



THE STATE OF
HATE

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On the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a northeast Iowa man rented a U-Haul and hung a Nazi swastika flag on the front of it. He also added a sign on the side that said "JEWS DID 9/11." Then he drove around Des Moines. He hit the Drake neighborhood, Sherman Hill, and East Village. He yelled at people at stop lights. The man even stopped outside the Iowa Capitol building and stuck out his arm in a Heil Hitler salute towards pedestrians. And then he posted a six-minute video of his drive onto a Telegram channel for the 319 Crew, a local neo-Nazi group.

It wasn't the first time the group had popped up in Iowa. In July 2022, the 319 Crew hung posters in a city park promoting the "Great Replacement" theory, the conspiracy theory that claims there's a concerted effort to reformulate the population of the country, replacing the current white majority with a non-white majority. It's inherently racist — and lately all too familiar. This is racism's cold war.

HATE ON THE RISE

The FBI's definition of a hate crime is a criminal offense motivated by the perpetrator's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity. According to data from 2020, there were 8,052 single-bias incidents (one or more offenses motivated by one bias) reported. Of those, 65 percent were based on race, ethnicity, or ancestry. That's 5,227 cases — almost a 9 percent increase from 2019.

"With greater normalization of hateful and bigoted rhetoric from politicians and pundits, the door has been opened to bad behavior across the board."

— Rachel Carroll Rivas

But there's a big issue with the data that's out there: it's probably not accurate. There aren't any requirements for reporting hate crimes to any central authority, including the FBI, which means there isn't an accurate measurement of hate in the country. What's worse, the FBI and local and state law enforcement under-report hate crimes, says Rachel

Carroll Rivas, Deputy Director of Research, Reporting & Analysis with the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project (SPLC), one of the leading independent organizations tracking hate across the country.

But one thing Carroll Rivas does know for sure: even without accurate data, the trend line is heading disturbingly up.

"Given the unreliable status of the data, the 2021 FBI hate crimes data report... still indicated an unacceptable number of incidents," she says.

THE TRUMP EFFECT

During his campaign, former president Donald Trump made numerous racist and discriminatory comments about groups of people and individuals. He called Senator Elizabeth Warren "Pocahontas" due to her claim of Native American heritage. He also referred to COVID-19 as "Kung Flu," sparking anti-Asian hate — according to FBI data, there was a 77 percent increase in anti-Asian hate between 2019 and 2020. And during a presidential debate, Trump refused to denounce white supremacy, pouring fuel on a fire that has led to the current state of hate today.

Dubbed "The Trump Effect" by researchers, it's easy to draw a line from Trump's rise in fame to the rise in hate crimes. The SPLC tracked data on hate crimes from the beginning of Trump's campaign through his presidency and saw a major rise in hate crime rates. Anti-Muslim attacks rose. People's view of immigrants increasingly worsened. The SPLC reported that 37 percent of hate incidents in the first 34 days following Trump's election referenced Trump or his campaign slogans.

