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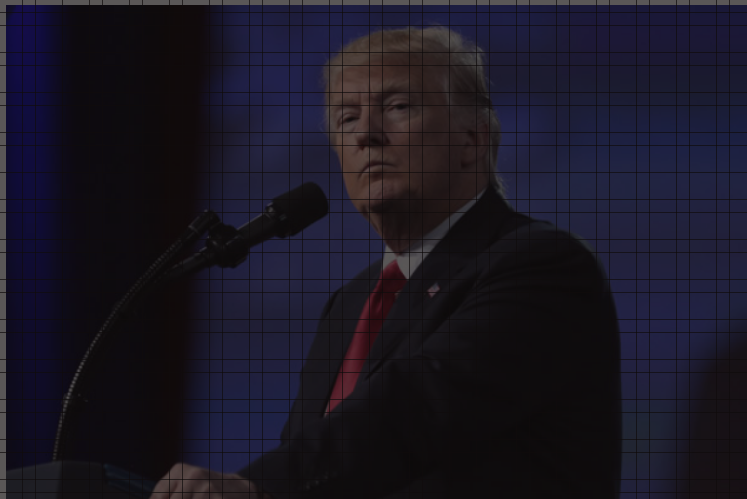
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COVID-19 factors in hate crimes spike



President **Donald Trump** has refused to refer to the virus by its given scientific label, instead referring to it as 'the Chinese Virus.' (Photo by Gage Skidmore via Flickr)

LOS ANGELES — As the number of Coronavirus (COVID-19) cases increases daily in California there has also been a sharp increase in incidents of racist or hateful comments directed at Asian-Americans, LGBTQ people, and immigrants. These incidents represent a spike in an already worrisome trend of anti-LGBTQ animus. Lecia Brooks, a spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center, (SPLC) tells the Los Angeles Blade:

A significant factor fueling the frequency of this trend is the racist rhetoric of President Donald Trump, Brooks says. Trump has refused to refer to the virus and the accompanying pandemic by its given scientific label, instead referring to it as 'the Chinese Virus,' in press briefings and photo opportunities. This has also caused some members of the West Wing staff to label it inaccurately and in a seemingly racist way. On March 17, CBS News White House correspondent Weijia Jang, a Chinese-American tweeted, "This morning a White House official referred to #Coronavirus as the "Kung Flu" to my face. Makes me wonder what they're calling it behind my back," she wrote.

In a press briefing later by the White House Coronavirus Response Task Force, when pressed by the assembled press corps, Trump deflected on the question of evading personal responsibility instead insisting that his label was accurate because the now global pandemic's epicenter was China. During another briefing, in a moment captured by Washington Post photographer Jabin Botsford that showed Trump's notes and remarks laid out on the podium, the word "coronavirus" was marked out and replaced with "Chinese Virus" in Trump's trademark black Sharpie.

Throughout the pandemic, Trump has been unrepentant in his labeling, which gives white nationalists and others freedom to be deplorable and racist toward other Americans the SPLC's Brooks says.

In California, the rise in hateful incidents, especially those directed at Asian Californians, caused California's Attorney General Xavier Becerra to post his own push back on Twitter. "Bigotry is not the cure to this public health crisis. Racism and xenophobia will not be tolerated — and in fact, they only make this moment worse. Let's work together and listen to our public health officials," he wrote.

But other minority communities have also been the targets of hateful commentary, the LGBTQ community being targeted by religious fundamentalists including notoriously homophobic Rev. Rick Warren, a pastor, and presidential "spiritual" adviser from Vero Beach, Fla.

"Plagues are one of the last steps of judgment," Warren said in a broadcast of his TruNews program at the end of January. He then went on to say that China is a "godless communist government" and "the United States is not much better."

"Look at the spiritual rebellion that is in this country, the hatred of God, the hatred of the Bible, the hatred of righteousness," he warned. "Just vile, disgusting people in this country now, transgendering little children, perverting them. Look at the rapes, and the sexual immorality, and the filth on our TVs and our movies."

More worrisome than the elevated number of hate/racist incidents directed at others during the COVID-19 pandemic says SPLC's Brooks, is the overall disturbing trend of anti-LGBTQ hate crimes and incidents, which has seen a 43 percent increase even as the

overall numbers of hate groups actually have been in decline.

