identified key leverage points so we could adapt and try again.

As part of our CCSJ work, we started by listening to our members and reaching out to key leaders in the Black community. We created spaces for dialogue, education, and meaningful cross-cultural exchanges with staff and members of San Francisco-based grassroots Chinese and Black organizations. Overall, we engaged 20 organizations. We deeply engaged over 1,000 working-class Chinese immigrant adults and more than 500 US-born Chinese youth. We also conducted a deep canvass on community safety. Including our events and actions, we reached over 1,900 Bay Area community members.

We convened safe spaces for CPA and Coleman Advocates members to share their feelings and experiences, analyzing historical and recent case studies of violence experienced by Black, Brown, and Asian people. We held listening sessions with Chinese community members only, Black community members only, and Chinese and Black community members together; advisory sessions with Black community leaders; and cross-organizational staff exchanges. We discussed the complexities of various situations, including different levels of harm and why someone might commit harm. We explored restorative justice responses to such incidents and to everyday experiences that our members had with families and within the Chinese community.

METHODOLOGY

LISTENING SESSIONS & CROSS-RACIAL MEMBER EXCHANGES: Listening came first. We needed to assess the situation quickly, to gauge the general orientation of CPA and Coleman Advocates community members and their appetite for our approach. We also were contending with disinformation and rapidly spreading rumors on English and Chinese social media. We began in the spring/summer of 2021 after a series of high-profile violent incidents against Asian Americans.

Through four listening sessions, we:

- Paid close attention to people's fears, contradictions, and questions about public safety.
- Assessed the impacts of the violence: what actions people took and any mental health effects.
- Intervened in misleading conservative narratives that promised an end to the violence without addressing its root causes.

We worked with Coleman Advocates¹, a San Francisco-based multiracial organization, to facilitate listening sessions with our respective members –adult Chinese immigrant tenants and workers, second-generation Chinese American youth, and Coleman's Black and Brown youth and adult member bases. We also held two intergenerational and multilingual exchanges where we facilitated dialogue about issues affecting people's lives. These events combined cultural sharing with political education. Each exchange explored a San Francisco neighborhood that was core to one organization's membership base: Chinatown (CPA) and Bayview (Coleman). Having worked together for years to build equity and justice in our communities, CPA and Coleman were able to leverage our long-standing organizational relationship to increase trust and understanding among our members.

DEEP CANVASS: In Spring 2022, CPA embarked on the first deep canvass program to speak in-language to working-class Chinese people in San Francisco on community safety issues and alternative solutions to police and accountability. Deep Canvassing is an outreach method that focuses on storytelling to process ideological beliefs, assumptions, and values and create common ground between the canvasser and the person being canvassed on a particular issue, ballot measure, or candidate. It also requires asking follow-up questions to deepen understanding, while holding a non-judgmental space. Deep canvassing has been shown to create lasting effects, compared to phone banking, traditional canvassing, and TV ads.

The deep canvassing program allowed us to focus on building relationships in the community, and to explore with openness and curiosity what our community was feeling and experiencing around community safety and what solutions were on their mind. A team of eight canvassers ran a six-week program targeting voter and member lists in Chinatown, the Richmond, the Excelsior, the Sunset, and Bayview Hunters Point. We knocked on 114 doors, dialed 3,469 unique phone numbers, and completed 503 conversations. In 431 conversations, canvassers were able to share their own experiences and stories around community safety. Of the people we talked to, 86 respondents were either a victim of a crime or knew a victim of a crime.

The conversations reflected what we heard in other spaces -- a nuanced understanding of why crimes and

¹ Since 1975, Coleman Advocates has fought to advance rights, safety, and full inclusion for low-income people of color. Coleman primarily serves Black, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islanders centered in Bayview-Hunters Point and the Excelsior.

violence occur. They shared that education and good jobs are critical to long-term community safety.

RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL HEALING: CPA supported community leader Sasanna Yee in her efforts to develop a neighborhood-specific racial healing program in Visitacion Valley, to honor her grandmother Yik Oi Huang who was fatally attacked there in 2019. Sasanna chose the neighborhood because of the background of Black displacement, demographic change, and incidents of violence. The core of the program was a series of four “Move the Chi”² events at Visitacion Valley Playground, the location where Sasanna’s grandmother was killed. The playground has been renamed Yik Oi Huang Peace & Friendship Park. Move the Chi volunteers designed the events to model a unified neighborhood response in the aftermath of violence. By reclaiming public space as people from different cultural backgrounds, residents were able to share their cultural practices of resilience. Programming included Qigong, sound healing, African drumming, hot Siva-Polynesian dance, acupressure ear seeds, herbal medicines, massage, and Reiki. A total of 100-150 people participated per session.

