

Racist texts are sent to Black students

Source and how many were sent are unknown

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Black college students in several states reported to authorities Wednesday they had received anonymous text messages using racist references to the era of U.S. slavery.

The messages varied in detail, but followed the same basic script, saying the recipient had “been selected to pick cotton at the nearest plantation.”

Officials could not say Thursday where the messages originated.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate incidents nationwide, and local authorities in Ohio, Alabama, South Carolina and other states were investigating the messages, which were sent out after the announcement of Donald Trump’s election victory.

It’s unclear who sent the messages and how many were sent. At least some of the messages claimed to have come from “A Trump supporter.”

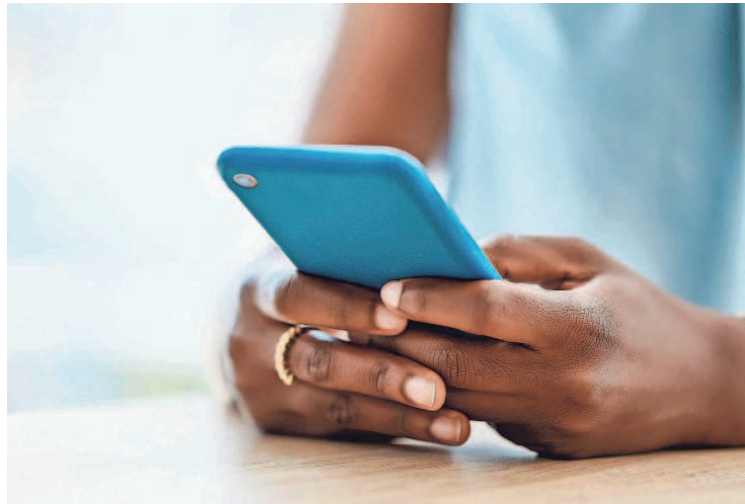
A statement from the FBI said the agency is “aware of the offensive and racist text messages sent to individuals around the country and is in contact with the Justice Department and other federal authorities on the matter.”

Representatives from civil rights advocacy organizations, including the SPLC and the NAACP’s Columbus, Ohio, chapter, said the contents of the messages constituted hate crimes.

Margaret Huang, president and CEO of the SPLC, called the texts “a public spectacle of hatred and racism that makes a mockery of our civil rights history” in a public statement on Thursday.

Huang called on political leaders to “condemn anti-Black racism, in any form, whenever we see it.”

Experts on domestic extremism were shocked by the messages Wednesday, telling USA TODAY the campaign appears to represent a tactic that has not previously been employed by white supremacists or hate groups.



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“This is the first I’ve ever seen of this kind of racist attack using texts – it’s frighteningly personal and harrowing,” said Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism. “I’ve also never seen this kind of racist messaging threatening people directly.”

Where are students receiving racist text messages?

Authorities began investigating the text messages following reports that students from Clemson University in South Carolina, Ohio State, the University of Alabama and other schools had received them.

But not all of the recipients were in college.

Mary Banks, who has a 16-year-old daughter in Columbus, said her daughter received one of the hateful text messages Wednesday evening and that it included her full name. A few of her daughter’s friends in the Columbus City School district received similar messages, she said.

Banks said she’s not surprised that racist hatred would surface at this

moment in history.

“I feel white supremacy got stronger after the election,” she said.

Ben Johnson, a spokesman for Ohio State University, told The Columbus Dispatch, part of the USA TODAY Network, that hateful messages were sent to “several students.”

Bethany McCorkle, a spokesperson for Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost’s office, said the office was aware of the text messages and looking into them.

Columbus NAACP President Nana Watson told The Columbus Dispatch that she believes the text messages are a hate crime.

“This is racism at its highest,” Watson said.

Diedre Simmons, a spokesperson for the University of Alabama, told the school newspaper, The Crimson White, that university officials informed local authorities about similar messages sent to students there.

Authorities at Clemson University are also investigating racist text messages sent to Black students in South Carolina, according to the Greenville News, part of the USA TODAY Network.

R.J. Polite, a senior at Clemson, who received a version of the text, said he was shocked by the message and mentioned the negativity he’s seeing on social media after Trump’s victory.

“It was ignorant and kind of childish,” Polite said. “I really tried to stay off of my phone and off the internet for the day because it was just so much going on. It was just bad.”

Who is sending the messages?

It’s unclear who sent the text messages.

Alejandra Caraballo, a clinical instructor at the Harvard Law School Cyberlaw Clinic, said this is the first time she has seen a widespread racist attack using text messages. Tracking the culprit who perpetrated the campaign may be complicated, depending on how extensive it is, she said.

That is also unclear.

“It remains to be seen how widespread this is,” Caraballo said. “If this is a few hundred texts, it could be done by a local racist group in an afternoon as a trolling tactic, but if it’s thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people, then it would have to be automated and involve a fair degree of sophistication.”

If the attack is that widespread, Caraballo said, she wouldn’t rule out foreign actors seeking to foment discord in the United States in the days after the presidential election. She said bomb threats to majority Black polling places on Election Day were reported to have come from Russian email addresses.

Bad actors can quite easily purchase lists of phone numbers – some categorized by race or other demographic characteristics – on the dark web, to be used for anything from sales campaigns to cybercrime, Caraballo said.

In some states, voter registration information is public, including a voter’s race, she said, and that information could be combined with phone records to create a targeted account like this.

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