



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The Psychology of Hate Crimes

Many issues impacted by hate crimes can be informed by psychological research. For example, are hate crimes more harmful than other kinds of crime? Why do people commit hate crimes? What can be done to prevent or lessen the impact of hate and bias-motivated crimes? This briefing paper is designed to inform the public policy debate on hate crime with knowledge gained from psychological research. Social scientific research is beginning to yield information on the nature of crimes committed because of real or perceived differences in race, religion, ethnicity or national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender.

What is a hate crime?

Current federal law defines hate crimes as any felony or crime of violence that manifests prejudice based on “race, color, religion, or national origin” (18 U.S.C. §245). Hate crimes can be understood as criminal conduct motivated in whole or in part by a negative opinion or attitude toward a group of persons. Hate crimes involve a specific aspect of the victim’s identity (e.g., race). Hate crimes are not simply biases, they are dangerous actions motivated by biases (e.g., cross burnings, physical assault).

Who is currently protected under federal hate crime law?

Presently, hate or bias-motivated crimes targeting victims because of race, color, religion, or national origin are punishable under federal law. Many states have laws which prohibit violent crimes against individuals based on these and/or other characteristics. In 1990, with the passage of the *Hate Crimes Statistics Act*, the federal government began to collect data about select categories of hate crimes. At present, no federal law exists that criminalizes bias-motivated crimes perpetrated against a person, property, or society that are motivated by the offender’s bias against a gender, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Are hate crimes different from other violent crimes?

Yes. Hate crimes have an effect on both the immediate target and the communities of which the individuals are a member, which differentiate them from other crimes.

What effects can hate crimes have on victims?

While violent crime victimization carries risk for psychological distress, victims of violent *hate* crimes may suffer from more psychological distress (e.g., depression, stress, anxiety, anger) than victims of other comparable violent crimes (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; McDevitt, Balboni, Garcia, & Gu, 2001). Survivors of violent crimes, including hate crimes, are also at risk for developing a variety of mental health problems including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD emerges in response to an event that involves death, injury, or a threat of harm to a person. Symptoms of PTSD may include intrusive thoughts or recurring dreams, refusal or inability to discuss the event, pulling away emotionally from others, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and disturbed sleep.

Depression, anxiety, and PTSD may interfere with an individual's ability to work or to maintain healthy relationships, can lead to other problems such as substance abuse or violent behavior, and may be associated with other health problems such as severe headaches, gastrointestinal problems, and insomnia. Similar to other victims of traumatic stress, hate crime victims may enjoy better outcomes when appropriate support and resources are made available soon after the trauma.

What effect can hate crimes have on communities?

Hate crimes are different from other crimes in that the offender—whether purposefully or not—is sending a message to members of a given group that they are unwelcome and unsafe in a particular neighborhood, community, school, workplace, or other environment. Thus, the crime simultaneously victimizes a specific individual and members of the group at large. Hate crimes are often intended to threaten entire communities and do so. For example, a hate crime that targeted children in a religious day care center and an ethnic minority postal worker was intended to instill fear in members of these minority communities (Sullaway, 2004). Being part of a community that is targeted because of immutable characteristics can decrease feelings of safety and security (Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002). Being a member of a victimized group may also lead to mental health problems. Research suggests that witnessing discrimination against one's group can lead to depressed emotion and lower self-esteem (McCoy & Major, 2003). More research is necessary to document the impact of hate crimes on those who share the victim's identity.

Who is at risk?

In 2007, law enforcement agencies in 49 states and the District of Columbia reported 7,624 bias-motivated incidents to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the federal government agency mandated by Congress to gather these statistics. However, the FBI points out that these data must be approached with caution. Victims do not always report hate crimes committed against them to law enforcement. In fact, a victim of a hate crime is far less likely than a victim of a similar (but not bias-motivated) crime to report the crime to the police, even when the individual knows the perpetrator (Dunbar, 2006; Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002). This reluctance often derives from trauma the victim experiences, a fear of retaliation, or belief that law enforcement is biased and will not support them.

In addition to race, color, national origin, and religion, individuals are targeted because of other aspects of their identity as well; including, disability status, sexual orientation, gender, and gender identity. Hate crime laws are designed to protect all individuals. While minority group members may be at greater risk for hate crimes, anyone can become a victim of a hate crime. For example, in 2007, the FBI reported that 18.4 percent of hate crimes based on race stemmed from anti-white bias.