STAFF EXCHANGES: To build capacity and alignment across the Bay Area, we held staff exchanges with eight organizations rooted in their communities and invested in shared struggle. We started with two exchanges with 30 staff from CPA and Coleman Advocates. Later, we expanded the exchanges to include:

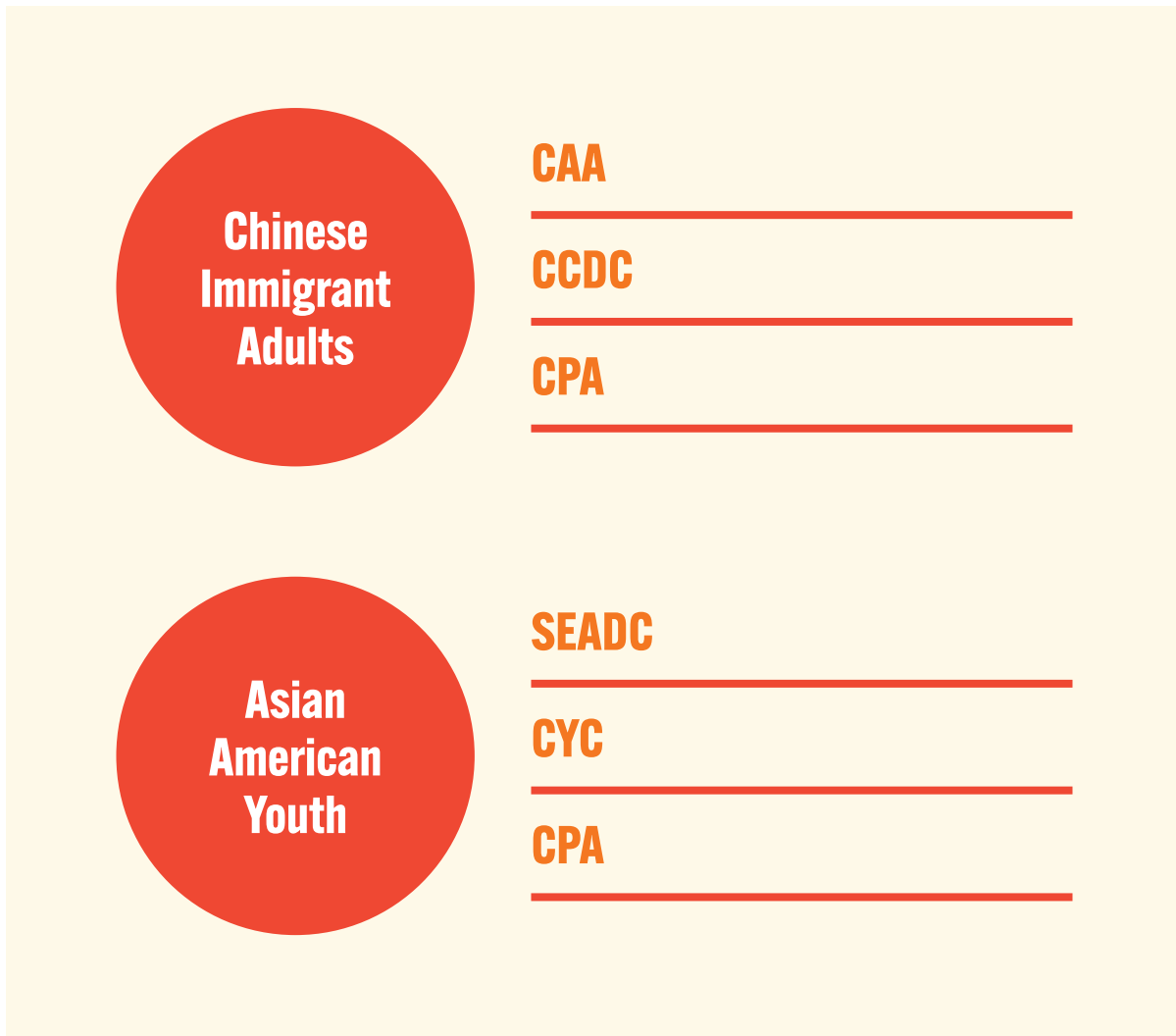
- Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA)
- Bayview Hunters Point Mobilization for Adolescent Growth in our Communities (BMAGIC)
- Hospitality House
- Southeast Asian Development Center (SEADC)
- Community Youth Center (CYC), and
- California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative.

