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Hate-crime reports rise in county

2004 was third straight year that more attacks and incidents were attributed to bias in one of nation's most diverse places.

By **TERI SFORZA**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Hate crimes and incidents rose "significantly" in 2004, officials said - but remained below levels seen a decade ago, when recession gripped the county and its population was smaller and less diverse.

There were 152 reports of hateful graffiti, vandalism, harassment, assaults and threats last year, compared with 128 the year before. That's an increase of nearly 19 percent.

"That bump is alarming," said Rusty Kennedy, director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

One of the more serious cases happened May 22 in Huntington Beach, shortly after gruesome beheadings of Westerners in Iraq. A Pakistani cab driver picked up a man named Scott Wilson. Wilson, who is white, allegedly began choking the driver and spitting on him, saying, "Did you see my homeboy get his head chopped off? ... I'm going to kill you twice for what your brothers did."

Wilson forced the driver to head toward Long Beach, prosecutors said; the driver pushed his panic button, which activated a GPS sys-

tem, and Long Beach police stopped the car and arrested Wilson shortly afterward. Wilson is charged with kidnaping, criminal threats and assault and battery, with a hate-crime enhancement.

"The last few years have been tremendously difficult," said Ra'id Faraj, spokesman for the Southern California Council on American-Islamic Relations. "9/11 left an impact on all of us. People choose to act from bias and hatred."

Hate acts are defined as "deliberate efforts to demean and exclude certain people

from exercising their rights to live, work and worship where they choose." African-Americans continue to be the most frequent targets in Orange County, followed by gays, lesbians and Jews.

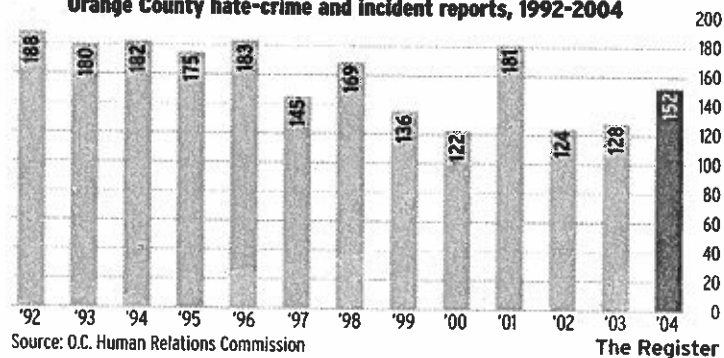
Last year was the third straight year of increases in hate reports, after several years of comparative quiet. The most serious category, assaults, rose to 39 from 26. That's a 50 percent increase, and it worries Kennedy.

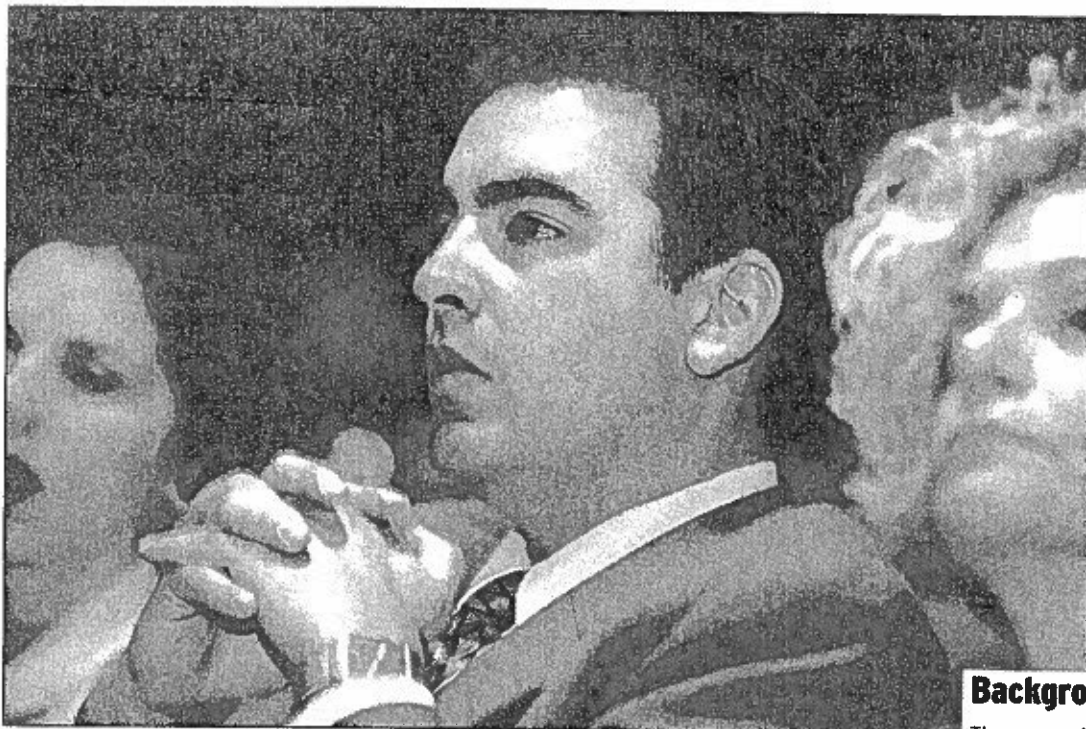
In Anaheim in September, a Pakistani man was in his car at a stoplight with his radio

