

# Changing perceptions about hate crimes

**T**he murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, in Wyoming last year brought the issue of violence and attacks against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into mainstream national discussion. Suddenly middle America knew what members of those communities have known for a long time. People are beaten, and sometimes killed, because of their sexuality.

The Fenway Community Health Center compiles the statistics of crimes that are hate motivated in Massachusetts annually. Two statistics in this year's report are startling. The first is the 13 percent increase in violent attacks in the commonwealth. While the Fenway is attributing two murders in part to some hate or bias motivation — including the murder of Allston's Rita Hester — not enough evidence has been found to allow police to do the same. But the number of reports of attacks in which people “have been kicked to the ground, beaten in the head with steel poles, slashed with bottles” is rising. That even one of these attacks can still happen today is shameful.

The numbers are rising in part because of the cooperation of the Boston Police Department and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. That relationship has improved considerably since less than a decade ago when activists were picketing Area A-1 and accusing officers of gay-bashing. People are much more comfortable reporting hate crimes to the police today.

Victims of attacks, no matter how minor, must continue to report them to police and to the Fenway. Those reports allow police and organizations the opportunity to keep watch on what happens and where it happens in Boston. Only then can they begin to address and diffuse problems.

The second startling statistic is the drop in the number of reports filed, from 228 to 145, which Fenway officials attribute directly to the 83 percent drop in reported incidents in schools and colleges. It is not likely these places have become much more tolerant and safer in one year's period. Rather, the money that paid for outreach programs that target young people and encourage them to report incidents ran out in 1997. Advocates are seeking to restore that money and the decision-makers who took it away should rethink that cut.

Little can be done about hate crimes unless they are reported. And as the cooperation between the Boston Police Department and the Fenway shows, a bad situation is improved when it is easier to report those incidents.