

Growing racism toward Indians concerns tribes

By Valerie Taliman, Indian Country

During his six-year term on the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Chairman Arlan Melendez of the Reno Sparks Indian Colony saw more than his share of racism, discrimination and hate crimes against Native Americans.

But even he was surprised by the vicious attacks by skinheads against one of his tribe's families, Johnny and Lisa Bonta, in Fernley in late May.

"We know from hearings in Montana, New Mexico and South Dakota that hate crimes are continuing to happen against Native Americans, mostly in border towns near our reservations," he said, citing a soon-to-be released report developed by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission that compiled testimony in 2009 about hate crimes from hundreds of Americans Indians.

The report follows up on the 2005 Department of Justice report that showed the overall violent crime rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives was 100 per 1,000 persons, meaning that one out of 10 American Indians has been a victim of violence.

The study also found that "American Indians are more likely than people of other races to experience violence at the hands of someone of a different race," with 70 percent of reported violent attacks committed by non-Indians.

"Nevada was always known as the 'Mississippi of the West' for its rampant racism. Up until the late 1950s, Indians had to be off the streets by sundown or face arrest," said Melendez. "Reno was a very racist place, but over the years it's become more diversified as more Hispanic people moved into the area.

Sadly, that's not the case in many rural communities where there's still a lot of good 'ole boy attitudes."

Melendez said he was shocked and very concerned about the hate crime committed against tribal members, especially since the victims are now being portrayed as the perpetrators, despite evidence to the contrary.

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