The primary factor and consideration Brooks points out is the president's close relationship with anti-LGBTQ groups such as the Washington D.C.-based Family Research Council, and homophobes like Warren.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's annual Year in Hate and Extremism report released on March 18, the white nationalist movement that was emboldened by the election of President Trump grew for a second straight year in 2019, as the number of hate groups in the movement, rose to 155 — a 55 percent increase since 2017.

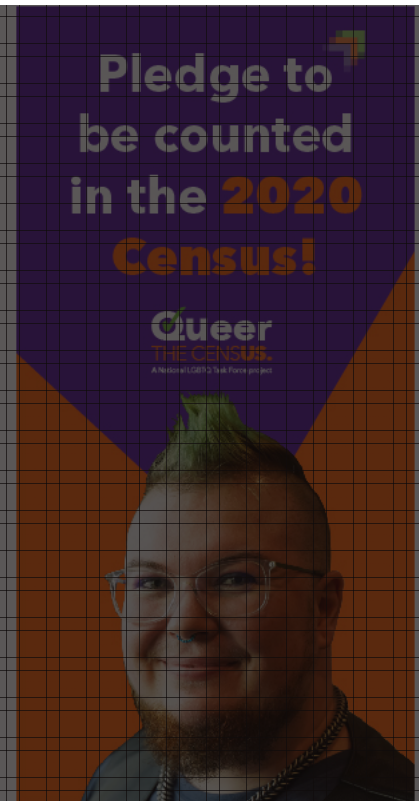
However, Brooks told the Blade that the SPLC had identified 940 hate groups operating across the country in 2019, which represented a slight decline from the all-time high of 1,020 in 2018. Yet she said, the fact remained that even with a number of significant neo-Nazi groups dropping as the result of leadership turmoil, Brooks cautioned that the groups remaining behind adhere to some form of white supremacist ideology.

Addressing the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ animus, Brooks pointed out that actions by the Trump administration, including recent actions stripping LGBTQ federal workers of equality rights, especially trans workers, has also been accompanied by a number of anti-trans legislation in 12-plus states. Idaho's recent bill set to become law as well as Alabama's legislation would effectively criminalize transition by youth, she noted.

"Basically, [Trump's] relationship with anti-LGBTQ+ organizations and individuals has caused the uptick," Brooks said. "That 43 percent number includes the murders of trans women of color and attacks on gay couples, which is directly because Trump has elevated the voices of these homophobes masquerading as 'Christian leaders,'" she added.

"This important new report shines a light on the explosion of anti-LGBTQ groups across our country," Shannon Minter, legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, wrote in a press statement. "The resurgence of these groups poses a real danger to LGBTQ people and to the progress we have made, which feels increasingly precarious in the face of this administration's shocking support for anti-LGBTQ hate groups and apparent determination to roll back even the most basic legal protections for LGBTQ people. Now more than ever, we must push back against these hateful narratives and call on elected officials and others to stand up for our common humanity."

"Stoking the fires of intolerance is unacceptable, especially during this time of crisis" a spokesperson for California Attorney General Becerra told the Los Angeles Blade on Monday. "Every effort will be made to address those actions promptly — hateful behavior cannot be tolerated."



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"Blaming an ethnic group, or the LGBTQ+ community right now for the COVID-19 crisis is immoral," Brooks said. "The SPLC will continue to monitor the crisis especially with an eye toward Asian Americans, but also immigrant groups as the white nationalists place blame there for the outbreak," she said.

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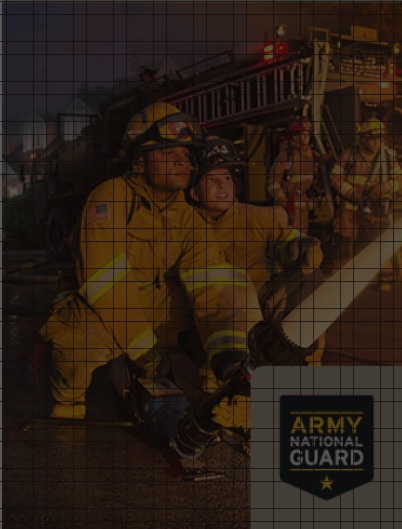
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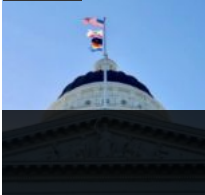
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