Andrew Yang Accused of Being Insensitive to People With Mental Illness

During the New York City mayoral primary, an opponent accused the politician of demonizing people with mental health issues.

June 23, 2021 By Caroline Tien

Less than one week before the polls opened, New York City mayoral candidate Andrew Yang came under fire for comments he made about people with mental health problems.

Yang, who shot to fame when he ran for president in 2020, decried the city's recent spike in violence during a televised debate with his chief Democratic rivals. "Yes, mentally ill people have rights, but you know who else have rights? We do! The people and families of the city," he said. "We have the right to walk the street and not fear for our safety because a mentally ill person is going to lash out at us."

In a subsequent tweet, Yang expanded on his statement. "Full context here was mental illness is behind half of anti-Asian hate crimes," he wrote. "We need to get them compassionate comprehensive care—and not let them languish on our streets."

New York City has seen a recent surge in such hate crimes, according to CBS News. In one particularly vicious attack, a man sucker-punched a 55-year-old woman as he passed her on the sidewalk in Chinatown.

According to The New York Times, several opponents of Yang categorized his statements as derogatory and insensitive. Eric Adams, who at press time was the mayoral Democratic front runner, characterized Yang's comments as an attempt to "demonize" people with mental health problems, the Times reported.

Ifeoma Ike, the senior campaign adviser for mayoral candidate Maya Wiley, accused him on social media of being "anti-Black" because, she claimed, Black people are disproportionately more likely to experience both mental illness and homelessness.

Despite the backlash, Yang defended his comments. In a phone conversation with the billionaire

John Catsimatidis that aired on the latter's radio show on June 21, he argued that the presence of mentally ill people in public places would hurt New York City's tourism industry.

"We need to get them the care that they need, but that will also supercharge our economic recovery because we all see these mentally ill people on our streets and subways, and you know who else sees them? Tourists," Yang said, according to Business Insider. "And then they don't come back, and they tell their friends, 'Don't go to New York City.'"

Roughly two hours after the polls closed at 9 p.m. on June 22, Yang conceded defeat.

For more on Black Americans and mental illness risk, read "Systemic Racism Increases the Risk of Psychosis Among Minorities." For more on institutional support for people with mental illness, read "More Than Half of American Adults Living With Mental Illness Don't Get Treatment."

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