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Hate crimes by teens disturbing

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Hate crimes by teens disturbing

If the stories of hate crimes told at last week's "Bridges of Respect" conference in Ellsworth are any indication, Maine has a long way to go in educating its youths about tolerance and respect for civil rights.

According to Assistant Attorney General Stephen Wessler, who prosecutes violations of Maine's Civil Rights Act, the percentage of hate crimes committed by teen-agers in the last five years has risen from 15 percent a year to 40 percent. This year Wessler's office has prosecuted 27 hate-crime cases. In contrast, the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office prosecutes fewer than a dozen a year. Wessler attributes the increase in the number of hate crimes to more people coming forward.

Regardless of why more hate crimes are being reported, Maine needs to curtail hatred toward minorities, particularly gays and lesbians, who are the most targeted minority. To do this, Maine schools need to open their stu-

dents' minds to reality and stress tolerance. More than half of hate-crime defendants are juveniles. The Attorney General's Office has implemented an anti-hate crimes program in schools across the state. Targets of hate crimes can seek help from civil rights teams of two to three students and an adult adviser. The teams also promote tolerance through posters and school programs.

But the answer must come from within the classroom itself.

Outside of schools, the Attorney General's Office is in dire need of funding to prosecute those who commit hate crimes. There have been 673 hate-crime complaints to the Attorney General's Office since 1992, when the office began a special civil rights branch, but only 90 people have been charged.

Facing the proliferation of these crimes head-on, in the classroom and in the court room, are the only ways to ensure civil rights for all.