



Staten Island's bias cases rise sharply, fueling fears

John M. Annese | annese@siadvance.com By John M. Annese | annese@siadvance.com

Follow on Twitter

on July 17, 2010 at 1:47 PM, updated July 17, 2010 at 2:00 PM



Staten Island Advance / Bill Lyons

Rafael Varios of Port Richmond makes a point to the panel during a community meeting at PS 20 in Port Richmond to discuss the increase of hate crimes in area, Thursday. Panel members are Mark Palladino, assistant DA, Office of the DA Richmond County; Michael Osgood, inspector of NYPD Hate Crimes Task Force; Pamela Chen, chief of civil rights, criminal division, United States Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, and Reinaldo Rivera, Jr., regional director, Northeast Caribbean Region, U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- As a wave of crimes against Mexican immigrants in Port Richmond continues to garner near-daily attention on Staten Island, police statistics reveal that the NYPD's bias crime investigators have been twice as busy in the borough this year compared to previous years.

The NYPD has investigated 21 incidents on Staten Island as possible bias crimes so far in 2010, compared to just nine incidents in the same time period last year.

That number has already exceeded the 18 bias investigations conducted in all of 2009, and the 19 conducted in all of 2008, according to police statistics.

And Staten Island's not the only borough seeing a marked increase: Citywide, investigators have looked into 200 possible bias crimes so far this year, compared to 111 from the same time period. Brooklyn and Manhattan have seen the majority of that increase, with Brooklyn seeing 89 incidents in 2010 compared to 37 year-to-date in 2009, and Manhattan seeing 58 in 2010 compared to 33 in year-to-date 2009.

Jonathan Peters, a professor and research fellow at the College of Staten Island, who tracks the borough's population, suggested the increase on Staten Island might stem from the borough's shifting population base, and the economy.

"There's a lot of social change going on in Staten Island," Peters said. "The population growth is quite strong ... We're probably going to crack 500,000 next year."

And in areas such as Port Richmond, where different minority groups are sharing, and often competing for, "the same urban space," tensions can erupt.

"The recession can motivate some tension. The job base on Staten Island is very weak," he said.

Most of the recent attacks on Staten Island have centered around the Port Richmond neighborhood, which is home to a growing Mexican population. That community has seen five assaults since April by black attackers on Mexican immigrants.

At a community forum in Port Richmond last Thursday, several immigrants spoke of their own experiences. Some told of being victimized, others recounted stories of friends, neighbors and loved ones being pummeled and robbed.

"We Mexicans are seen as garbage," said one woman, her words translated from Spanish by an interpreter. "I know the Americans work, but we work hard. We work with our sweat ... We just want protection."

At the forum, a panel from the NYPD, the U.S. Department of Justice, and District Attorney Daniel Donovan's office laid out the legal definition of a hate crime, and repeated the same assurance, that police would not investigate the immigration status of someone coming forward as the victim of a crime.

One activist at the forum, Al Peters, said he wanted to "extend an apology for members of my (the African American) community" for the recent attacks.

He also called for a deeper dialogue between members of the black and Hispanic communities.

"There is a community that has pre-dated you in Port Richmond ... and that community needs to be respected as well," he said.

"We need to sit down, negotiate at the table of common sense."

Bias crimes typically spike in economic recession, and the borough's unemployment rate, which was at 3.9 percent in 2008, since has climbed to 8.5 percent, said Tom Volscho, an associate professor of sociology at CSI who focuses on racism and class studies.

"The groups that get victimized are usually scapegoats," he said.

Still, attacks against Mexican immigrants haven't been the only incidents investigated as possible bias crimes in recent months.

The U.S. Department of Justice has maintained a presence on Staten Island since 2008 -- after four young men launched a racially-motivated Election Night rampage in response to the election of Barack Obama -- monitoring race relations and meeting with community leaders.

The NYPD's Hate Crimes Task Force was called in to investigate a July 4 brawl in South Beach where two black teens were attacked and slashed by a group of Hispanic attackers, as well as a July 7 attack on two gay men by a large group of black youths.

And last month, a Midland Beach man was charged with aggravated harassment as a hate crime after, police allege, he left threatening, racially offensive voicemail messages with the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network on April 30.

Not all of the incidents investigated ultimately meet the legal definition of a hate crime, though.

In some instances, an investigation reveals different motives, such as a past confrontation between the victim and the assailant, said District Attorney Donovan.

Donovan often points out that his office pursued the first indictment under the Hate Crimes Act of 2000, and prosecuted hate crimes when the evidence warrants it.

"We're not shy about this, but we'll use it in those proper circumstances."

"Just because the offender and the victim are different, that's not enough to satisfy the statute," explained Inspector Michael Osgood, who heads the NYPD's task force, speaking at last week's forum. "The main reason for the crime must be the identity of the victim. It doesn't have to be the whole reason, but it does have to be a substantial reason."

Osgood wouldn't speculate on the increase in bias investigations.

"We need to do more human things. We need to sit down with each other. We need to get to know each other," he said.

Councilwoman Debi Rose (D-North Shore), the Island's first black elected official, suggested the economic downturn and Staten Island's rapid population growth over the past few decades may account for some of the spike in bias investigations, adding, though, that more people may now be willing to come forward to authorities as victims of hate crimes.

And Staten Island may still be coming to grips with the diversity that follows a surge in population.

"We grew so fast that people didn't get a chance to accept the changes," she said.

"They just weren't ready."

Rev. Terry Troia, the executive director of the not-for-profit Project Hospitality, said political upheavals, such as the recent debate over Arizona's controversial new immigration law, have added to "a rising intolerance on all levels."

© 2015 SILive.com. All rights reserved.