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JERSEY MAYHEM

'It could have been me': Black, Jewish communities in Monmouth, Ocean counties on edge

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As he learned of Saturday's mass shooting in Buffalo that left 10 people dead simply because of the color of their skin, Asbury Park Pastor Semaj Y. Vanzant Sr., who is Black, could easily see himself in their place.

The minster shopped at that New York Tops Friendly Market store years ago, when he was a student in Pennsylvania.

"We used to go up through Buffalo to get to Niagara Falls in Canada because, at the age of 19, we could drink, so just foolish college stuff," said Vanzant, of Asbury Park's Second Baptist Church. "But I have been to that Tops on our way up or on our way back... it could of been me, it could be my wife, it could be my kids."

Similar fears are on the minds of many at the Jersey Shore as hate-fueled crimes — whether aimed at specific races, ethnicities, religions or a particular sexual orientation — increase across the country.

During the three-month period from January through March 2022, anti-Black crimes accounted for 39% of bias crimes in New Jersey, while about 16% were anti-Jewish crimes, according to the NJ State Police Bias Incident Report. Biased crimes against gay males accounted for 8%. The numbers are similar to crimes reported in 2021.

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'This must stop': NJ officials condemn attack on Jewish residents in Lakewood, Jackson

At the Jersey Shore, Ocean Township had the most reported bias crimes in the region with a total of 17 for the first three months of this year. Neptune had five bias crimes, while none were reported in Asbury Park. Lakewood and Howell had 12 and 11 reports, respectively, according to State Police. All three municipalities also had the most biased crimes in the area last year.

During 2021, Lakewood had the highest number of bias crimes with a total of 34. Ocean Township saw 32 of these types of crimes, while Howell had 30, Neptune had 17, and Asbury Park had one.

The accused 18-year-old white gunman charged in the multiple murders purposed targeted Black people, authorities said. His online diatribes described his hatred of other groups, including members of the Jewish community. The document named several locations in Ocean County, Ocean County Sheriff Michael Mastronardy told the Asbury Park Press on Sunday.

"We reached out to those communities earlier (Sunday), and are working with our partners, departments and chiefs," he said. "We monitor the activity at those locations."

Neptune Mayor Nick Williams said the community was praying for the victims in Buffalo.

"It's a very American tale of domestic terrorism which appears to have struck once again on Saturday, this time in the city of Buffalo, New York," Williams said. "We in Neptune must be concerned with such actions of individuals who have only one thing on their minds, which is to harm or kill other human beings for whatever reason. It has been proven over and over again this can happen in anyplace."

To combat bias crimes, the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office recently launched SAFE PLACE, a program that provides secure locations — libraries, a bar, a gym, a car wash — for people like members of the LGBTQ community to report bias incidents.

The Ocean County Prosecutor's Office has also hosted events and forums addressing hate crimes in the community. Among them was the "Love Thy Neighbor: There is No Room for Hate in Ocean County," campaign in 2019.

The office more recently has formed coalitions with communities and church groups to help fight racial division.

New Jersey recently announced more than a $1 million in grants going toward a hate-crime awareness campaign and for improvements to bias incident reporting.

Currently, Lakewood leads New Jersey in bias incident reports, with antisemitic cases accounting for 81% of occurrences, according to state data from 2021.

Susan Antman, executive director of New Jersey's Jewish Federation, said the Nonprofit Security Grant Program helped synagogues and other religious spaces pay for security equipment and personnel.

Last Thursday, leaders of the Federation met with officials in Washington, where they advocated for more accessible bias incident reporting and additional bias crime prevention training for law enforcement.

Rabbi Moshe Zev Weisberg, of the Lakewood Vaad, a council of Jewish community members, said that cameras and other types of security measurements can do little to prevent tragedy. He said society needs to work on the mind of the people with radical beliefs.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks radical organizations across the nation, identified 12 hate groups in New Jersey last year, including ones focused on white supremacy and antisemitism.

"This tragedy is yet another wakeup call that hate speech, no matter in what veneer it is wrapped, is not only repugnant, but can actually kill," Weisberg said.

After Saturday's attack in Buffalo, Pastor Vanzant said he spoke with ministers from Kansas City, Houston and North Carolina.

"We were just all outraged. Not so much at this (single incident) but we are outraged at the fact that we have not done anything to address these types of things," Vanzant said. "I just hope the same hope that I have all the time: That somebody is bold enough, and that we have enough unity, to change laws to figure out different regulations so that we can get to a place of seeing things differently."

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