

Reported Hate Crimes in Waterloo Region

Commentary by Superintendent Gary Askin, Strategic and Tactical Services Division

June 15, 2011- Many Waterloo Region residents were surprised at the recent Statistics Canada release that identified our community as having the highest rate of police-reported hate crimes in the country in 2009. We, in the law enforcement community also question how such a safe, diverse, and progressive area could be labeled with such a disturbing claim.

Do these statistics actually reflect our community standards and is there an indication that hate has woven itself into the community fabric?

Since the Waterloo Regional Police Service is recognized as the provincial leader in hate crime enforcement and prevention, we believe our efforts have made Waterloo Region an inclusive community that honours its diverse culture and that the Statistics Canada release is somewhat misleading.

To see how our community has progressed, we must recall the cultural climate of the past. Around the year 2000, Superintendent Gary Askin was quoted as saying that Waterloo Region was a “hotbed” of white supremacist activity. At the time, we were investigating and monitoring the actions of skinheads and white pride groups such as the Tri City Skins, The Canadian Ethnic Cleansing Team, and the Canadian Heritage Alliance. These supremacist groups were gaining momentum and the violent rhetoric was building.

Assaults were becoming a regular occurrence. Death threats were common and our community became the arena where right wing extremists clashed with whoever opposed them. Violence was frequently directed at local anti-racist activists; however, the entire community was affected as everyone who was considered “different” was a potential target.

Extremists require an unstable culture to survive and thrive. They recognize that pitting one element of society against another creates chaos. Extremists use that chaos as leverage to generate community terror. The extremists’ criminal intent and the gravity of their actions did not go unnoticed. The Waterloo Regional Police responded with a swift, multi-faceted approach designed to target these groups while restoring community safety and confidence.

Here are the steps that were taken:

We partnered with local community groups, policing partners, and human rights organizations. We proposed, sought funding for, administered, and created the Provincial Hate Crime Extremism Investigation Team (www.hceit.ca)

Initially our group was comprised of five police agencies and was funded by the Provincial government. We hired an open source, intelligence expert from the Simon Wiesenthal Center with expertise in terrorism and intelligence to coordinate, compile, and disseminate information for the HCEIT partners and provincial intelligence agencies. We built a website to help educate the public and police on these matters.

We conducted extensive hate crime/sensitivity training sessions for all Waterloo Region Police Service (WRPS) members.

Hate crimes charges are difficult to prove. Moreover, a hate crime charge must be approved by the Attorney General. Thus, hate crimes are hard to prosecute. However, we quickly learned that many of the extremists were involved in other criminal activity such as drug trafficking, thefts, and in one instance—child pornography. We began an enforcement campaign, developed information, and executed search warrants and arrested the individuals who were committing these criminal offences.

We sought out victims of hate related assaults and encouraged them to come forward so that the culprits could be prosecuted.

We analyzed our data, identified potential community groups that could be targeted and met with their officials in order to solidify our community contacts. We recognized that a time of crisis “was not the time to be handing out business cards.”

We conducted hate crime seminars locally and gradually grew the HCEIT into thirteen police agencies within Ontario

We attended skinhead concerts that frequently promote hate through music and warned the venue owners and performers that any entertainment designed to incite hatred would not be tolerated.

As our expertise grew we were frequently requested to teach others and facilitated hate crime conferences as far away as British Columbia. Through our Ministry funding, we developed a hate crime instructional video designed to educate law enforcement on hate related issues and legislation.

We have met with Israeli military and police officials in Tel Aviv to exchange ideas concerning terrorism and Safe Cities projects- all geared towards increasing our understanding so we are able to develop comprehensive community safety strategies.

We traveled to Germany with a group of Canadian police leaders to explore the root causes of hate. We met with the German counter-terrorism unit to discuss challenges and to develop new tactics to fight radical extremism. While there, we attended the NS Dokumentationszentrum (Gestapo Museum) in Cologne to develop an understanding of the origins of hate and the impact of the National Socialist movement. These findings will be presented to Canadian police leaders later this summer.

There has been a considerable change in the climate of hate and how it affects our community in the past 10 years. Due to our comprehensive strategy of combining education, community cooperation in enforcement, and policing partnerships, these local hate organizations have been dismantled.

A closer look at the statistics indicates that 54% of the national average of reported hate crimes was for the offence of Mischief (graffiti being the most common). In Waterloo Region, almost 80% of our reported hate crimes were for that same offence of Mischief. This leaves us with a much lower amount of reported hate crimes for incidents such as assault and uttering threats.

As a police service, we must remain vigilant to ensure that our reporting mechanisms accurately depict both the act AND the motivation - a key element in determining if the act does reflect a hate crime as defined in the Criminal Code. Proving motivation is always difficult and requires a comprehensive assessment of the incident. We are prepared to meet that challenge.

Waterloo Region is an educated, engaged community and we must continue to promote a multi-cultural pluralistic approach to community safety if we are to keep the culture of hate at bay.

Waterloo Region no longer has organized, roving gangs of extremists preying on whomever they choose. With the public's assistance and support, these local groups have been dismantled. Our strategies have been effective and our relentless approach of fighting hate has resulted in a safer more inclusive community. However, there will always be haters; therefore, our work isn't finished.

We can expect that the next terror-related incident will be used by extremist groups to advance their agenda and to further their cause. Terrorist acts give haters the opportunity to rouse anger in the general public and to use the incidents to vindicate their extremist views.

Your police service has a heightened awareness of the issues surrounding hate. We created and lead a provincially based joint forces project that gives us dedicated, committed partnerships to fight hate and terror. We have leveraged international strategies to ensure a sustainable, long term commitment to community safety.

We are fortunate that hate crimes in our region are few, yet we know there are more affected who haven't or are not able to come forward. Hate related incidents and crimes range from the very subtle to overt acts of violence. Our 2009 statistics reflect every incident that may be perceived as hate. Canadian hate statistics are collected and reported in various ways. Policing partners all seem to agree that we need a standard definition of hate crime and activity that is accepted by all sectors of society.

Until then we will err on the side of caution. We will continue to vigorously pursue any and all incidents that may be perceived as hate and document them as accordingly. If we make mistakes along the way we hope it is because we are doing too much and not too little.

We can be proud that our community health is defined by our diverse partnerships and our resilient community values which reflect the highest standards. These characteristics will be needed to resist any extremist influence and safeguard us from any hate-motivated chaos that attempts to divide us.