

AROUND THE NATION

In New York, Activists Prepare Bystanders to Take Action Against Harassment

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Heard on All Things Considered

HANSI LO WANG



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If you see a bias-based attack at a subway station, do you know how to intervene? Activists in New York City are preparing people with tips like engaging the victim and distracting the harasser.

If you were to witness a bias-based attack or a hate crime, how would you respond?

It's something some activists are preparing some New Yorkers to be ready for, as reports of hate crimes in the city have increased since the election of Donald Trump. They are up 63 percent compared to the same period last year as of Dec. 14, according to the New York City Police Department.

Earlier this month, a man allegedly threatened to cut the throat of an off-duty police officer wearing a hijab. Two days later, a transit worker wearing a hijab was allegedly pushed down the stairs in Grand Central Terminal by a man who called her a "terrorist."

Christen Brandt, a trainer with the **Center for Anti-Violence Education**, wants more bystanders who witness attacks and hate crimes to become what she calls "upstanders" — people who will intervene rather than just walk away.

"Watching an act of harassment in real time, it's something that makes people really tense up. They're often just not sure what to do or how to get involved," Brandt says.

Recently, she helped train about a hundred people at a community center in Queens. They warmed up by repeating phrases they might use on a harasser, things like "Leave him alone!" and "You can't do that!"

But before you speak up, Brandt says it's important to stay level-headed. Then, figure out what's the safest way to take action.

"Are you behind the harasser? Are you in a position where you are in physical danger of being assaulted should the harasser decide to attack the victim?" she says.



Center for Anti-Violence Education trainers (from left) Christen Brandt, Vineeta Kapahi and Tish Tab lead a workshop in New York City on how bystanders who witness bias-based attacks and hate crimes can intervene. *Hansi Lo Wang/NPR*

Intervening as an "upstander," though, doesn't have to involve getting in a harasser's face. Brandt says there are more indirect strategies.

"If there are people around you, go up to that person and say, 'Hey! Do you see what's happening? Yeah? Can you call someone?'" she says.

You could ignore the harasser completely and instead engage the person who is under attack, or you could ask the harasser unrelated questions — about directions, for example — in an effort to distract the harasser.

Advocacy groups have been scrambling to hold more workshops for bystanders.

Debjani Roy is with Hollaback!, a group that offers webinars on how to respond to street harassment.

Her organization is working with a video-training group called WITNESS to figure out how best to train bystanders to record cellphone video of any incident with tips like filming landmarks and saying what day and time it is.

Roy warns, though, that it's always best to check with the victim before sharing a video publicly.

"It's very easy to use it in the wrong way where you're actually putting someone in danger," she says.

In New York, where the threat of danger has been heightened in the Muslim community, Mariana

Aguilera of Queens says she finds comfort seeing so many of her neighbors training with Brandt at the community center.

"I'm a convert to Islam, so for the last 10 years I've been going through these experiences of harassment. And in these 10 years, I've never witnessed something like this in this room, people from different faiths and different walks of life coming together," she says.

They're all preparing to stand up against hate and violence, and that, she says, is an empowering sight to see.

Related NPR article:

Hundreds Of Hateful Incidents Reported After Trump's Victory

November 14, 2016 6:03 PM ET
MERRIT KENNEDY



A man carrying a sign that reads "United Against Hate" dances with other demonstrators during a protest against President-elect Donald Trump in Olvera Street's Plaza in downtown Los Angeles on Saturday.

Richard Vogel/AP

Michigan middle school students chanting "build a wall" at Latino classmates. A woman speaking a foreign language on a San Francisco Bay Area train being called an "ugly, mean, evil, little pig." A Los Angeles student reportedly being teased that she was going to be deported.

Since the presidential election, reports of intimidating and aggressive incidents toward minorities and women have surfaced across the country.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate incidents, has recorded more than 300 such reports in the past six days. SPLC spokesman Ryan

Lenz tells The Two-Way that they "span a number of different sorts of ideological motivators," including anti-black, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and anti-woman attitudes.

Rights groups have called for President-elect Donald Trump and other politicians to take a strong stand against intimidation.

"After a long campaign in which various ideologies from the radical right were given a direct conduit into the mainstream of American politics," Lenz says, "it seems that with the election of President-elect Donald Trump, that these ideologies and those who adhere to them feel that they are legitimized or authorized in some way to act out in the public space where previously they existed only online."

The only other comparable moment in this country since the turn of the 20th century was the flood of anti-Muslim incidents immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks, he adds.

Trump was asked [in a 60 Minutes interview](#) that aired Sunday night about the widespread reports. He said he was "saddened" and called the reports "terrible." Looking into the camera, he told the perpetrators to "stop it" and vowed to "bring this country together."

But a major political appointment on Sunday might fuel divisions: Trump tapped Stephen Bannon as his chief strategist. Bannon has served as head of Breitbart News, a far-right media outlet that has been a platform for the so-called alt-right movement, which espouses white nationalism.

The SPLC says it hasn't been able to independently verify all of the recent reports. And it's worth noting that "some anti-immigrant and other bullying stories are spreading unchecked on social media," [as NPR's Kirk Siegler reported](#), "but there are a growing number of confirmed investigations into alleged harassment and hate crimes."

For example, a diverse Episcopal church in Silver Spring, Md., found racist graffiti scrawled in several spots prior to Sunday's services, [member station WAMU reports](#). The messages read, "Trump Nation Whites only."



In Philadelphia, [the Anti-Defamation League says](#) swastikas combined with pro-Trump graffiti were discovered last Wednesday on an abandoned storefront.

Many of these reports are coming from school and university campuses. At Minnesota's Maple Grove Senior High School, a bathroom stall was said to have been defaced with "#whitesonly," "#whiteamerica" and "Trump," among others. "Students say they now worry about going to class," [according to a local CBS affiliate](#). [In a letter to parents](#), the school's principal said he was "horrified" and that it "goes against everything for which our school stands."

At San Diego State University, a student was walking in the stairwell of a parking structure when two men confronted her and robbed her, [according to the police report](#), which says the men "made comments about President-Elect Trump and the Muslim community."

Many school districts around the country are proactively providing support and counseling to students, while trying to open up a dialogue in classrooms.

"We must ensure that our students feel safe by providing safe and respectful learning communities," Boston Public School Superintendent Tommy Chang

said in a letter to parents the day after the election, [as The Washington Post reported](#).

[In another letter sent the same day](#), Denver Public Schools Superintendent Tom Boasberg told parents, "We encourage students, families and educators to talk, to create safe spaces where hopes, fears and differences can be raised — spaces where we can challenge each other to reach common ground on issues that divide us."

A third-grade teacher in Philadelphia is responding by leading her students in anti-racist, empowering affirmations, [as NPR's Eyder Peralta reports](#). "I can do anything I put my mind to," the students say in unison in a video that has been viewed 3.2 million times. Teacher Jasmyn Wright posted the video on Facebook and says that ultimately, it's up to students "to face adversity and defeat it."



<https://www.facebook.com/jasmyn.wright.7/videos/10100222400255257/>

Larry Ferlazzo of Sacramento, Calif., asked his students, who include many immigrants, to write letters to Trump himself expressing their fears about the election. Several of the notes were [published by the Post](#).

"During the election, some of the things you said made us feel really bad for myself and my family and others. It really made me cry," says one student from Afghanistan. "My family and I hope you will be nice and don't be racist and love us back."