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Anti-Semitic incidents surge across New England in 2017 *by* PENNY SCHWARTZ *Journal Correspondent*



Anti-Semitic and racist graffiti was spray-painted on the sea wall at Marblehead's Devereux Beach over the Fourth of July weekend.

NOVEMBER 16, 2017 – BOSTON – In a year marked by a steep rise in anti-Semitic incidents across New England, 26 communities north of Boston did not escape the surge of vandalism and harassment that riled residents from Marblehead and Swampscott, to Peabody, North Andover, Reading, Melrose and more.

In the first three quarters of the year, there were 132 anti-Semitic incidents in New England – a 32 percent increase over the same period in 2016, including vandalism, harassment and threats against Jewish institutions, according to the Anti Defamation League.

Massachusetts, with 117 of the region's incidents, ranked third highest across the country, according to the ADL's Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, published on Nov. 2. A breakdown of the incidents in the state was provided to the Journal from the ADL's New England regional office.

As the ADL released its audit, Gov. Charlie Baker re-established the Governor's Task Force on Hate Crimes, signing an executive order at a Nov. 6 State House ceremony.

"Our administration is committed to making Massachusetts a safe and welcoming place with zero-tolerance for

hate or violence,” Baker said in a statement. The advisory group will take up the prevalence; deterrence and prevention of hate crimes and the support of victims, according to the governor’s office.

At the State House ceremony, Baker swore in the 17-member task force co-chaired by Secretary of Public Safety and Security Daniel Bennett, and Josh Kraft, president of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston.

The task force also includes Robert Trestan, ADL New England regional director and, from north of Boston, Ana M. Javier, president of the Merrimack Valley Project, a Lowell-based community advocacy group.

Kraft, president of the New England Patriots Charitable Foundation, said that while the group is not yet off the ground, he is enthusiastic about its diversity as an asset to combat the challenge of hate crimes.

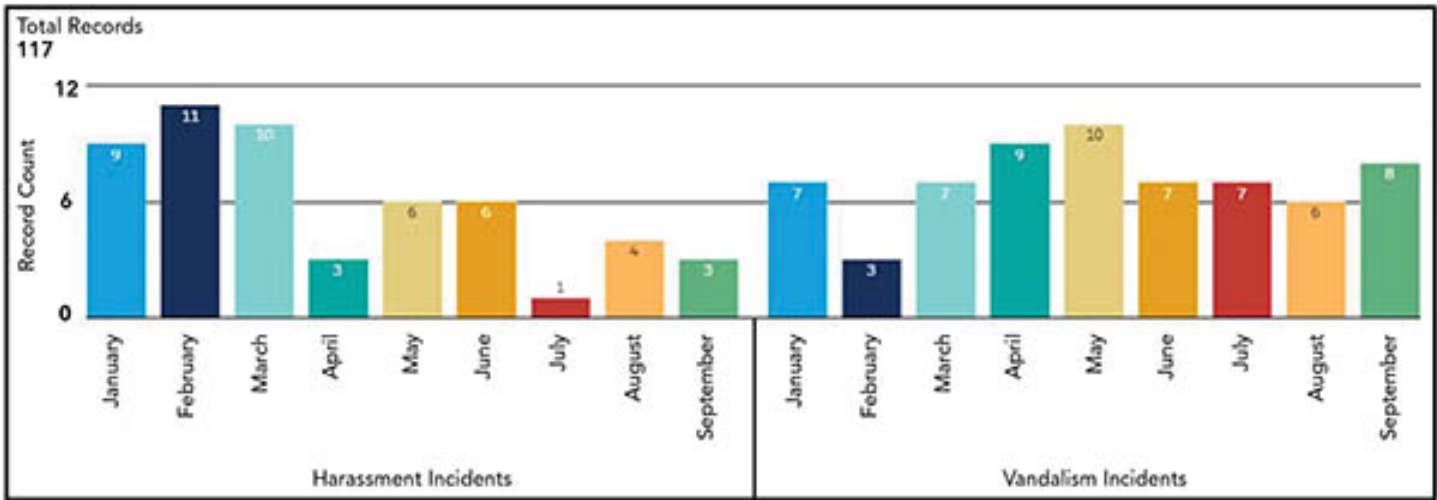
In related news, hate crimes across the country rose by nearly 5 percent, the second increase in as many years, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On Tuesday, the FBI released its annual report that collects data on hate crimes based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. In 2016, there were 6,121 reported hate crimes, compared to the 5,850 reported in 2015.

