



# CRIMES ON THE RISE

Why have attacks against religions, cultures, beliefs and sexual orientation increased, and what's being done about it?

BY NAN BIALEK

A man who was allegedly radicalized online by a neo-Nazi organization painted a swastika as well as other Nazi symbols and antisemitic language on the side of a Racine synagogue in 2019. In West Allis in 2021, a young Black couple found their vehicle tires slashed on several occasions over several months. Hand-written notes using the n-word and other offensive language were found at the scene.

In the aftermath of mass shootings at an El Paso Walmart, the Tops supermarket in Buffalo, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and Club Q in Colorado Springs, hate crimes against minority communities seem to be increasingly deadly and, some fear, less of a shock than they once were.

In late November of last year, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas warned that America faces a "heightened threat environment," which

he says is "driven by violent extremists seeking to further a political or social goal or act on a grievance."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security expects the threat level to remain heightened, warning that lone offenders and small groups "motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances" could target public gatherings, infrastructure, faith-based institutions, the LGBTQ community, schools, racial and religious minorities, and others. The threat comes from both foreign and domestic terrorists who, according to the DHS bulletin, "continue to maintain a visible presence online in attempts to motivate supporters to conduct attacks in the homeland."

## Hate Crimes By The Numbers

Hate crimes have been escalating in Wisconsin in recent years, according to statistics compiled by the FBI. The state's

reported hate crime incidents increased from 42 in 2017 to 111 in 2021.

Nationally, the total number of hate crimes as reported by the FBI held relatively steady over the same time period, at about 7,000 per year, with a spike to 8,263 in 2018. Data collection for the FBI's 2021 reported number of hate crime incidents, 7,303, is likely lower than the actual number of crimes committed, because only 65 percent of police departments chose to contribute data for 2021.

Further, experts estimate that the actual number of hate crimes is significantly higher than those cited by the FBI, because the majority of hate crimes are never reported to the Bureau nor to local law enforcement.

How are hate crimes defined? At the federal level, motivation for committing a crime must be based on bias against race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender

identity or disability. The most common types of hate crimes, according to the FBI, are destruction/ damage/vandalism, intimidation, and simple assault.

Acts of prejudice that are not crimes and do not involve violence, threats or property damage are referred to as "bias" or "hate" incidents.

In Wisconsin, in 2021, the latest year for which statistics are available, the most common type of hate crime was related to race/ ethnicity/ ancestry (57 percent), followed by sexual orientation (14 percent) and religion (12 percent), per the FBI's hate crimes report.

## Antisemitism On The Rise

Hate crimes and incidents aimed at Milwaukee's Jewish community increased by 459 percent from 2015 to 2021, notes Miryam Rosenzweig, president and CEO of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation. She believes the rise in antisemitism is connected to extremist views being amplified by celebrities and on social media sites, which results in implied societal permission to hate.

"What we're seeing is people saying things out loud that they used to whisper," she says. "It's very dangerous. The majority of incidents are not done by people who would identify themselves as part of a hate group."

Through repeated exposure, however, hate speech and hate crime can become "normalized." And hateful behavior accelerates quickly, Rosenzweig says.

The actual number of reported local anti-Jewish hate incidents in 2021 was 95. A disturbing trend is a rise in antisemitic incidents among middle and high school students. Those were up 80 percent in 2021 versus 2020, according to annual antisemitic audits compiled by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation. The audit notes that many of those incidents involved Holocaust jokes or direct harassment of Jewish students.

"A sixth-grader doesn't know to hate another religion," Rosenzweig says. "When we see a swastika show up in a middle school locker, where does that come from? We saw Nazi costumes in Milwaukee and Madison this past Halloween. When that becomes something funny to do, it does not make us a healthier society."

Rosenzweig, who is the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, points out that one-third of Americans do not believe the Holocaust happened, "as if that's a fact to be disputed," she says. "I never imagined in my lifetime, in the United States and modern culture, that we'd be talking about the safety and security of Jewish people."

## Permission To Hate?

Janan Najeeb, president of the Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition, believes that hate speech coming from political figures, combined with the COVID pandemic, has contributed to a mainstreaming of bigotry.

"In many cases, hate speech was coming from the highest levels of government, which suddenly allowed those who had these beliefs and convictions a platform for their hate," she explains. "The pandemic and some of the economic effects that came as a result also resulted in many angry people who needed a scapegoat ... That anger is then turned outward at the government or people of color."

