The Psychology of Hate Crimes

What is a hate crime?
A hate crime is a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”

What are the effects of hate crimes?
People victimized by violent hate crimes are more likely to experience more psychological distress than victims of other violent crimes. Specifically, victims of crimes that are bias-motivated are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and anger than victims of crimes that are not motivated by bias.

Hate crimes send messages to members of the victim’s group that they are unwelcome and unsafe in the community, victimizing the entire group and decreasing feelings of safety and security. Furthermore, witnessing discrimination against one’s own group can lead to psychological distress and lower self-esteem.

What leads to hate crimes?
Hate crimes are an extreme form of prejudice, made more likely in the context of social and political change. Public and political discourse may devalue members of unfamiliar groups, and offenders may feel that their livelihood or way-of-life is threatened by demographic changes. Offenders may not be motivated by hate, but rather by fear, ignorance, or anger. These can lead to dehumanization of unfamiliar groups, and to targeted aggression.

How prevalent are hate crimes?
- The FBI reported 5,850 hate crimes in 2015, however, the majority of hate crimes are never reported, so these data underestimate the true pervasiveness.
- Reported hate crimes in 2015 were motivated by hostility based on race/ethnicity (58.9%), religion (19.8%), sexual orientation (17.8%), gender identity (1.7%), and disability (1.3%). Hate crimes targeted Jewish, African-American, and LGBT communities at high rates.
- The FBI reported a 7% increase in hate crimes nationwide from 2014 to 2015, with a 67% increase in crimes against Muslims. Washington, D.C. and New York City also report increased hate crimes.

The American Psychological Association (APA) condemns all hate crimes.
APA supports the efforts of researchers, law enforcement, clinicians, teachers, and policy-makers to reduce the prevalence of hate crimes and to alleviate their effects upon victims. We can address hate crimes through the following prevention and intervention policies and programs:
- Support implementation of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act and full funding for the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division, Office for Victims of Crime, and Community Relations Service.
- Enact hate crime laws in states lacking legislation and strengthen laws in others, incorporating race, religion, ethnicity/national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and disability.
- Follow law-enforcement and community guidelines outlined by campaigns such as ‘Building Stronger, Safer Communities’ and ‘Not in Our Town.’

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