Race-based crimes directed against African Americans continue to be the highest, accounting for more than 50 percent. Religious-based hate crimes are the next highest, with those directed at Jews and Jewish institutions accounting for 53 percent of that category. Crimes targeting Muslims rose the sharpest, up by 19 percent from 2015 to 2016. Those directed at the LGBTQ community were third highest.

“The divisive political climate combined with technology are contributing to the increase,” said the ADL’s Trestan, when asked about the rise in anti Semitic incidents in Massachusetts and the FBI’s latest figures.

“We cannot ignore the correlation between the ‘Muslim ban’ and a 19 percent increase in hate crimes [that] targeted Muslims,” he wrote in an email. “Since most hate incidents don’t rise to the level of a crime, the FBI report is a reminder that people continue to experience bigotry every day.”

The ADL cautions that the FBI’s data collection is based on voluntary reporting from police departments, leading to perennial underreporting of these crimes and is working with other groups to press for changes to improve information gathering.



This ADL chart shows the number of reported anti-Semitic incidents that occurred in New England from January to September in 2017. The figures on the left represent reported events of harassment; those on the right, acts of vandalism.

Anti-Semitic incidents widespread across Massachusetts

The incidents in Massachusetts were spread across 58 cities and towns with 53 unfolding at K-12 schools and college campuses – an over 60 percent increase compared with the same period last year.

While there was not a surge in violent attacks, the ADL's Trestan told the Journal that the rise of incidents such as swastikas painted at schools – such as Marblehead and Reading – must be taken seriously because they send a message of hate and intimidation.

"The concern is what happens next," he asserted.

According to the New England ADL, harassment includes anti-Semitic slurs or anti-Jewish rhetoric, either spoken or in writing, and vandalism includes cases where property, including Jewish institutions, have been damaged or defaced.

The incidents ranged in scope and severity including two separate acts of vandalism last summer at the New England Holocaust Memorial, where arrests were made. In Marblehead, the words "Jew," and "Make America Great Again," were painted side-by-side on the harbor wall over the Fourth of July weekend, along with "KKK" and other slogans referring to Israel.

The rise of hate crimes and anti-Semitic incidents is not surprising, said Jack Beermann, a professor at Boston University School of Law who specializes in civil rights. The Swampscott resident said the rhetoric of the current political environment and last year's presidential election campaign caters to hate groups. He cited a statement by President Trump following the deadly violence at the August 11 white nationalist and anti-Semitic rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. "He called the white supremacists fine people," Beermann noted.

"I'm not saying he [President Trump] is a white supremacist. But he legitimizes them in the politics of today," Beermann said.

While Beermann can't say how effective the governor's task force can be, it's a step, he said. He noted the current public outcries against sexual harassment. "We are waiting for a similar cultural moment about hate," he said. "Having institutions like this in place [the task force] can move us towards that."

North of Boston

Among the 26 incidents north of Boston, five were listed as harassment, including one in Ipswich, where last May, a Jewish family woke in the middle of the night to hear passengers in a car yelling profanities at them. Among the 21 acts of vandalism were incidents in North Andover, Georgetown, Salem, Swampscott, Reading and in Marblehead. Last July, in Melrose, tombstones were toppled at the Netherlands Jewish cemetery. In September, also in Melrose, a swastika was found painted on a play structure at an elementary school.

The ADL's Trestan is deeply disturbed by the continuing rise of hate symbols and other incidents at schools. But he also sees rays of hope in educational settings to counter the trend, he said. He pointed to anti-bias programs being incorporated into the curriculum at schools, such as in Marblehead.

"That is taking the long view," he said, noting that students in middle and high schools are the future leaders of the state and country.

Helaine Hazlett, a member of Marblehead's Task Force Against Discrimination and a board member of the New England ADL and its North Shore Advisory Committee, told the Journal she is hopeful that the governor's task force will raise awareness of hate crimes at the state level.

Like Beermann, Hazlett blamed the divisive political rhetoric of the current administration for giving permission to those responsible for anti-Semitic and other hate-filled acts.

She echoed Trestan's view that educational programs in schools are the way to counter the kinds of bigotry that kids may encounter in their daily lives.

"Education is the only way to go," she said.