ADVISORY SESSIONS WITH BLACK LEADERS AND ORGANIZERS: To hone our strategic direction, we held four advisory sessions with community leaders and social justice organizers of Black-led organizations in San Francisco. We wanted to:

- Build with Black-led organizations with whom we had historically lacked extensive relationships.
- Listen to and understand Black leaders’ personal and organizational perspectives on safety, healing, and solidarity between Black and Asian American communities.
- Learn about the current landscape of issues affecting Black communities in San Francisco, including root causes of violence/harm; and
- Explore the tensions inherent to building Black-Asian American solidarity and how we might work through them.

² In Chinese traditional medicine, chi is a vital life force, meant to flow freely throughout the body, that can become stagnant or blocked with pain or trauma.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CAPACITY-BUILDING: Finally, we believe we need more useful frameworks, practices, and skills to address harm and healing beyond legal and carceral solutions. We designed and piloted a culturally relevant program for working-class Chinese Americans to explore restorative justice concepts and practices³. The pilot had two cohorts of grassroots members: one with Asian American youth from CPA, SEADC, and CYC, and the other with Chinese immigrant adults from CPA, CAA, and Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC). We plan to expand the program to reach broader AAPI and BIPOC communities in future phases.



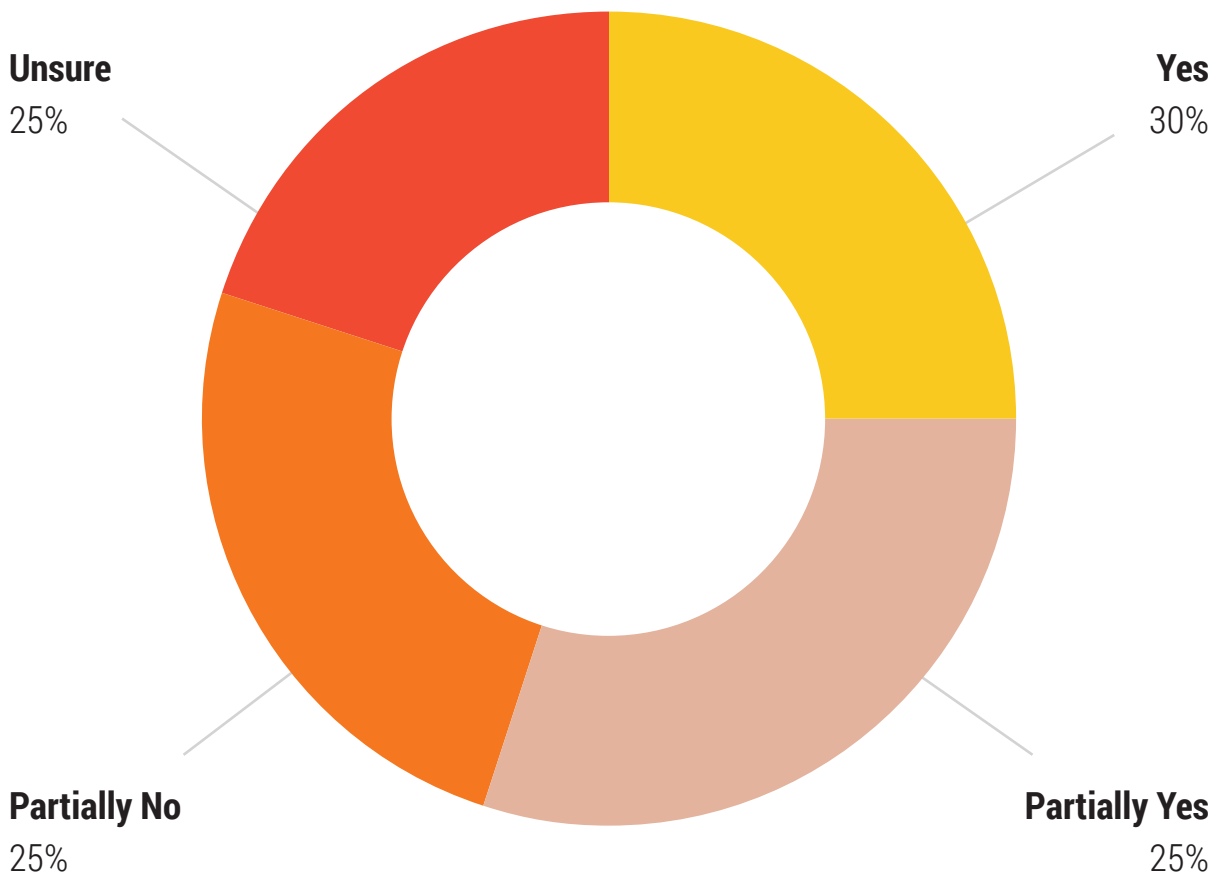
³ Restorative justice is a model of responding to harm that focuses on the harm done to people and communities, rather than on the laws that have been broken. It sees crime as a violation of people and relationships, rather than of the law and the state. Restorative justice focuses on repair and prevention, rather than punishment. It attempts to address the causes of crime and to take concrete steps to reduce future harm.

