Two teens burn a cross on the lawn of an African-American minister.

A derogatory message directed toward Arabs is spray-painted on the wall of an arson-damaged grocery owned by a Middle Eastern man.

Tires are slashed and a racial slur is painted on the car of a black family.

A group of black teens say occupants of a pickup displaying a Confederate flag had opened fire on them, wounding one.

For reasons authorities and social scientists cannot seem to explain, a series of unrelated crimes with racial overtones has occurred in Snohomish County this year.

"For the first time in my life, I"ve witnessed three criminal incidents where racism was the key component of that crime," said Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon, referring to three high-profile incidents: an Arlington cross-burning in March, another cross-burning four months later in Edmonds and a racial epithet spray-painted on a car in Everett this month.

While city and county officials have been quick to condemn the acts, the crimes have caused soul-searching among many Snohomish County residents, who wonder whether the area, with its predominantly white but growing minority population, is as tolerant as they once thought. The county's minority population has more than doubled, from 8 percent in 1990 to 17 percent in 2000, according to the U.S. census.

State Rep. John Lovick, D-Mill Creek, who is black, said the biggest problem is that no one really knows what to do or how to address race in the community.

"We don"t have dialogue on this, or even if we do, it doesn"t last very long," he said.

The acts are a clear, albeit painful, sign that the county is becoming a diverse and multiethnic society, said Jason Martin, a black pastor whose son was targeted by two white teens in March when they burned a 5-foot cross in his lawn.

"It's pulling to the surface things that have been lying dormant for a long time," he said.

According to new FBI statistics, hate crimes in the state are on a slight decline, from 230 in 2002 to 222 in 2003. The county, unlike other communities along the Interstate 5 corridor, is not home to organized hate or extremist groups. Even so, in 2002, Everett had 10 reported

hate-crime incidents. That's the same number as Tacoma, which is home to several active neo-Nazi groups, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, an Alabama organization that tracks hate crimes.

Some blame youths in the county with taking pranks too far or being too far removed from the civil-rights movement to know exactly what they''re doing. A majority of the acts have involved youths.

Experts say about 90 percent of bias-related crimes are done by individuals, not hate groups.

"Whether an incident is a so-called prank by juveniles or a clearly bias-motivated crime, the effect on the community is the same — negative," said Laurie Wood, an analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

But whether the incidents point to a deep-seated problem or brewing racial intolerance is a matter of debate among those who investigate and respond to racially motivated crime.

Authorities say the acts in Snohomish County this year are by no means clear-cut hate crimes. To prosecute a hate crime, investigators must find that the suspect had targeted the victim specifically because of the victim's race, national origin, religion or sexual orientation. But in most incidents in the county this year, the suspects had a dispute with the victims.

That muddies the waters for proving racial motivation. When does a fight that is at first personal become racial? The law isn''t clear.

At that point, Assistant U.S. Attorney Bruce Miyake said, it comes down to proving whether race is the primary motivation.

So even though a racial slur was spray-painted on the side of Ray Whitlow's car in letters more than a foot high, authorities aren''t calling what happened a hate crime.

"The premise of the crime was not to run [the family] out of the neighborhood," said Snohomish County sheriff's spokeswoman Jan Jorgensen. "It appears to have come from a dispute that got out of hand."

But for Whitlow, who woke up one morning earlier this month to see that someone had slashed his car tires and put sugar in the gas tank, the conclusion was an easy one.

"It's not like someone is drunk and says, "I''ll kick a dent in this car," " Whitlow said. "A lot of thought and time went into it. To me, that's someone hating you for all that time they planned it."

Some community members disagree that motive should play a part when prosecuting the crime.

Christina Castorena, an organizer of an Oct. 13 rally in support of the Whitlow family, said a

personal dispute doesn"t justify the use of racist acts.

"The fact is that this was a hateful and malicious crime that sends a specific message," said Castorena, the associate dean of diversity at the college.

Making the matter even more nettlesome here is the fact that some incidents were erroneously reported as hate crimes or later turned out to be pranks. For example, the shooting of a black teen near Snohomish in April was initially blamed on two people in a truck bedecked with a Confederate flag. Later, the teens admitted they had been playing with a gun when it accidentally went off, wounding a 16-year-old.

In another, the arson at the Middle Eastern grocery in Everett last summer bore similarities to a hate crime.

Found in the damaged store were a spray-painted cross and a derogatory message directed at "Arabs." The Pakistani owner reported that he had been threatened by white customers. But investigators found that the owner was facing mounting financial difficulties.

He has since been charged with setting fire to the store, along with an accomplice who made the fire look to be a hate crime.

Sgt. Boyd Bryant, an Everett police spokesman, said that when the fire was first reported, he warned the public and the media not to jump to conclusions.

"We are not going to presumptuously call graffiti on the wall evidence of a hate crime, and [the grocery case] is a prime example of that," he said.

Both the so-called pranks and hoaxes are part of what can happen when a community is uncomfortable about race, said Vernon Johnson, a political-science professor at Western Washington University.

"While the leading incidents don"t seem like any hate-group activity is in any of this, when we have a community whose fabric is so delicate in terms of race, it is a very uneasy place to be," he said.

Those responsible must be pursued and prosecuted harshly to send a message to kids who might consider similar acts, he said.

"They will learn that they need to find another way," Johnson said.

Source