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Palo Alto school hit in latest case of swastika graffiti

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A classroom at Palo Alto High School that was defaced last week with swastikas and what was intended to be a slur joins a growing list of similarly targeted property around the Bay Area.

A pair of synagogues in San Francisco and Redwood City, two East Bay neighborhoods and a Marin hillside are among the sites that have been hit with the Nazi hate symbol over the past several months.

It is also highly likely that there have been other hate-related incidents, particularly targeting individuals, which have gone unreported, according to Anti-Defamation League regional director Jonathan Bernstein.

In the case of Palo Alto, at least five swastikas, spray-painted in black on chairs and doors in the room, were discovered following President's Day weekend Feb. 19. A broken window and graffiti labeling a specific school administrator as gay were also found.

High school officials immediately notified city police about the defacement. Still, some in the school district have interpreted the incident as nothing more than an act of vandalism.

"Due to the fact that it had a negative comment about [an administrator], it sounded more like an act of graffiti [by a student] than a hate crime," said Irv Rollins, assistant superintendent of the Palo Alto Unified School District, who would not reveal the name of the targeted faculty member. "I've been in the school business for almost 40 years and, unfortunately, we all have our turn."

Police do not agree with this assessment.

"Something like this is not simply vandalism. It's a hate crime," said Lori Kratzer, a detective for the Palo Alto Police Department. "Even if these are juveniles who did this, it is still inexcusable, it's still a crime. It may be out of total ignorance, but something needs to be done about the situation."

Kratzer was uncertain whether the swastikas were drawn correctly. Though Kratzer didn't know whether the targeted school administrator is either Jewish or gay, she said these factors were irrelevant. She considers the graffiti a hate crime because it "was derogatory in nature and aimed against a group or individual."

The department is investigating, but currently has no leads. The responding police officer did, however, recover the can of spray paint used by the vandal or vandals in the classroom. It will be processed for fingerprints.

Bernstein, who heads the Central Pacific Region of the ADL, lauded the police department's strong stance. He also noted that it "behooves the school to respond more aggressively" since there may be Jewish and gay or lesbian students who feel vulnerable as a result.

Although there does seem to be a clear increase in swastika graffiti around the Bay Area, Bernstein said the ADL does not have an explanation.

Nevertheless, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, Temple Beth Jacob in Redwood City, sidewalks and other neighborhood property in Oakland and Piedmont and a hillside in San Rafael were among the areas recently targeted.

And while most hate crimes, like these, "are not perpetrated by hate groups and extremists," Bernstein added that, "it is important that these things not be treated lightly" since they could be warning signs of something more serious yet to come.

As an example, he noted that brothers Matthew and James Williams, who were convicted in November of firebombing three Sacramento-area synagogues, originally began expressing their anti-Semitic views by putting fliers on the windshields of cars at a temple.

"We have seen over and over again how extreme, violent, hateful activities began with minor offenses," he said.

This is partially why the ADL lobbied the state legislature "pretty heavily" last year to ensure the passage of an assembly bill, requiring schools to report hate-related activity on campus, he said.

He added that he hopes the Palo Alto school district is "not brushing these types of incidents under the rug to avoid giving their campus a black eye" since it will only cause the hate "to fester" and lead to more incidents.

But Palo Alto school officials remain adamant that they take hate activity seriously.

"If we thought this were a hate crime we would absolutely be leading the charge to make sure everyone knows that this is not tolerated and to increase awareness," said Rollins.