WHAT WE HEARD

Working-class Chinese tenants, workers, parents, and young people grapple with contradictions.

LISTENING SESSIONS: During our listening sessions, it became clear that our Chinese immigrant first- and second-generation members had urgent safety needs that the city was not addressing. Members talked about their trauma and a deep fear of going outside after the violence of recent months and years, and the fear of retribution if they reported a crime. Community members shared a strong desire to find varying solutions to harm- some described the need for immediate responses like community safety patrols and police, and the lack of lasting security that these provided. Many understood the difficulty of providing a universal solution for every case of violence. Others were curious about solutions that were both accountable and restorative but had doubts because there were no past examples of this. When asked if they believed the police kept them and their community safe, members responded with uncertainty.

CPA Membership Base Listening Session Poll: Do police keep our communities safe?



These discussions also highlighted the wide popularization of pro-carceral positions and the need for more education resources to inoculate against and correct disinformation spread through ethnic and mainstream media. Chinese earned media and social media outlets have often cited California Proposition 474 as a key example of why criminal justice reforms were to blame for the rise in crimes. Prop 47 passed in 2014, but the effects of the disinformation drawing a false equivalency between it and the rise in crime continue to persist.

Members lifted up the importance of education to eliminate violence – education in the cultures and histories of different racial groups, in the legal system, and in concrete skills to resolve conflicts without violence.

“ **In ethnic media, all we see is violence against Asians.** Within our communities, we only think it’s violence against Asians. But we don’t see impacts on other communities of color. We need more education outside of media.

—Adult TWC member

Our members also told us they were eager to build relationships and discuss charged topics across Chinese-Black communities. They expressed a desire to understand why violence had occurred, for true accountability, and for empathy and responsibility from our government and the larger community.

“ **Government needs to do something about this [economic violence], especially the wage gap.** They should increase universal basic income in the country. Because of this, people are split. Asian and Black people need to learn how to cooperate... we know who is getting oppressed the most, so instead we must stay need unity to find solutions for these problems.

—Youth MOJO member

“ **We need solidarity in different communities.** The bigger society needs to be safe first in order for each of us to be safe. It is important that we spend our energy supporting a better environment for all.

—Adult TWC member

4 California Proposition 47 passed in 2014 and recategorized certain nonviolent offenses as misdemeanors rather than felonies. It affected crimes like theft, fraud, and forgery where the value of the property did not exceed \$950.



Art Mural in Chinatown, SF, of a Recipe for how to "Love our People like You Love Our Food" by Vida Kuang.

Youth members shared their own experiences with racism and the experiences of their peers of other races. Their discussions revealed critical themes along two possible paths forward: 1) intervention and healing, or 2) inaction and the status quo. They noted the difference between immediate, reactive responses to violence and long-term solutions, which were lacking. They expressed optimism that cross-racial community-building could help bring a longer-term solution outside of a punitive and retributive framework. They also recognized that such slow shifting of hearts and minds would require endurance and strength to build alternatives to fear. The following chart reflects themes and quotes from youth member listening sessions, and shows the need for resource allocation, narrative intervention and active healing needed to break cycles of violence:

Cross-racial member exchanges penetrate barriers and surface tensions.

