

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. bias crimes are skyrocketing. A state report says all kids and teachers need anti-bias training.**

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As bias and harassment claims continue to escalate in New Jersey, a state task force has recommended anti-bias education for all public school kids and teachers, according to two reports released Thursday by the state attorney general's office.

New Jersey logged 994 bias incidents last year, almost a 75% increase from the year before, according to the 2019 Bias Incident Report.

It's both the state's highest total and largest year-to-year increase since New Jersey began tracking incidents decades ago, which range from bullying during recess to last year's Jersey City kosher market shooting.

Gov. Phil Murphy promised action.

"My Administration will deliver on the sweeping recommendations of this report to set the bar high for future generations," Murphy said in a statement.

State Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said, "Hate has been brought out of hiding over the past few years across the nation, and the troubling — though unfortunately unsurprising — result has been a spike in bias activity in our state — particularly among our youth."

Almost half the known offenders were minors, and more incidents happened at elementary and secondary schools than anywhere else, according to the bias report.

As a result, New Jersey should beef up its hate crime law and hire a more diverse pool of educators, according to two of the 27 recommendations made by the Interagency Task Force to Combat Youth Bias.

"Every time a student is harassed ... every time a person is demeaned, dehumanized, or excluded because of who they are, it inflicts immeasurable pain not only on individuals but on entire communities," Rachel Apter, director of the state's civil rights office, said in a statement.

Recent incidents included a student posting a video on TikTok comparing Black men to chimpanzees and a swastika found on a classroom wall, according to the report.

The task force launched a series of hearings late last year, and concluded that students are learning to discriminate at home, from political leaders, on social media and in their classrooms.

White students in New Jersey are less likely to be disciplined than Black students, the task force's report said, which contributes to an environment that allows kids to be targeted because of their religion, ethnicity or sexuality.

"In the face of bias and stereotypes, the failure of bystanders to intervene, of school administrators to address it, and of parents and broader communities to condemn it, can teach children as much about what their community is prepared to tolerate as the act of hate itself," the report said.

Furthermore, "too few districts have consistently, effectively, or meaningfully implemented" existing anti-bias training, the task force wrote.

The coronavirus pandemic has not only disproportionately affected minority communities, it has triggered racist attacks against Asian and Jewish residents, Apter wrote. Without broad changes to how children are taught and xenophobia is punished, the root causes won't be addressed, the report said.

Bias data has historically been flawed, and the bias report acknowledged the rising numbers may be partially due to more people reporting harassment and law enforcement doing a better job logging it. At the same time, many incidents go unreported and officials said current numbers are likely an undercount.