Hate in Michigan: A look at crimes and bias

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POSTED: 06/17/16

Members of the community gathered Thursday in downtown Pontiac for a vigil to honor the victims of the Orlando massacre at the Pulse nightclub. Photo by Cassondra Daszko - Digital First Media
Lilianna Reyes was born a boy.
But her soul thrives today as a transgender woman.

“I was 17 when I found out that I could be the woman I wanted to be,” said Reyes, who is the youth program manager for Affirmations, a community center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Ferndale.

It was here that many in the LGBT community gathered collectively last Tuesday night to mourn the senseless loss of lives in an Orlando nightclub massacre June 12.

She herself was once targeted after attending a bar in Detroit that catered to transgender people.

“I was with two friends. We were outside the bar sitting in the car when a man in his late 20s came up to me,” Reyes said.

One minute he was flirting. The next minute he was holding a gun to her face.

At first she was not afraid because thought the gun was a fake. “I said, ‘Are you kidding me?’” Reyes said.

Then it registered that it was real and that he was threatening to kill her.

The man threw a brown paper bag on her lap and told her and everyone else in the car to put their money in it.

She told the man she needed to get her purse. As she was turning, she heard the gunman’s friend shout for him to get the keys. He didn’t hear what he said. So, Reyes told the gunman his friend was calling him.

As he looked, Reyes’ passenger shifted the car into drive and they sped away.

“We were an easy target,” Reyes said.
As are many victims of hate crimes, she added.

HATE DEFINED

A hate crime is a criminal act that occurs when a victim is targeted because of his or her membership, or perceived membership, in a certain social group.

The FBI annually gathers statistics on hate crimes motivated by a victim’s race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, gender, or gender identity. It has done so since the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990, and it has published a report on hate crimes since 1992.

• In 2014, the latest year the FBI hate crimes report covers, police in 13 Oakland County communities and one university reported 36 hate crimes.

There were three in Auburn Hills, two in Beverly Hills, two in Farmington Hills, two in Ferndale, one in Holly, two in Huntington Woods, one in Royal Oak, five in Southfield, two in Troy, one in Walled Lake, three in West Bloomfield, one at Oakland University, and 11 through the Oakland County Sheriff’s Office.

Of the hate crimes reported, 22 were motivated by race, seven by religion, four by sexual orientation, two by ethnicity, and one by disability, making race the largest motivator of hate crimes reported.

• Across a half-dozen communities and Macomb County, there were 26 reported: 16 by race, five by religion, two by sexual orientation, two by disability, and one by ethnicity.

• In select Wayne County communities that reported to the FBI, there were nine by race, two by religion, two by ethnicity, and one by sexual orientation.

• In outstate counties of Isabella and Gratiot, there was one reported by race and one by sexual orientation. At Central Michigan University, there was one reported by sexual orientation and one by disability.

LOCAL EXAMPLES

There are relatively few hate crimes in Michigan compared to other categories of crime, but they have occurred over the years, as well as incidents of bias:

• In 2006, a Warren man was jailed for shouting obscenities and epithets at the leader of a local mosque. The man pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and was sentenced to 21 days in the Macomb County Jail.

• On March 11, 2011, a man walked into a convenience store in Detroit and struck another customer in the face. The victim suffered a fractured eye socket and other facial injuries as a result. The following summer, Everett Dwayne Avery, 36, of Detroit, Michigan pleaded guilty to a federal hate crime, admitting that he assaulted the other young man in the convenience store because he believed the victim was gay.

• Last Halloween, police said a killer entered the Madison Heights home of Fernando Gonzales, strangled him and set his house on fire. Police at the time speculated the crime may have motivated by hate since Gonzalez led an alternative lifestyle.
• A Sterling Heights man and his codefendant from Warren, both age 21 at the time, both pleaded no contest to a charge of ethnic intimidation for spraying anti-Arab graffiti on a Warren church in 2007.

• Charges of misdemeanor assault and attempted ethnic intimidation in 2005 for a 55-year-old Warren man and his 53-year-old wife, stemming from an incident involving an 18-year-old Iraqi woman. Police said the couple called the young woman an “Iraqi bitch” during a dispute in which she was visiting family who resided next to the Warren couple.

• A 3 ½-foot burned wooden cross planted in the front lawn of a Chesterfield Township biracial couple’s home in 2004. The words “Die Nigger” were written in large white letters on the vinyl siding of the home’s garage on Heather Line, near 21 Mile Road and Interstate 94. The FBI joined the investigation.

• A swastika and a racial slur spray-painted on separate vehicles in 2001 in the area of 12 Mile and Schoenherr roads in Warren. But the owners of the vehicles appeared to be unlikely targets for a hate crime.

• In April 2015, the Oakland County Prosecutor’s Office authorized petitions in family court after a black Bloomfield Hills student videotaped students using racist language and bullying him on a school bus.

• In February 2015, the head varsity basketball coach for Bloomfield Hills Schools resigned after administrators learned he slapped a player and also touched another player’s hair, calling it “nappy.”

HISTORY OF HATE CRIMES

“Hate crimes have been around forever,” said Jeff Downey, from Oakland County.

Downey is the assistant special agent in charge with the FBI in Detroit. The son of an FBI agent, his job is to investigate hate crimes – crimes that are motivated by bias.

The FBI has been investigating what are now called hate crimes since World War I.

But it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that its role expanded.

Before then, the federal government took the position that protection of civil rights was a local function, not a federal one. However, the murders of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney, near Philadelphia, Mississippi in June 1964 provided the impetus for a visible and sustained federal effort to protect and foster civil rights for African Americans.

MIBURN, as the Mississippi Burning case was called, became the largest federal investigation ever conducted in that state.

On Oct. 20, 1967, seven men were convicted of conspiring to violate constitutional rights of the slain civil rights workers.

Shepard was a gay college student tortured and killed near Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. Byrd was a 49-year-old black man from Texas who was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to his death the same year.

The brutality and senseless nature of the murders spurred national and international attention that brought about the desire to amend U.S. hate crime legislation.

CURBING HATE

Downey, at the FBI in Detroit, would like to see an end to hate crimes.

“We have agents whose sole purpose is to investigate hate crimes,” Downey said. “The challenge for us in a lot of cases is that the victims often don’t come forward for a number of reasons.”

Maybe they don’t trust the law or feel that law enforcement agents will not vigorously pursue the offenders, he said. They might be embarrassed or feel they did something wrong. There may be cultural or linguistic impediments or they are reluctant to acknowledge their sexual orientation or immigration status to law enforcement.

But Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard said sometimes incidents are reported that don’t rise to the level of hate crimes.

“It cuts both ways,” Bouchard said. “Sometimes people report things as a hate crime and it may not be. Sometimes they don’t report because they don’t want the attention.”