CROSS-RACIAL MEMBER EXCHANGES: Amid escalating violence and racial tensions, we wanted to bring together Black and Chinese-speaking community members in San Francisco who rarely had a chance to engage in meaningful dialogue. Creating space for people to be open and vulnerable was not easy given the infrequency of interaction, language barriers, the quickness of media outlets and politicians to assign victim and perpetrator labels, and implicit and explicit bias in both communities. We made sure the exchanges were nurturing, calming, and fun, not transactional. Black and Chinese parents shared how they felt stereotyped and how stereotypes impacted their children in school-settings. We saw that as long as we created spaces for our members to share stories, build relationships, be vulnerable, and understand each other's experiences more fully, we could build a foundation for trust.

During one exchange, we split people into small, mixed-language, and intergenerational groups to complete a 13-site scavenger hunt in Chinatown. Participants used clues about the histories, missions, and stories of various sites to identify and situate them in the lives of Chinatown residents. Using embedded bilingual interpreters, they were able to communicate with each other across language barriers. Prioritizing fun helped them feel at ease. They explored their values together by running around the neighborhood sharing stories of family and history and relating them back to race, class, and community safety.



Coleman Advocates and CPA members visiting a Chinatown resident's single-room occupancy unit residence.

“ **We live in the US, one of the wealthiest countries in the world.** In our community, in Chinatown, people close to us live in a little box like this. This is not right.

—One Coleman Advocates youth visiting a single-room occupancy residence

Another exchange featured a tour led by Coleman staff of Bayview's activism and organizing history, starting with Hilltop Park, to explore the impact of redevelopment and gentrification. CPA members learned about the Big Five of Bayview: five Black women and outspoken mothers who worked to protect and improve their neighborhood starting in the 1960s. A young CPA member became emotional during the visits to Hilltop Park, Bayview Library, and the Bayview Opera House, saying that there was so much he didn't know about this neighborhood. While there are Chinese people who live in Bayview, some of CPA's members who live in Chinatown have limited contact with and understanding of Black communities in Bayview. For most of the adult CPA members who participated in this exchange, it was one of their first times in Bayview. As people described where they felt most deeply rooted, Coleman organizers Mildred Coffey and Amanda Ajisebutu spoke of the generational loss over multiple generations within Bayview's Black community because of illnesses derived from environmental toxic pollution, policing, willful neglect, and profit-driven development. Participants left this exchange understanding the collective weight of intergenerational trauma, of not having grandparents to take care of families and communities.

“ **Growing up, I was very connected with my elders.** I saw my grandfather almost every day and even though we couldn't communicate well, I can't imagine walking around Chinatown without elders.

—Chinese Progressive Association staff member Connie Liu

“ **I still call this place 'home' even though I don't live here anymore.** I'm here because I'm still passionate about my people.

—Coleman Advocates member Linda Antoine



Coleman child member sharing a celebratory moment with CPA elder member after completing their neighborhood thirteen-site scavenger hunt.

Cross-organizational conversations reveal the importance of honest dialogue and relationship-building.

STAFF EXCHANGES: In the two staff exchanges between CPA and Coleman Advocates, people shared their personal stories and described how they understood their racial and class identities growing up. They then dove deeper into a conversation on staff members' orientations to their own power through their roles in the community. Some patterns emerged:

- Staff at each organization said that they and their members believed their communities were not as united as the other organization's communities.
- Members of each organization lacked a solid context for the history of other communities.
- People spoke honestly about the history of communities getting pitted against each other, internal community stereotypes of other communities, and the dynamics of one's own racial community, and how these made it harder to win.

These sessions were the start of a long process of community building that takes time. Participants agreed that we could create lasting social change by identifying common goals, finding ways to support each other, and sharing strategies for change.

Discussions with Black leaders highlight economic factors, unrelenting trauma, and the need to build deep and mutual care.

