

local news

Violent vote

New hate crimes statistics show violence against lesbians and gay men increases each election cycle in Oregon

by Inga Sorensen

Portland police officials say reports of crimes motivated by sexual orientation bias increased from 1993 to 1994, making it the only major category to see a jump during that period.

"All the other categories—race, color, religion and national origin—were down," says Portland Police Bureau spokesman Lt. C.W. Jensen. "I have speculated, and the numbers seem to bear this out, that there is an increase during election years. That likely has to do with the anti-gay initiatives that have been on the ballot during the past few years."

According to Jensen, Portland police recorded 140 reports of bias crimes based on sexual orientation in 1992. That, of course, was the year Ballot Measure 9 was on the ballot. The campaign over Ballot Measure 9, which would have declared homosexuality "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse," grabbed international attention and created a highly charged emotional climate throughout the region. In 1993, an off-election year, Jensen says 58 sexual-orientation bias crimes were reported to Portland police. Last year, when a watered-down version of Ballot Measure 9 was on the statewide ballot, reports of bias crimes against sexual minorities jumped to 66, a 12 percent increase.

"The feelings around Ballot Measure 9 were so intense," says Jensen, who was a member of the bureau's bias crimes unit during that campaign. "People with No on 9 bumper stickers were getting their car windows smashed out... People were really afraid."

Jim Bellah, who is currently a detective with the unit, agrees: "Measure 9 was so new and got a tremendous amount of media coverage. I'm sure those factors had a lot to do with the escalation in emotions and anti-gay harassment."

"I think in 1994 gays and lesbians were a little more prepared because they had been through this before," adds Jensen. "It all seemed a little more in-control. But the fact remains that reports of bias crimes against sexual minorities went up when there was a statewide anti-gay initiative on the ballot. I think this spiking pattern validates why we need a hate crimes law that says you can't do this."

Reports to the Portland-based Lesbian Community Project also indicate there is a correlation between elections and hate-motivated incidents against sexual minorities. In 1992, LCP, which runs an Anti-Violence Project Documentation Line, documented 602 bias incidents against gay men and lesbians in Oregon. In 1993, that figure plummeted to 99 reports. In 1994, reports rose to 106, a 7 percent increase over the previous year.

That pattern appears to mirror a national trend. Incidents of violence against gay men and lesbians, documented by tracking programs in nine cities (including Portland), increased 1.6 percent—from 2,031 incidents in 1993 to 2,064 in 1994.

New York's Anti-Violence Project, which collects and processes national anti-gay and -lesbian data in conjunction with local anti-violence projects, recently released data gathered from Detroit, Port-

land, Denver, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Columbus, Ohio. Only Chicago, Denver and San Francisco saw sexual-orientation bias crime rates drop from 1993 to 1994.

The other cities recorded increases, with New York leading the way with 632 incidents reported in 1994—a 7.7 percent increase from the 587 incidents reported a year earlier. Some attribute the rise there to the massive Stonewall 25 celebration and the staging of Gay Games IV in New York last June. In fact, 91 incidents of violence against gay men and lesbians were reported that month in New York City—marking the highest number ever recorded in a single month in the Big Apple.

As for the overall increase nationally, many speculate the negative tone of the November elections played a significant role.

"I think that is true, and I do think the initiatives here in Oregon certainly have something to do with this pattern," says LCP Executive Director LaVerne Lewis. "I'm pleased to say, however, that I think our community is doing a great job in educating itself about the potential dangers. We're more aware that we could be targeted for hate crimes. In turn this awareness has led to a big increase in self-defense trainings; we travel in pairs; we wear whistles."

Lewis also says Portland police have proven that they take hate crimes seriously, which may deter potential abusers from committing those crimes in Portland. She points to the department's bias crimes unit which is specifically dedicated to investigating hate crimes. Gay men and lesbians can also air their concerns during meetings of the bureau's Sexual Minority Roundtable, an ongoing gathering of sexual minorities and police officials.

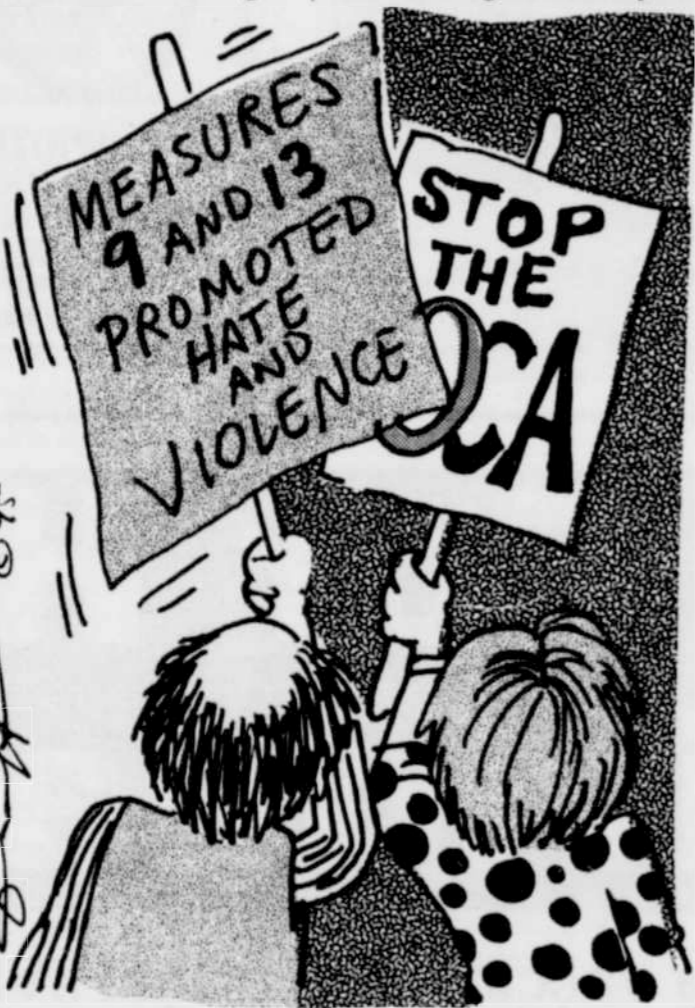
"I think gays and lesbians here have more confidence in themselves and the police," says Lewis. "What we're finding is that people who call our hate crimes line are more willing to also call the police."

As for the latest statistics, Lewis says perpetrators seem to be younger (teenagers to those in their early 20s), and appear to commit their crimes in pairs or groups.

"We just have to keep taking care of ourselves," she says. To do just that, Portland's Anti-Violence Project has set up a crisis intervention team that will go to the scene of a hate crime or to the aid of a victim.

"The police will call us if they think they have a hate crime situation involving sexual orientation. We'll get there and offer what support we can," she says.

To report a bias incident in Portland, call the Portland Police Bureau Bias Crimes Unit at 823-0434 and the Anti-Violence Project Documentation Line at 796-1703 (for Oregon calls outside of Portland, dial 1-800-796-1703).



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