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Sheriff's office says antisemitic messages in Jacksonville were not crimes

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CNN —

The multiple antisemitic messages that appeared in public spaces in Jacksonville, Florida, this weekend, including at the high-profile Florida-Georgia college football game, do not constitute crimes at this time, the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office said.

“At this time, the Sheriff's Office has not identified any crimes having been committed; the comments displayed do not include any type of threat and are protected by the First Amendment,” public information officer T.N. Dash said in an email. “We will continue to monitor any reports of this nature to determine if they rise to level of a criminal nature.”

The Jacksonville branch of the FBI also said it is in contact with the sheriff's office in case the investigation reveals further information of a crime.

“Investigating these acts remains a top priority for the FBI because hate crimes are not only an attack on the victim – these acts are meant to threaten and intimidate an entire community,” FBI

Jacksonville Special Agent in Charge Sherri Onks said.

The police statements came as local and state officials condemned the antisemitic messages. The US has seen a rise in antisemitic incidents over the past few years, with 941 incidents in 2015 jumping to 2,717 [tracked in 2021 by the Anti-Defamation League](#). Four years ago, a gunman stormed into a [synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania](#), and killed 11 people in the deadliest attack on Jewish people on US soil.

One of the messages, referencing rapper Kanye West, was seen scrolling on the outside of TIAA Bank Field during the Florida-Georgia game on Saturday, according to video shot by a relative of Vic Micolucci, a reporter for CNN affiliate WJXT.

In the [video](#), the words “Kanye is right about the jews” are visible scrolling across the exterior of the stadium structure, referencing [recent antisemitic comments from the rapper Ye](#), formerly known as Kanye West.

It is unclear how the message was projected onto the stadium wall. It is also unclear how long the message was visible outside the stadium.

“We are horrified by and condemn the hate speech committed at TIAA Bank Field on Saturday night and other acts of anti-Semitism so visible of late,” TIAA Bank Field Vice President Michael Cosgrove said in a statement. “TIAA stands with the Jewish community and remains committed to inclusion and tolerance.”

In other videos circulating on social media, the same message was also visible on at least one building in Jacksonville on Saturday night.

And on Friday, banners were also visible from a highway overpass on Interstate 10 in Jacksonville, according to a tweet from a local reporter. They were also referenced in a statement by Florida Agricultural Commissioner Nikki Fried. The banners read “End Jewish Supremacy in America” and “Honk if you know it’s the Jews.”

The language in the scrolling messages in Jacksonville mirrors banners hung from a freeway overpass in [Los Angeles last weekend](#) by a group appearing to make Nazi salutes.

Jennifer Plotkin, the Board President of the Jewish Federation and Foundation in Northeast Florida, told CNN’s Brianna Keilar Monday she was “certainly disheartened and concerned by the escalation of antisemitic rhetoric that we’ve seen, specifically over this past weekend.”

“We are very thankful for the numerous leaders and community members who have expressed their disgust and condemnation of these acts as well and going forward we will be using our anger and disappointment that these things are happening here, to build alliances within our community and to ensure that our Jewish community is protected,” Plotkin added.

In southern Florida, the Broward County sheriff’s office is investigating a report of racist and antisemitic messages spray-painted in Weston on Sunday morning, according to a release.

The mayor of Weston and other city leaders announced a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of whomever is responsible for the vandalism. The messages were spray-painted around a playground and included swastikas and phrases like “N***ers kill Jews” and “I hate Jews.”

Captain Sam Cavalieri with the Broward County Sheriff's Office said the perpetrators would likely be charged with vandalism, with an enhancement for a hate crime.

"These crimes are disgusting and disturbing," Cavalieri said.

Broward County Sheriff Gregory Tony, who is Black, said antisemitic and racist messages would not be tolerated.

"Such acts constitute a hate crime and are a reminder of a dark period in history when both Blacks and Jews were viciously assaulted and murdered without just cause," he said. "Like my Jewish brothers and sisters, I recall the deep pain and hardship of my ancestors, and I will continue to defend all our residents' lives, liberty, and pursuit of happiness."

"Broward County is one of the most diverse counties in the state, and we are proud of every segment that makes us unique."

Weston Mayor Margaret Brown also spoke out against the crime: "When members of our community are attacked, it affects and impacts us all," Brown said during a news conference on Monday morning. "We stand together united against the racist, antisemitic messages. In Weston, there is no place for hate, and we will not tolerate it. Our community is not and will not again tolerate such acts."

A number of Florida officials have condemned the messages in statements following the weekend.

Attempts to scapegoat the Jewish community has no place in Florida, Gov. Ron DeSantis said, according to Deputy Secretary Jeremy Redfern.

Although DeSantis did not directly address the incidents in a

statement emailed to CNN, Redfern said that DeSantis has a “proven record of supporting the Jewish community and fighting anti-Semitism” through legislative proposals, laws, and decisive executive action.

“The first step is to ensure we do not normalize this behavior,” Fried said. “Do not normalize antisemitic messages above a freeway, or anywhere else.”

The Jewish Federation and Foundation of Northeast Florida has “condemned and is outraged” by the multiple antisemitic events.

“We are harnessing our outrage into positive action. The Jewish Federation and Foundation has been in communication with the FBI, the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, and the St. Johns Sheriff’s office. We will continue to work with them in ensuring the safety and security of our community,” the group said in a statement.

“The rhetoric we have seen and heard in the last few weeks is unnerving and a scare tactic. However, our largest concern is that even one person will see this as a call to action and repeat what we witnessed in Pittsburgh exactly four years ago this weekend,” the Federation said.

US Rep. John Rutherford, whose district includes Jacksonville, said in a [statement on Twitter](#), “There is absolutely no room for this sort of hate in Florida. I continue to stand in support of the Jewish community in Jacksonville and across the nation.”

In a tweet on Sunday morning, [Jacksonville Mayor Lenny Curry](#) said the city is made better because of its diversity.

“Those who spread messages of hate, racism and antisemitism will not be able to change the heart of this city or her people,”

Curry wrote in the tweet. “I condemn these cowards and their cowardly messages.”

The University of Georgia and University of Florida jointly issued a statement condemning the messages.

“We strongly condemn the antisemitic hate speech projected outside TIAA Bank Field in Jacksonville after the Florida-Georgia football game Saturday night and the other antisemitic messages that have appeared in Jacksonville.

“The University of Florida and the University of Georgia together denounce these and all acts of antisemitism and other forms of hatred and intolerance. We are proud to be home to strong and thriving Jewish communities at UGA and UF, and we stand together against hate,” the statement said.

West appeared in a rambling 16-minute video shared by WmgLab Records on YouTube on Saturday, in which he did not apologize for his antisemitic remarks but seemed to try to distance himself from any “hate group.”

“I have no association to any hate group,” West said as he closed his remarks in prayer. “If any hate happens upon any Jewish person, it is not associated (gestures to himself) because I am demanding that everyone walk in love.”

Jacksonville Jaguars owner Shad Khan said he was “really distressed on all this antisemitic rhetoric around Florida-Georgia.”

“It’s not the Jacksonville I know and love, and all of us have to work together to absolutely put an end to it. So, let’s stop it,” he said prior to the Jaguars game against the Denver Broncos in London.

CNN's Chuck Johnston, Denise Royal, Devon M. Sayers, Amy Simonson and Alta Spells contributed to this report.