ADVISORY SESSIONS WITH BLACK LEADERS AND ORGANIZERS: In this period, it felt particularly important to create spaces to listen deeply to how black communities and leaders understood what was happening. Below are themes from the conversations:

- 1 Anti-Blackness and anti-Asian violence are real, and we need to address both.** Neither negates the other. As one person shared, We need to repair emotional trauma and work toward freedom, joy, and human dignity together.
- 2 A false model of scarcity keeps communities of color divided.** Forces in power (media, police, politicians) are trying to tear us apart, ignoring stories of shared struggle and bridge-building.
- 3 There are major material problems, and we need to fix them.** Safety is economic, not just physical.
- 4 We must extend to each other the time and nuance to avoid knee-jerk reactions.** Focusing only on rapid crisis response gets in the way of solidarity.
- 5 We need to share ourselves, our histories, and our political knowledge to build roots of belonging across race and generations.** There are barriers to communication right now, and we want to overcome them. BIPOC communities rarely have actual dialogue about our histories and community conditions.
- 6 We have to care for each other.** True safety comes from a united community, not just the police.
- 7 Our liberation struggles are interconnected.** As humans, we have many more commonalities than differences, and as political actors, we have even more to share.



Coleman and CPA members on Coleman's neighborhood learning tour at Hilltop Park.

“ **We never are shown that in fact, Black and Asian folks work together.** Our Asian brothers and sisters grew up with us in San Francisco, in the projects. We were in community with Chinese folks and Black folks, running in the same gang, the same crews. But that will never be televised. We protected our Asian elders when kids tried that nonsense. That will never be shown. It will never be in the media — because the desire to control the image of and demonize Black folks is too strong.

-- Black leader participant from Advisory Session

“ **We need time and space to process the impact of what's happened to us on any given day...** There are few resources to address the level of trauma. We are always in a reactive mode, a crisis response, to things that happen. We don't have space to just grieve, to feel our feelings, to just have the conversation.

-- Black leader participant from Advisory Session

“ **We haven't had opportunities to build together.** There's been intentional displacement of Black San Francisco and the emerging immigrant community, as well as a disconnect in sharing knowledge of our history.

-- Black leader participant from Advisory Session



Two CPA adult members reflect on how they've been taught to address conflict between two people, the biases they hold in themselves, how they feel biases play a role in conflict.

Culturally relevant content and trusted relationships foster breakthroughs in learning about restorative justice.

To our knowledge, CPA is one of the first groups in the country to teach restorative justice in Chinese to working-class immigrants. Our staff spent significant time and thought carefully translating concepts into Chinese in a linguistically and culturally accessible way. We knew that building a successful practice required taking local context into account, allowing each community to assess its specific needs and resources and to apply restorative principles to its own context. In designing the curriculum, CPA staff wove in Chinese philosophy and Buddhism, which share many concepts with restorative justice. This helped ground restorative justice concepts in existing lived experiences and made them easier to adopt.

Because cohort members were already familiar with and trusted each other, they were personally invested in learning and sharing with vulnerability. This space allowed for rich discussion to reassess long-ingrained behaviors and beliefs. Participants were able to see their relationships to race more clearly.

For example, we discussed the case of Peter Liang, a young Chinese American police officer who killed an innocent young Black man, Akai Gurley, in Brooklyn in 2014. When we asked if a police officer should be held accountable for accidentally killing a young man, everyone said yes. But when we added race to the scenario, some members wondered whether the Chinese officer should be given the same chance to be forgiven as a white police officer. When members interrogated the contradictions in their responses to different racial contexts, they recognized their own implicit and explicit racism. Participants were able to evaluate their perspectives on punishment versus reconciliation and were enthusiastic about opportunities for healing through community accountability. They described punitive culture as incomplete and unjust and felt and saw that other alternatives were possible.



A group of CPA youth members sits together in a circle practice to discuss various ways of addressing accountability and harm.

Unexpectedly, the workshops became a space for deep self- and intergenerational healing. Cultural norms can make it easy to assign blame for failings on individuals and teach individuals to hold themselves morally culpable for mistakes like missing a question on a test. Facilitators created activities like “The Letter to Myself” where members wrote a letter to themselves to forgive the mistakes they’ve made in past. Through this activity, we saw adult members notice how they blamed themselves and then unconsciously perpetuated blame toward their children. Both adult and youth cohort participants discovered insights into their parent-child relationships and a desire to handle conflict differently, by building understanding and connection.

“ **My dad had high expectations for me, which also influenced me to be more competitive and to want validation from him.** This expectation has unconsciously trickled down to how I interact with my daughter. This is something I have to constantly reflect on because I actually didn’t like my dad’s response, and I value my daughter’s mental health more. Through this, I learned everyone makes mistakes, and I also have to forgive myself if I am able to forgive others.

