

## What are the 63 hate groups in Florida and are they dangerous?

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In the wake of last weekend's tragic violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, you might have heard this nugget of information: 63 hate groups are active in Florida. Only California has more.

Those numbers come from the Southern Poverty Law Center, a Montgomery, Alabama-based civil-rights organization.

Here is what you might not have heard: More than a third of the hate groups identified are black separatists groups such as the New Black Panther Party or the Nation of Islam.

Another is a Holocaust denial bookstore in Key West.

A third is a Winter Springs group founded by a Nicaraguan immigrant that wants the federal government to get tougher on illegal immigrants, supports making English the nation's official language and supports a total ban on immigration from Muslim countries.

All have some harsh views that might be repugnant to many Americans. But none has been involved in the type of violent actions seen in Virginia last weekend.

### What is a hate group?

So what defines a "hate group?"

The SPLC website says "All hate groups have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics."

But that doesn't necessarily mean they are violent.

Their activities can include "criminal acts, marches, rallies, speeches, meetings, leafleting or publishing," SPLC says.

Some worry that labeling an organization a hate group is a method of trying to limit offensive speech.

"Time and again, I see the SPLC using the reputation it gained decades ago fighting the Klan as a tool to bludgeon mainstream politically conservative opponents," Cornell law professor and SPLC critic William Jacobson told Politico Magazine in June. "For groups that do not threaten violence, the use of SPLC 'hate group' or 'extremist' designations frequently are exploited as an excuse to silence speech and speakers," Jacobson adds. "It taints not only the group or person, but others who associate with them."

**Roger Gangitano of Melbourne asked county commissioners to allow people with concealed weapons permits to carrying concealed weapons into buildings at the Brevard County Government Center in Viera. (Photo: DAVE BERMAN/FLORIDA TODAY)**

Until he stepped down last week for personal reasons, Roger Gangitano was the leader of the Space Coast Chapter of ACT! For America, one the 63 Florida hate groups identified by the SPLC.

The civil rights group says ACT! for America is an anti-Muslim group.

But Gangitano, who is still a member of the group, said he doesn't hate Muslims or anybody else.

"I am opposed to drunk drivers. I am not opposed to all drivers," he said. "I am opposed to terrorists who are Muslims or Muslims who support terrorism. I don't oppose all Muslims."

Gangitano said that is almost impossible to shake the label of being a hate group once you have it.

"It is really hard to argue a negative. How am I suppose to prove I am not hateful? Come up and give you a hug?"

**Violence is on the rise**

But while some — if not most — hate groups may not be involved in violent or criminal activity, there has been a clear increase in hate-related violence in recent years, with Islamic jihadists and far-right wing supporters responsible for the vast majority of the deaths.

Alex Nowrasteh, an analyst at the Cato Institute, published a blog post Monday about terrorist violence over the past 25 years.

Nowrasteh, who reviewed data from a number of sources, said that 3,342 people had been killed by terrorists on U.S. soil since 1992. Islamists were responsible for 92 percent of those deaths, with the vast majority killed in the 9/11 attacks.

Nationalist and right-wing terrorists were the second-deadliest group, killing 219 people during the past 25 years, Nowrasteh found. That accounted for 6.6 percent of all U.S. terror deaths during the past 25 years. The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing — the second-deadliest terror attack in U.S. history — accounted for 168 of those deaths.

Nowrasteh did say the left-wing terrorist deaths have been on the upswing since the beginning of 2016, accounting for 13 deaths as opposed to only five, including the woman killed in Charlottesville. But over the 25 year period, left-wing terrorists were responsible for just 23 deaths, he said.

"Regardless of the recent upswing in deaths from left-wing terrorism since 2016, Nationalist and right-wing terrorists have killed about 10 times as many people since 1992," Nowrasteh wrote.

Other groups monitoring hate groups, such as the New America think-tank, have published slightly different numbers showing right-wing attacks continuing to out-number left-wing ones. But all point to an increasing number of acts of violence from all sides since 2009.

**'Hate speech' is protected speech**

Increasing violence has led to calls for government officials to ban rallies such as Charlottesville's "Unite the Right" or Black Lives Matter marches.

But the First Amendment's protections of free speech and peaceful assembly give communities and government institutions such as state university's little leeway, said Ken Paulson, president of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University.

Paulson said the founding fathers knew the First Amendment would be used to defend the right to say things they found repugnant. But they felt that was better than allowing the government to control who could say what.

"There is a lot of misunderstanding of hate speech, that it is some different kind of speech," Paulson said. "It isn't. It is free speech."

