

Agencies must have policies on hate crimes

A quick pop quiz:

Which one of the following is a hate crime?

A. Fliers are left on car windshields blaming Jewish people for the grocery strike.

B. A "skinhead" gang member hits an Asian man on the head.

B is the correct response. Both are motivated by hate but A is an incident while B is a crime.

Not to worry if you got this

wrong. It seems many of California's law-enforcement officers might be hard-pressed to answer this question correctly, although it is their job to be able to do this.

A study released last week by the California Policy Research Center, a University of California program, revealed that more than 40 percent of law-enforcement agencies in the state don't have a policy to guide how they interpret and respond to hate crimes in their communities. The policies that do exist vary widely.

The result is that California's hate-crime laws are not uniformly enforced.

This study caught my eye because I'd been curious about the level of hate-crime activity in Orange County

since seeing a news report last month that linked an allegedly shady bail-bond agency owned by a La Habra family to racist gangs.

I found it alarming that, if these allegations are true, it could mean racist thugs are ramping up their criminal activities in Orange County.

Joyce Greenspan, a regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, told me that "skinheads" have "become more diversified in their hate and their crime" in the past few years, with more of these white supremacists acting as foot soldiers for gangs in jail.

I was still mulling over the presence of racist gangs in Orange County when I got wind of the study.

Unfortunately, the study didn't mention which agencies lack a hate-crime policy or which ones were deficient.

So I went to the Orange County Human Relations Commission, which has figures showing that more than 75 percent of our law-enforcement agencies have hate-crime policies.

It sounds pretty good, but I'm wondering why not all agencies have policies on the books. Otherwise, I don't see how officers and deputies can be expected to know how to properly handle a hate crime, especially the more serious ones like those committed by white-supremacist gangs.

California is widely known for having the most comprehensive hate-crime laws in the country, but what good are they if they aren't being enforced properly?

This is an important issue in a county that last year logged 128 hate-crime reports.

And, let's not forget that there are active hate groups in the county. A quick glance at annual reports put out by the

Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League show hate groups exist in our area.

All this means that our law-enforcement agencies need to remain vigilant for hate crimes.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that law-enforcement agencies aren't doing their job. I'm simply saying that they could be doing it better.

It's not that hate crimes aren't important to police chiefs and sheriffs.

"It's an issue that's on our minds," said La Habra Police Chief Dennis Kies, president of the Orange County Chiefs of Police and Sheriff's Association.

Kies faxed me a copy of the 2½ pages of the La Habra police manual that detail how his officers should handle hate crimes.

Kies rightly notes that Orange County law-enforcement agencies have a great working relationship with the county's Human Relations Commission, which tracks hate crimes and offers training to law enforcement.

I'm sure police chiefs and sheriffs have many pressing matters, but hate crimes should receive special attention because of the potential they have to tear a community apart. Remember, a hate crime is directed at an entire community of people, not just the victim of the crime.

Valerie Jenness, co-author of the study on hate-crime policing, notes that having a policy in place sends a message to the community that its police department cares about these crimes.

"We have some good evidence to suggest that policies matter," said Jenness, a criminology professor at UC Irvine.

Jenness found that police departments with hate-crime policies reported up to 25 percent more of these crimes.

Of course, when it comes to hate crimes the issue of reporting is always a tricky one.

"We only talk about what's reported and there's probably more than 10 times more hate crimes than what is reported," said Greenspan, whose area includes Orange County.

Often, hate-crime victims don't want to step forward for various reasons.

Perhaps because they fear future attacks.

Perhaps because they don't want to be seen as whiners.

Perhaps because they think law enforcement won't take their complaint seriously.

Without a policy in place, law enforcement may not even know how to handle such a complaint.



**MINERVA
CANTO**
REGISTER
COLUMNIST