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White supremacist propaganda more than quadrupled in Mass. in 2019

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by Angela Yang

Last year saw the highest activity on record for white supremacist propaganda in the U.S., with Massachusetts among the states that recorded the most cases.

Propaganda distribution in the country spiked in 2019, more than doubling from the previous year, according to a report released earlier this month by the Anti-Defamation League.

The international non-governmental organization found 2,713 reported cases of literature distribution nationwide. Massachusetts made up 148 of those cases, with 30 occurring on college campuses, compared to a total of 35 incidents in 2018.

ADL Interim Deputy Regional Director Peggy Shukur said white supremacists tend to target urban hubs and young communities. Boston, a densely populated city with dozens of colleges, is a perfect bullseye.

“We’ve seen many, many situations on campuses in the Boston area, Boston University being just one of



Posters for the white supremacist group “The Base” on Boston University’s campus last November. Instances of white supremacist propaganda increased fourfold in Mass. last year, with cases also

many,” Shukur said. “So we see that either in the public square and public places or very often at college campuses.”

more than doubling across the United States. COURTESY SEBASTIAN PORRECA

But the Commonwealth is not a maverick among traditionally progressive states. Every New England state, according to the ADL, reported at least a doubling of white supremacist propaganda from 2018 to 2019.

None, however, surpassed Massachusetts, whose number of cases more than quadrupled.

The kinds of literature white supremacy groups distribute, Shukur said, come in the form of flyers, stickers, banners and posters, among other mediums.

“We’re seeing that a lot of these groups use leafleting, which is sort of an anonymous way for them to spread their hateful information,” Shukur said. “They do this often and under the cloak of anonymity in the middle of the night.”

One series of incidents occurred at Syracuse University in New York through November of last year, when racist graffiti and hate speech against Black and Asian students swept the campus.

Shukur said white supremacists do not solely target racial minorities: they also tend to take anti-LGBTQ and anti-Semitic action.

“But we use that term of white supremacy to characterize various belief systems that generally have base tenets that whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they coexist,” Shukur said. “That whites should live by themselves in a white-only society, that white people have their own culture that’s superior to other cultures, that white people are genetically superior to other people.”

While the term white supremacist connotes a focus solely on race, many of these groups express equally hostile sentiments toward queer and Jewish communities. Those attitudes are highly common in the propaganda spread in Massachusetts.

Kurtlan Massarsky is the director of development and marketing for the The Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth, dubbed BAGLY. He said the report’s findings do not necessarily convey new revelations.

“It doesn’t surprise me at all,” Massarsky said. “College and university campuses have kind of become a battleground on the ideological, free speech versus hate speech kind of deal around targeting minority populations of people.”

This sort of ideological clash erupted last semester at BU when conservative pundit Ben Shapiro agreed to speak at the university. Student groups rallied against each other in a battle around whether widely perceived hate speech should be permissible as free speech.

Yet the kind of discriminatory action Massarsky notices most often is not exactly anonymous, he said.

The Straight Pride Parade in Boston last August drew several hundred supporters, and members of its organizing group took to the Boston Police Headquarters this past Saturday to support local officers' efforts to protect the marchers at August's parade.

In terms of more incognito propaganda, Massarsky said BAGLY receives anti-LGBTQ mail with some frequency throughout the year, especially near the holiday season.

"It's not every day, but I know that we receive largely religious propaganda, little pamphlets or whatever," Massarsky said. "Tends to usually be around, I would say, Christian ideology. I haven't seen it being from any other organized religion, but they might be out there."

Laura Farnsworth, program manager of local human services agency Open Sky Community Services, has worked with LGBTQ communities for years. She said that recently, gender-variant individuals have been taking the brunt of the discrimination.

"The trend is more and more youth identifying as gender-queer or transgender and heightened levels of discrimination and bias based on their identities," Farnsworth said, "like being purposefully misgendered, being called out for using the restroom they belong in and being purposefully outed even in their schools."

Although propaganda plays a part in the dissemination of anti-LGBTQ messages, Farnsworth said that more often and on a more personal level, queer youth still experience bullying at school as well as retribution at home for coming out.

