

Hate and Harassment are Rampant on Neighborhood Facebook Pages and Groups, New ADL Report Finds

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Localized Facebook Groups Become Toxic Sites of Identity-Based Harassment

New York, NY, June 6, 2024 ... Researchers at the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) Center for Technology and Society (CTS) found that some **Facebook groups in local communities have become toxic sites of harassment, particularly identity-based harassment** against Jews, women, LGBTQ+ advocates, immigrants, and people of color.

Through interviews with community members, targets of the harassment and other stakeholders, combined with online observation, content analysis, and data scraping, ADL investigated hate and harassment occurring on Facebook groups or pages in three local regions. In all three cases, the harassers—often part of the local political establishment, whether anonymous or not—excluded those they perceived as threatening outsiders to consolidate their control over civic life.

The three communities reviewed by ADL in **this study** included a suburban county outside New York City, where neighbors organized against a growing Orthodox Jewish community; a town near Boston, where backlash ensued when a woman of color won a municipal election; and in small-town Ohio, where a local reproductive rights activist

was harassed and hounded out of town by extremist groups while running for city council. These incidents all shared a common feature: hate-based harassment taking place on neighborhood Facebook pages and groups.

Through these case studies, ADL identified a shared pattern of harassment:

1. *An event or series of events unfold when someone from a marginalized group gets involved in local civic life, surfacing tensions over demographic change.*
2. *These tensions erupt in existing or newly created community Facebook Pages and Groups, involving online hate and harassment, often anonymously.*
3. *Disgruntled community members pursue public actions and other forms of online and offline harassment.*

Unlike other forms of online harassment, such as trolling campaigns where targets don't know their perpetrators, targets of local harassment are more likely to interact with their harassers in everyday life, inhabiting the same town or region, and often know people in common, making this form of harassment even more harmful.

"Harassment on neighborhood and local groups and pages can be terribly damaging for targeted individuals and families, leading not only to emotional harm but also to potential physical violence and withdrawal from participating in civic life," said Jonathan Greenblatt, ADL CEO. "Addressing online harassment in local communities requires concrete steps from platforms and policymakers and we are calling on all responsible parties to take action now to protect all communities."

ADL has previously found that a majority of Americans experience harassment on Facebook, according to CTS's 2023 Survey of Online Hate and Harassment. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the U.S. by number of users; even still, the number of people who report harassment there is out of proportion to its popularity: 54 percent of those polled were harassed on Facebook, twice that of X/Twitter, the next most likely platform where online harassment happens. Facebook provides very limited

data access, making it understudied compared to other platforms (see [ADL's 2023 report on data accessibility](#) for evaluations of each major platform).

In addition to interviews and qualitative analysis for the three case studies, ADL researchers analyzed the quantity of antisemitic content on Facebook communities where harassment took place, using ADL's own antisemitism classifier. Findings supported the firsthand experiences of those interviewed: **the reported Facebook communities had 5-10 times as much antisemitic content as control pages.**

"You are more likely to be harassed on Facebook than on other platforms, yet this harassment is rarely visible to researchers," said Jordan Kraemer, Director of Policy and Research, ADL Center for Technology and Society. "Facebook has become a key platform for neighborhood news and discussion groups, serving as a new 'public square.' However, harassment remains rampant and reporting inefficient, with the platform rarely if ever taking action to protect the targets."

The report includes detailed recommendations for tech companies and government:

For tech companies:

- Close anonymity loopholes.
- Use network analysis to detect local harassment campaigns.
- Provide user-friendly tools to report & prevent harassment.
- Make transparency reports accessible and understandable to non-experts.
- Give greater access to data for researchers and third-party auditors.

For government:

- Federal legislators and other state lawmakers should follow the example of California and to enact similar policies to California's A.B. 587, a landmark bill requiring

publication of aspects of platforms' terms of services and the actions they take against content that violates those terms.

- Support and urge passage of current legislative efforts that aim to address important issues highlighted throughout this report
- Lawmakers should enhance access to justice for victims of online abuse.

Beyond platform policies and enforcement, broader changes are needed in local communities to support targets, educate law enforcement, and build trust in public institutions. Targets need better information on how to respond to local online harassment, such as how to document it, report it to platforms and law enforcement, and how to protect their safety, such as increasing privacy protections on their social media accounts. Local law enforcement too needs to understand local laws, the nature of online harassment, and their jurisdiction, to provide meaningful help for targets.

ADL is the leading anti-hate organization in the world. Founded in 1913, its timeless mission is "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." Today, ADL continues to fight all forms of antisemitism and bias, using innovation and partnerships to drive impact. A global leader in combating antisemitism, countering extremism and battling bigotry wherever and whenever it happens, ADL works to protect democracy and ensure a just and inclusive society for all. More at www.adl.org.