Communities can set guidelines for rallies regulating such things as the hours and locations for such gatherings, but they have to apply equally to all groups.

The fact that many of the marchers in Virginia were armed would not have been enough to shut down the rally, Paulson said, since Virginia law allows "open carry" of firearms.

"The First Amendment regulates speech. Parade rules regulate marching. Gun laws regulate weapons," he said. "Just having those in combination doesn't change the nature of any of the three."

Some speech advocating violence is not protected by the First Amendment, he said, but it has to be a very specific incitement to immediate violence.

Florida faces a potential court battle in coming weeks over the University of Florida's decision not to rent event space to White Supremacist Richard Spencer, who was to have been one of the main speakers at the "Unite the Right" rally in Virginia.

"This decision was made after assessing potential risks with campus, community, state and federal law enforcement officials following violent clashes in Charlottesville, Va., and continued calls online and in social media for similar violence in Gainesville such as those decreeing: "The Next Battlefield is in Florida," wrote UF President W. Kent Fuchs in a statement.

Universities have more leeway on who they rent space to as opposed to what speakers student clubs are allowed to invite, Paulson said. But they still can't favor some speakers over others because of the content of their speech.

"When a university rents space, it's not establishing a public forum. It can set rental guidelines that can include barring applicants who might create a security concern for the campus. The university could be challenged, however, if it only saw security threats at one end of the political spectrum."

### **Non-violent groups bear watching**

While headlines have touted Florida having a large number of hate groups, on a per-capita basis, the Sunshine State is fairly typical for the nation.

And a number of those are fledgling groups with only a handful of members, said Lonny Wilk, associate regional director for the Anti-Defamation League in Florida.

One group the ADL is watching is Vanguard America, a white supremacist group that has been active in Florida handing out fliers, posters and stickers at universities.

“Much of this propaganda is not only hateful, it is recruiting new members,” Wilk said.

Just because a hate group is small or hasn’t been violent, that doesn’t mean it isn’t dangerous, he added.

Acceptance of bigotry at any level, even as simple as stereotyping or belittling jokes, leads to acceptance of more extreme forms of bias, Wilk said.

The ADL describes a “Pyramid of Hate,” that has a base of bias and several escalating levels with genocide at the apex.

“Like a pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels,” an ADL flier says. “If people or institutions treat behaviors on the lower levels as being acceptable or ‘normal,’ it results in the behaviors at the next level becoming more accepted.”

And one place where such hate has become “normal” is in cyberspace.

Before the internet, hate groups tended to be regional organizations that communicated mostly in person and recruiting efforts rarely expanded past distributing leaflets.

But hate groups with a computer and internet connection have a potential global audience.

“One thing that does concern us is not the groups in of themselves,” Wilk said. “But those who are not affiliated, but are being indoctrinated online.”

He pointed to Dylann Roof, who in 2015 shot nine people to death in a historically black church in Charleston, South Carolina. All his victims were African-American.

Roof, who was 21 at the time of the murders, was not a member of any racist hate groups, but frequented racist websites and even created one of his own.

The ADL urges parents to be vigilant in overseeing their children’s internet usage and reporting any attempts to either bully children online or recruit them into hate groups.

“Somebody can be on the computer or on the cell phone and be bombarded by racist posts,” Wilk said.

The internet has also become a fundraising mechanism for hate groups that sell merchandise or collect donations online.

In the wake of Charlottesville some internet companies such as website host GoDaddy and PayPal have banned some hate groups from using their services. But such efforts could resemble a game of Whac-A-Mole as new hate sites pop up.

Wilk said it is critical for individuals to report online hate activity to internet companies.

The ADL maintains a website that shows the various internet companies’ hate speech guidelines and how to report violations.

Ultimately, the antidote for hate, Wilk said, is for Americans to stand in solidarity against it.

“There are not two sides here,” Wilk said. “Hate is hate is hate and it must be relegated back to the shadows.”

### **Florida hate groups**

The Southern Poverty Law Center says there are 63 hate groups in Florida. The groups can be found from Key West to Pensacola and include:

**22** black separatist organizations

**8** Ku Klux Klan chapters

**7** anti-Muslim groups

**5** neo-Nazi organizations

**5** racist skinhead groups

**4** white nationalist groups

**4** neo-Confederate groups

**3** anti-LGBT groups

**3** “general hate” groups

**1** anti-immigration group

**1** Holocaust denial bookstore

### **To learn more**

- The Southern Poverty Law Center: [SPLCenter.org](http://SPLCenter.org)
- Anti-Defamation League: [ADL.org](http://ADL.org)
- You can read Alex Nowrasteh’s piece on hate violence at [www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org)