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Hate Crimes Increase for the Third Consecutive Year, F.B.I. Reports

By John Eligon

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Hate crime reports increased 17 percent last year from 2016, the F.B.I. said on Tuesday, rising for the third consecutive year as heated racial rhetoric and actions have come to dominate the news.

Of the more than 7,100 hate crimes reported last year, nearly three out of five were motivated by race and ethnicity, according to the annual report. Religion and sexual orientation were the other two primary motivators.

In addition to the tense political climate, the increase also points to a growing awareness among various law enforcement agencies of the importance of identifying and reporting hate crimes to the F.B.I.

Reporting hate crimes to the F.B.I. is currently voluntary. Last year, roughly a thousand more agencies submitted data than those that did the previous year.

But hate crimes remain vastly underreported. Only 12.6 percent of the agencies in the F.B.I. report indicated that hate crimes had occurred in their jurisdictions in 2017. Agencies as large as the Miami and Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Departments reported zero. (A spokeswoman for the Las Vegas police later said that the report was made in error and that there were actually 61 in the jurisdiction last year.)

“I wouldn’t feel too confident in those numbers,” said Sim J. Singh, the senior advocacy manager for the Sikh Coalition, a civil rights organization. Data shows that hate crime victims often do not trust that reporting will help them.

There are agencies taking steps to enhance law enforcement reporting. Will Johnson, the chief of police in Arlington, Tex., and a vice president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, said that some departments lack the proper training for identifying and reporting hate crimes. Last year, the chiefs’ association passed a resolution encouraging law enforcement agencies to collect, analyze and report on hate crimes.

“More importantly than anything else is the effective conversation and heightened awareness in communities that this is important and that government institutions are prepared to respond effectively to crimes that victimize broadly across our communities,” Chief Johnson said.

The F.B.I. said it planned to train law enforcement officers next year on how to do a better job of identifying and reporting bias-motivated incidents. The Justice Department has also launched a new website on hate crimes.

“This report is a call to action — and we will heed that call,” Matthew Whitaker, the acting attorney general, said in a statement. “The Department of Justice’s top priority is to reduce violent crime in America, and hate crimes are violent crimes. They are also despicable violations of our core values as Americans.”

Much of the country’s political discourse in recent years has been fueled by deep racial divisions. Controversies have ignited this week over a photo of high school students flashing what appears to be a Nazi salute, and a joke by Cindy Hyde-Smith, a white United States senator from Mississippi who ran against Mike Espy, who is black. Ms. Hyde-Smith said that she would attend a public hanging if a supporter asked her to.

The offenses in hate crimes vary in severity from murder to vandalism. A spate of seemingly racially motivated incidents grabbed headlines last year, including a white man’s fatal stabbing of two men who were protecting a woman wearing a hijab in Portland, Ore., and the killing of a white anti-racism protester in Charlottesville, Va., by a white supremacist who plowed into a crowd with a car.

Black people accounted for nearly half of hate crime victims last year, according to the F.B.I. report. Of those targeted based on religion, 58 percent were Jewish.

Last month in Kentucky, a white man accused of fatally shooting two black people at a supermarket had tried to enter a predominantly black church before the killing; in Pittsburgh, a white man charged with killing 11 worshipers at a synagogue had taken to social media to accuse a Jewish organization that helps to resettle migrants of bringing “invaders” to “kill our people.”

“For the N.A.A.C.P., we began to see this during the presidential election in 2015,” said Derrick Johnson, the president of the organization. “The level of tribalism that was being fueled by presidential candidates, the acceptance of intolerance that has been condoned by President Trump and many others across the country has simply emboldened individuals to be more open and notorious with their racial hatred.”

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