

Report links hate groups, anti-immigrant activism

The Southern Poverty Law Center counts 888 such organizations, an increase. One newly added group protests.

From the Associated Press

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NEW YORK — Anti-immigrant sentiment is fueling nationwide increases in the number of hate groups and the number of hate crimes targeting Latinos, according to a watchdog group.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, in a [report](#) being released today titled "The Year in Hate," said it counted 888 hate groups in its latest tally, up from 844 in 2006 and 602 in 2000.

The most prominent of the organizations added to the list, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, or FAIR, vehemently rejected the "hate group" label and questioned the law center's motives.

FAIR said the center was using smear tactics to boost donations and stifle legitimate debate on immigration.

"Their banner may be 'Stop the Hate' but it's really 'Stop the debate,' " said FAIR's president, Dan Stein. "Apparently you can't even articulate an argument for immigration reform without being smeared."

The law center's report contends there is a link between anti-immigrant activism and the significant rise in hate crimes against Latinos in recent years. According to FBI statistics, 819 people were victimized by anti-Latino hate crimes in 2006, compared with 595 in 2003.

"The immigration debate has turned ugly and the result has been a growth in white supremacist hate groups and anti-Latino hate crime," said Mark Potok, director of the law center's Intelligence Project. "The majority of anti-Latino hate crimes are carried out by people who think they're attacking immigrants, and very likely undocumented immigrants."

Potok said hate groups were proliferating because a growing number of Americans were agitated by the immigration debate.

He said many new groups had appeared in the border states of California, Texas and Arizona, where illegal immigration has been a particularly volatile issue.

Critics of the law center, including FAIR, contend that the periodic reports on hate groups exaggerate the threat to public safety and inflate the total by including entities that are little more than websites or online chat rooms.

Potok acknowledged that some of the groups may be small and said it is impossible for outsiders to gauge the membership of most of the groups.

Among the largest categories of hate groups, Potok said, are neo-Nazis, white nationalists, racist skinheads and those with links to the Ku Klux Klan.

FAIR, which is frequently quoted by the media and whose officials often have testified before Congress, advocates tighter immigration controls. In pursuing these goals, it says, "there should be no favoritism toward or discrimination against any person on the basis of race, color, or creed."

The center's critique of FAIR was endorsed by a major Latino group, the National Council of La Raza. The council's vice president for advocacy and legislation, Cecilia Muñoz, said FAIR's leaders were polished in public forums but represented "a very unsavory set of views."

Stein described the assertions of bigotry as "a total fantasy."