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) recorded a 28 percent increase in hate and bias incidents nationwide in 2021 compared with 2020. Those incidents included four anti-mosque incidents in May alone, and

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## NUMBER OF WISCONSIN HATE CRIME INCIDENTS BY YEAR

2017 - 42

2018 - 46

2019 - 50

2020 - 72

2021 - 111

Source: FBI

included a death threat, attempted stabbing, vandalism and harassment. Incidents of harassment included several situations where hijabs (Islamic headscarves) were forcibly removed from Muslim women.

## Standing Up To Hate

Corey Saylor, spokesman for CAIR, points out that hate speech by celebrities and political leaders can “give permission and open the door for targeting minority communities.” Free speech must be protected, he adds, but when hate speech takes the spotlight, public leaders must speak out quickly and forcefully in response “because it takes away that permission.”

At this point, he continues, “we’re at a very substantive crossroads in terms of where we’re going as a nation. Will we live up to the values of judging each individual on merit, or are we going back to full-on racism, and just giving up on those values?”

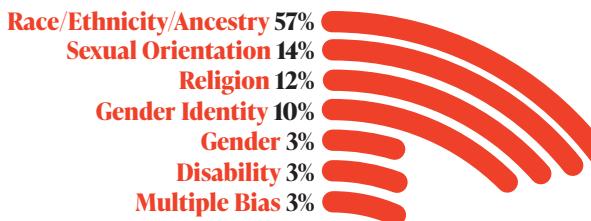
There are strategies that individuals and organizations can use to resist hate and promote understanding. Rosenzweig, for example, advocates for including education about antisemitism in corporate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs.

“I’m all in for education in DEI programs because you can’t combat something you’re not aware of,” she says.

Najeeb says there should be “zero tolerance” for hate and bigotry when it comes to attacking a person’s race, religion, gender, appearance and so on. She also believes that there should be more effort by schools, businesses, government, the arts and all parts of society to bring diversity of political opinions and diversity of race, ethnicity and religion to their organizations.

“A better understanding of civil discourse and modeling it at all levels is very important,” Najeeb says. “Most importantly, people need to work in their sphere of influence. Every person has some family member or friend who makes unacceptable statements about certain groups of people — we need to stop it immediately and use the opportunity to educate. It may not make us the most popular person, but it is the right thing to do.” MKE

*To report a hate crime, first contact your local police department. Follow up the report with a tip to the FBI, either online at tips.fbi.gov or by calling the Milwaukee FBI Field Office at (414) 276-4684.*



## TYPES OF HATE CRIME INCIDENTS IN WISCONSIN, 2021

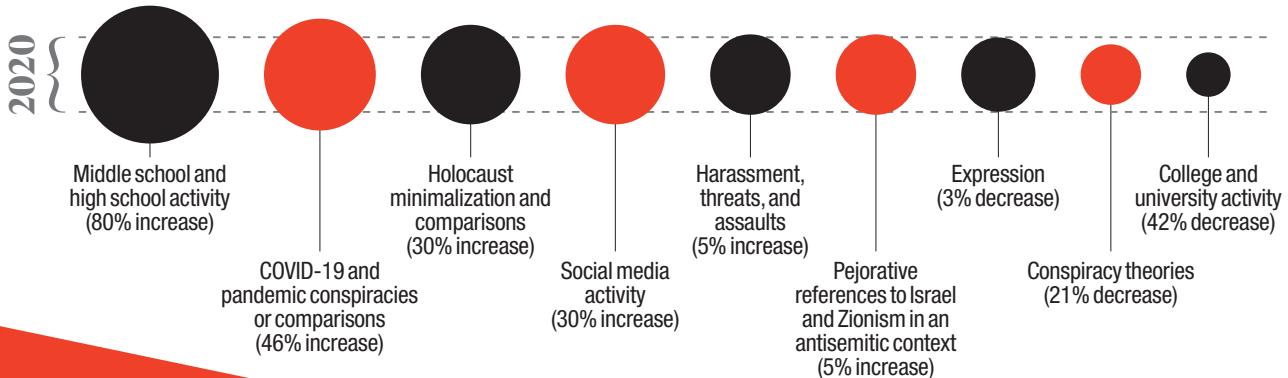
*Source: FBI*

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## 2021 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents in Wisconsin

Increase/decrease trends compared to 2020. All incidents have been corroborated.



*Source: Milwaukee Jewish Federation*