Race/Ethnicity. Many reported hate crimes are motivated by racial bias. In 2007, more than half of the 7,621 single-bias crimes reported to the FBI (50.8 percent) were racially motivated. Of 1,256 hate crimes in 2007 motivated by bias based on ethnicity or national origin, the FBI found that 61.7 percent were anti-Hispanic.

Religion. Bias and violence against Arab and Muslim Americans reached its height after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. It is estimated that there were more than 700 violent incidents targeting Arab and/or Muslim Americans or those perceived to be Arab or Muslim Americans in the first nine weeks following September 11th. Due to a lack of understanding of religious differences, Sikhs have been mistakenly targeted as Muslims. Since hate crimes are defined as based on real *or* perceived group membership, these incidents are considered hate crimes. Most religiously motivated hate crimes are acts of vandalism, although personal attacks are also common. In 2007, the FBI reported that the

great majority of these crimes were directed against Jews (68.4 percent), followed by anti-other religion (9.5 percent) and anti-Islamic (9.0 percent) hate crimes.

Disability. In 2007, 62 hate crimes against individuals with mental disabilities and 20 hate crimes that targeted those with physical disabilities were reported to the FBI. However, other research suggests that persons with disabilities are four to 10 times more likely to be a victim of a crime than persons without disabilities. There is also evidence that persons with disabilities are at risk of being abused by those whose job it is to serve or protect them. Studies have shown that in cases of sexual abuse of persons with disabilities, 48 percent of the perpetrators were employed in the disability services field and gained access to their victims through the work setting.

Sexual Orientation. In 2007, there were 1,460 hate crimes based upon sexual orientation reported to the FBI, of which 59.2 percent were classified as anti-male homosexual bias. In a study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons, researchers found that roughly one-fifth of the women and one-fourth of the men had been the victim of a hate crime since age 16 (Herek et al., 2007). One in eight women and one in six men had been victimized within the last five years.

Gender Identity. Currently, the FBI does not track statistics of hate crimes committed against individuals because of real or perceived gender identity and expression. However, research suggests that transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals (people who dress or look differently than the normative presentation of their biological sex) are at high risk of victimization (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). It has been suggested that if the FBI did track hate crimes based on gender identity, it would represent the second-largest category of all hate crimes (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, 2006).

Who are the perpetrators of hate crime?

While hate groups can pose a serious threat to communities, research suggests that the vast majority of offenders are not members of organized hate groups. Additionally, recent data suggest that over 50 percent of perpetrators of hate crimes are under age 25. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2001), 31 percent of hate-based violent offenders and 46 percent of hate-based property offenders from 1997-1999 were under age 18.

What can be done to address hate crimes?

Law enforcement officials, community leaders, educators, researchers, clinicians, and policymakers must work together to stop hate crimes. The American Psychological Association strongly recommends the following:

- Support federal anti-discrimination laws, statutes, and regulations that ensure full legal protection from discrimination and bias-motivated crimes, including:
 1. The Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 (H.R. 1913, 111th Congress)
 2. The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act (S. 909, 111th Congress)
- Support legislation on standardized procedures for identifying and collecting data related to hate crimes to ensure more accurate statistics, including:
 1. The Hate Crime Statistics Improvement Act of 2009 (H.R. 823, 111th Congress)
 2. The Hate Crimes Against the Homeless Statistics Act of 2007 (H.R. 2216, 110th Congress)

- Support research assessing the prevalence, incidence, predictors, and outcomes of hate crimes, as well as the psychological impact of hate crimes on victims, their families, and the community.
- Support interventions to address the mental health needs of survivors of hate crime.
- Support educational efforts aimed at dispelling stereotypes, reducing intergroup conflict, and encouraging broader understanding and appreciation of intercultural issues.
- Support development and dissemination of empirically based hate crime prevention and intervention programs.
- Support training of law enforcement, health care providers, and victim-assistance professionals regarding how they can assist individuals and communities that have been victimized by hate crime.
- Encourage collaborations between community members, local advocacy organizations, and law enforcement agencies to promote healthy and safe environments.

APA Links of Interest

For more information on APA's work on hate crimes, please visit the following websites:

Public Interest Government Relations Office

<http://www.apa.org/ppo/pi>

APA Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs

<http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/homepage>

APA Office on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/homepage>

APA Division of Trauma Psychology

<http://www.apatraumadivision.org>

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