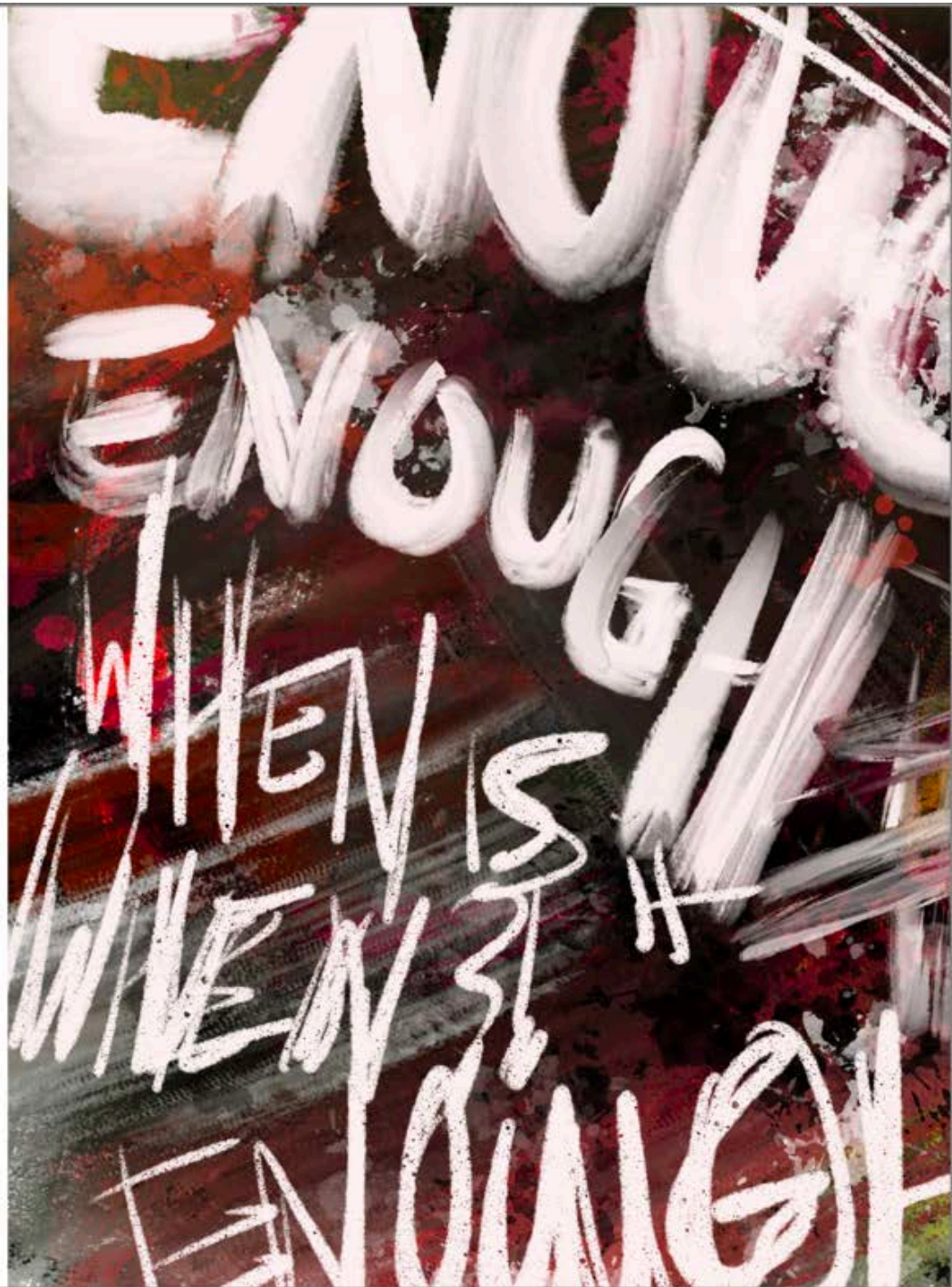
"With greater normalization of hateful and bigoted rhetoric from politicians and pundits, the door has been opened to bad behavior across the board," Carroll Rivas says.

HATE IN THE LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD

In April 2021 in Des Moines' Capitol Heights neighborhood, Joseph Rossing met with Robert Shelton, who was looking to buy scooters from Rossing. While the two white men were talking, a Black man was driving by, slowed down his car, and told the two men to stop their kids from riding the scooters in the middle of the street. Rather than listening to the man looking out for their kids, the two men instead pried open the man's car door, physically assaulted him and yelled racial slurs.

Reports said Shelton and Rossing kicked and punched the victim. Rossing took off his shirt to show his swastika tattoo during the assault. Both men were charged with assault in violation of an individual's rights, which is Iowa's hate crime statute, and various other offenses. According to court documents, Rossing was a member of Frys, a white supremacist group. Shelton pleaded guilty to the hate crime charge and was given five years of probation plus \$2,000 in fines. Because Rossing was on parole when the assault happened, he was sentenced to 17 years in prison, though the hate crime charge was dismissed.

This isn't uncommon, though. In some places, like New York City, the rate at which hate crime charges are dismissed are as high as 85 percent, according to data from the Division of Criminal Justice Services. This still can result in another conviction, but it's usually not as severe.