-- Restorative Justice adult cohort member

LESSONS LEARNED

CPA gained important information about our base, our allies, the political climate, and what people want and need to build lasting community safety. Here are the key takeaways:

What We Heard From Tenants, Workers, Parents, And Youth

- **Chinese immigrants and US-born Chinese Americans hold diverse, complex, and contradictory perspectives on how to handle violence and harm.** Immigrant workers, elders, and English-speaking young people in our base expressed far-ranging and nuanced views. When surveyed, some said they believed the police kept the community safe, but the far greater response was one of uncertainty. Many said the current system of policing and punishment was ineffective and failed to provide enough resources for victims to heal, even as they struggled to name alternatives. Understanding the breadth of people's viewpoints required patient inquiry and enough space for nuance, storytelling, principled debate, and analysis building.
- **Simplistic media stories of Chinese and Asian American victimization exploit racism against Black people to foster resentment and build support for pro-carceral policies.** This affects our base. Discussions with our members revealed the outsized role that the media plays in shaping opinions on public safety. Mainstream, ethnic, and social media backed by conservative political forces amplify disinformation and exploit people's fears to build support for policing and punishment. Social media platforms spread videos of the most egregious incidents, repeatedly provoking anger, fear, and trauma at lightning speed. Mainstream and ethnic media too readily cite anti-Asian racial bias while ignoring factors like poverty and racial segregation. Moreover, the myth of Black criminality has long been a convenient lever to build public support for tough-on-crime policies, due to the U.S. history of slavery and Black Codes. Ethnic media overemphasizes crimes against Asians where suspects are Black, and mainstream media often chooses the lazy "if it bleeds, it leads" approach over thoughtful reporting. All this fuels racial animosity, bolsters punitive responses, and impedes the informed debate we need to find lasting solutions.
- **Given ample space and accurate information, communities experiencing violence want solidarity and progress, not more division.** Fear and insecurity make our communities more vulnerable to disinformation and punitive solutions that inflict rather than repair harm. However, the deep inquiry, intergenerational listening sessions, and cross-racial exchanges we conducted revealed a strong hunger among our members to learn more about the root causes of violence and explore solutions that repair damage and build racial solidarity.

The Role Of Organizing

- **Multiracial organizing softens the ground for tackling interracial tensions with honesty and integrity when they arise.** CPA has decades of experience forming multiracial alliances like San Francisco Rising to build political power for communities of color. This allows us to play an important role in this moment. We can draw on our trusted relationships with Black organizations and leaders to have honest conversations amid serious racial tensions. CPA's history has taught us that Chinese Americans are not

singular victims of racial harm, and we cannot solve our problems standing alone. Our vulnerability to violence stems not from hateful acts by individuals, but from a system of institutional racism that hurts everyone. This empowers us to engage in challenging conversations knowing we are part of a long arc of struggle.

- **What we saw and heard from our members and allies reflected the racism, classism, and gender oppression that lie deeply embedded in U.S. society and institutions.** The starting point for this work was to listen. Not surprisingly, we heard comments and perspectives from our Chinese immigrant and US-born Chinese American base, as well as from our Black allies, that echoed the larger society's dominant views. Despite the best intentions, we witnessed negative assumptions about Chinese people and Asian Americans generally, about Black people, as well as about people of different class backgrounds and gender identities. It was important to create the space to surface these ideas openly and honestly.
- **Bringing people together cross-racially to analyze conditions and seek ways to improve them builds bonds of empathy that can transcend divisions.** CPA and our allies brought together Chinese and Black communities that rarely have the chance to interact in very collaborative and immersive activities, including explorations of Chinatown and the historically Black neighborhood of Bayview. We created space for participants to ask questions, navigate conflict, and deepen their analyses. We witnessed them feeling empathy for each other's stories, gaining new understanding and mutual commitment, and wanting more.