"Over the last couple of years since the last election, a lot of our youth report blatant harassment bias," Farnsworth said. "It's always a two steps forward, two steps back kind of thing. Because every time we start to make strides, based on the politics of the country, we always take a step backward."

Meanwhile, the Jewish community in Boston has observed hateful propaganda in the form of anti-Semitic writing or swastika symbols plastered on bathroom stalls and synagogue walls.

Michael Weingarten, treasurer of the Boston Synagogue, said these non-confrontational occurrences are among the more common discriminatory acts toward the Jewish community. However, Weingarten said, it's the rarer instances of overt anti-Semitic action that are the most dangerous.

"So you get people who were the neo-Nazis marching against Blacks and Jews in Charlottesville a couple years ago," Weingarten said. "It wasn't that long afterwards that we had a fatal shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh."

While the Boston Synagogue has not experienced any recent anti-Semitic issues, Weingarten said the country's current political atmosphere has fostered a more accepting environment for acts of aggression.

"As a synagogue, we have had to deal with the consequences of seeing fatal shootings in other synagogues, and we've had to learn lessons from that," Weingarten said. "We've observed that we have to keep the doors locked and we have to screen who

we let into our buildings on the Sabbath as well as the rest of the week.”

Previously, many synagogues would keep their doors open during Shabbat services to welcome in attendees. That’s no longer the norm.

Central Reform Temple in Boston is also aware of this development, according to founding Rabbi Howard Berman, but remains among the few synagogues that have not moved toward heightened security measures.

“While we’re very conscious of security issues, we have never had any incidents and our services are open,” Berman said. “Anybody comes in, we don’t have any kind of security screening unlike, unfortunately, is the case in many communities where you have to go through metal detectors or there are security guards.”

Seated in the heart of Back Bay, CRT also displays highly visible signs and banners. Yet the small congregation saves its heavy security for major holy days when the public is aware that a significant number of people will gather at a certain place and time.

Berman said aside from those major incidents that garner media attention, Jews in America do not usually undergo any significant confrontation with anti-Semitism anymore.

“Systemic discrimination that intrudes on people’s personal lives or financial lives or social lives is really not a major issue at this point,” Berman said. “And I don’t think any of the current iterations of anti-Semitism have included that, other than the very complex debates and unfortunate tensions that tend to exist on college campuses.”

While CRT feels its members have overwhelmingly encountered more loving support than hate, Berman said it’s important to remember that perceptions and experiences differ across the Jewish community. He said many Jews in the country do not feel beleaguered or threatened today, but remain aware of how easily situations can turn.

“I think most of us feel a solidarity with, whether it be the African American community or the LGBTQ community or the Asian American community where there is discrimination and there is increasing bigotry, and we’re all in this together,” Berman said. “I don’t think we feel singled out.”

Some Massachusetts residents said they have not personally come across blatant propaganda in the state, but are unsurprised by the ADL statistics.

72-year-old Dennis Grimes of South End said white supremacist ideology has always been nascent across the country and, until recently, was merely suppressed.

“Always remember one thing: what is in your heart is what comes out. [President Donald] Trump is now their leader, and he brought it out,” Grimes said. “But he does things in codes. ‘Make America Great Again’ was a code for the white supremacists that says, ‘We now have our leader, we now can come out and say and do what we want and there’s no repercussion for it.’”

Darby Patterson, 22, of Cambridge said while New England carries the connotation of being more socially liberal and accepting, location does not necessarily define views within a community.

“A lot of people refuse to accept that there are white supremacists and that there is racism in the Northeast,” Patterson said. “You still have to combat these hateful ideas wherever you are with kindness. And as a person who was born and raised in the Northeast I’m disappointed, but we need to acknowledge that there are these hateful attitudes.”

One Dorchester resident offered an opposing viewpoint. 80-year-old Joe McDonald said he does not think white supremacist activity is a severe problem today, and that the media should turn to other angles.

“There are other things they should be reporting, too. A lot of times, Black-on-white crime,” McDonald said. “It’s out there, things like that. I just don’t see it get the same attention as a racist white person.”



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One Comment



Zoe

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A really important story and well-written!

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