FIGHTING BACK

Sharlene Bohr has seen discrimination and hate move from the edges of society to the edges of the mainstream firsthand. As executive director of the Northeast Iowa Peace and Justice Center (NEIPJC), she helps lead initiatives around racial justice, immigration, climate activism, and the LGBTQIA+ community for Decorah and the nearby area. Since its founding in 2008, the NEIPJC has brought social change to the area through advocacy and direct action. From organizing supply drives to help those affected by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, to running educational "Pronouns 101" style workshops, the NEIPJC tries to help as many people as possible who may be affected by different forms of discrimination. Sometimes, Bohr says people just need to listen and learn.

"Take the opportunity in conversations to move the needle towards equity, inclusion, and justice," she says. "If you're a person who has exposure and a different perspective and first-person knowledge, let's try to push the needle."

Bohr isn't alone. There's the Des Moines Black Liberation Movement Collective that works to bring awareness to systematic oppression. There's JustVoices that is seeking to end racial profiling by police in Des Moines. There's also the Collective Action for Racial Equality (CARE) in Decorah, Iowa, that's working with the local school board to bring in diversity training for school staff.

Nikki Battle, a member of CARE, is also the mother of four biracial children. Battle says her kids have noticed a difference since the trainings, but the problem hasn't been solved. "They still feel if there was an issue at school, they don't feel comfortable [bringing] it up to the administration," Battle says. "We still have a lot of work to do."

In 2021, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds signed a law that banned teaching critical race theory and similar diversity training in schools. The theory, which looks at how the U.S. was shaped by slavery, was said to be "discriminatory indoctrination," according to Reynolds. Despite the governor's actions, Bohr and Battle are seeing progress. People are becoming more aware of the issues at hand and joining the fight against hate. But is it enough?

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Des Moines lawyer Ben Lynch quit his job doing in-house counsel for a real estate company and opened up his own firm specializing in civil rights cases. Lynch even took some cases pro bono for those who were arrested during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Des Moines. He acknowledges that not everyone can do what he does, but everyone can be an advocate.

"Being an advocate for somebody doesn't have to be putting up a BLM sign in your yard, it can be as simple as reporting something to the police or an employer," Lynch says.

He sees no end in sight. Given the current climate of hate and discrimination in the U.S., Lynch has his work cut out for him.

"My phone rings off the hook and my email blows up every day. I don't expect it to stop anytime soon," Lynch says. "We're never hurting for civil rights cases at this firm. I don't ever see it stopping, sadly, but all we can do is fight back."

STAYING HOPEFUL

"Are you sure you aren't a little mixed? Because usually Asian people's eyes are small." These are the kinds of questions that Northeastern University sophomore Crystal Lin got used to while growing up in a predominantly white suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"When I got put in the gifted and talented program at school in first grade, some girl said 'of course they put you in there. You're Chinese.' I was just like 'huh?'" Lin says. "People will still pull back their eyes to make them into slits to look Asian. Usually you just laugh it off. You telling them, 'that's not okay,' isn't going to change how they act."

These microaggressions were common for Lin. But, even after moving to Boston in 2021 for college, she still has moments where she feels uncomfortable and even unsafe.

"Most of the Asian women I know, including myself, will stand a certain way in subway stations because we don't want to risk getting pushed in front of a train," Lin says.

For progress to be made, Lin thinks it starts at school and at home. She says when parents and schools fail to teach about race relations, that's when the problems become bigger. Though, with the 2016 presidential election, she notes that the type of candidate able to be elected has changed.

"The election of Donald Trump fundamentally changed the Republican Party and the type of person that can win a nomination," Lin says. "People who hate non-white people hate them very strongly. The people that feel anger toward Asian people or non-white people — they'll keep voting for the people who help amplify their voices."

She dreams of a day when she and other people of color, or different religions, gender identities and sexual orientations can feel accepted and safe.

"I'm hopeful that enough will change in our lifetimes so that people won't be afraid to walk on the streets and be afraid for their lives," Lin says.

When that day may come, though, is a question left unanswered.