What Our Communities Want

- **People want the violence to stop.** First and foremost, our members desperately want to feel safe. Driven by fear and trauma, this leads some to grasp at easy solutions like the police before quickly realizing how untenable that is. This, in turn, leads to more fear and hopelessness, especially without clear alternatives.
- **People want to change the underlying economic conditions that lead to violence.** Both Chinese and Black participants noted various ways that class shapes community safety. The wage gap, income inequality, and rising rents contribute to violence by creating a climate of scarcity and rivalry. People saw how violence could thrive in such conditions with its effects often trickling down through generations. CPA has supported workers to get back wages and to pass affordable housing, minimum wage, and paid sick leave policies. Participants viewed such efforts to improve their material conditions as vital to community safety.
- **People want to understand what justice and accountability can look like when it restores rather than damages people, relationships, and communities.** Dominant media and political narratives equate justice with punishment, even though this does nothing to repair damage or make communities safer. People told us they wanted a different kind of accountability that repairs people and relationships when someone commits or experiences harm.
- **The desire to hold people who do harm accountable in restorative ways resonated on a deeply personal level.** We witnessed how eager and optimistic our members felt to build racial solidarity and explore alternatives to the current system of blame and punishment. They related this to multiple areas of their lives – family relationships; workplace violations; and bullying, harassment, or violence in

schools. This was especially transformational for parents and young people who realized that valuing care and wellness over competition and approval-seeking could help them navigate everyday conflicts and challenges with their family and peers.

- **There is no acceptable quick fix to the violence that people are experiencing, leaving communities to tend to immediate harm with inadequate resources.** Our members very much feel and recognize the limitations of the current pro-carceral system, and this leads to greater fear and a sense of hopelessness. The kinds of solutions that people want simply do not exist yet. We need time and resources to create them.

OUR NEXT STEPS

All of this points to the need for continued work. Our plans include:

- **Working through CCSJ, expanding community outreach, political education, and engagement.** We will provide community members and staff with political education on AAPI and Black history, current issues affecting our communities, alternatives to the criminal justice system, racial justice, and racial solidarity. This will include an in-language curriculum and wider participation in deep listening and empathy-based conversations.
- **Building capacity for resiliency and healing practices.** We will also provide staff and community members with tools to process emotions and heal from trauma, manage conflicts better, and restore and transform relationships within and across communities.
- **Dedicating space to organize and build relationships among AAPI, Black, and Brown working-class people.** We will provide cross-racial member exchanges, create a racial justice and restorative justice cohort, and coordinate more closely among AAPI, Black, and Brown organizations. Most perpetrators of anti-Asian violence are white men. However, because of how the media and other forces have pitted Asian and Black communities against one another, as described above, we will tend to the specific damage done to Black-Asian relations.
- **Identifying and prioritizing opportunities to join forces with other communities of color for long-term economic and racial justice solutions.** We will seek out and build campaigns that strengthen the ground for multiracial solidarity and develop our capacity to win lasting community safety in our workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools.
- **Expanding our media strategy to combat disinformation and popularize our analysis.** With emboldened ethnic-nationalist, conservative, and reactionary forces in the media, narrative intervention is increasingly challenging but more urgent than ever. CPA will sharpen our narrative strategy in Chinese and English-speaking media to combat disinformation, frame shared concerns, and educate audiences. We will tell stories about diverse communities and community-driven solutions to safety, affordability, quality jobs, and mental health and wellness.
- **Continuing to work with critical coalitions to hone our analysis and develop solutions to keep all communities safe.** Locally, CPA is part of San Francisco Rising and the Coalition for Community Safety and Justice. We will hold local agencies accountable for addressing safety concerns, particularly

around language access and cultural relevance, and ensure that impacted communities have input into solutions. We will deepen our work with statewide and national alliances like AAPIs for Civic Empowerment Education Fund and Grassroots Asians Rising to learn, analyze, develop strategy, and leverage our strengths collectively to address these issues.

- **Rigorously practicing multiracial solidarity as a core strategy.** We will continue to support and uplift our underrepresented AAPI partners and our Black, Brown, and indigenous partners. Our communities have different histories, experiences, and needs, but we are stronger together.



CPA and Coleman Advocate members take a moment from their grassroots Chinatown tour to pose for a picture at Portsmouth Square.

CONCLUSION

One of our leaders put it simply: “People are hungry, and this is hard.” The problem of violence against Asian Americans is urgent, with far-reaching implications. At this moment, people across AAPI, Black, and Brown communities experiencing violence are desperate for solutions and willing to do what is necessary to realize them. Faced with the shattering violence of policing and incarceration, people want alternatives to punishment that keep them safe, a system based on mutual care and healing. There is potential to build a lasting cross-class and multiracial movement for actual community safety if we invest deeply in relationships and organizing. CPA stands ready to serve our people and movements to meet this critical challenge.

華人
進步會

CHINESE
PROGRESSIVE
ASSOCIATION