Reversal of trend

As the county's population has grown and become more diverse, fewer hate acts are being reported compared with a decade ago. Much more needs to be done, officials said. The big spike in 2001 reflects the anger that gripped people after 9/11, and the steady creep upward over the past three years is cause for concern, they say.

Orange County hate-crime and incident reports, 1992-2004





ROSE PALMISANO,
RISING NUMBER OF REPORTS: Deputy District Attorney Paul Chrisopoulos listens to the latest O.C. hate-report statistics in Santa Ana.

on. A car pulled up alongside, and two men began harassing him about the loud "Arabic" music he was playing. They jumped out of their car, punched him and stole cash.

"We have more work to do," Kennedy said.

For the first time, the report separated hate crimes, such as assault, from hate incidents, such as insults. Of the 152 reports, 99 were treated as crimes and 53 as incidents.

- For blacks, crimes climbed to 25 from 18; incidents fell to 3 from 6.

- For gays and lesbians, crimes climbed to 15 from 11; incidents to 6 from 4.

- For Jews, crimes climbed to 15 from 10; incidents dropped to 21 from 22.

- For Arab/Middle Easterners, crimes climbed to 9 from 6; incidents to 5 from 4.

Officials warn that the statistics must be viewed warily. Some groups document incidents painstakingly (the Jewish community's Anti-Defamation League reported half of the hate incidents) while numbers for other groups may

seem low, probably because victims are reluctant to deal with authorities.

Only a tiny percentage of hate crimes are prosecuted each year - about 10 - because most of the time, suspects remain unknown.

Orange County has become one of the most diverse counties in America. Three million live here. About half are white; about one third, Hispanic; about 18 percent, Asian or "multi-racial," and about 2 percent, black.

In that context, having 152 crimes and incidents is not a drastically high number, Paul Chrisopoulos, deputy district attorney, said.

Clearly, Kennedy said, things are better now than they were in the early 1990s,

But no one is celebrating yet. "Our celebration will be when we have no hate incidents against any community," said Faraj.

"No one group can be safe if all people aren't safe," said Joyce Greenspan with the Anti-Defamation League.

Background

The concept of hate crimes gradually became established in American law in the latter third of the 20th century. Here are the definitions used by the Orange County Human Relations Commission:

HATE CRIMES

A hate crime is any criminal act or attempted criminal act which can be determined to have been motivated by the victim's race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender or disability. Examples: racist graffiti on someone else's property; burning a cross on someone's lawn; violence or threats intended to injure, intimidate or interfere.

HATE INCIDENTS

Hate incidents are actions motivated by hate but protected by the First Amendment right to freedom of expression, according to the commission's definition. Examples: distributing racist pamphlets at a public place; displaying anti-gay or anti-lesbian signs at a march, parade or other public event; and mailing letters ridiculing people with disabilities.